

Call ID: PING-2024-1–Dark-Web

Title: Dark web monitoring to counter illicit trade in New Psychoactive Substances (NPSs), firearms, and other contraband

Summary: *In the context of customs risk assessment, PEN-CP customs partners aim for cutting-edge knowledge on the merits of accessing information and retrievable data from dark web marketplaces that trade in goods such as NPSs, firearms, and one additional illicit product/material (to be chosen by the Selected Supplier). Such information may be useful for risk assessment purposes (shipment targeting, operator profiling, etc.). The Selected Supplier will use an existing technology/software (whether their own or from a third party) to carry out monitoring and analysis activities in the dark web, and PEN-CP customs partners will assess the value of the information presented during the project and in the final report. The results and findings can potentially help shape the future direction on how Customs administrations would best benefit from ‘information in the dark web’.*

Context, customs challenge and innovation opportunity

Today, a substantial portion of illicit cross-border trade is carried out covertly on the dark web, an encrypted portion of the internet that is inaccessible to conventional web browsers. The dark web hosts anonymous marketplaces for a wide range of illicit products, from illegal drugs and counterfeits to firearms and other weapons. Within the dark web, there is potential to access a valuable intelligence source for customs, providing evidence on trending illicit products, new smuggling techniques, shifts in destination countries, and other matters. More specific details may also be gathered, including addresses, payment techniques, routings, shipping schedules, and the configuration of various types of packaging. Such insights would help customs officers to stay abreast of trafficking activities, allowing them to adjust their control strategies accordingly, and focus inspection resources on high-risk shipments.

There is significant potential to leverage dark web intelligence for customs risk management purposes. However, the current adoption of dark web monitoring within customs agencies remains limited, owing to factors including the lack of proven concepts and operational tools, limited resources and lack of expertise. This conceptual and technical gap prevents customs agencies from monitoring the dark web effectively and integrating their findings into effective and informed customs risk management processes.

Innovation Grant: technical elements and expected results

- The anticipated outcome of this Innovation Grant is the delivery of a comprehensive report and a proof-of-concept for a proven dark web monitoring technique. This innovative approach aims to support customs data collection and analysis, particularly targeting risk assessment purposes.

- In terms of illicit commodities, the Innovation Grant should focus on the cross-border trade of New Psychoactive Substances (NPSs) and firearms. In addition, applicants are expected to address one additional illicit commodity of their preference within the project's scope.
- While applicants are strongly encouraged to showcase their existing technologies and services, they are still granted the freedom to propose any technologies, provided these demonstrate the potential to extract valuable information from the dark web for the explicit purpose of customs risk assessment.
- Potential techniques encompass automated web crawling, translation and transliteration methods, social engineering, as well as various data analytics approaches.
- The outputs of this work will undergo iterative refinement in collaboration with customs experts throughout the project, ensuring that the outcomes genuinely contribute value to customs operations.
- No transfer of IP rights is foreseen.

Anticipated project tasks include:

- Live kick-off and user requirement meeting with customs in the UK (Sep2024, exact date to be confirmed as part of the contract process).
- Configuring dark web monitoring tool(s) and running a round of information collection and analysis.
- Mid-term online meeting with customs, presenting interim results and agreeing details for the second round of dark web monitoring activities (Oct/Nov2024).
- Executing second round of dark web monitoring activities
- Production of full report, and presentation of the report at the final PEN-CP live event (Switzerland, Jan2025).

Common instructions for all PING calls

Announcement of call for proposals

This call for proposals for PEN-CP Innovation Grants (PINGs) is published on the PEN-CP project website at www.pen-cp.net/calls and on the European Commission portal at <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/home> (the direct link to the EC call text page will not be known at the time that the call is published on the PEN-CP website).

Eligibility of applicants

- The call is targeted for companies and research organizations (as 'legal persons'), which have a well-recognized ID such as a national registration number, a VAT number, etc.
- Proposals from individual persons or consortia are not eligible and will not be considered in the evaluation.
- Proposals from applicants with prior involvement in customs innovation projects are encouraged.

Application process

- Step 1: To express interest, the applicant should send an email to pen-cp@cross-border.org , **specifying the call identifier in the subject line**. The email should include the contact details of the applicant's designated representative, including their email address and phone number.
- Step 2: In a return email, the applicant will receive a designated applicant ID, indicating clearance to proceed with the full proposal submission.
- Step 3: The applicant should submit the full proposal by sending the three required documents to pen-cp@cross-border.org AND pen-cp-arttic@eurtd.com

Required documents for full proposal submission

- Document 1 — Technology starting point, main outputs and expected results
 - Explain the starting point with the technologies you propose to use and/or develop/innovate further.
 - Provide a comprehensive outline of the project's main outputs and results. This may incorporate technical diagrams where appropriate.
 - Please ensure that the document does not exceed 3 pages.
- Document 2 — Methodology, work plan and risk management
 - Detail the methodology, work plan and risk management plan, as well as any accompanying resources such as Gantt charts, person-day allocations, etc.
 - Please ensure that this document does not exceed 3 pages.
- Document 3 — CV of the project manager and CV of a key expert
 - Submit *curricula vitae* (CVs) for the project manager and one other key expert, detailing their respective relevant experience and skills.

- While there is no page limit, we encourage you to follow the Europass standard format.
 - *Additional action: Please include in the project manager CV cover page a web link to a (national) Register of Commerce or similar institution, where the legal entity data is visible. Alternatively, please include a separate extract document on the legal entity data.*
- *Please do not include a financial bid, since the grant amount is pre-determined as described at the end of this document.*

Submission language

- All documents must be in English.

Proposal evaluation and scoring

- Document 1 — Technology starting point, main outputs and expected results (max 42 points, threshold 25 points)
 - Suitability of the technologies / solutions you plan to use for project execution.
 - Feasibility to achieve the planned outputs and results of the project.
 - Anticipated impacts for the broader customs community.
- Document 2 — Methodology, work plan, risk management (max 42 points, threshold 25 points)
 - Proposed approach, techniques, and methodologies for conducting the project.
 - Project timeline with tasks outlined in the work plan, considering organization, scheduling, and resource allocation for efficient project execution.
 - Summary of key project risks and related mitigation measures.
- Document 3 — CV of the project manager and a key expert (max 16 points, threshold 10 points)
 - Capability to effectively carry out technical work and all project tasks.
 - Demonstrated experience and skills relevant to the project.
 - Past involvement in customs innovation projects is viewed favorably.
- *Full proposal: total points max 100 (threshold 60 – aggregation of individual document thresholds).*

Evaluation and contract signing process

- Step 1: Evaluation of all proposals through scoring and ranking.
- Step 2: Selection of the applicant (referred to as the Selected Supplier) with the highest score and initiation of the contractual process.
- Step 3: Notification of evaluation results to all other applicants.
- Step 4: Contracting with the Selected Supplier.
- Step 5: If the contract cannot be finalized with the Selected Supplier, the next highest scoring applicant may be invited for contract negotiation (then proceed with Step 4).

Questions and Answers

- All questions should be addressed to pen-cp@cross-border.org AND pen-cp-arttic@eurtd.com
- *Please specify the call identifier in the subject line of your email.*
- All questions from applicants will be published along with their respective answers at www.pen-cp.net/calls

Publication of evaluation results

- Results of the evaluations will be published in due course at www.pen-cp.net/calls

Innovation Grant Panels

- Each PEN-CP Innovation Grant (PING) has its dedicated Innovation Grant Panel, whose responsibilities will include proposal evaluation, project steering, and assessment of outputs and results.
- The Panels will comprise three PEN-CP experts, at least two of whom will be representatives of PEN-CP member customs administrations.

Dates & deadlines

- Official call publication date: 1 March 2024
- Deadline for proposal submission: 1 June 2024 (by 5pm Brussels time)
- Proposal evaluation results available: 15 June 2024 (target date)
- Project start date: Latest by 1 September 2024 (and earliest on 1 July 2024)
- Project duration: Maximum 5 months (project must finish by 31.1.2025 latest)

Grant amount, payments travel expenses and IP rights

- Grant amount: 59.500 EUR (fixed)
- Payment terms: The grant will be paid in two installments: 60% upon project kick-off, and the remaining 40% following the delivery and presentation of final outputs and results at the designated PEN-CP event.
- The Selected Supplier will be responsible for covering the expenses related to two trips for attendance at live project meetings, which include the kick-off and the final presentation.
- IP rights issues, including possible transfers, are explained separately in each PING call.

Contact person for all queries

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