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The Seventh World Customs Organization Global Canine Forum: A New Stage in International Cooperation against Illicit Drug Trafficking

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Abstract: The article analyses the outcomes of the 7th WCO Global Canine Forum, held in Tashkent on 7–9 September 2026 and hosted by the Customs Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The Forum brought together more than 150 participants from 50 countries and experts from over 15 international organizations, and was the first WCO event of this scale in Central Asia. The study reviews the Forum's evolution since 2011, the Synthetic Drugs Detection Project (SDDP), the two WCO instruments endorsed by the Council in June 2026, and the role of Uzbekistan's National Canine Centre as a WCO Regional Dog Training Centre. Policy proposals for the development of Uzbek customs canine services are formulated.

Keywords: World Customs Organization, Global Canine Forum, detector dogs, customs canine programmes, synthetic drugs, SDDP, RDTC, international cooperation.

Introduction

Illicit drug trafficking is a lucrative and rapidly adapting form of transnational organised crime. In recent years, fentanyl analogues, amphetamine-type stimulants and new psychoactive substances have become increasingly widespread alongside traditional drugs. Their high potency in small quantities facilitates concealment in postal consignments, express cargo and passenger baggage, creating a need to further strengthen customs controls.

Technical inspection tools, including X-ray imaging systems, ion mobility spectrometers and artificial intelligence-based image analysis, are advancing rapidly. Nevertheless, specially trained detection dogs remain important in customs control because of their speed, mobility and cost-effectiveness. Their olfactory capabilities enable them to detect airborne volatile compounds at very low concentrations and rapidly screen passengers, vehicles and cargo.

Since 2011, the World Customs Organization (WCO) has organised Global Canine Forums to strengthen the canine capabilities of its Members' customs administrations. The Seventh Forum, held in Tashkent on 7–9 September 2026, was the first WCO event of this scale in Central Asia. Its coincidence with the 30th anniversary of the National Canine Centre added to its significance for Uzbekistan.

Literature Review

The effectiveness of detection dogs has been extensively examined in the international scientific literature. K. Furton and L. Myers outlined the scientific basis for using dogs to detect chemical substances, noting that their sensitivity is comparable to that of many instrumental analytical methods [2]. J. Hayes analysed how canine physiology, training approaches and analytical methods influence detection outcomes [3]. Experiments conducted by T. Jezierski demonstrated that detection performance varies according to breed, training level, substance type and search conditions [4]. L. Lazarowski established the need to standardise methods in canine detection research [5]. These findings highlight the importance of consistent requirements for training detection dogs and evaluating canine training centres.

The World Customs Organization (WCO) coordinates cooperation in this field through its network of Regional Dog Training Centres and Global Canine Forums. Generally held every two years in different regions, these forums enable Member administrations to exchange practical experience.

Analysis and Results

Evolution of the Global Canine Forums. The Seventh Forum continued a 15-year tradition and marked the first time the event was held in Central Asia. Beginning at WCO headquarters, the forums subsequently took place across Europe, Latin America, Australia and East Asia before reaching Central Asia. This geographical progression reflects the WCO's strategy to expand its canine activities across regions (Table 1).

Table 1

WCO Global Canine Forums, 2011–2026

Forum	Dates	Host City and Country
I	25–27 January 2011	Brussels, Belgium (WCO headquarters)
II	28–30 May 2013	Moscow, Russia
III	24–26 June 2015	Buenos Aires, Argentina
IV	2–4 October 2017	Prague, Czech Republic
V	1–3 October 2019	Melbourne, Australia
VI	March 2024	Hong Kong, China
VII	7–9 September 2026	Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Source: Compiled by the author from official WCO reports.

The five-year interval between 2019 and 2024 is attributable to restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the Sixth Forum in Hong Kong, the biennial schedule resumed.

Organisation and Participant Composition

The Forum was held under the theme "Adaptability in a Complex World: Advancing Canine Services through Innovation, Safety and Cooperation". It brought together more than 150 participants from 50 countries and representatives of over 15 international organisations.

Participants represented all continents: Europe (the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, Greece, Hungary, Serbia and Malta), Asia and the Pacific (China, Hong Kong, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, India and Australia), the Middle East (the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Iran), Africa (Burkina Faso, Botswana, Gabon, Angola, Mali and Cameroon), the Americas (the United States, Canada, Brazil and Jamaica), and the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Caucasus (Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan). International organisations were represented by the WCO Secretariat and its Regional Office for Capacity Building for Europe (ROCB Europe), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

At the opening ceremony, WCO Secretary General Ian Saunders emphasised the importance of coordinated action among countries in combating illicit drug trafficking. He stressed the need to make effective use of all resources available to customs administrations, including detection dogs and the specialised skills of their handlers. On the same day, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of the Republic of Uzbekistan received the WCO Secretary General. Their meeting addressed cooperation in customs administration reform, digitalisation, law enforcement and personnel training [6].

Speakers included WCO Canine Coordinator K. Barker and canine specialists from the customs or border services of the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Japan, Latvia, Canada, Germany, the Czech Republic, Australia, Russia, Hong Kong, the United States and China [7]. According to the State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan, discussions covered emerging trends in canine units, the effective deployment of canine teams in operational settings, the scientific foundations of scent detection, and the use of alternative training materials.

Synthetic Drugs Detection Project (SDDP)

One of the Forum's key topics was the Synthetic Drugs Detection Project (SDDP), presented by a WCO canine expert. Designed to address the rapidly expanding illicit trade in synthetic drugs, the project aims to strengthen detection capabilities, improve interagency coordination and enhance international cooperation against organised criminal groups. It is implemented through two complementary areas of activity (Table 3).

Table 3

Areas of Activity under the SDDP

Area of Activity	Activities
Strengthening synthetic drug detection capabilities	National needs and capacity assessment missions; national training programmes; regional workshops to support operational cooperation
Promoting best practices and guidelines	Knowledge sharing among Member administrations and experts; strengthening multilateral cooperation

New WCO Canine Instruments

Two instruments endorsed by the WCO Council in June 2026 were presented at the Forum:

1. **"Compendium of Best Practices in Canine Programmes: Practical Recommendations and Guidelines"** consolidates experience in establishing canine programmes, selecting and training detection dogs, and deploying them operationally.

2. "Accreditation Standards for WCO Regional Dog Training Centres" establishes training, methodological and infrastructure requirements for these centres.

These instruments support the development of common professional standards for canine services and provide an institutional framework for the methodological standardisation identified as necessary in the scientific literature.

The National Canine Centre's 30th Anniversary and Operational Achievements

The Seventh Global Canine Forum in Uzbekistan coincided with the 30th anniversary of the National Canine Centre.

Established in 1996, the Centre has held WCO Regional Dog Training Centre status since 2008. During the Forum, foreign delegations visited its veterinary clinic, kennels and training grounds and observed its training procedures. Practical demonstrations showcased the capabilities of service dogs trained to detect drugs, explosives and weapons, locate concealed persons and perform guarding duties. Selected indicators of the Centre's activities are presented in Table 4.

The National Canine Centre also delivered a presentation as part of the Forum programme. During his visit, WCO Secretary General Ian Saunders toured the veterinary clinic and training grounds and observed operational demonstrations by canine units from Uzbekistan's national agencies. The Centre thus served as an important venue for sharing practical expertise alongside its organisational role in the Forum.

Table 4

Key Performance Indicators of the National Canine Centre over the Past Three Years

Indicator	Value
Dog handlers trained	843 (620 from customs and 223 from other law enforcement agencies)
Pedigree puppies bred	241
Foreign dog handlers receiving advanced training	220 from 9 countries
Service dogs trained, including for foreign partners	More than 200
Drugs detected with the assistance of service dogs	More than 12 tonnes
Service dogs exported to the Republic of Korea	12
Service dogs donated to Tajikistan	10
Types of veterinary services provided	Increased from 27 to 53

The operational effectiveness of detection dogs in customs control was demonstrated during an inspection at the Ayritom border customs post on 1 October 2026. An alert by a detection dog prompted a detailed inspection of an empty goods vehicle arriving from Afghanistan. Officers

discovered 98 packages concealed beneath the trailer floor, containing 42.335 kg of hashish and 10.260 kg of opium, a combined total of 52.595 kg. This case illustrates the important role of detection dogs in identifying vehicles presenting indications of risk and directing them for further inspection.

During the Forum, the Customs Committee presented the "Digital Canine" system introduced at the National Canine Centre. The system is designed to digitalise canine service workflows, accelerate information exchange and improve operational efficiency. It also aims to strengthen coordination among canine units and improve the use of operational information.

Outcomes of Bilateral Cooperation

Alongside multilateral dialogue, the Forum supported the development of bilateral cooperation with several countries:

✓ A memorandum on cooperation and the exchange of expertise was signed between the National Canine Centre and the Canine Centre of Russia's Federal Customs Service.

✓ **Republic of Korea:** Readiness was expressed to continue cooperation following the delivery of 12 service dogs since 2023.

✓ **Burkina Faso:** The management of the country's customs canine centre expressed interest in purchasing service dogs trained in Uzbekistan and establishing operational cooperation.

✓ **Armenia and Hungary:** Discussions addressed service dog training and professional development for canine specialists.

International dialogue continued after the Forum. Representatives of delegations from the Republic of Korea and Japan visited the National Canine Centre, observed the capabilities of the service dogs trained there and discussed potential purchases. These meetings provided an opportunity to share the Centre's expertise with foreign partners and laid the groundwork for expanding practical cooperation in canine services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Forum's outcomes are significant for Uzbekistan's customs canine services in **three respects**.

First, the Forum provided an opportunity to demonstrate the National Canine Centre's capabilities as a WCO Regional Dog Training Centre to international specialists. The WCO's new accreditation standards call for regular assessment of the Centre's training programmes, methodological support and infrastructure, with improvements introduced where necessary.

Second, particular attention was given to synthetic drug detection. Discussions under the project addressed training dogs to detect the odours of emerging substances, using safe training materials and protecting dog handlers. These approaches should be gradually incorporated into the Centre's existing training programmes.

Third, the presentation of the "Digital Canine" system enabled Uzbekistan to share its experience with international specialists. Data held in the system could be used to assess service dog performance, compare training indicators and identify needs for additional training.

During the Forum, a cooperation memorandum was signed with the Canine Centre of Russia's Federal Customs Service. Continued cooperation on service dogs was discussed with the Republic

of Korea, while Burkina Faso expressed interest in dogs trained in Uzbekistan. Discussions with Armenia and Hungary also addressed service dog training and professional development for canine specialists. Subsequent visits to the Centre by representatives from the Republic of Korea and Japan, including discussions on purchasing service dogs, demonstrated the practical continuation of international dialogue.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Consolidate the Forum's recommendations through seminars involving the Centre's specialists and take steps to apply them in regional canine units.
2. Assess the Centre's training programmes, instructor qualifications and infrastructure annually against WCO accreditation requirements and develop an improvement plan.
3. Organise synthetic drug detection training that incorporates safe training samples and measures to protect dog handlers.
4. Use data from the "Digital Canine" system to assess service dog performance and retraining needs, and introduce integration with other systems in stages, guided by pilot results.

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