



Memorable Moments from the Last 30 Years of INTERPOL



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Abstract

Aim: The aim of the study is to present, from the author's own point of view and based on his personal experience, the most significant changes in INTERPOL over the last 30 years in Hungary.

Methodology: In addition to the relevant literature and legislation, the author draws on his own lived experience to describe the past three decades of the organisation's 'close-up view of history'.

Findings: Looking at the history of INTERPOL, it can be seen that, in addition to the spirit of internationalism, regionalism and regional/continental cooperation have always played a crucial role in practice. In the beginning, partly due to a lack of technical development, this was a restraining force in day-to-day operations. However, INTERPOL has taken advantage of the opportunities offered by technical-digital developments to recognise the regionality of the way in which smaller entities are recognised and operate, thus contributing to the effectiveness of global INTERPOL. In Europe, this is represented by the INTERPOL European Commission. Likewise, an important means of enhancing effectiveness is INTERPOL's cooperation with other regional law enforcement organisations – in the case of Europe, this is the close working relationship that has been established between INTERPOL and Europol. All this could not be achieved without the added value through the National Centre Bureaus of the Member States, which in the case of Hungary is the International Law Enforcement Cooperation Centre.

Value: As a result of this overview, the reader can see the structure of the domestic system, its links with the international organisation, the relevant EU agencies and the structure and role of the committees of strategic importance.

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Introduction

The international organisation that is worth a hundred years can safely be said to have stood the test of time. Especially when it covers a period that included the Second World War, the subsequent Cold War, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the split of the European West and East into communist and capitalist blocs, the revolutions in Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the unification of Germany, the emergence of international networks of mafias and organised crime, numerous terrorist attacks, migration crises, and the list of examples is endless.

This year we celebrate the centenary of the founding of INTERPOL, and Hungary should not be left out, as it was one of the twenty countries that established the organisation at the beginning of the 20th century ([URL1](#)). The idea is earlier, the precedent is the Monaco Police Congress, but Hungary was in a very different political and economic situation in 1914 than in Vienna in 1923. INTERPOL is not a police organisation with supranational powers, but a common network for cooperation between police forces in several countries ([Rostami & Jooj, 2021](#)). This gives me the opportunity to recall the last thirty years of this cooperation from a very particular perspective, from my own memories. I do not therefore intend to give a historical retrospective with facts and figures, but simply to mention a moment or an institution of the almost three decades in which I have been involved in some way.

National Central Bureau Budapest

Hungary, despite being a founding member, left the organisation in 1952 in the political climate of the 1950s and re-joined only in 1981.¹ At that time, the INTERPOL Hungarian National Central Bureau² was only a departmental body within the National Police Headquarters, and for years it carried out the tasks that its international cooperation obligations required it to perform. These were

1 At the 50th General Assembly of Interpol in Nice, 3–10 November 1981, 89 in favour, 4 against and 2 abstentions.

2 As early as 1927, it was decided that each country should set up a national central bureau.

primarily the exchange of information, the translation and forwarding of various requests, the issuing and withdrawal of international warrants, the repatriation of arrested persons, cooperation in international mutual legal assistance matters, and participation in various seminars and conferences. The most important of these meetings was the annual INTERPOL General Assembly, which was usually attended by the National Police Chief and the current head of the NCB Budapest. Although decisions were taken here, for a long time we did not pay much attention to this cooperation, nor did we play a significant role in the development of the strategy.

In those years, the division of labour followed the classical scheme. Within the office there were two departments, one for specific cases, where the case handlers carried out their daily tasks on a line-by-line basis (either by country or by group of offences) using the communication channels of the time, the other department was exclusively responsible for translating documents in different languages.³ Today, we see day by day that in the modern world, without direct and secure communication, and especially without real-time channels, international communication cannot work, but thirty years ago there was only telex communication between the INTERPOL General Secretariat and the Member States. Although faxes could be used and computer links were beginning to be established, let us not forget that even the use of mobile telephones in Hungary only began to take off after 1994. The issuing of wanted persons also worked in such a way that each request had to be typed in by the clerk on a separate interface and then sent by telex, while fingerprints, for example, could only be sent by fax or letter. In the first case, there were quality shortcomings, and in the latter, the time needed for delivery. It is no coincidence that, in those days, INTERPOL's cooperation was much criticised, mainly because of its slowness, and so it was very often the case that police officers preferred to use direct channels rather than INTERPOL, which, of course, had disadvantages in addition to speed. On the one hand, not everyone had contacts with all countries, so more intensive cooperation was only an option in the case of neighbouring countries, and on the other hand, it was extremely difficult to use the information obtained in this way in the course of the criminal proceedings. The number of police officers with contacts was also limited, and their availability was obviously limited. So, there was a need for an organisation that could serve all police units and was not only available during office hours. 24-hour availability required an on-call system where the already limited number of officers had to be available at night, with a landline telephone connection.

3 The four official languages of INTERPOL are English, French, Spanish and Arabic, but we communicated in German instead of Arabic.

Europol

As the European Community became the European Union and thus a much more integrated form of cooperation, this integration has also been reflected in the field of criminal cooperation. In the light of this, the European Police Office (Europol) appeared on the scene, which, however much they tried to deny it, was a major competitor to INTERPOL, especially in Europe. The Member States began to use this channel more and more intensively, and cooperation with INTERPOL became increasingly marginalised. This was the situation even if, from the outset, experts believed that the two organisations should not compete, but should work together in a complementary way, taking advantage of their differences. For a long time this did not work in practice. The EU Member States increasingly used Europol among themselves for a number of reasons: in addition to geographical advantages the similarity of legal systems, the compatibility of organisational elements based on the structure of national police forces and the compatibility of police procedural techniques. This was coupled with a constantly evolving and tightening single European data protection regime, which all EU Member States must use and respect – not only among themselves, but also in their relations with third countries.

As the years passed, the need for the cooperation between the two organisations grew stronger and stronger, so communication and participation in mutual programmes intensified, and in 2009 an agreement was reached to install liaison officers in each other's centres. Europol gradually built up its own communication system, steadily expanding the liaison officer system and developing the 'one shop stop' principle, which meant that in each country a single unit would be set up to bring all international police communications under one umbrella. In Hungary, this organisational element became the International Law Enforcement Cooperation Centre.

International Law Enforcement Cooperation Centre (ILECC)

At that time Hungary was not yet a member of the EU, but in 1998 accession negotiations could begin ([URL2](#)). This already included the creation of an International Crime Control Centre and the establishment of a liaison officer system. In order to meet this requirement, ILECC was set up in 1999. In addition to the Community requirement, the importance of setting up this new organisation was also demonstrated by the fact that a separate law was passed on the Centre, which also provided for INTERPOL's legal status. On the basis of Act LIV of

1999 on cooperation and exchange of information within the framework of the European Union Law Enforcement Information System and the International Criminal Police Organization, a central budgetary body was established under the control of the National Police Headquarters.⁴ This law also stipulates that in the course of cooperation with INTERPOL, the police will exchange information with member countries and the INTERPOL Secretariat General in accordance with the statutes and operating principles of the organisation. INTERPOL membership is considered an international commitment.⁵

Under ILECC, four units with departmental status were created. The INTERPOL NCB Budapest, the Europol National Unit (ENU), which became the Europol National Bureau, the International Information Unit and the SIRENE National Bureau (Hegyaljai, 2012). In 2002, a police liaison officer and then a customs liaison officer were posted to Europol's headquarters in The Hague, which was later expanded and became a part of ILECC under the name Europol Liaison Officer Office. Over the years, a number of minor and major changes have led to the current structure. The Directorate for International Criminal Cooperation, which includes the Department for Cooperation in Criminal Matters and the Department for Wanted Records Management, is directly subordinate to ILECC. The latter manages the Division for Management and Coordination and the Division for Data Processing and Service Support. The Interpol Hungarian National Bureau, the Division for International Information Exchange and the SIRENE Bureau are part of the Department for Cooperation in Criminal Matters. The Europol National Bureau operates under the name of the International Strategy Division, directly under the Directorate for International Criminal Cooperation.

From this structure, it can be seen that the relations between the various international organisations are not linear, nor are they strictly separated, but are integrated under a central management, given that this is the most effective way to eliminate possible duplication and overlaps. And nothing is better proof of its legitimacy than the last 25 years.

INTERPOL European Committee

What has been described above is the operational cooperation and, in general, the day-to-day, practical contacts, which ensure the continuity and effectiveness

4 Organisational and Operational Rules of the International Law Enforcement Cooperation Centre No 3/2015.

5 Act LIV of 1999 on cooperation and exchange of information within the framework of the European Union Law Enforcement Information System and the International Criminal Police Organization.

of the work of the member countries, but this does not in itself give INTERPOL as an international organisation a say in how it should develop its strategy, what issues it should address, what position it should take with international partners and, in general, what direction it should take in the future.

Although the annual General Assembly is INTERPOL's highest decision-making body, it takes decisions for the whole organisation and therefore for all its member countries worldwide. However, as the number of members increased, the need for a more restricted decision-making forum covering only one continent arose, and the system of regional conferences was created. These meetings typically discuss issues that concern the region and only take decisions that affect the countries concerned. The European Regional Conferences therefore have the power to take enforceable decisions for the region, to set up regional organisations or committees. This power was used to create the INTERPOL European Committee in 1991.

In order for a member country to have any form of influence on INTERPOL's decision-making process, its representative must have access to one of the decision-making or preparatory bodies. One such body is the INTERPOL European Committee. This is decided by application and nomination, but a specific feature of the system is that to have a realistic chance of getting in, a Member State needs to nominate an expert with sufficient experience, especially an INTERPOL background, to make a successful application. In addition to several years of experience, a candidate must also regularly participate in events such as international conferences, meetings, seminars, training courses. This is why it was a great success that the European Regional Conference in Tel Aviv in 2012 voted in favour of Hungary's candidate.

The members of the eight-member committee are elected by the European Regional Conference by simple majority for a four-year term. In practice, this means that two members are elected each year at the INTERPOL European Regional Conference meeting, thus ensuring rotation between countries and the principle of equality. The chairperson of the Committee is elected by secret ballot at the Committee meeting for a one-year renewable term.⁶ If a member is unable to attend at least three meetings a year, a new member may be elected by decision of the European Regional Conference. Representation of all the countries of the European region is achieved by eight members representing not only their own country but also six to eight other countries. Three ordinary meetings are held each year (usually in February, September and November), but extraordinary meetings can be organised in case of need. In addition to the

6 Hungary gained membership from 2012–2016, including three years as president.

members, the Chair, Vice-Chairs and members of the Executive Committee are invited to attend the meetings, as well as other organisations and experts on committee decision. In general, the Secretary General of INTERPOL, the Special Representative in Brussels, the INTERPOL Liaison Officer seconded to Europol, the Europol Liaison Officer seconded to INTERPOL, the responsible Directors and experts in the relevant subjects and external experts on an ad hoc basis are invited, but they do not have the right to vote. The Committee shall have a quorum if half of its members are present. Each member has one vote and decisions are taken by simple majority (Hegyaljai, 2017).

INTERPOL Executive Committee

The 13-member body oversees the operation and activities of INTERPOL, where each continent is represented and where the INTERPOL President is also the chair of the committee. Members are elected for a term of 1–3 years at the INTERPOL General Assembly. In this context, it is of great importance that a representative of a Member State is able to become a member. The greatest Hungarian success in the history of INTERPOL so far is that Hungary was able to nominate a candidate who won a significant majority of the votes of the member states at the 2016 INTERPOL General Assembly in Indonesia, and thus became a member of the Commission. In the previous chapter, it was already mentioned that the candidate for the INTERPOL European Committee has to be ‘built up’ for the candidature, but for this forum this statement is much more valid, as here it is not only the European votes that have to be obtained, but also the majority votes of all member states. Looking at each election, it is safe to say that smaller countries are running at a significant disadvantage. In the process, each continent has a quota, and always applies for the vacant seat. Only countries from that continent can apply for the vacant seats, but each country votes for its candidate. This system is quite disadvantageous for less well-known countries. However, this inequality could be reduced by having only the countries of the region vote for the candidates for each regional seat, as they would know each other better, have a better idea of who is a reliable or punctual partner for cooperation, and take better account of the possibilities for rotation. This solution would, however, require a change to the Constitution of INTERPOL, which is currently not a reality.

General Assembly

As mentioned above, INTERPOL's main decision-making body is the INTERPOL General Assembly ([URL3](#)). It is held once a year and all countries are invited to the event, although not all 195 members attend. Decisions are taken by passing resolutions. These can include any decision relating to the operation of the organisation, which may include budget, strategy, programmes, activities, membership and staffing. They are prepared and placed on the agenda by the Executive Committee. Naturally, during the four-day meeting, in addition to resolutions, a wide range of topics will be discussed, taking into account crime trends and geographical specificities. The diversity of these is illustrated by the structure of the agenda of a General Assembly ([Barnett & Coleman, 2005](#)).

The event has a special, well-meaning multicultural atmosphere, as it brings together police chiefs from different continents. In addition to the lectures, there is also the opportunity to meet or negotiate bilaterally with representatives of countries with which cooperation is less intensive or with which it is otherwise not possible to have personal contacts because of geographical distances. On the margins of the General Assembly, and at the same time and in the same venue, a security exhibition is being held where the world's leading companies will present their latest developments, providing an opportunity to network with the private sector and even to do business.

Why does a country assume the responsibility of hosting a General Assembly when it requires significant financial and human resources? Prestige comes first. Secondly, it gives a much better chance of getting into the international law enforcement circulation. Thirdly, there is the opportunity for a country to show its commitment to law enforcement. If successful, the system developed can serve as an example for other partners. If it is not, it can use this event to show that it is ready to play a bigger role and also to show where it needs support. For countries that are less well known or smaller globally, hosting a conference, usually with around a thousand participants, is a particularly good opportunity. The choice of which country can host the General Assembly depends on both who applies to host it and whether the General Assembly accepts the right to host it.

In addition to the fact that Hungary regularly participates in these meetings as a member, it should also be remembered that in 2001 Hungary hosted the 70th General Assembly of INTERPOL in Budapest. One of its special features was that it took place two weeks after the terrorist attack on the United States. The possibility of postponing the event was raised on several occasions, as the terrorist threat was extremely high in many countries. And then, at the start of

the opening session, the power went out in the conference room for a minute. Fortunately, it was just a technical problem.

Despite the concerns, Hungary agreed to host the event and we are proud to say that it was a great success.

This year's 91st INTERPOL General Assembly will symbolically take place in Vienna, where the Hungarian delegation will be present as it was 100 years ago.

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Online links in the article

URL1: *General Secretariat*. <https://www.interpol.int/Who-we-are/INTERPOL-100/1923-how-our-history-started>

URL2: *J/1040. számú jelentés a társulási megállapodás végrehajtásának előrehaladásáról és a további végrehajtásra szolgáló kormányzati intézkedési terv megvalósulásáról, valamint általában Magyarországnak az Európai Unióba történő integrációjának helyzetéről*. <https://www.parlament.hu/irom36/1040/1040.htm>

URL3: *General Assembly*. <https://www.interpol.int/Who-we-are/Governance/General-Assembly>

Laws and Regulations

Act LIV of 1999 on Cooperation and Exchange of Information within the Framework of the European Union Law Enforcement Information System and the International Criminal Police Organization

Reference of the article according to APA regulation

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