

The 2025 Annual Meeting will be held in Istanbul, hosted jointly by the Turkish Chamber of Shipping and the Maritime Association of Shipowners and Agents.

One of the major topics of conversation within FONASBA and across the global maritime chain during the past year has been the use of seaborne transportation for the movement of illicit cargoes. For some years, Antwerp and Rotterdam have seen significant increases in the volume of drugs being brought in by sea and this led ECASBA, FONASBA's European committee, to join forces with the World Shipping Council to host a session during the 2023 European Shipping Week in Brussels to raise awareness of the issue within both the European maritime community and amongst legislators. The significant effects on ship agency and seagoing staff of the infiltration of the sector by organised crime cannot be understated and therefore this has become a priority issue for FONASBA and ECASBA. Quick and effective action by the port and maritime communities in Antwerp and Rotterdam has led to reductions in the movement of drugs and other illicit cargoes using those two gateways. Unfortunately, however, this has led to increases in trafficking through other, often smaller, ports where security is less stringent.

Building on the initial impetus gained from the Brussels event, the issue has now escalated across Europe into a wide-ranging alliance of state and private bodies and authorities, the European Port Alliance, which is

bringing all the involved parties together in a concerted effort to disrupt and impede the movement of illicit cargo through European ports. ECASBA is represented on that organisation and is ensuring the concerns of ship agents are fully reflected in its work. That this topic was frequently raised during the 2024 European Parliament elections was welcome recognition of the scale of the issue. ECASBA is also encouraging individual ship agent members to engage directly with their own national authorities to ensure their members' concerns are recognised at national level. Self-evidently however, this issue is not limited to Europe and the inherent flexibility and anonymity provided by the global container sector has also seen ports in the southern hemisphere being targeted, both as means of gaining access to local markets as well as steps on an often long and winding road to the major markets, such as Europe and the US. That Australian ports are already being actively targeted was evidenced by the presence of officials from the Australian customs authorities at the 2023 European Shipping Week event, one of whom participated in the discussion panel.

The issue has also gained traction at IMO, with the Facilitation Committee deciding in April last year to establish a working group to revise its current guidelines for the prevention of the smuggling of drugs and other related materials through international maritime transport. FONASBA has already

expressed its willingness to take an active role in that work, the revised guidelines are expected to be presented to the Committee in 2026.

The issue has been on the agenda for FONASBA and ECASBA meetings over the past two years, including the Jordan and Athens Annual Meetings, and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

Elsewhere in IMO, FONASBA participated in the completion of the Explanatory Manual to the revised FAL Convention and worked with BIMCO, the International Association of Ports and Harbours and the International Federation of Ship Masters Associations on a major study into digitalization in the maritime sector. Feeding into IMO's work on the establishment of maritime single windows worldwide, the survey highlights the practical issues currently faced by ship owners and operators, ports and agents in entering and clearing vessels and makes the case for harmonisation and standardisation of the reporting process as an essential first step to the implementation of a global digital environment for ship reporting. It is also pleasing to note that the role of the agent as the coordinator of the port call and the first point of contact for the master and crew is referenced regularly by the nearly 500 respondents to the survey.

As always, this is just a summary of the issues FONASBA is undertaking on behalf of its worldwide membership, and we will continue to actively promote and protect their interests throughout 2025. ▲



*Pictured: delegates at the 2024 FONASBA AGM, held in Athens in October 2024.*