



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
LiA Project Report

**From the Ground Up: Community-Driven Solutions to
Transnational Organized Crime**

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1. Background and Objectives

GI-TOC's medium-term strategy (2024–26) commits the organisation to strengthening analytical evidence, developing programmes that disrupt criminal markets, amplifying civil-society voices and building resilience in vulnerable communities. My initial LiA project proposed to support two community-based initiatives funded by the Resilience Fund in Haiti and South-East Asia. However, upon arriving in Vienna, I was asked to focus on GI-TOC's multilateral engagement agenda. Rather than pursuing unrelated tasks, the revised project integrated multiple research and advocacy streams into a cohesive six-week plan aimed at influencing two landmark global events: the Fifteenth Crime Congress (April 2026) and the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime. The Convention commonly known as the Hanoi Convention will open for signature in Hanoi in October 2025. The following sections synthesise the outputs delivered, and the insights gained across this six-week project.

The project's objectives evolved to:

1. **Analyse the outcomes of the regional preparatory meetings (RPMs) for the Fifteenth Crime Congress** and identify opportunities to advance civil-society participation and realistic assessments of transnational organised crime.
2. **Monitor state positions and contribute to advocacy in the negotiation of the United Nations Convention against Cybercrime (Hanoi Convention)**, culminating in participation at two rounds of negotiations at UN headquarters and supporting preparations for the October 2025 signing ceremony in Hanoi.

3. **Support the Eurasia Observatory with targeted research** on (a) the political economy of organised crime in Belarus, (b) the use of digital currencies by criminal actors in Central Asia and (c) the expansion of Uzbek criminal groups.
4. **Conduct open-source research on emergent forms of trafficking**, particularly egg trafficking and illegal surrogacy, and craft a public-facing blog on human-trafficking flows from South America to Europe.

2. Methodology

The methodology combined policy analysis, open-source intelligence (OSINT), stakeholder engagement and field observation:

- **RPM analysis:** I reviewed official RPM outcome documents from five regional meetings (Asia-Pacific, Western Asia, Latin America & Caribbean, Europe and Africa). I then coded recommendations relating to civil-society participation, human rights, and organised crime ecosystems. The analysis identified cross-cutting themes and gaps, transforming into a guidance note used internally at GI-TOC for advocacy.
- **Cybercrime convention monitoring:** Using UN documents, press releases and civil-society statements, I created a source document of state positions on key issues: the scope of offences, electronic evidence sharing, human-rights safeguards and implementation mechanisms. I updated the matrix weekly and used it to develop talking points for GI-TOC delegations.
- **Open-source research:** For the Eurasia Observatory tasks, I consulted media reports, academic publications and government data. In the digital-currency stream I focused on the ruble-backed A7A5 stablecoin, drawing on investigative reporting that documented

its rapid growth (transactions exceeding \$40 billion by July 2025) and its role in sanction-evasion schemes. For human egg-trafficking research, I compiled case studies from news outlets (e.g., Georgian surrogacy scams, Greek illegal adoptions, Indian egg-trafficking ring and surrogacy prosecutions in Cambodia).

- **Stakeholder engagement:** I worked closely with GI-TOC staff across departments and attended two rounds of cybercrime convention negotiations at the UN headquarters in Vienna. These meetings provided real-time insights into diplomatic dynamics and allowed me to apply research findings to advocacy.
- **Public communication:** I authored a blog that synthesised research on human-trafficking flows from South America to Europe (to be published by GI-TOC in late October). The blog highlighted recent cases, such as Spain's dismantling of a ring that forced more than 1 000 Venezuelan and Colombian women into sex work and analysed how traffickers exploit drug routes and migrant smuggling corridors.

3. Key Findings

3.1 Regional Preparatory Meetings for the Fifteenth Crime Congress

The RPMs helped recognize both the opportunities and challenges for civil-society participation at the Fifteenth Crime Congress. Many regions highlighted the need for inclusive, evidence-based approaches to organized crime; however, proposed recommendations often focused on strengthening state capacities without specifying mechanisms for engaging communities. Latin America and the Caribbean stressed human rights and alternative development; Africa highlighted the importance of community resilience; Europe emphasized the need to prioritize combating cybercrime and environmental crime; and Western Asia focused

on terrorism and border security. These varied priorities suggest that GI-TOC’s advocacy should tailor messages to regional contexts while consistently promoting civil-society involvement, a recommendation I consistently made throughout my LiA. A recurring gap I found in regions’ strategies and priorities was the lack of explicit recognition of victims and survivors. GI-TOC’s strategy to “place victims and survivors of organised crime in the spotlight” provides an entry point for filling this gap.

3.2 UN Convention against Cybercrime

On 24 December 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention against Cybercrime as part of a suite of resolutions. The treaty will open for signature at a high-level ceremony hosted by Viet Nam in Hanoi on 25–26 October 2025 before remaining open at UN headquarters until the end of 2026. While some states praised the convention as a universal framework for combating crimes committed using information technologies, human-rights organizations warned that it grants governments broad surveillance powers and lacks enforceable safeguards to expression and privacy. The treaty obliges states to collect electronic evidence and share it for any serious crime with the corresponding officials, raising concerns that legitimate activities such as journalism, peaceful protest or same-sex relationships could be criminalized. GI-TOC’s position emphasised that implementation must respect human rights and that civil society should be involved in the design of future protocols. The final resolution acknowledges the need for continued dialogue, providing a window for advocacy.

3.3 Digital Currencies and Organized Crime in Eurasia

The emergence of the ruble-backed A7A5 stablecoin shows how digital currencies can facilitate sanctions evasion and illicit trade. Launched in January 2025 by Russian bank Promsvyazbank and payments firm A7, A7A5 is issued in Kyrgyzstan and enables cross-border payments outside the SWIFT system. By July 2025, blockchain analysis showed that funds moved through A7A5 exceeded \$40 billion, with over \$1 billion transferred daily. Investigations by TRM Labs and Elliptic indicate that the coin is linked to networks importing dual-use goods from China to Russia. Central Asian regulatory frameworks have struggled to keep pace with this, creating gaps and opportunities for criminal actors to deepen activities. These findings suggest that GI-TOC and partners should monitor emerging crypto-assets, advocate for harmonized regulations and explore how illicit finance intersects with organised crime.

3.4 Political Economy of Organized Crime in Belarus and Uzbek Networks

Belarus's political economy has long been intertwined with illicit markets, from cigarette smuggling to drug trafficking. Open-source reports of drug seizures reveal a pattern where state-embedded actors benefiting from trafficking routes. I also noted a recurring trend of Uzbek criminal groups expanding westwards. Reports suggest that some Uzbek networks have re-established themselves in Russia and are moving into parts of Europe by posing as Ukrainian refugees. This expansion is a clear example of how conflict and displacement create openings for organized crime and emphasized the need for cooperation between Eastern European law-enforcement agencies.

3.5 Egg Trafficking and Illegal Surrogacy

Egg trafficking and illegal surrogacy are emerging forms of human trafficking that exploit vulnerable women. In Georgia, Thai women were lured with promises of surrogacy work but were instead forced to undergo monthly egg-retrieval procedures and had their passports confiscated. In Greece, authorities dismantled a network that recruited pregnant women from Bulgaria, placed them in private hospitals and sold newborns for €25 000–€28 000; some women were also used as surrogates and had their ovaries harvested at the same time. In India's Varanasi district, a gang coerced teenage girls into donating eggs by forging documents and promising payment; victims received only a fraction of what they were promised. In 2020, Cambodia witnessed a surrogacy case where 32 women were convicted of human trafficking under laws not designed for surrogacy, a legal vacuum exploited for victim criminalisation. These cases share common features: deceptive recruitment, exploitation of economic vulnerability, lack of regulatory oversight and involvement of corrupt medical professionals. Addressing egg trafficking requires robust legal frameworks, cross-border cooperation and survivor-centred interventions. This was communicated in the UN meetings to member states.

3.6 Human-Trafficking Flows from South America to Europe

My blog research highlighted a surge in trafficking of South American women to Europe for sexual exploitation. In February 2025 Spanish police dismantled a ring that trafficked more than 1 000 women, mostly from Venezuela and Colombia, into sex work; victims were lured with false job offers and coerced into sexual work once in Spain. Similar cases have emerged across Europe, often linked to broader criminal networks involved in other forms of criminality like cocaine trafficking and migrant smuggling. Economic crises, political instability and

humanitarian emergencies in countries of origin make women vulnerable to exploitation.

Traffickers exploit established drug routes across the Atlantic and often operate with impunity due to limited cooperation between source and destination countries. These findings show the clear need for integrated responses that address organised crime holistically.

4. Recommendations

1. **Establish cross-regional early-warning and information-sharing mechanisms.** To detect emerging trafficking patterns and illicit financial flows, GI-TOC should convene networks of civil-society organisations, journalists and researchers across source, transit and destination regions. New and existing platforms could facilitate real-time alerts on cases like the A7A5 stablecoin or egg-trafficking rings. Such mechanisms align with GI-TOC's strategic objective to expand networks of action and promote knowledge exchange.
2. **Advocate for survivor-centred legal frameworks.** Governments should ensure that victims of surrogacy or egg trafficking are treated as victims, not criminals. The Cambodian case shows the harm of applying generic trafficking laws to surrogate mothers. GI-TOC can support legal reforms that clarify consent, regulate fertility clinics, and provide medical and psychosocial support. Where existing laws prohibit surrogacy, authorities should adopt policies that prevent prosecution of coerced women and target organizers instead.
3. **Strengthen regulation and oversight of digital currencies in Eurasia.** The rapid growth of the A7A5 stablecoin and its use for sanctions evasion highlight the need for coordinated regulatory responses. GI-TOC should work with Central Asian governments,

financial-intelligence units and crypto-analysis firms to monitor transactions, identify illicit actors and develop best-practice guidelines. In tandem, capacity-building programmes could help authorities understand blockchain technology and its use by organized crime.

5. Conclusion

This LiA placement evolved from a planned community-engagement project into an immersive experience at the nexus of research, advocacy and diplomacy. By analysing RPM outcomes, monitoring cybercrime negotiations, researching organised-crime trends and documenting emerging trafficking crimes, I contributed to GI-TOC's mission of combining evidence with action. Participating in UN negotiations showed me firsthand how civil society can influence global norms, while collaborating with observatories and writing for the public taught me the value of cross-disciplinary communication. The recommendations above aim to strengthen community-driven responses to organised crime and reflect the lessons learned over six weeks.