

For a safer and more secure Europe in a better world. European High Risk Security Network | cycle 2024–2025

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In the years 2024–2025, the European High Risk Security Network (EU-HRSN) – an EU network of uniformed special forces for high-risk operations¹ – operated under the leadership of the Portuguese Guarda Nacional Republicana (GNR). During this presidency, the Network’s focus gradually shifted from activities centred on the protection of public spaces and immediate response towards a broader resilience-building approach. The focus was on capacity-building as well as current and future threats. The Network provides both practitioners and researchers with regular opportunities to meet representatives from organisations involved in combating threats, thereby enabling them to learn about current initiatives and forms of cooperation aimed at protecting public spaces during a period of geopolitical instability, armed conflict as well as growing security and safety challenges at international, regional and local levels.

¹ More on the EU-HRSN, see: G. Salazar, *Spanish Presidency of the EU High Risk Security Network held by the Guardia Civil through the Grupo de Acción Rápida*, “Terrorism – Studies, Analyses, Prevention” 2023, no. 4, pp. 525–535. <https://doi.org/10.4467/27204383TER.23.038.18340>.

The origins and aims of the EU-HRSN

In 2017, in response to an increase in terrorist attacks, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union adopted Directive (EU) 2017/541 on combating terrorism². This was a key milestone in the EU's counterterrorism architecture, reinforcing the legal and operational basis for preventing and responding to terrorist threats. Building upon this foundation, the *EU Action Plan – Union for Security: Protection of Public Spaces*³ was introduced to enhance the security and resilience of public accessible areas. This initiative provided the institutional and strategic groundwork for the establishment of the EU-HRSN network, which took place on 1 November 2018. It was established to strengthen cooperation, exchange knowledge and coordinate activities between Member States, in the field of public space protection, while taking into account traditional protective measures limitations in the context of evolving terrorist and criminal threats. This objective reflects an increased awareness of the so-called soft targets vulnerabilities, which stem from their public and shared nature, along with the high concentration of people who could be exposed to potential harm. In this context, the Network aims to preserve the openness, accessibility and inclusive nature of public spaces across the EU while avoiding the implementation of overly restrictive or highly visible armed security measures that could undermine their social function. Accordingly, the EU-HRSN promotes the adoption of proportionate and effective protective strategies aimed at reducing vulnerabilities and mitigating the impact of potential attacks.

The EU-HRSN operates within the Law Enforcement Networks ecosystem under the Counter-Terrorism Unit (D2) of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME). Since its establishment, the EU-HRSN has been chaired by: the Dutch *Royal Netherlands Marechaussee* (2018–2021), the Spanish *Guardia Civil* (2021–2023) and, as mentioned, the Portuguese *Guarda Nacional Republicana* (2024–2025).

² Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on combating terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA (Official Journal of the EU L 88/6 of 31 III 2017).

³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Action Plan to support the protection of public spaces, COM(2017) 612 final.

The structure of the EU-HRSN

The Network's continuity depends not only on rotating leadership, but also on institutional memory, in other words, how the experience gained in crisis situations is put to use. For that reason, the structure of the EU-HRSN rests on permanent programme office support, acting as a secretariat, in close cooperation with the previous and future chairmanship (in the case of Portugal, this is, respectively, Spanish – Guardia Civil, and French – Gendarmerie Nationale), thereby ensuring strategic alignment over a longer time horizon (6 years' window).

At the tactical and operational level, the Network is organised into three pillars: Working Groups, Cooperation and Coordination, as well as Projects and Initiatives. The Working Groups are the heart of the Network and develop key topics that have been formally approved by the European Commission (EC): Risk assessment, Tactical UAS & C-UAS⁴, Tactical Rescue Response, Human Factor, and Protective Security Advise & Coordination for Major Events (Figure 1). The Cooperation and Coordination pillar establishes a permanent link with ongoing stakeholders, while the Projects and Initiatives pillar provides ad-hoc support for specific events, such as training courses, conferences and webinars⁵.

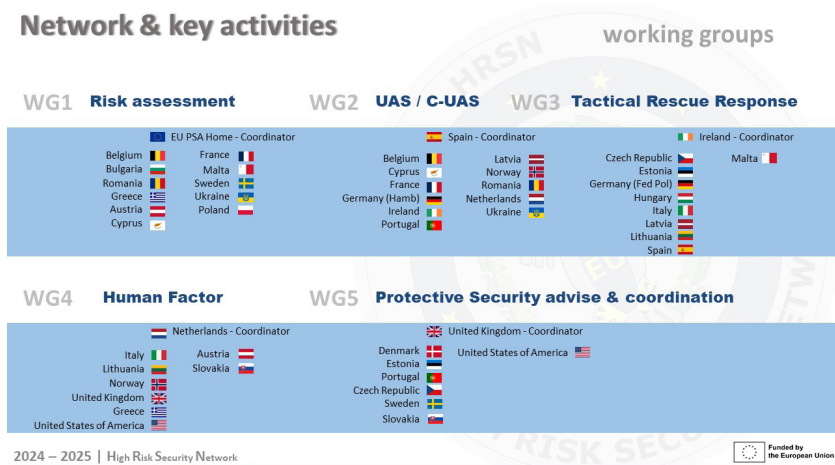


Figure 1. Network structure and Working Groups.

Source: EU-HRSN's own materials.

⁴ UAS – unmanned aerial system; C-UAS – counter-unmanned aerial system (editor's note).

⁵ See: <https://hrsn.eu/sample-page/>.

Responsibility for network management lies with the Steering Group, as approved by a majority at the first General Conference of the current cycle (Image 1). The Steering Group comprises the previous chair, the vice-chair (who will become the next chair), the Working Group Coordinators, an observer from the European Commission and invited experts.



Image 1. EU-HRSN General Conference, 22 February 2024.

Source: EU-HRSN's own materials.

Conceptual approach and the achievements of the Portuguese Presidency

As outlined in the Public Spaces Protection Action Plan, the EU-HRSN brings together representatives from 41 specialised law enforcement units across 30 countries⁶, including non-EU partners such as the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the New York Police Department (NYPD), as well as intervention forces from Kenya, Ghana and Senegal. The EU-HRSN also benefits from the participation of the DG HOME and the Protective Security Advisors (PSA), namely the programme run by the EU group of advisers on building resilience to threats, which facilitates contact

⁶ See: <https://hrsn.eu>.

with experts in security and risk assessment. The EU-HRSN cooperates closely with the Joint Research Centre (JRC) and the PRESERVE, ESIWA+ and Public Spaces+ projects, alongside other Law Enforcement Networks (AIRPOL, AQUAPOL, ATLAS, EIFS, ENLETS, ESG and RAILPOL) under the coordination of the European Commission's DG HOME D2.

The Network has adopted a case-study approach (Figure 2), examining in depth the terror incidents that have occurred in Europe over the past two decades and other events (Figure 3). This approach is based on a permanent learning process to help us better understand how to avoid and prevent similar incidents in a near future. The EU-HRSN supports the EU commissions and Member States in setting priorities, strategies and mechanisms to deter, prevent, dissuade, protect and mitigate those threats, while studying current and future challenges, identifying vulnerabilities and working on capacity building development needs. The case-study approach is based on the *Pathway to violence* theory, which is rooted in the behavioural research conducted by Frederick Calhoun and Steve Weston in 2016⁷. This theory provides a general model that explains how and why incidents of targeted violence occur. It also defines a framework for identifying, preventing and managing threats, which may enable us to break the chain of violence and prevent future incidents.

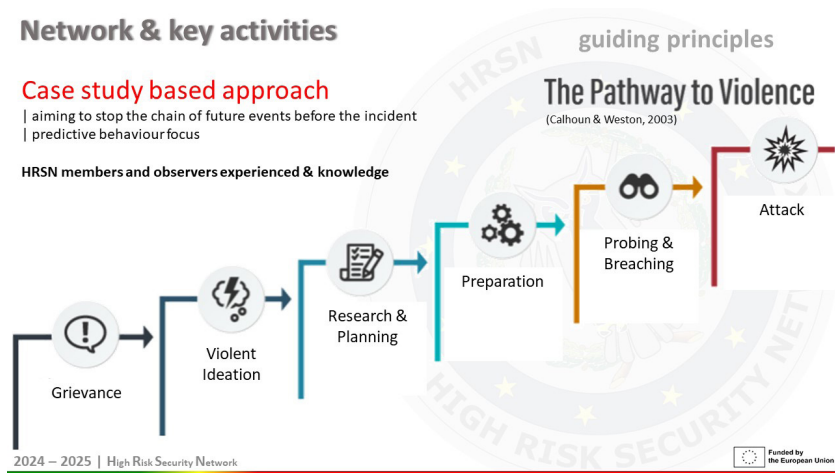


Figure 2. Case-study approach.

Source: EU-HRSN's own materials.

⁷ *Pathway to Violence*, CISA, 24 II 2023, <https://www.cisa.gov/resources-tools/resources/pathway-violence> [accessed: 17 VI 2026].

Network & key activities



Figure 3. Some of the selected events from 2025 analysed by the EU-HRSN.

Source: EU-HRSN's own materials.

The Portuguese chairmanship, represented by the GNR Intervention Unit (Unidade de Intervenção)⁸, integrates highly specialised forces in the areas of Crowd and Riot Control, SWAT and Special Operations, Explosives and Underground Security, and K9 (units with service dogs), as well as pre-deployment training capabilities. The unit's wide scope easily links it to several international specialised networks within the European framework, such as ATLAS, ENLETS, EU PSA, EOD, RAILPOL, FRONTEX and CEPOL, among others. This has enabled the EU-HRSN to easily collaborate with other stakeholders in the protection of public spaces, working in a multilayer integrated perspective.

Throughout the Portuguese presidency, the Network supported the production and harmonisation of tactics, techniques and procedures, the drafting of directives as well as technical and tactical content, the collection and dissemination of identified lessons, as well as the consolidation and development of capabilities in the field of public space protection. Thanks to a strong momentum across the five established Working Groups and ongoing cooperation with other networks, projects and European forums dedicated to this issue, valuable contributions were

⁸ GNR – Unidade de Intervenção, Facebook profile, <https://www.facebook.com/gnr.ui.intervencao> [accessed: 17 VI 2026].

made to reinforce the aforementioned critical security areas, fully in line with objectives previously approved by the EC.

Of the 104 activities organised or attended by the Network⁹ (involving 1097 EU-HRSN experts), particular emphasis should be given to the creation and delivery of several training and exercise initiatives:

- *Advanced Operators Counter-Unmanned Aircraft Systems Training Course*, delivered in cooperation with the JRC C-UAS laboratory in Belgium, strengthening technical and tactical CUAS capabilities;
- *Search, Detect and React Training Course*, implemented in cooperation with the Lithuanian Police (1st edition) and the Greek Police (2nd edition), enhancing the detection of suspicious behaviour in public spaces;
- *Tactical Rescue Response* training and exercises, held in Ireland (1st edition) and Spain (2nd edition), improving operational interoperability of first responders in active attacker scenarios, involving specialists from multiple countries with police, emergency services and armed forces background;
- *Workshop and table top exercise on Protective Security advice and coordination*, organised in Portugal, aiming to better coordinate the response to a crisis situations by different entities and organisations;
- Several online web conferences were held, involving a wide set of partners working on public spaces protection. These conferences aimed to share knowledge and identify lessons on key topics such as arms trafficking, 3D printing, case studies on active shooters and insider threats, threat assessment and risk management, lessons learned from security operations during the 33rd Olympic Games in Paris and His Holiness Pope Francis' visit to the Sanctuary of Fátima, vehicle barrier systems, detection of suspicious behaviour, and JRC technological support tools.

One of the Network most significant achievements during the Portuguese presidency is considered to be the operationalisation of a Pool & Sharing (P&S) mechanism. This is an innovative high-impact solution that enables the agile and reliable mobilisation of specialised

⁹ Ibid.

assets and experts to reinforce high-risk international events security. This is achieved through the deployment of non-executive technical support teams, thereby strengthening Member States capacity to prepare and conduct complex security events, in a context of limited resources and demanding operational requirements.

One example of the use of this mechanism was the deployment for *Operation David*, providing security for the visit of the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, to Ireland. Since the implementation, the P&S mechanism has been activated 10 times, resulting in 58 operational deployment days (a total of 470 hours) and the direct involvement of 47 police experts from member countries. This clearly reflects the credibility achieved by the EU-HRSN and emphasises its capacity to turn international cooperation into an effective operational response.

Challenges

Looking ahead, challenges for the EU-HRSN in the area of security require a shift from a narrow focus on protection, prevention and immediate response towards a broader crosscutting approach. This aims to maintain a functional operating environment in times of crises, strengthening resilience and preparedness levels, based in a security and safety community culture development and a clear investment on security by design principles. This approach should involve security forces first responders, emergency services as well as specialised units, people and politicians in a collective organised effort, as a permanent learning and capacity building process.

In response to this challenge, good practices and innovative solutions must be made available to public spaces partners and stakeholders, helping to bridge the gap between security research and operational needs. The focus should be on new and emerging security threats, as well as ensuring the necessary operational synergies between civilian, police and military components.

The P&S mechanisms referred to as *Rapid Counter-drone Emergency Response Teams* in the *Action Plan on Drone and Counter-Drone Security*¹⁰,

¹⁰ *Action Plan on Drone and Counter-Drone Security*, European Commission, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/drone-security> [accessed: 17 VI 2026].

must be able to provide cross-border coverage and deploy specialised mobile units in the context of high-risk and high-profile events, while maintaining interoperability. The mechanism is activated at the request of a Member State authority, as a mutual European assistance approach.

Security by design approach should be an essential principle applied when designing public spaces. For example, design concepts for building entrances and open public areas (e.g. access control zones and vehicles barriers) can mitigate risk and prevent hostile intrusions. Local authorities need to prioritise integrating security and safety partners in the renovation process of urban plans. This combination of the expertise from, among others, architects, planners and the police will enable the implementation of optimal, cost-effective, multi-functional and socially acceptable solutions¹¹.

Moreover, consolidating a European Union Risk Assessment Process Methodology is an important step towards a common model for assessing terror-related risks, and is the first step towards a collective approach to preparation and planning. The EU-HRSN and PSA have already made efforts in this area, proposing a three-step model that focuses on intent and capability, threat and vulnerabilities. This will allow procedures to be standardised and facilitate the dissemination of good practices among all EU members. The methodology applied was based on the following assumptions: clear identification of the risk owner; level and nature of threat, based on the *modus operandi* (scenario), hostile intent, capability and opportunity; worst-case consequences; level of vulnerability and residual risk; mitigation/counter measures recommendations.

The adoption of the new EU Agenda on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism¹² highlights the need to invest in early detection capabilities and innovations to protect citizens and public spaces from threats posed by explosives, drones, 3D-printed weapons, vehicle ramming and bladed weapons. Furthermore, the EU programme identifies

¹¹ M. Larcher, V. Karlos, R. Schumacher, D. Strezova, A. Caverzan, J. Coaffee, B. Moritz, A.V. Neves, S. Ilum, N. Gebbeken, A. Schröder, M. Schlüter, P. Warnstedt, M. Stewart, *Security by Design: Protection of public spaces from terrorist attacks*, JRC131172. The text is available on a website: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC131172>.

¹² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions ProtectEU: Agenda to prevent and counter terrorism, COM(2026) 101 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52026DC0101> [accessed: 17 VI 2026].

as a key action the support to testing and deployment of EU-funded solutions to equip law enforcement. These are areas in which the Network is actively ongoing developments through its working groups.

In line with the Directive on the resilience of critical entities¹³, the focus of public space prevention, protection and immediate response is shifting towards a wider challenge. Resilience is recognised as an increasingly important element of the overall framework for combating terrorism and hybrid threats. Private and public stakeholders must be, more than ever, prepared to counter incidents that could disrupt the functioning of essential services, to mitigate their effects, and to take remedial action.

Summary

During the 2024-2025 cycle, the EU-HRSN has grown in terms of partners and capabilities. It has consolidated its role as a relevant European and international stakeholder in the protection of public spaces by organising conferences, expert meetings, workshops, training programmes and international exercises. These activities systematically aligned efforts, shared good practices and developed technical, tactical and operational-level procedures.

The EU-HRSN is more than a cooperation forum, it has been evolving beyond its initial responsibilities as a European cooperation forum, assuming itself as an active security platform for knowledge development and specialised capability building in support of high-risk events and public areas. It translates cooperation into a structured instrument for a real and effective impact into daily security needs.

On 12 February 2026, the Portuguese Chairmanship symbolically handed over the Network leadership to the French counterpart of the GNR, the Gendarmerie Nationale, which actually took over on 1 March. The takeover of responsibilities should not be seen as the, but as an opportunity for renovated energy, taking advantage of the momentum, institutional memory and operational network credibility to implement and consolidate the EC action plans and agenda.

¹³ Directive (EU) 2022/2557 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on the resilience of critical entities and repealing Council Directive 2008/114/EC (Official Journal of the EU L 333/164 of 27 XII 2022).

The Portuguese GNR's commitment to national and international cooperation in the field of specialised intervention and public spaces protection will remain fully active within the EU-HRSN and across the various platforms, the GNR participates, as a proactive, dynamic and highly proficient partner, fully aware that, by working together and aligning efforts, we will be always better prepared to deal with (in)security challenges.

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