



Law Enforcement Training in the European Union



András Gaál

Head of Department, Police Lieutenant Colonel
Hungarian National Police Headquarters
International Training Centre
CEPOL Hungarian National Unit
gaal.andras@nokitc.hu



Abstract

Aim: This study examines the opportunities available to individual countries to act jointly and effectively against cross-border crime, with particular emphasis on the potential embedded in education.

Methodology: In addition to the legislation, recommendations, and best practices related to CEPOL's functioning, the study presents European Union law enforcement training based on the author's personal experience.

Findings: Beyond tracing the development and operation of CEPOL, the study provides insights into why a unified European law enforcement training system is important and necessary.

Value: The paper is practice-oriented and seeks to offer a comprehensive overview of CEPOL's role and history.

Keywords: CEPOL, international cooperation

Introduction

In the 21st century, there is no longer any doubt that criminal activities have long transcended national borders, and even continents. Just as globalization has advanced and become dominant in the economy, crime has also become a global phenomenon, as it is nothing more than another means of generating

The manuscript was submitted in English. Received: 22 July 2025. Revised: 29 July 2025.
Accepted: 16 August 2025.

profit. Consequently, if success is to be achieved in the field of law enforcement, a form of globalization must also be pursued there. This requires cooperation between states (continents, communities of nations). Once again, this is a case of law enforcement following in the footsteps of crime: the crossing of borders by crime preceded that of law enforcement. It is in the fundamental interest of every country to strengthen international cooperation, both in practical law enforcement and in the science of law enforcement. The former entails the exchange and flow of information, while the latter involves the development of unified standards for complex investigative and detection procedures. Such objectives can only be realized through broad-based intergovernmental cooperation.

This study explores the role played by CEPOL in enabling joint and effective action against cross-border crime, with particular emphasis on the opportunities offered by education.

The Establishment of the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL)

Common challenges and shared responsibilities made unified action necessary not only in operational terms but also in the field of training. As borders opened and unique forms of crime became exportable, a demand emerged not only for information exchange and joint action but also for law enforcement professionals to exchange their knowledge, thereby enabling more effective action against cross-border crime. It was in response to this demand that the idea of a unified European police training system was conceived.

The primary aim of establishing the European Police College (CEPOL) was to provide training for senior officers of EU Member States, supplementing national training with Union-level knowledge and best practices. One of the major achievements of the European Union is the freedom of movement, a right granted to all EU citizens. However, this also facilitated the free and uncontrolled movement of crime and offenders, which could only be effectively countered through closer cooperation among the police forces of Member States. This underscored the importance of creating an academy capable of offering European-level solutions in the areas of law enforcement, crime prevention, public order, and public security – particularly with regard to cross-border aspects – while supporting the exchange of experience among Member States as well as research and scientific work.

A key objective of CEPOL is to familiarize the national police forces of the Member States with the possibilities of cross-border police cooperation, since

successful collaboration requires that Member States understand precisely what they can expect from their partners and within which legal and organizational frameworks they can work together. The deepening of international and EU legal knowledge is also among its central goals.

The creation of a common European dimension for police training was decided by the European Council in 1999, and with Council Decision 2000/820/JHA, the European Police College was formally established. In 2001, CEPOL began operating as a network of police training institutions from EU Member States, with its Secretariat temporarily located in Copenhagen, Denmark. At that time, the Academy had neither a budget nor legal personality; its courses were organized from the human and financial resources of the Member States themselves.

The acronym CEPOL derives from the French Collège Européen de Police. The official English designation of the organization is European Police College, in Hungarian Európai Rendőrákadémia.

During the course of the Academy's operation, it became evident that in order to enhance efficiency, the organization needed its own budget and legal personality. Consequently, by Council Decision 2004/566/JHA, CEPOL was transformed into a European Union agency, while retaining its network-based operational character.

In its current form, since 1 July 2016, it has operated under the name European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training, while keeping the acronym CEPOL.

The network, which was transformed into an EU agency as of 1 January 2006, had previously maintained its permanent seat in Bramshill (United Kingdom). It was a significant achievement for Hungary when, in 2014, CEPOL was successfully relocated to our country; since then, its headquarters have been based in Budapest. Our commitment to the organization has remained unwavering, and Hungary—recognizing that in the field of law enforcement priorities, training and the exchange of experience among Member States must play a prominent role, and that independent, EU-level law enforcement education is indispensable—continues to support CEPOL's work. This support is reflected in the provision of a new, modern headquarters better suited to contemporary needs, while acknowledging the Agency's achievements to date.

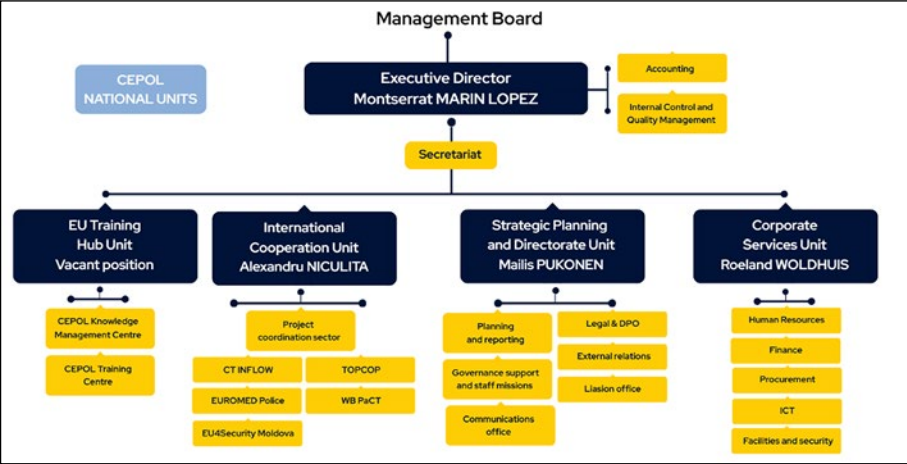
The Structure and Functioning of CEPOL

As previously noted, CEPOL operates both as a European Union agency and as a network of law enforcement training institutions of the Member States. This dual

nature is also reflected in its organizational structure. The Agency component of the Academy is located in Budapest and is headed by the Executive Director.

The decision-making body of CEPOL is the Management Board, composed of delegates—typically directors—of the law enforcement training institutions of the Member States. Each EU Member State is represented by one member with voting rights. The Chair of the Management Board is always provided by the country holding the rotating Presidency of the European Union. The Executive Director of the Agency reports to the Management Board on the Agency’s activities.

Figure 1
Decision-Making Body of CEPOL



Note. CEPOL

Key components of the organization are the National Contact Points (NCPs), responsible for coordinating and harmonizing work among the Member States, as well as the working groups, which are tasked with developing CEPOL’s programmes and training activities, and designing new initiatives.

All EU Member States are members of CEPOL, with associated countries participating without voting rights. CEPOL training courses are generally organized by national law enforcement training institutions that have concluded framework agreements with the Agency. In Hungary, the International Training Centre (ITC) has entered into such an agreement with CEPOL. The CEPOL Hungarian National Unit operates within the ITC, serving both as the National Contact Point for Hungary and as the body delegating Hungary’s voting member

to the Management Board. In simplified terms, the Management Board takes the decisions, the Agency is responsible for their implementation, and the Member States organize the training activities. In legal terms, CEPOL is represented by the Executive Director. The official working language of the Agency is English.

The Management Board currently meets twice a year. It discusses all matters requiring a decision, including work programmes, budgets, and new initiatives, and hears reports from the Agency and other experts. Between meetings, written procedures are used to decide on issues requiring a resolution. The appointment, extension of mandate, and dismissal of the Executive Director also fall within the competence of the Management Board. The Executive Director leads the Agency, manages daily operations, supports the work of the Management Board and the Member States, and is responsible for the implementation of the budget. The Agency drafts the annual budget and work programme, reports, proposals, and agreements, which are submitted to the Management Board for discussion and/or approval. The Agency coordinates the implementation of the approved work programme, provides logistical support to the Member States for the organization of training courses, arranges online programmes, and hosts seminars and meetings.

From an operational perspective, the National Contact Points play a key role in the organization, as they are responsible for national-level tasks related to CEPOL. Staff working there coordinate applications for training, travel arrangements for participants from their Member State, involvement in the exchange programme or other initiatives, and the organization of seminars awarded to their country. They cooperate with contact points in other Member States, ensuring the proper day-to-day functioning of the network. Representatives of the National Contact Points generally meet twice a year, similar to the Management Board.

CEPOL's core mission is therefore law enforcement training and responding proactively to current challenges arising from international crime. In formulating its long-term strategy as well as in designing specific training programmes, the Agency must take into account the principles, recommendations, and objectives set out in EU-level professional and political programmes and documents, as well as the risks and threats identified therein. Within this professional and political framework, CEPOL develops its various training and educational activities year by year (annual programme) and continuously enhances its service, educational, and expert potential in line with the needs of the Member States.

CEPOL training activities can be grouped into three main categories. The largest group consists of seminars, courses, and conferences, of which approximately 100–150 are organized annually by the Member States and the Agency. These training events place strong emphasis on the European dimension: in

addition to the host country, at least three supporting countries and several EU institutions participate in their delivery, thereby fostering European-level, collective thinking. Typically attended by 25–30 participants, these courses provide significant added value by enabling professionals working in the same field to meet in person, discuss problems and challenges, and share best practices.

The second major category comprises online training formats (webinars, e-lessons, e-workshops, online modules). While they lack the added value of personal interaction inherent in traditional seminars, they offer the advantage of being recorded and accessible for later viewing, and they allow for a much larger number of participants at a time. Furthermore, they are cost-effective, as there are no expenses for travel, accommodation, or subsistence: participants can join directly from their own offices, and their absence from work is usually limited to only a few hours.

The third category of training is the exchange programme, which is unsurprisingly one of CEPOL's most popular products. The Agency pairs applicants according to their professional fields, enabling them to undertake one-week study visits to each other's organizations. The programme fosters closer ties between professionals working in the same area and offers the opportunity to become acquainted with the capacities and methods of other countries.

The Agency classifies training topics into various categories and prioritizes them in line with European Union guidelines. CEPOL continuously monitors crime trends and, based on the findings as well as proposals from the Member States, compiles the priority training themes. These include, among others:

- Serious and organised crime
- Cybercrime
- Public order and crime prevention
- Strategic management for senior police officers
- Counter-terrorism
- International missions / Civil crisis management
- International police cooperation and information exchange

An overview of the above training categories clearly shows that CEPOL's activities cover almost the entire spectrum of law enforcement. Beyond courses focusing on specific, specialized areas (e.g., targeted searches or cybercrime), the Agency offers high-level, up-to-date training and cooperation opportunities for professionals working in European countries in leadership, research, scientific, crime prevention, police medical, and human rights fields. For Hungarian police officers, customs officials, civil servants, as well as colleagues engaged in education and research, CEPOL provides a comprehensive, high-quality training

portfolio that meets nearly all needs. This portfolio offers excellent opportunities to acquire the latest international practical and research knowledge, to become familiar with emerging criminal and public order trends, and to achieve European-level networking and partnership objectives.

Regardless of the type of training, the aim remains the same: to strengthen European law enforcement cooperation and to enhance professional expertise.

Figure 2

CEPOL–ITC DVI Training 2023



Note. CEPOL

The target group of CEPOL training courses previously consisted primarily of senior police officers, as involving the leadership was considered more effective than training the broader staff given the limited number of participants. Today, this is only partly true, since the emergence of new training formats and the changing needs and expectations towards CEPOL have led to a transformation of the target audience. Taking advantage of the opportunities offered by online courses, many frontline police officers have also come into contact with the Agency. Moreover, by incorporating proposals from Member States and other institutions, CEPOL now provides training for professionals working in other areas of law enforcement, alongside or together with police officers.

In the globalized world of the 21st century, the growing effectiveness and risks of cross-border crime and terrorism continuously pose renewed challenges to international and European law enforcement agencies as well as to European political leadership. These challenges demand adequate and up-to-date responses not only from individual European states and institutions but also from organizations responsible for law enforcement training at the European level.

In response to these challenges, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL), which plays a leading role in the field of European law enforcement training, adopts a strategy for each programming cycle and, at the level of specific training programmes (courses/seminars, online modules) as well as individual projects (working groups, the creation of an expert database, etc.), proactively addresses the current challenges arising from international crime. In formulating both its long-term strategy and its specific training programmes, the Agency must take into account the principles, recommendations, and objectives set out in European Union professional and political programmes and documents, as well as the risks and threats identified therein. Within this professional and political framework, the Agency designs its various training and educational activities year by year (annual programme) and continuously develops its service, educational, and expert potential in line with the needs of the Member States—enhanced since 2013 by the establishment of a lecturer–presenter–researcher database.

Among the most significant European professional and political documents shaping training programmes, those of greatest importance for CEPOL include the Stockholm Programme, the Treaty of Lisbon, Europol's Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA), and the priorities set out within EMPACT. In previous years as well, CEPOL based the design of its annual training portfolio on earlier documents of a similar profile that preceded these. In addition, CEPOL takes into account and evaluates further guidelines and recommendations contained in documents issued by various political and professional bodies and institutions of the European Union (e.g., the Standing Committee on Operational Cooperation on Internal Security – COSI, the European Council, etc.).

CEPOL's strategic programme, as well as its annual programmes, are developed transparently and democratically, taking into consideration professional and political expectations. On the one hand, the drafting of the programmes and the preparation of the final documents are carried out with the involvement of European political and professional organizations—including the European Commission, Europol, various EU agencies and networks such as ENFSI (European Network of Forensic Science Institutes). On the other hand, before decisions are taken, the CEPOL Management Board also considers the needs

and proposals put forward at the level of the Member States, which are integrated into the Agency's professional programmes in accordance with established democratic mechanisms.

Outlook

CEPOL is a developing European Union agency that continuously improves the quality and range of its services in line with European legislative obligations and the needs of the Member States. CEPOL strives to become the Union's central hub for law enforcement training, equipping law enforcement personnel with the skills required to prevent and combat the crime of today and tomorrow. Its strategic goal is to foster a common law enforcement culture through training and to promote the accreditation of vocational law enforcement education. In addition, as a modern EU agency, it also seeks to set an example in organizational management.

With regard to forms of European cooperation, it can be observed that the common institutions are composed of European countries sharing similar traits and historical, social, and cultural development. Due to their criminal situations and geographical location, these countries exert a direct influence on one another's security environment, and their public safety responsibilities are therefore closely interconnected. They have rightly recognized this interdependence and the need to coordinate their activities accordingly, since common problems require joint solutions based on cooperation among those concerned. Beyond geographical factors, it is also of great importance to recognize that in today's fast-paced, IT-driven world, personal relationships are vital in the field of police cooperation. Joint work carried out in direct, physical collaboration helps dismantle prejudices and strengthen trust among partners, and in recent years has contributed to the dismantling of numerous criminal organizations and the resolution of many cases.

The future, both in Europe and globally, points towards increasingly close cooperation.

Perhaps the most fitting way to summarize why it is so essential for cooperation among countries to remain uninterrupted is through the words of a former CEPOL Executive Director.

'In many respects, the future of Europe depends on whether we are able to meet the security challenges arising in the field of home affairs and justice, and whether we can address the threat of cross-border crime. The dynamism of European Union agencies such as Europol, Frontex, and Eurojust compels CEPOL

to keep pace with them and to support their law enforcement efforts. Furthermore, the renewal of CEPOL is strongly encouraged by the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon and the launch of the Stockholm Programme's action plan.

In the coming years—within the evolving framework of international law enforcement cooperation—ever greater expectations can be anticipated with regard to European police training. The creation of European training systems is one of the objectives that promotes a shift in teaching and learning from a quantitative to a qualitative approach. In line with this trend, CEPOL must have a jointly developed and clearly articulated strategy. (...)

In our conviction, the CEPOL network will function as a European law enforcement training centre and knowledge base characterized by the highest level of international excellence.¹

Dr Ferenc Bánfi

Executive Director of CEPOL

Conclusion

Crime knows no borders and is constantly evolving, and law enforcement must adapt to new trends and patterns. This includes understanding the dynamics of serious and organised crime, terrorism, and other emerging threats such as cross-border and hybrid challenges.

With technological advancement, law enforcement agencies must keep pace with new tools and methods, ranging from cybersecurity measures to advanced forensic techniques.

At the same time, law enforcement personnel at the European level often come from an ageing workforce, and they must both understand and apply new technologies, which requires further investment in training.

Law enforcement and training activities are a shared responsibility, and lasting results can only be achieved through cooperation and mutual support. Dialogue, the exchange of experience, new approaches, and the application of modern training methods are therefore of key importance.

For effective cross-border cooperation, there is an increasing need to establish a common EU law enforcement culture that applies all systems and cooperation mechanisms created at Union level, including the sharing of best practices through joint capacity-building activities.

1 Quality Approach, Quality Training – CEPOL Publication, 2010

Promoting lifelong learning for law enforcement officials may also require a new approach at the EU level.

A thorough and comprehensive assessment of current trends and the present situation would enable the creation of a Union-wide framework that supports responses tailored to actual needs and, potentially, the mutual recognition of learning outcomes, acknowledging qualifications acquired through any form of education and training.

Figure 3

13th Meeting of the CEPOL Management Board, 2024, Budapest



Note. CEPOL

References

-
- CEPOL. (2023). *CEPOL New Strategy 2023–2027*.
- Council of the European Union. (2010). *EU Policy Cycle*.
- Council of the European Union. (2010). *Stockholm Programme*.
- Horváczy, E., & Magyar, I. (2013). *A Rendészeti képzés az Európai Unióban* [Law enforcement training in the European Union]. BM NOK.

Laws and regulations

Act XXII of 2024 on the promulgation of the Headquarters Agreement between the Government of Hungary and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL). Council Decision (EU) 2015/2219 on the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL) and replacing and repealing Council Decision 2005/681/JHA. Council Decision 2000/820/JHA establishing the European Police College (CEPOL). Council Decision 2005/681/JHA establishing the European Police College (CEPOL) and repealing Decision 2000/820/JHA.

Reference of the article according to APA regulation

Gaál, A. (2025). Law Enforcement Training in the European Union. *Belügyi Szemle*, 73(9), 1993–2004. <https://doi.org/10.38146/BSZ-AJIA.2025.v73.i9.pp1993-2004>

Statements

Conflict of interest

The author has declared no conflict of interest.

Funding

The author has received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethics

No dataset is associated with this article.

Open access

This article is an Open Access publication published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY NC-ND 2.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>), in the sense that it may be freely used, shared and republished in any medium, provided that the original author and the place of publication, as well as a link to the CC License, are credited.

Corresponding author

The corresponding author of this article is András Gaál, who can be contacted at gaal.andras@nokitc.hu.