

**GLOBAL  
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Crime**



# THE COCAINE PIPELINE TO EUROPE

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February 2021

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Cover: In 2019, Spanish police seized a semi-submersible that had crossed the Atlantic with three tonnes of cocaine on board. © *Lalo R. Villar/AFP via Getty Images*

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# CONTENTS

Abbreviations and acronyms .....	v
<b>Executive summary .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Trafficking to Europe.....	3
Impact of the pandemic .....	5
The future of cocaine in Europe .....	6
Methodology.....	6
<b>The Colombian shift to Europe: a business no-brainer .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Risk vs reward.....	11
The changing face of the cocaine trade.....	12
<b>Spain: the European base for Latin American organized crime .....</b>	<b>14</b>
Birth of the European cocaine trade, and the move downstream .....	15
Spain in the new cocaine era .....	18
<b>The Italian mafia and the move upstream .....</b>	<b>21</b>
Cocaine brokers and the criminal diaspora.....	23
The Italian mafia and the cocaine migration .....	24
<b>Cocaine: the criminal steroid .....</b>	<b>28</b>
The Latin American steroid effect .....	29
Europe consumes the steroid.....	32
<b>Container shipping: cocaine hide-and-seek .....</b>	<b>36</b>
The move to containers .....	38
Switching ports and departure points .....	40
Ever-changing modus operandi.....	42
The future of the container battle.....	46
The war for ports.....	46
<b>The rise of <i>plata</i> over <i>plomo</i>: the cancer of corruption .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<i>Plomo o plata</i> .....	49
Venezuela and the Air France smuggling incident.....	50
Cocaine corruption in Latin America.....	54
Air France: The twist in the tale.....	55
The corruption cancer in Europe.....	56
<b>The future of the cocaine trade to Europe.....</b>	<b>57</b>
Notes.....	63



Tuscany, Italy, 15 May 2020. Carabinieri from the Investigation Unit of the Operational Department of Livorno display 'bricks' of cocaine from a three-tonne seizure before it was destroyed by fire. The cocaine, worth more than 400 million euros, was seized at the port of Livorno in February 2020 - the second largest cocaine seizure in Italy. © Laura Lezza/Getty Images

# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AUC	United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia
CONACUID	National Commission Against Illicit Drug Use (Venezuela)
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration (US)
EMCDDA	European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction
EU	European Union
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
GNB	Bolivarian National Guard
IRPI	Investigative Reporting Project Italy
NCA	National Crime Agency (UK)
OCCRP	Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project
ONDCP	Office of National Drug Control Policy (US)
PCC	First Capital Command (Brazil)
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

▲ Police inspect seized cocaine in Cartagena, Colombia. © Associated Press



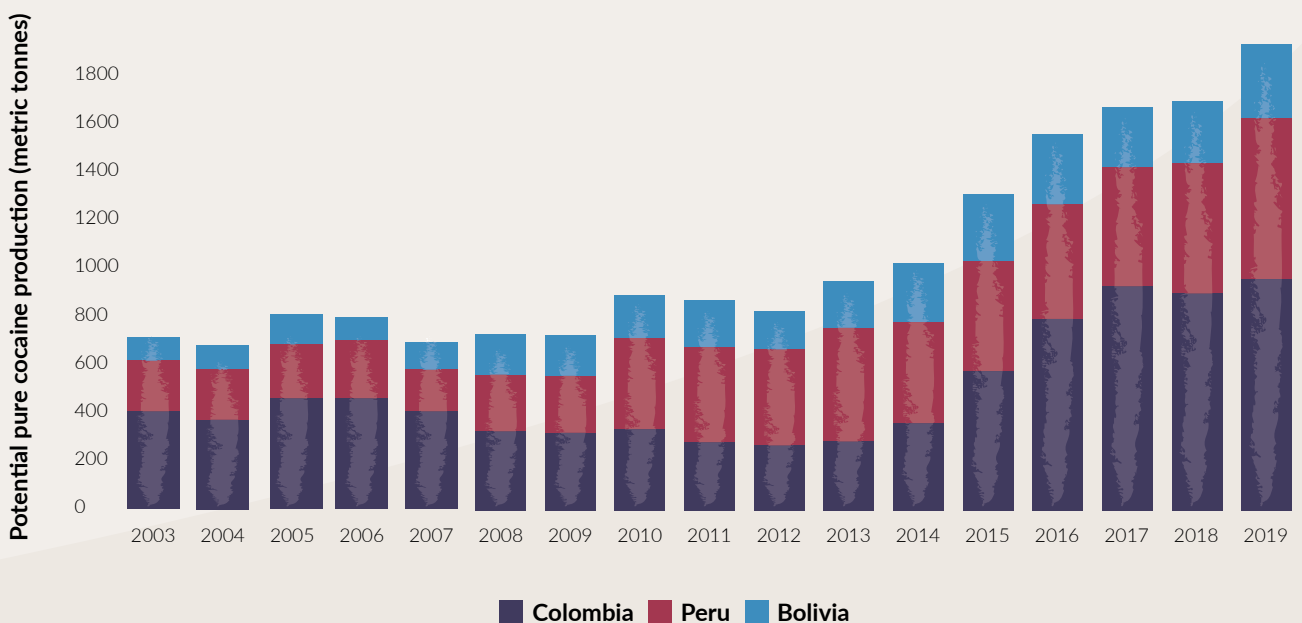
Over the past few years, the cocaine trade has enjoyed an unprecedented boom, fuelled by soaring production. In 2018, the combined production for Colombia, Bolivia and Peru – the three main producers of cocaine – was more than double that of 2013 (Figure 1). While the rate of growth has slowed of late, there is still no sign of it hitting a peak.

Coverage of this phenomenon has largely focused on the United States and its seemingly endless ‘war on drugs’. However, smarter traffickers have long preferred Europe, which has far more potential for growth than the more saturated US market, and higher profits. Cocaine to Europe has increased over the years, to the point where it is now beginning to rival that entering the US mainland.

‘For 2019 and the first months of 2020, the thinking was that the flow of drugs entering or passing through Europe was between 500 and 800 tonnes. We base these numbers in part on the notion that we are seizing 10% to 20% of the total,’ said one senior European police official and cocaine expert, who was not authorized to speak on the record.

A significant percentage of that flow is in transit to other parts of the world. Traffickers are pushing eastwards from the more established markets in western Europe towards Russia and Asia – and feeding every country in between.

From a business perspective, trafficking cocaine to Europe is a far more attractive prospect than targeting the US. Prices are significantly higher and the risks of interdiction, extradition and seizure of assets significantly lower. A kilogram of cocaine in the US is worth up to US\$28 000 wholesale. That same kilogram is worth around US\$40 000 on average and as much as nearly US\$80 000 in different parts of Europe.<sup>1</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Cocaine production, 2003–2019.  
SOURCE: ONDCP

*From a business perspective, trafficking cocaine to Europe is a more attractive prospect than targeting the US.*

The US has deployed massive resources in Latin America to fight the drug trade. There is an army of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents on the ground, while other agencies, such as the Department of Homeland Security and the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, as well as the US military's Southern Command, all contribute to the cause. By contrast, European presence and capacity upstream is minimal. Europe has but a handful of police attachés or liaison officers posted to Latin America and some scarce naval assets in the Caribbean.

For Europe, unlike the US, the problems of cocaine appear far removed. Europe does not suffer the levels of violence seen in Latin America, nor does it have the type of systematic corruption that is prevalent in many Latin American and Caribbean nations. As Europe battles the coronavirus pandemic, an economic turndown, Islamic terrorism, internal political tensions and irregular migration, the cocaine trade has slipped far down the list of government priorities.

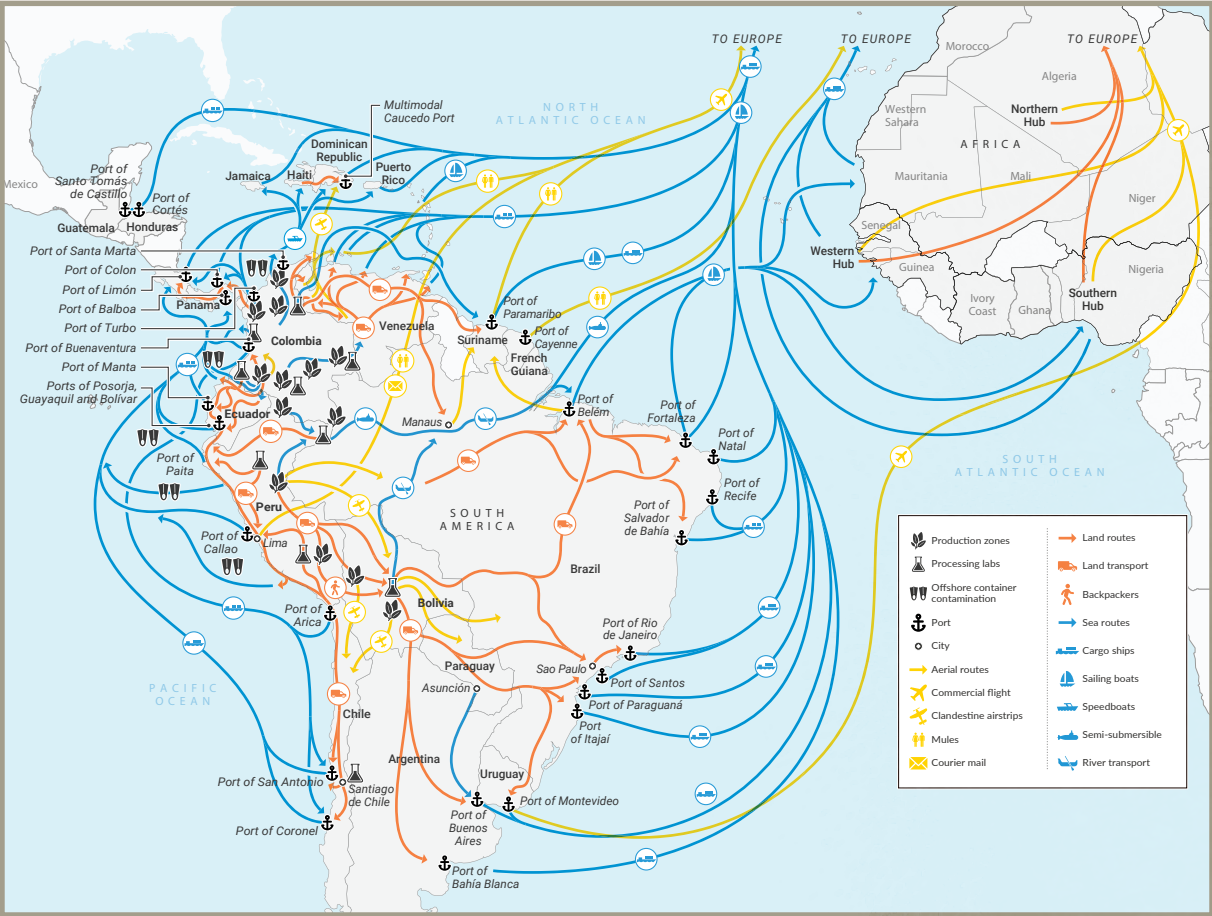
Yet Europe is not exempt from the collateral damage of the cocaine trade, nor the distorting effects on the economy that billions of euros of drug money produce as they wash through banks and local economies. There is drug-related violence in most European countries, many examples of police officers, customs officials and port/airport workers corrupted by drug-trafficking organizations, and, perhaps most worrying of all, incontrovertible evidence of the strengthening of European mafias thanks to the riches generated by the cocaine trade. The story of the rise of the 'Ndrangheta in Italy (and across the globe), for example, is intimately tied to the cocaine trade, while the expansion of the power of Balkans mafias is similarly linked to cocaine. The national-security threats presented by these criminal structures is clear and growing.

The damage that the cocaine trade is inflicting in Latin America and the Caribbean should also be of huge concern to Europe. Many European nations have former colonies in the region and overseas territories in the Caribbean. The evolution of Venezuela's increasingly dictatorial and criminalized regime means that many European nations with a presence in the Caribbean now have a neighbour exporting cocaine and criminality, as well as migrants fleeing the collapse of the state and rampant inflation.

# Trafficking to Europe

From the traffickers' point of view, sending drugs to Europe faces one inescapable hurdle. Unlike with the United States, there is no land bridge. Therefore, traffickers must move cocaine via sea or air (Figure 2). In the past decade, they have largely opted for sea routes, focusing mainly on container trafficking. An elaborate game of hide-and-seek has resulted, as traffickers use different methods of hiding cocaine among the millions of containers that reach Europe every year. Yet other ways of moving cocaine into Europe abound. In November 2019, Spanish authorities seized a 'narco submarine' that had crossed the Atlantic with 3 tonnes of cocaine, which at current European wholesale prices is worth up to €90 million (around US\$100 million). Although Spanish police believe such vessels have been dispatched for years, it was the first to be found in European waters.

Well aware that European authorities are paying special attention to containers arriving directly from the cocaine-producing nations of Colombia and Peru, traffickers are using other departure points around the region. Understanding that containers and companies are now being profiled by European police and customs, traffickers increasingly use 'rip-on, rip-off' techniques, inserting drugs among legitimate goods with their owners unaware that their containers host cocaine consignments.



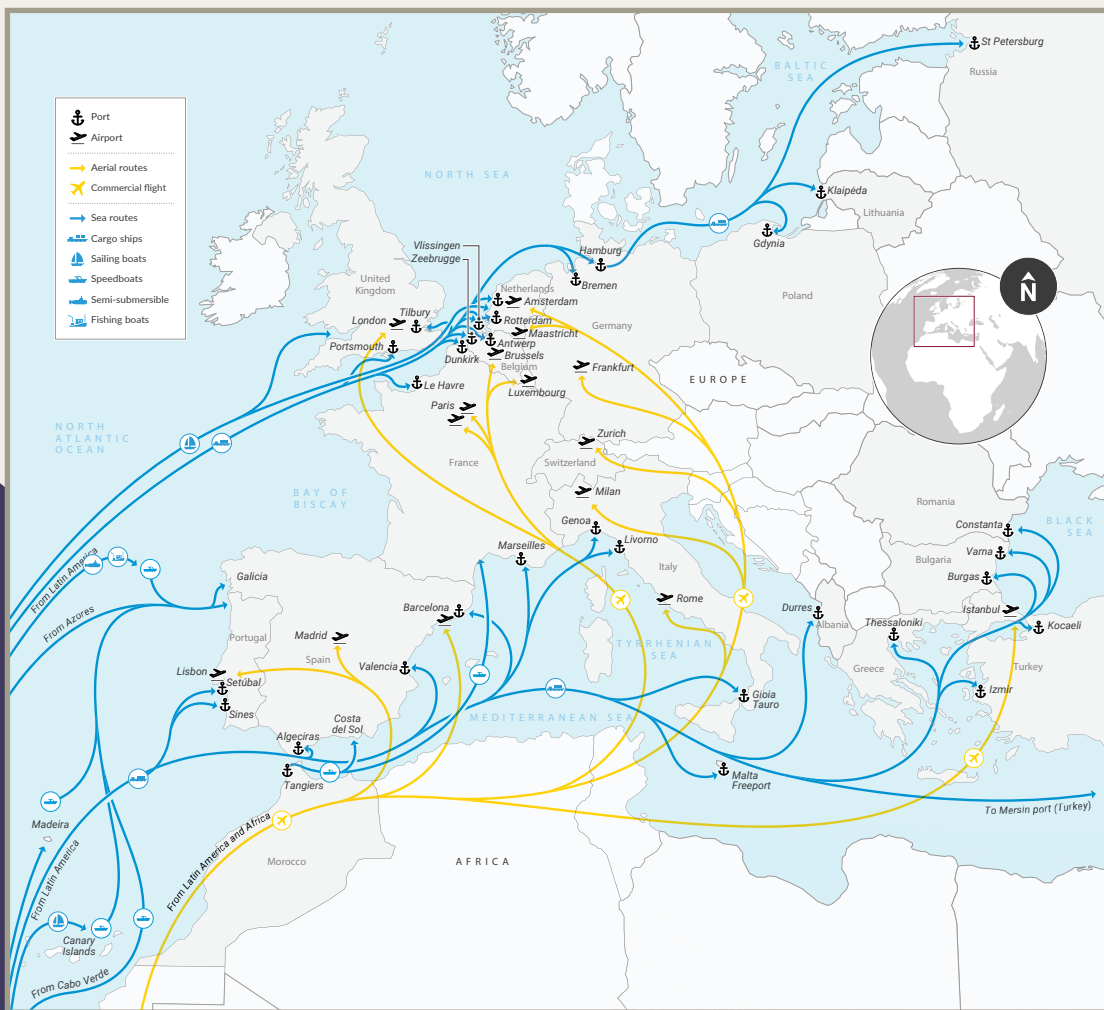
**FIGURE 2** Cocaine trafficking routes to Europe.  
SOURCE: InSight Crime investigations

Although the main air routes for moving cocaine to Europe use commercial flights, there have been cases of charter flights traveling directly from Latin America to Europe carrying significant cocaine consignments. Sailing vessels have also become more accessible and easier to pilot. And with growing traffic between the Caribbean and Europe, this has become an increasingly popular way to move large cocaine consignments.

Reception in Europe has also seen increasing diversification (Figure 3). Spain has historically been the natural home for Latin American traffickers. With its linguistic and cultural links, and thanks to an alliance with Galician smugglers, Spain became the principal entry point for cocaine in Europe in the late 1980s.

Spain has however been eclipsed by Belgium and the Netherlands. Here, traffickers have been

attracted by the efficiency of the ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam, which, combined with excellent transport infrastructure, can rapidly send a container almost anywhere in Europe. Drug traffickers appreciate that kind of efficiency as much as any other businessperson, and revel in the sheer volume of containers flowing through these ports, which provides endless opportunities to camouflage their consignments. However, as seizures have increased in these ports, traffickers have also switched to secondary European ports where there is far less scrutiny of incoming containers. Traffickers have also shipped substantial quantities of cocaine indirectly to Europe via West Africa and North Africa using containers, maritime shipping and drug ‘mules’ on commercial air flights. Seizures on this route have fluctuated over the past 20 years, but there are signs that they may be on the upswing again.



**FIGURE 3** Cocaine-trafficking reception in Europe.  
SOURCE: InSight Crime investigations

As Latin American criminals moved downstream to Europe to sell their wares, some European mafias began to move upstream to get closer to the sources of production and so secure better prices for cocaine. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was the Italian mafia that pioneered the move upstream, securing cheap cocaine in Colombia and establishing a permanent presence in Latin America in the 1990s. Buying at the source in Colombia and arranging transport back to Europe meant the Italians could pocket most of the massive profits themselves. Other European mafias soon began to mimic this model, and it is becoming ever more common today.

However, it is misleading in today's criminal landscape to think purely of national mafias.

The cocaine trade is now populated by a variety of different types of criminal syndicates, which are made up of many different and mixed nationalities. There are no longer criminal structures like the Medellín Cartel, which controlled cocaine production in Colombia and sold their drugs on the streets of Miami and New York. Criminal networks today rely on subcontracting out much of the work to different transport specialists, assassins for hire, corruption nodes and money launderers, as well as legal actors such as lawyers, accountants and bankers. Different criminal nodes will align for a particular shipment, then drift apart, searching for new opportunities and trafficking constellations.

## Impact of the pandemic

The cocaine trade, along with all businesses, has been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. According to Kevin Mills,<sup>2</sup> who recently retired from the British National Crime Agency (NCA) after a 31-year career and now works as a security and investigations consultant in Bogotá, the cocaine trade to Europe has been hit on six fronts:

- 1.** Reduction in container traffic from Latin America to Europe. In the first months of the pandemic, there was a drop in the volume of containers coming into Europe. A rise in seizures in Europe in the first half of 2020 might have been the result of traffickers trying to move the same amount of cocaine in a shrinking flow of containers, thus running a greater risk of discovery.
- 2.** The prohibition on personal travel in and out of Latin America. 'There is no ability for criminals and planners to fly out [to Colombia] as there is no incoming travel, which makes planning and closing deals more complicated, and there is no outgoing travel that permits a small but frequent supply of mules, or cocaine that is hidden in air cargo or suitcases,' said Mills.
- 3.** The huge drop in sailing craft crossing the Atlantic and moving through the Caribbean. 'The yachting threat has been really resurgent in

the past 2–3 years from the eastern Caribbean ... it is completely dead in the water at the moment, because vessels cannot move between countries,' said Mills.

- 4.** Increased maritime scrutiny. The overall reduction in maritime traffic means that any vessels loitering off the coast of South America attract a great deal of attention, and nations are now paying extra attention to any foreign vessel seeking to dock. 'The movement of heavy cargo, tugs, fishing vessels, again because of the issue of crossing maritime borders, has taken a huge hit,' explained Mills.
- 5.** A huge drop in air traffic, including commercial flights, charter flights and private planes. Few nations are giving the same sort of permissions for private planes to land, meaning that charter flights cannot operate as before and the overall reduction in flying means that illegal flights have less traffic in which to hide.
- 6.** Drop in sales outlets in Europe. The lockdown restrictions implemented to tackle the pandemic and associated economic impact have led to fewer parties and most social venues being closed, and left people with less money to spend. However, Mills believes this is a temporary state of affairs and the traffickers are already adapting to changing conditions.

## The future of cocaine in Europe

From the perspective of the authorities, the future of cocaine trafficking to Europe holds many dangers. While European and Latin American governments struggle to contain the pandemic and associated economic carnage, organized crime sees new opportunities. Although the crisis has also presented challenges to transnational organized crime, the evidence suggests that it is adapting quickly. If European cocaine consumption recovers quickly and new markets in eastern Europe are further developed, Europe could rival the US in terms of its cocaine problem. Indeed, if huge cocaine consignments controlled by European mafias transit the EU on their way to other markets in Asia, the challenges could even surpass those faced by the US.

## Methodology

This report is the product of field investigations over two years in more than 10 countries in Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe, as well as interviews with officials, investigators and experts in numerous countries across both continents, and the collection and analysis of open source data and reporting.

A photograph of a person wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a patterned shirt, carrying a large sack of coca leaves. The person is standing in front of a shipping yard with numerous stacked containers. The background is a lush green forest. The image is overlaid with a dark blue geometric pattern in the top left corner.

# THE COLOMBIAN SHIFT TO EUROPE

## A BUSINESS NO-BRAINER

▲ Farmers haul sacks of coca in Colombia. © Associated Press; Unsplash

In September 1989, Los Angeles police broke open the cheap padlock that was the only security on a warehouse in the northern suburb of Sylmar. Inside they discovered more than 21 tonnes of cocaine and US\$10 million in cash, packed into more than a thousand cardboard boxes.

The Sylmar haul was – and still is – the biggest cocaine seizure ever recorded.<sup>3</sup> It also marked a milestone in the history of the cocaine trade, then dominated by the Medellín and Cali drug cartels. The tremors in the criminal underworld caused by the seizure would be felt not just in Latin America and the US, but also across the Atlantic in Europe.

At the time of the seizure, crackdowns on the Colombian cartels' favoured air and sea routes through the Caribbean had seen them grow increasingly dependent on the Mexicans' ability to move drugs across the US border. And the Mexicans knew it. In Sylmar, the cocaine in the warehouse was being held hostage by Mexican traffickers who refused to release it to its Colombian owners as a dispute raged over payment.

According to the DEA, the staggering financial loss of the seizure drove the two sides to thrash out a new deal to avoid any such standoffs in the future. The Colombians began to pay the Mexicans not with cash but with up to 50% of the cocaine from each shipment. Over time, the model spread, and the Mexicans became not just transporters, but also owners of the cocaine and the major distributors in the US.

As the DEA concluded in its official history of the drug trade, '[t]his shift to using cocaine as compensation for transportation services radically changed the role and sphere of influence of Mexico-based trafficking organizations in the US cocaine trade.'<sup>4</sup> Within a decade, the balance of power in cocaine trafficking to the US had decisively shifted to the Mexicans, who established a stranglehold on the US border-crossing points, reducing the Colombians to the role of suppliers.

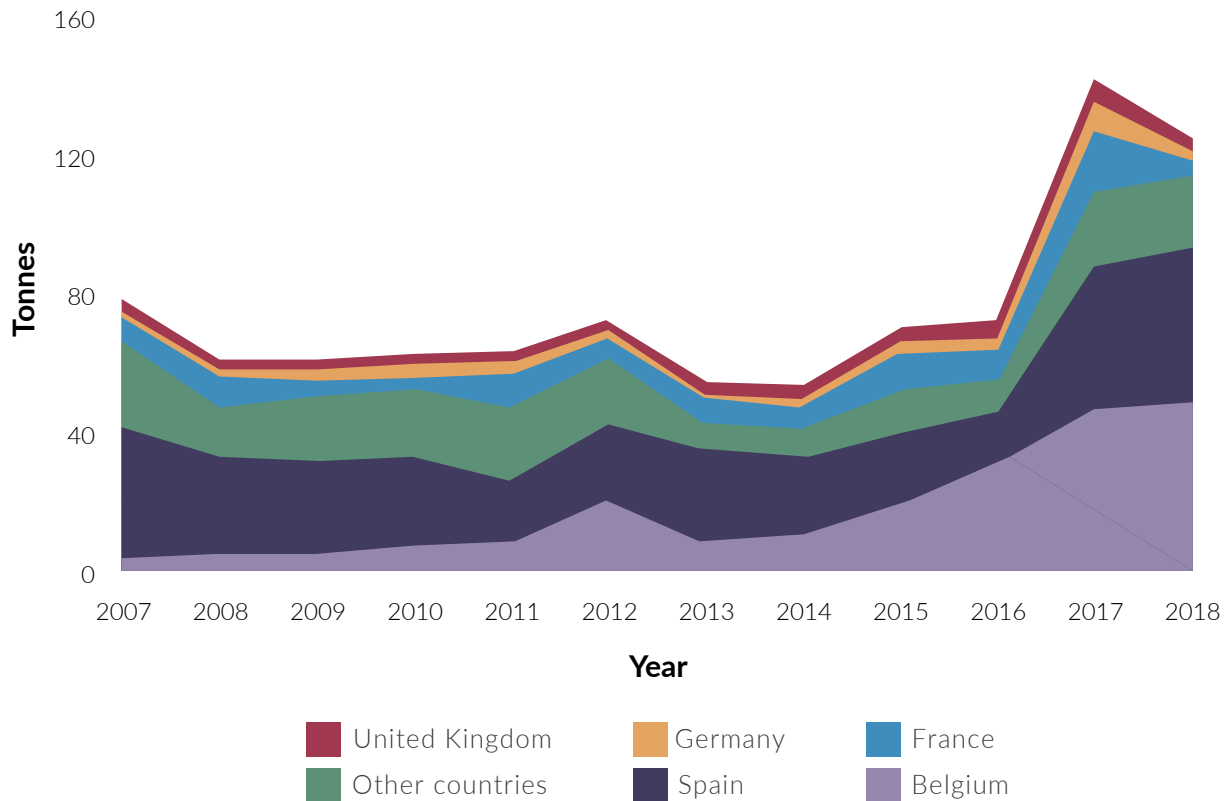
The Colombians were left with two options. The first was to fight the Mexicans and seek to break their monopoly in order to regain direct access to the world's biggest cocaine market. This would involve not only challenging the ever more powerful – and violent – Mexican cartels on their home turf, but also making the Colombians priority targets for the United States' increasingly belligerent anti-narcotics efforts. Or, they could cede the US market to the Mexicans while turning their attention to new markets with higher prices and lower risks. Markets like Europe.

The shift was detectable in the volumes of seizures. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that in 1998 – as the Mexicans were starting to tighten their chokehold on the US market – 267 tonnes of cocaine were trafficked into the US, compared to 63 tonnes to Europe.<sup>5</sup> 10 years later, the US market had declined by 38% to 165 tonnes. The European market, meanwhile, had grown 98%, rising to 124 tonnes. Perhaps even more tellingly, the UNODC estimated that by 2009, trafficking to Europe was the source of half of the profits made by cocaine traffickers in South America, Central America and the Caribbean, while the US market accounted for a third.



Another decade on, and that gap has almost certainly widened. In 2017, authorities in the EU, Norway and Turkey seized a record 142 tonnes of cocaine (Figure 4), twice as much as the year before and more than

20 tonnes higher than the previous record, according to the EU’s annual Drug Markets Report.<sup>6</sup> The report also estimates that between 100 and 137 tonnes of cocaine was consumed in the region that year.



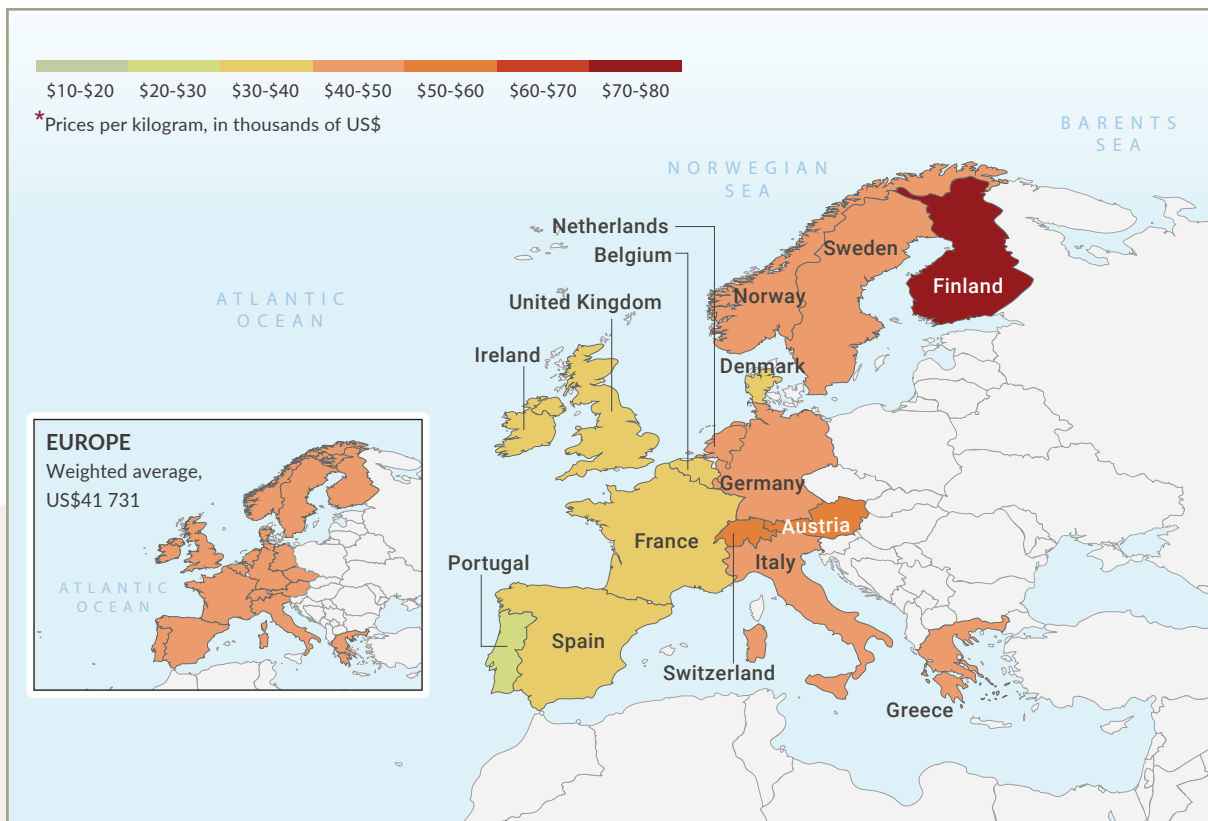
**FIGURE 4** Cocaine seized in Europe and Turkey, 2007-2018.  
SOURCE: EMCDDA/Europol

However, even at the upper end of this estimate, this would mean European authorities seized over half of all the product cocaine traffickers tried to ship into Europe, which would represent a startling – and highly unlikely – success rate. International law enforcement and underworld sources in both Europe and the Americas say they expect around 15% to 20% of shipments to be seized at any one link in the supply chain. This would equate to 568 to 804 tonnes successfully trafficked into, or through, Europe in 2017.

Yet even this huge figure may not reflect today’s situation. Since 2017, major entry points such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, the UK and Germany have all posted huge increases in seizures. If these reflect a broader regional trend, the current figure may be hundreds of tonnes higher.

In part, the rise in seizures may be explained by European security forces getting better at seizing cocaine. But this alone does not stand up as an explanation. Wholesale prices have been in a long-term decline, while purity levels have been increasing and retail prices remained stable or fell slightly<sup>7</sup> – all indications that the market is not short of product.

Data on seizures and consumption suggest the US market nevertheless remains slightly larger. Quantity, though, is just part of the story. Europe remains a more lucrative market than the US. Calculations by the UNODC indicate that the average wholesale price in Europe in 2017, weighted by population, was US\$41 731 per kilogram (Figure 5), compared to US\$28 000 in the US.<sup>8</sup>



**FIGURE 5** Cocaine wholesale prices in Europe.  
SOURCE: UNODC

Europol estimates that the EU retail market for cocaine was worth between €7.6 billion and €10.5 billion (approximately US\$8.4 billion to US\$11.8 billion) in 2017. But calculating using the 568 and 804 tonne range and UNODC prices, then Europe's cocaine wholesale market could be worth between US\$23.7 billion and US\$33.6 billion. However, it is likely that a significant portion of the cocaine entering Europe is in transit to other parts of the world.

## Risk vs reward

Drug traffickers, though, not only look at the rewards; they also weigh the risks. And while trafficking to the US today is fraught with risk, in Europe the odds are stacked heavily in the criminals' favour.

The US has waged a relentless 'war on drugs' in Latin America since the 1980s, and while this has done little to reduce drug consumption or lessen the societal impact of organized crime, the Americans have become highly adept at two things: seizing drugs and locking up drug traffickers. European authorities, in contrast, have a light footprint upstream and have shown limited interest in prioritizing the arrest, prosecution and incarceration of Latin American traffickers.

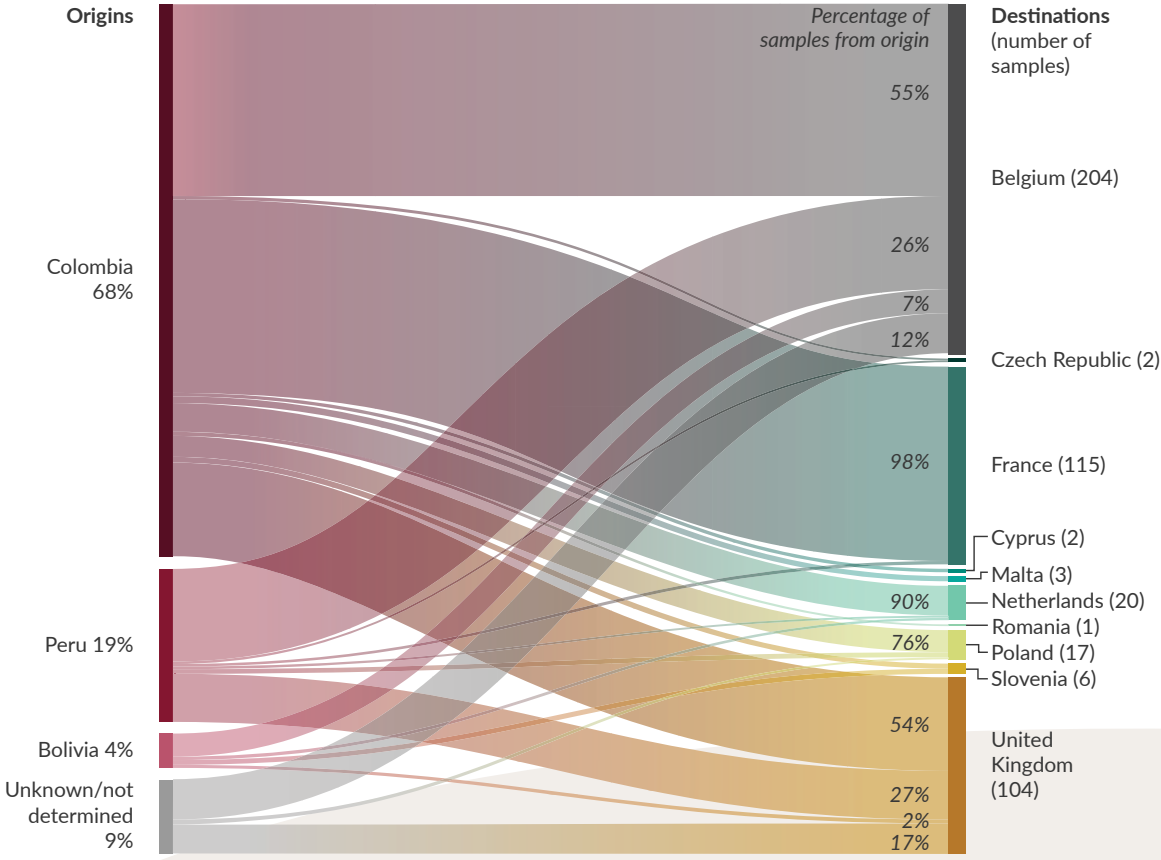
The differences between the two approaches can be clearly seen in the respective law enforcement expenditures. According to the US Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), the US spends US\$17.4 billion on supply-side reduction, which includes drug interdiction, law enforcement investigations and prosecutions.<sup>9</sup> Although no such precise figures have been published by the EU, the data available suggests the EU spends between US\$3 billion and US\$4 billion on supply-side reduction.

Extradition numbers also show the contrast. Although publicly available data is patchy, it allows for some comparisons. A European Commission study of extradition between Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean between 2008 and 2011 showed European nations extraditing an average of 61 people from the region a year.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, between 2002 and 2010, the US extradited an average of 137 people a year from Colombia alone, according to an investigation by *El Tiempo*.<sup>11</sup>

Europe has one final advantage over the US for the traffickers – it is a far more open market. The Mexican cartels maintain their grip over US borders, controlling them with extreme violence. In doing so, they maintain their monopoly over much of the wholesale cocaine market in the US, reducing traffickers from other countries to the roles of suppliers and transporters. But there are no such barriers in Europe, where anyone with the capital, contacts and know-how can enter the cocaine market. There are also countless routes into the continent. As such, Latin American traffickers can significantly increase their profits by selling on the European wholesale market while reducing their risk – and European mafias can come upstream to increase their share of the profits.

# The changing face of the cocaine trade

Today, cocaine production is booming. Colombia has seen a year-on-year increase in cocaine production since 2012.<sup>12</sup> The latest monitoring results from Peru<sup>13</sup> and Bolivia,<sup>14</sup> which according to chemical analysis of seized drugs, account for around a quarter of the cocaine entering Europe (Figure 6), show a 36% and 10% rise in coca cultivation respectively. The world is awash with cocaine.



**FIGURE 6** Origins of cocaine trafficked to Europe.  
 NOTE: Samples of cocaine seized in Europe between 2015 and 2018 were chemically analyzed to determine where the drug had been produced.  
 SOURCE: EMCDDA/Europol

In Colombia, members of the Mexican cartels are an increasingly common sight. They dispatch their emissaries to strike deals and to monitor and oversee production and trafficking. They have even financed Colombian armed groups to ensure a constant flow of cocaine, according to multiple investigations.<sup>15</sup>

However, this is not a sign of strength, or an indication that the Mexicans are taking over the Colombian drug trade. It is a sign of their frustration with the increasingly fragmented and decentralized Colombian underworld and the difficulty they have getting the cocaine they need to feed the US market.<sup>16</sup>

From the mighty trafficking federation of the Norte del Valle Cartel to the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), all of the most reliable Colombian suppliers have splintered into a multitude of much smaller networks. This makes it difficult for the Mexicans to guarantee the consistent supply of large quantities of cocaine they need to keep their supply lines fed.

For the Colombians, selling cocaine to the Mexicans for the US market still accounts for a large percentage of their business. But for many traffickers, the European market is now their priority. The kilogram they might sell for US\$3 000 to the Mexicans goes for more than 10 times that on the wholesale market in Europe.

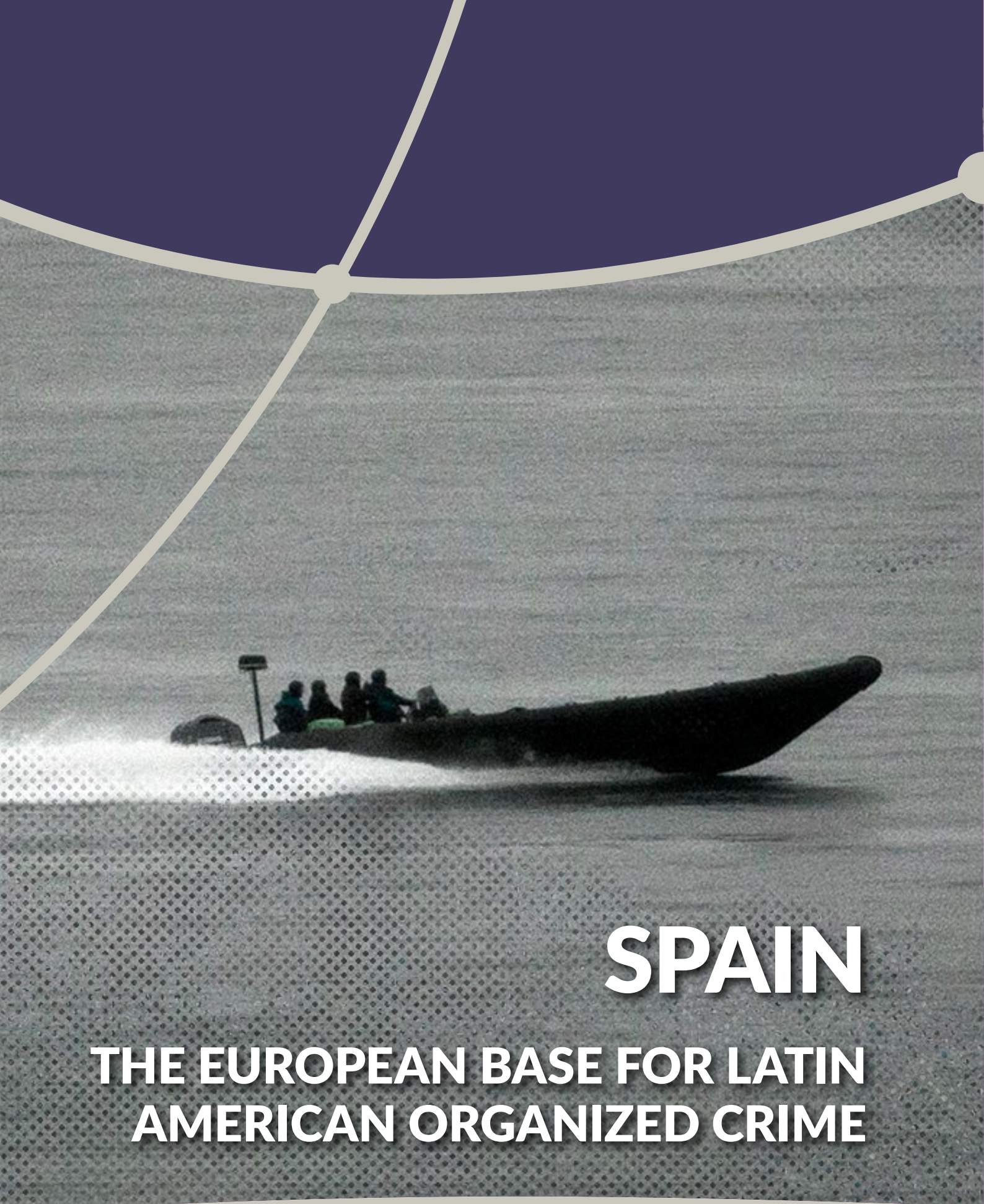
With more cocaine to move than ever before, Colombian traffickers have also been aggressively developing other markets around the globe, some with incredible and barely tapped potential. Markets such as China, with its vast population and growing prosperity, or Australia, where wholesale cocaine prices ranged from US\$110 000 to US\$154 000 per kilogram in 2018, according to the UNODC<sup>17</sup> – a markup that could run as high as over 7 000% for Colombian traffickers.

The signs of the entry into these markets of big-time traffickers are clear.

Previously, Asia and Oceania were largely fed by small-volume trafficking that used mules or courier mail. However, in recent years, these countries have begun to see shipping containers arriving at their ports with hundreds and even thousands of kilograms. In September 2019, Malaysian authorities seized 12 tonnes of cocaine in one shipment alone.

Nevertheless, for the time being, Europe's market size, prices, risk levels and its shipping infrastructure make it arguably the most attractive cocaine market in the world. When Colombia's cartels made their first tentative deals with Galician smugglers and the Italian mafia to move cocaine into Europe in the 1980s, it would have been unthinkable that one day they might shy away from the US in favour of the old continent. But today, it is a business no-brainer.

*Europe's market size, prices and shipping infrastructure make it the most attractive cocaine market in the world.*



# SPAIN

## THE EUROPEAN BASE FOR LATIN AMERICAN ORGANIZED CRIME

▲ A suspected drug boat off the coast of southern Spain. © Associated Press

**O**n 30 April 1984, the Mercedes taking Colombian Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla home after work was strafed with machine-gun fire by the feared hitmen or 'sicarios' of drug lord Pablo Escobar. The Medellín Cartel had declared war on the state. And that war was to set in motion a strange series of events that would kickstart the European cocaine trade.

The killing of Lara Bonilla – one of the few politicians to defy the power of the Medellín and Cali cartels in the early 1980s – sparked a backlash from the previously cowed Colombian state. It immediately signed into law the drug lords' worst fear – extradition to the US.

Fear of capture and extradition drove an exodus of top drug traffickers to more friendly climes. Pablo Escobar fled to Panama, protected by his friend, the dictator General Manuel Noriega. Others, such as Medellín Cartel boss Jorge Ochoa Vázquez and Cali Cartel head Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, chose Spain. There they lived under false names, collecting opulent properties and high-end vehicles in Madrid, according to media reports at the time.<sup>19</sup> But in November 1984, they were both arrested and sent to the infamous Carabanchel prison.

The two top Colombian traffickers, who would go on to become deadly rivals, shared the prison not only with each other but also with Spain's top contraband traffickers from the region of Galicia, among them the smuggler José Ramón Prado, better known by his alias 'Sito Miñanco'. And the Galicians, the Colombians quickly realized, were exactly what they needed to expand their business into Europe. These smugglers could provide the vehicles and boats to safely bring in anything along the long, rocky coasts of Galicia. They could also offer the Colombians one of the most coveted criminal advantages: corruption networks that penetrated deep into local elites.

The time they shared in prison gave birth to a criminal alliance that became central to large-scale cocaine trafficking to Europe. It also set Spain on the path to becoming the main European entry point for Colombian cocaine and the European operations base of Latin American organized crime.

## **Birth of the European cocaine trade, and the move downstream**

In contrast to the US, where the crack explosion had normalized cocaine use (around 6% of the population reported regular use of the drug), the European cocaine market in the early 1980s was small, according to the US-based National Research Council Committee on Substance Abuse Prevention Research.<sup>20</sup> But in this small market – and its higher prices – the Colombians saw enormous potential for growth.

Furthermore, in the 1980s, the US was beginning to ramp up its 'war on drugs' by strengthening agencies (such as the DEA), developing tools such as extradition and increasing its upstream presence. The Europeans were taking no such action.

With the conditions ripe for the Colombians to exploit, the Galicians offered a secure pipeline into the heart of Europe. Galicia, with its 1 500 kilometres of coastline crammed in between Portugal and France, has been a smugglers' paradise for centuries. In *Fariña*, his book on the birth of the cocaine trade in Spain, journalist Nacho Carretero described how smuggling was not even a criminal offence until 1982, and how even after this date, it was a socially accepted profession. In the 1960s, cigarette smuggling became Galicia's biggest illicit market, and by the 1980s it was a multimillion-dollar business that corrupted customs and police officers as well as local politicians.

*Fariña* documents how the first contacts between the Galician smugglers and Colombian cocaine traffickers were made in Panama, where the Galicians would go to launder their tobacco-smuggling profits. Together they organized some test shipments. But it was in the Madrid prison where the arrangements for large-scale cocaine smuggling to Spain took shape.

To bring in the drugs, Galician fishing vessels would sail to Colombia and back, dropping off the cocaine in the high seas on their return, according to Carretero. From there, go-fast boats and other small vessels would bring it to land. Both parties would keep one member of the other group hostage until the drugs were handed back to the Colombians, who then took care of wholesale distribution to European criminal groups, including Italian mafia organizations such as the Camorra and the 'Ndrangheta. For their part, the Galicians earned 30% of the profits, according to Carretero.

The impact of the new nexus forming between the Colombians, Galicians and Italians soon became apparent. Data compiled by the UNODC suggests a gradual but steady increase in the size of the European market throughout the 1990s, as seizures climbed while prices fell.<sup>21</sup>

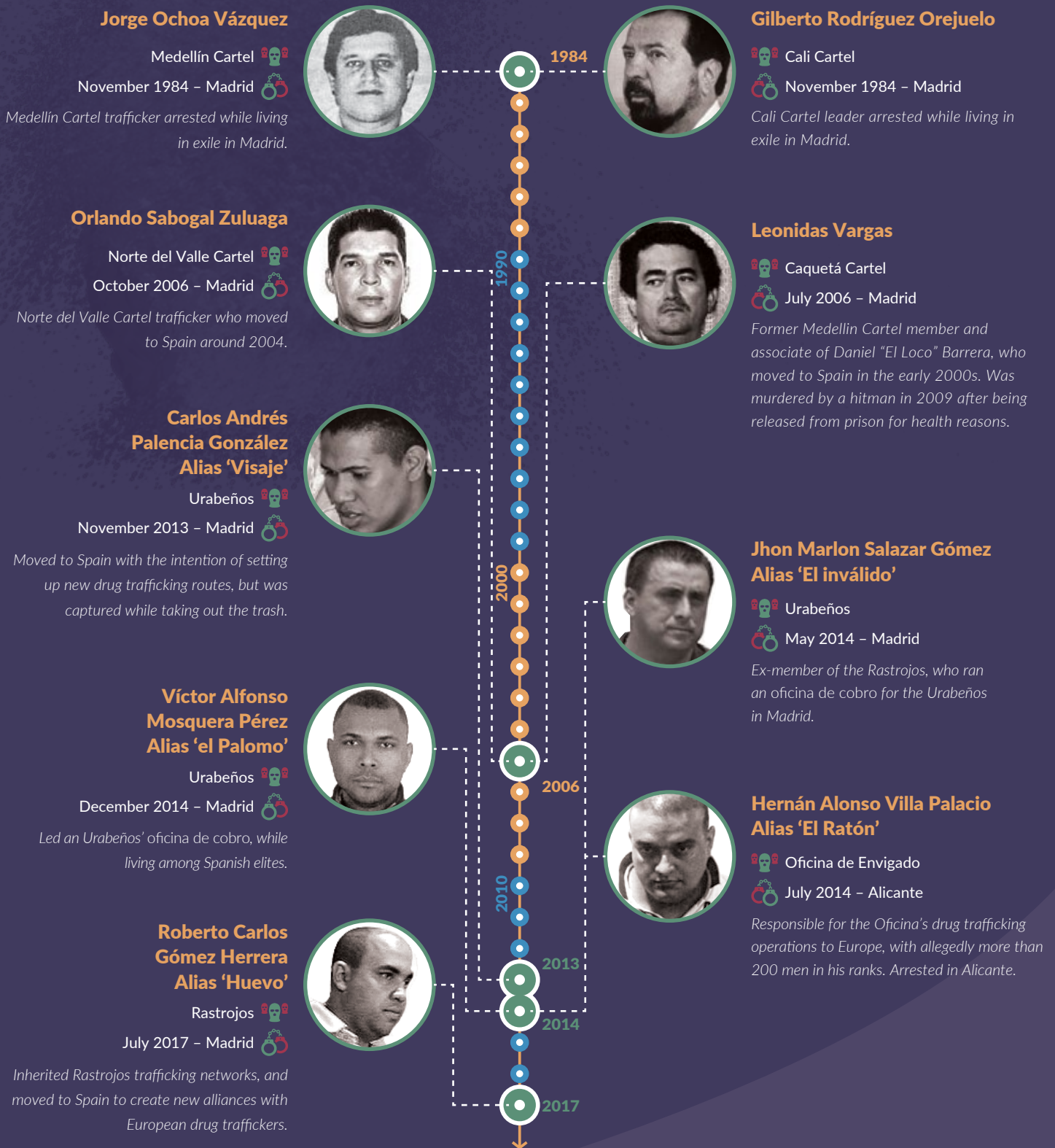
Galicia though, was just the beginning, and new routes began opening all around Spain. By 2006, the country was recording the third-highest cocaine seizures in the world, according to the UNODC.<sup>22</sup> Seizures were increasingly made outside of Galicia, including in Andalusia, Valencia and Barcelona, as traffickers began to use other modus operandi, especially shipping containers.

The Colombians' growing European wholesale business, meanwhile, required them to set up operations on the continent. Spain, with its shared language and commercial and cultural ties, was their natural home. And as the European market grew in importance to the Colombians, so did the Colombians' presence in Spain. By the first decade of 2000s, authorities became aware that this included not only trafficking networks but also *oficinas de cobro* – or collection offices – the name given to Colombian criminal structures dedicated to providing services to drug traffickers, above all debt collection and assassinations. One of the most notorious Colombian *oficinas* to operate in Spain was known as the 'Señores de Ácido' (Lords of Acid), which was based in Madrid. (The group earned its name after dissolving in acid the headless corpse of a relative of a drug trafficker with an outstanding debt.) The Lords of Acid were directed from Colombia by Luis Dávalos Jiménez, alias 'Pampo', a member of the Norte del Valle Cartel leadership. The *oficina's* contract killers were involved in kidnapping, murders, debt collection and extortion. Colombian newspaper *El Espectador* reported how the Colombians had set up the network in an effort to export to Spain the organized-crime model of the Oficina de Envigado, the original Colombian *oficina*, which was created to collect debts for Pablo Escobar and his Medellín Cartel.<sup>23</sup>

But it was not just the foot soldiers of cocaine trafficking that set up shop in Spain. In 2006, one of Colombia's most-wanted traffickers, Leonidas Vargas, was arrested in Madrid.<sup>24</sup> In 2009, Vargas was freed on conditional bail due to health reasons, but was then assassinated in his hospital bed as the Colombian cartel battles played out on Spanish soil.



# Top Colombian cocaine traffickers arrested in Spain



Organization Date and place where arrested

SOURCE: Media reports

Since then, high-profile traffickers from some of Colombia's notorious cocaine-trafficking networks, such as the Urabeños<sup>25</sup> and the Oficina de Envigado,<sup>26</sup> have also been captured in Spain (see the visual above), in one case reportedly while living in the same gated community as Madrid soccer stars Cristiano Ronaldo and Fernando Torres.<sup>27</sup>

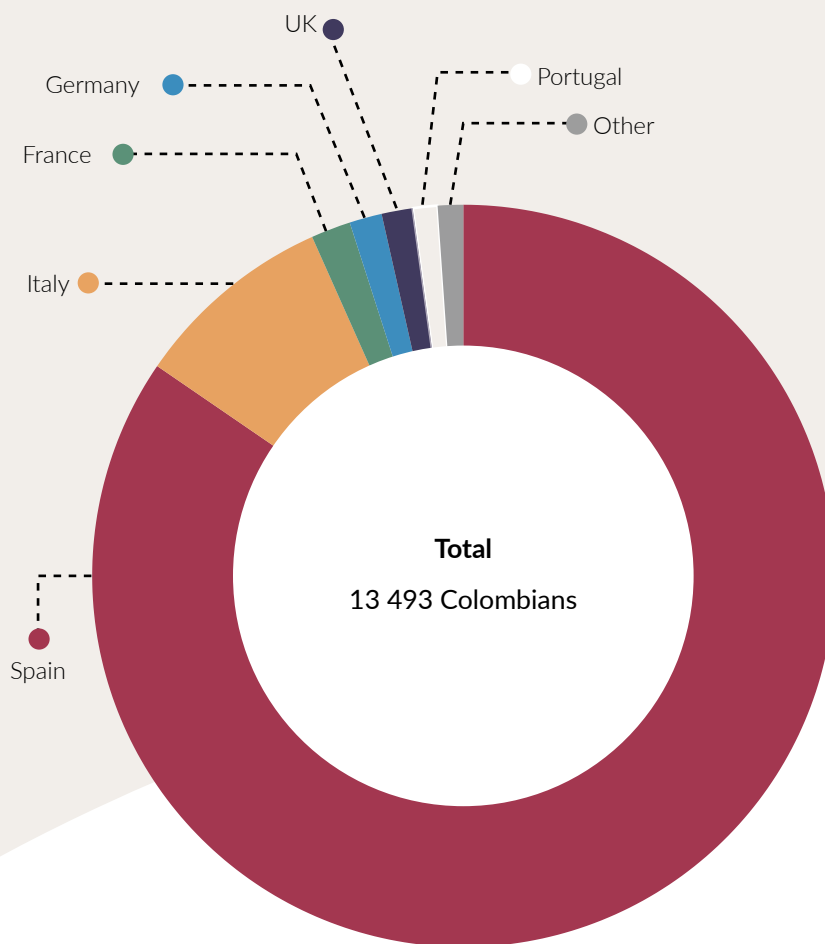
## Spain in the new cocaine era

In 2019, the Spanish police stumbled upon a drug-filled semi-submersible that had crossed the Atlantic. The vessel had carried 3 tonnes of cocaine more than 9 000 kilometres along the Amazon river and across the Atlantic, but the crew had been forced to abandon it off the coast of Galicia after suffering mechanical problems, according to an investigation by Spain's *El País*.<sup>28</sup> Spanish police sources told InSight Crime that Latin American traffickers have used semi-submersibles to move cocaine into Spain since the middle of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Colombian drug lord Diego Pérez Henao, alias 'Diego Rastrojo,' of the Rastrojos, was a pioneer, often operating out of Venezuela, where he was finally captured in 2012. But the discovery of the 2019 semi-submersible offered a glimpse into a new generation of low-profile Galician traffickers that are now involved in the business. 'The Spanish groups working with semi-submersibles are investing in these operations,' Chief Commissioner Antonio Martínez Duarte, head of the Spanish police's Central Anti-narcotics Brigade, told InSight Crime.

The old guard of Galicians is still active in the cocaine trade, although they have faced setbacks in recent years. A network of more than 30 Galicians, allegedly led by Sito Miñanco, was dismantled in 2018 in the largest police operation against drug trafficking in Galicia since 1990.<sup>29</sup> The crime group was linked to two large busts in 2017: a 3.7 tonne shipment aboard a tugboat seized in international waters, and a 616 kilogram seizure made in a container found in Hoorn, the Netherlands.<sup>30</sup>

The main players in today's Spanish cocaine trade do not seek the legendary status of their predecessors, instead preferring the protection of anonymity and a low-profile life among local elites. '[These traffickers] are part of high society and live a normal life. Some of them send their kids to the same schools as the judges here,' Víctor Méndez, author of *Narcogallegos*, a book on the Spanish drug trade, told InSight Crime. 'Their lives are not super luxurious, but they have a lot of money without drawing attention to themselves, without the fancy cars.'

Colombian traffickers also remain deeply embedded in the Spanish cocaine trade, hiding among a diaspora that has grown from around 10 000 in 1998<sup>31</sup> to 270 000 today.<sup>32</sup> The ongoing importance of Spain to their operations is reflected in the figures – 85% of Colombians convicted of drug trafficking in Europe are incarcerated in Spain, according to the Colombian Bureau of Statistics (Figure 7).<sup>33</sup>



**FIGURE 7** Colombians imprisoned in Europe for drug trafficking.

SOURCE: Colombian Bureau of Statistics

Madrid is regarded as a principal operating base, said Chief Inspector Emilio Rodríguez, of the police’s Specialist Response Against Organized Crime Group. The capital’s luxury hotels are used to meet associates, while reception points along the coast are easy to reach from the city.

All major Colombian drug traffickers working in Europe use Spain, according to Rodríguez. Many have established cells in the country, although higher ups in the organizations only ever come to oversee the final stages of trafficking deals. ‘There are permanent, low-level representatives in the country, but if we arrest a big guy from one of these groups, it is always during the last phase of a [drug trafficking] operation,’ he said.

*Spain has been displaced as Europe's top cocaine entry point by Belgium.*

The Colombians commonly dispatch shipments with multiple owners, the police chief added. Part of the load belongs to them, and they will sell it on the wholesale market. The rest belongs to other traffickers from both Europe and Latin America who pay the Colombians to source and move their cocaine. Colombian *oficinas de cobro* also continue to operate, policing and protecting traffickers' interests. While some are allied with specific groups, they often work as hired guns for the highest bidders.

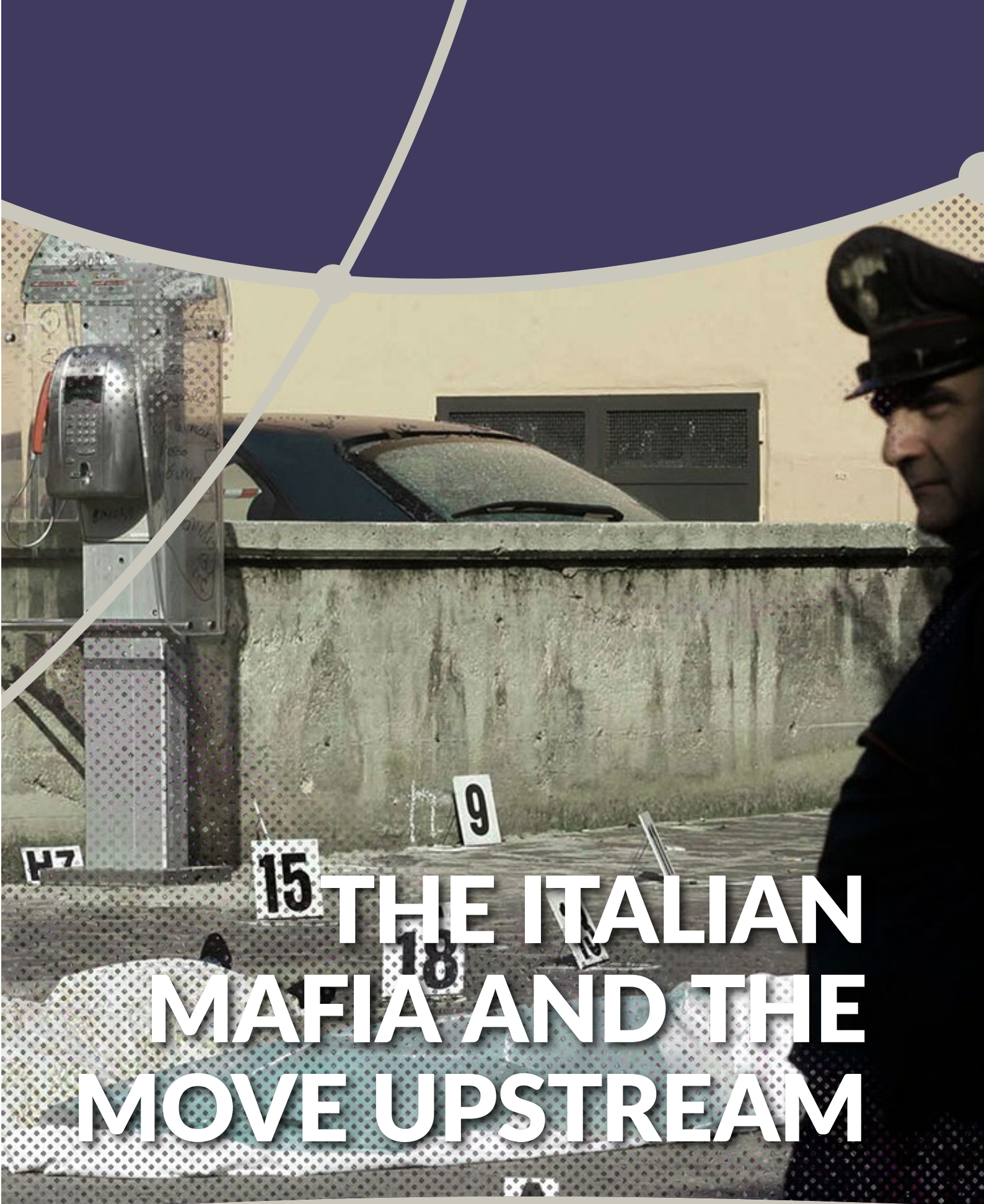
Although numerous Colombian criminal organizations use Spain, one group more than any other has caught the attention of Spanish police. 'We have all types of Colombian groups [in Madrid], but lately, we see a lot of members from the Urabeños,' said Chief Commissioner Martínez. The Urabeños sell cocaine wholesale, offer logistical services to independent traffickers and use Spain for money laundering operations.

Today's cocaine routes are no longer concentrated in Galicia, but pass through Spain's coasts, islands, ports and airports all around the country. Most seizures are made on vessels or in container ports such as Algeciras, Barcelona and Valencia, where an estimated 40% to 50% of all cocaine in Spain arrives. And the loads are getting bigger, as shown by the nearly 9-tonne haul seized in Algeciras in 2018 – a Spanish record.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, other routes have opened up, such as using the hashish-trafficking lines that run from Morocco to the beaches along the Costa del Sol.<sup>35</sup> 'The complete infrastructure, go-fasts and other boats, for hashish is used to transport the cocaine that enters via Africa,' said Chief Inspector Rodríguez.

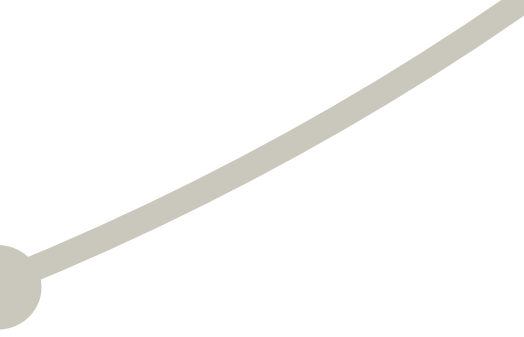
However, Spain has now been displaced as Europe's top cocaine entry point by Belgium and its port at Antwerp – a reflection of the critical role of container shipping in trafficking today. Although Spain has historically ranked in the top three European nations for seizures, recently there has been a sharp drop: from a high of 50 tonnes in 2018 to just 21 tonnes in the first 10 months of 2019. Police believe this is a sign that, while Spain's strategic importance continues, its importance as a trafficking route is declining. 'Colombian organizations use Spain as a meeting point with organizations from Serbia, eastern Europe [and] Africa, but it is no longer the principal arrival point for drugs,' said Chief Commissioner Martínez.

Such international traffickers, along with other organized-crime networks from the Balkans, the British Isles, the Netherlands and elsewhere also now run their own networks in Spain. And while they may continue to work with the Colombians and the Galicians downstream in Spain, ever more of these groups are also working upstream in Latin America, following the trail cut by the Colombians' other main partners from the cartel era – the Italian mafia.



# THE ITALIAN MAFIA AND THE MOVE UPSTREAM

▲ Italian police stand over the body of a murdered mobster in Naples. © Associated Press



Operation Tiburón Galloway began as a local investigation by prosecutors in the Italian region of Calabria in 2001, but quickly snowballed into a multinational, multiagency investigation. Over five years, prosecutors uncovered a vast cocaine trafficking and money laundering conspiracy spanning both Italy and Colombia – and even the retirement plans of one of Colombia’s most notorious warlords.

The investigation into the alliance between Salvatore Mancuso, a commander of Colombia’s paramilitary army, the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) and the ‘Ndrangheta mafia revealed just how far the Italians had come in the cocaine trade – all the way to the source. According to reports in the Italian media, the evidence showed that the Italians were buying cocaine from Mancuso in Colombia at US\$3 000 a kilogram,<sup>36</sup> then organizing its shipment through Colombian ports and via Venezuela to Europe, where it would fetch prices up to 20 times higher on the wholesale market.<sup>37</sup>

Mancuso, in turn, went into the business with the Italians in Colombia, even opening an Italian restaurant in the Caribbean city of Barranquilla that became popular with mobsters and local elites alike. And as the paramilitaries negotiated their demobilization with the Colombian government, he sent one of his personal fixers to Italy to scout for property, according to an investigation by *El Espectador*.<sup>38</sup>

Communications intercepts between ‘Ndrangheta members hinted at why: ‘[Mancuso] is at the end of the peace process, and they will surely give him a couple of years in prison, then after he is coming to Italy,’ Mancuso’s chief mafia business partner told his son. But Mancuso did not get his retirement in Italy – at least not yet.<sup>39</sup> He was instead extradited to the US, where he served a 12-year prison sentence on drug-trafficking charges.

Since then, the European cocaine trade has changed and evolved. But networks organized along the same lines as the Mancuso mafia ring are becoming more common as more and more European traffickers move upstream in search of cheap cocaine and coordinate its dispatch to Europe directly. Nonetheless, it was the Italians, with their particular brand of organization, entrepreneurship and criminal efficiency who pioneered the approach, and it is still the Italians who have the most far-reaching and sophisticated upstream operations.

## Cocaine brokers and the criminal diaspora

Italian involvement in the cocaine trade even pre-dates the rise of the Colombian cartels, with records of mafia members arrested in Brazil for cocaine trafficking as far back as 1972.<sup>40</sup> But at first, cocaine was a minor part of a broad criminal portfolio that included everything from international heroin trafficking to local waste-disposal rackets.

When Colombia's Medellín and Cali cartels began to ramp up cocaine trafficking into Europe in the 1980s, the Italians were among the main wholesale buyers, moving and selling the product that Galician smugglers brought in for the Colombians. But they soon wanted more, and the Italians' experience in the heroin business offered them a major competitive advantage over other European mafias getting into the cocaine trade. 'They exported heroin from Europe into the United States so they had a lot of experience and they had established distribution and importation chains,' said Mike Vigil, a former chief of international operations for the DEA. The more forward-thinking mafiosi understood that this experience and criminal infrastructure could be used to traffic the cocaine themselves.

By the early 1990s, Italian cocaine brokers were stationing themselves in Colombia, 'so they could be closer to the supply and coordinate shipments to their standards,' according to Vigil. The most infamous was the baby-faced trafficker Roberto Pannunzi, dubbed the 'Copernicus of cocaine' by Italian crime writer Roberto Saviano. Pannunzi's first realization was that the heroin he had trafficked for years was worth much more to Latin American traffickers than the cocaine they shipped to Europe. So, as Saviano describes in his book *ZeroZeroZero*, Pannunzi began a drug exchange: 1 kilogram of heroin for 25 kilograms of cocaine. His second realization was that there was far, far more money to be made from cocaine upstream.

By the early 1990s, Pannunzi had leveraged his cartel contacts in Colombia and his mafia contacts in Italy to set himself up as an upstream middleman, establishing himself as one of the original cocaine brokers. He worked for himself, brokering deals between the

Medellín Cartel and both the Cosa Nostra and 'Ndrangheta mafias, but beholden to none of them.

But the cartel era was winding down, with the killing of Pablo Escobar in 1993 and the capture of the Cali Cartel bosses in 1995, ushering in a new generation of traffickers and organizations. Pannunzi was captured in Medellín less than two months after Escobar's death. The police officials arresting him turned down his offer of a million dollars to let him go.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, he was released five years later after prosecutors ran out of time to bring their case against him.<sup>42</sup>

By that time, Colombia's criminal monoliths had splintered into federations of smaller trafficking networks. For the Italian mafia, that represented new opportunities, and their footprint upstream began to grow. But the mafia that proved the most adept at moving in the new cocaine trade was not Italy's notorious and storied Cosa Nostra mafia, but the 'Ndrangheta, a relatively minor federation of family crime clans from the impoverished region of Calabria.

The 'Ndrangheta plotted a chart upstream by turning a weakness into a strength. Poverty and lack of opportunity drove a mass migration of Calabrians throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and among their numbers were 'Ndrina – the mafia clans that make up the 'Ndrangheta network. 'Migrants from Calabria created communities around the world and they strengthened the connections with the Calabrian region – this was the first base of their network,' said Alessia Cerantola, an investigative journalist at the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and co-founder of the Investigative Reporting Project Italy (IRPI).

These migrant crime clans not only dedicated themselves to crime but also to setting up legal businesses as fronts for illegal activity and to launder money. Among them were export companies, which the Italians used to ship cocaine to Europe in cargo and containers – what would become the main method of shipping cocaine to Europe.



Salvatore Mancuso, former commander of Colombia's paramilitary army, the AUC.

This upstream presence allowed the 'Ndrangheta to cut out the independent brokers and control more of the supply chain directly. 'They have their people in the key positions in the supply chain,' said Cerantola. 'This is not only in Italy but also on an international level thanks to the people they located in key strategic roles around the world.'

Italian migration was also key to the alliance between the 'Ndrangheta and Salvatore Mancuso, who was the son of an Italian migrant from the south-western region of Campania, and came from the city of Montería in Colombia's Caribbean, home to a significant Italian diaspora.<sup>43</sup>

Mancuso, though, was far from the only 'Ndrangheta supplier, as their upstream brokers set to work making other connections, not only with right-wing paramilitaries but also with guerrilla insurgents.<sup>44</sup> By 2006, as the AUC was coming to the end of its demobilization process as part of a peace deal with the Colombian government, the 'Ndrangheta was handling up to 80% of European cocaine imports, according to a report commissioned by Italy's anti-Mafia commission.<sup>45</sup>

## The Italian mafia and the cocaine migration

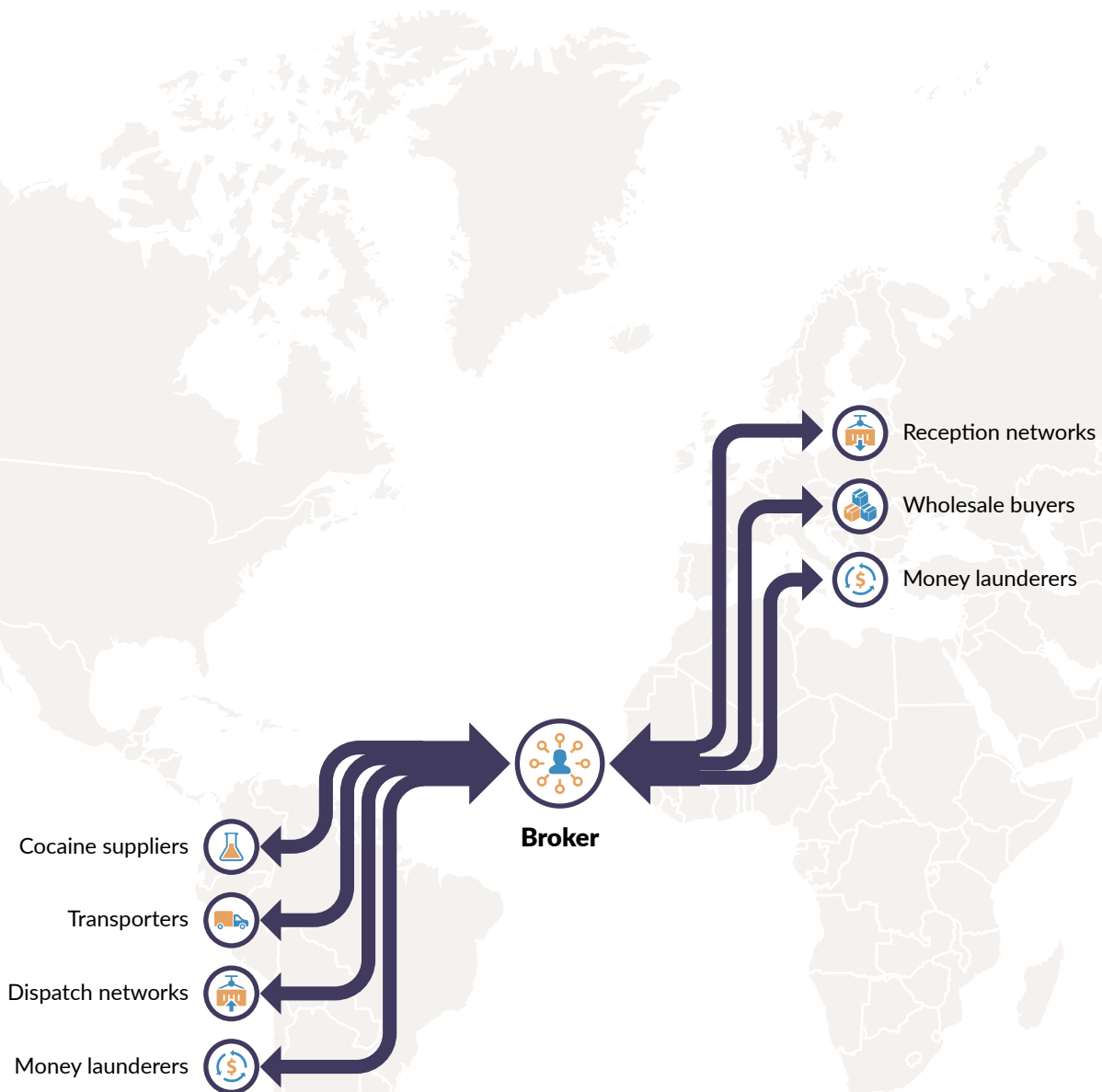
When Mancuso was extradited to the US along with 13 other paramilitary commanders in 2008, it was a watershed moment for the cocaine trade, as the old guard was dragged off the criminal stage and a new generation jostled to take their place in the Colombian underworld.



In the new cocaine trade that developed in this power vacuum, trafficking to Europe opened up, both geographically and strategically. Over a decade later, there are more routes and more actors involved than ever before. But the Italian mafia remain at the forefront of this expansion.

Police and intelligence sources all around Latin America report their presence. In Brazil – today one of the

main dispatch points to Europe, according to Europol – police sources uncovered an alliance between the 'Ndrangheta and Brazil's most powerful criminal group, the First Capital Command (PCC) in 2017.<sup>46</sup> In Costa Rica, intelligence sources say the Italians are the most common European actor found trafficking in the country, while in Peru police report that the Italians are among the main financiers of cocaine shipments.



**FIGURE 8** Cocaine broker network.  
SOURCE: InSight Crime investigations

Brokers, many of them resident upstream, remain the lynchpin of their operations, with their connections to suppliers and dispatch networks (Figure 8). 'The 'Ndrangheta have brokers in these countries, typically in Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica, and these brokers try to organize the sales from these countries using legal businesses,' said Maurizio Catino, an expert on the Italian mafia and author of the book *Mafia Organizations*. 'In these countries, there are 'Ndrangheta logistics cells for trafficking cocaine through the movement of goods for export to North America and Europe,' he added.

An IRPI and CORRECTIV investigation into one of these brokers, Nicola Assisi, offered a glimpse into how they work.<sup>47</sup> According to the investigation, Assisi established himself as one of the cocaine world's leading brokers after he inherited the contact book of the legendary trafficker Pasquale Marando. Marando had worked alongside Pannunzi as one of the pioneers of Italian cocaine trafficking.<sup>48</sup> When Marando was murdered by rivals in 2002, Assisi moved to take over the upstream networks he left behind.

Evidence collected by investigators shows how Assisi sourced cocaine from suppliers in Peru, Paraguay and Brazil. He then contracted the PCC to move the cocaine to the port of Santos and dispatch it to Europe, where his 'Ndrangheta clients were waiting. After decades in the cocaine trade, Assisi was finally captured in Brazil in 2019.<sup>49</sup>

Assisi, like Roberto Pannunzi before him, was an independent operator rather than a member of an 'Ndrangheta clan. Most trafficking networks prefer it this way because it avoids the alerts that known mafia members would raise upstream, according to Esteban Chavarría, the head of the anti-narcotics unit of the prosecutors' office in Costa Rica, where the Italian mafia currently has a major footprint. 'They do not directly form a part of the mafia in Italy, they have not been arrested and they have not been investigated, but they know the Costa Rican market and they come to form this link, a bridge between the mafia and Costa Rica,' Chavarría said.

The relationship between Assisi and the PCC is also typical of today's Italian trafficking networks, where the brokers contract local criminal groups to handle the export. However, in some cases, the Italians have set up their own front businesses for sending cocaine shipments. One of these cases ended with murder, when an Italian trafficker who set up a fruit company in Costa Rica was gunned down in San José after a lost shipment. Chavarría believes it was not an isolated case. 'We are investigating more of these structures that have been set up by Europeans to carry out this type of trafficking,' he said.

Italian mafia operations have been uncovered in many other countries that have become – or are at risk of becoming – major cocaine export platforms supplying the European market. These include Ecuador,<sup>50</sup> the Dominican Republic, Suriname,<sup>51</sup> Guyana,<sup>52</sup> Uruguay,<sup>53</sup> Argentina,<sup>54</sup> Bolivia,<sup>55</sup> the Dutch Caribbean and Chile.<sup>56</sup> The 'Ndrangheta alone operates in more than 30 countries around the world, according to European police.<sup>57</sup>

These networks also manipulate illicit finance flows, which they channel through Latin America and the Caribbean. In some places, they have turned their money into power, by spreading corruption and penetrating vulnerable states.

One of the most audacious attempts to co-opt upstream states came on the Caribbean island of Curaçao. After gaining autonomy from the Netherlands in 2010, Curaçao elected Gerrit Schotte as its first prime minister. However, the country's first independent government was compromised by Francesco Corrallo, a casino owner in the region and, according to Italian prosecutors, an international drug trafficker who was an important member of the Sicilian mafia. Investigations into Schotte revealed how Corrallo bribed the Curaçaoan politician to gain access to confidential government information and to secure the appointment of his relatives and allies in critical positions at the Central Bank and the Gaming Board and within Schotte's cabinet.<sup>58</sup> In 2016, Schotte was convicted of forgery, official bribery and money laundering.<sup>59</sup>

Latin America and the Caribbean are also used as a refuge for Italian mafiosi on the run from the law, those needing to lie low or looking to take semi-retirement by laundering money in the sunshine. Just such a criminal retirement ring was broken up in the Dominican Republic in June 2020, when INTERPOL arrested eight Camorra fugitives who had fled Italy after being convicted of crimes ranging from cocaine trafficking to embezzlement.<sup>60</sup> The men – all but one over 50 years of age – were living quiet lives allegedly laundering money through restaurants and tourist businesses.

The Italians are no longer the only European criminals setting up operations upstream. More and more groups – above all from the Balkans – have followed the path they forged upstream to maximize profits from the cocaine trade. Today, it is common to hear of Serbs buying cocaine at the source in Peru, or Albanians organizing shipments through the ports of Ecuador. However, the Italian mafia's generations of experience moving both drugs and money, their global networks and their proven capacity to innovate and adapt will ensure they remain among the most powerful and innovative criminal syndicates, posing serious security threats not only in Europe, but also in Latin America.

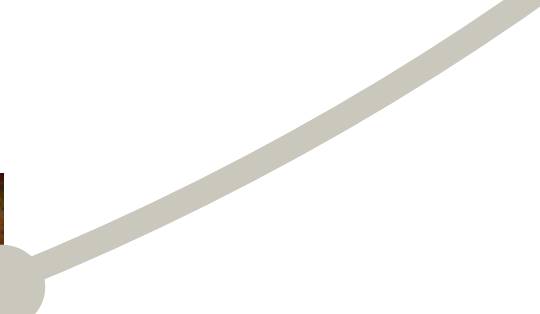
*The Italian mafia remain at the forefront of the cocaine trafficking expansion.*



# COCAINE

## THE CRIMINAL STEROID

▲ Arms seized from the First Capital Command, Brazil's most powerful criminal group. © Associated Press



**C**ocaine is a criminal steroid. Those that gain access to its riches enjoy accelerated growth and power, usually leaving a trail of violence and corruption in their wake. And today, there are more opportunities than ever for criminal groups to access cocaine in both Latin America and Europe.

The cocaine trade has spawned some of the most powerful and notorious criminal structures on the planet. In Colombia, it turned a ragtag band of smugglers into the Medellín Cartel, which declared war on the state itself. In Mexico, it turned rural drug farmers into the heads of multinational criminal conglomerates of astonishing reach and power.

While the US market was initially the main driver of this criminal evolution, over the last two decades the growing European market has also played a key role. In Latin America, cocaine money from Europe has seen Venezuelan corruption networks emerge as major transnational traffickers, while in Brazil it has turned a prison gang into South America's fastest-growing criminal syndicate. In Europe, Galician smugglers and Italian mafias were the first to benefit, but they were soon joined by others – above all criminal organizations from the Balkans.

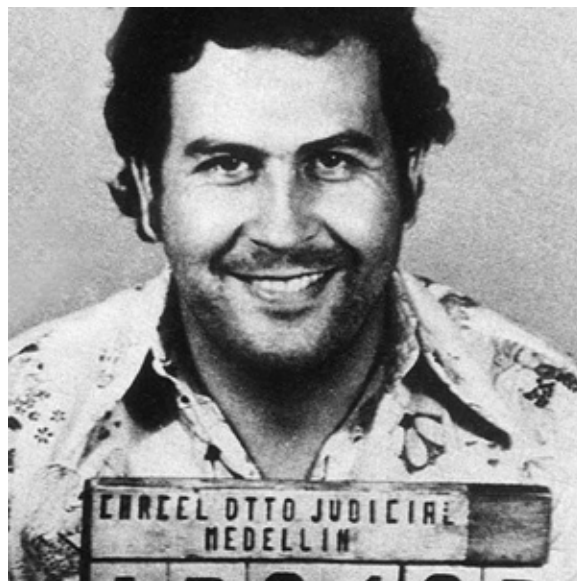
## **The Latin American steroid effect**

In 1976, Pablo Escobar was arrested for trafficking cocaine for the first time when police discovered 39 kilograms of cocaine hidden in the tyre of a car he had driven up from Ecuador.<sup>61</sup> When he was arrested for the second time – after 15 years spent trafficking countless tonnes of cocaine into the US and Europe – he negotiated his own incarceration into a purpose-built luxury prison.<sup>62</sup> Between these two arrests, he was elected to Colombia's congress,<sup>63</sup> then waged a successful war against the government and police, ordering scores of assassinations and terrorist attacks. And he earned enough money to secure a place on the Forbes Billionaires List for seven years running.<sup>64</sup>

When Escobar finally negotiated his surrender, it was only after extradition had been taken off the statute books and on the condition that he could run his own opulent prison.<sup>65</sup> Ultimately, Escobar fell not because the state defeated him, but after a civil war broke out between different elements of the Medellín Cartel. Many of his own people turned on him and waged a dirty war against his network, using Escobar's own tactics against him, while cooperating with the security forces.

The fall of Escobar sparked the transition from all-powerful cartels to federations of smaller trafficking groups.<sup>66</sup> But the cocaine trade retained its transformative power. One of these federations was the paramilitaries of the AUC, a network of allied private armies purportedly formed to combat the threat from Marxist guerrillas, but in most cases more focused on controlling the drug trade.<sup>67</sup> The AUC employed brutal and often indiscriminate violence to secure control of coca fields, cocaine laboratories and major trafficking arteries.<sup>68</sup> When the group demobilized in 2006, more than 30 000 fighters handed over their weapons and their dominion of up to a quarter of the country.

Then, as control of the US cocaine trade shifted to Mexico in the 1990s, it was the turn of Mexican organized crime. Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel began as drug farmers and moved into marijuana trafficking, but it was the cocaine trade that made their cartel what it is today: a multibillion-dollar operation with connections to the upper echelons of the Mexican state and criminal interests in as many as 50 countries worldwide.<sup>69</sup>



Medellín Cartel head Pablo Escobar



Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro

## Venezuela

One of the first major trafficking routes to Europe outside of Colombia to emerge was Venezuela, which was the main dispatch point for Europe-bound cocaine for the first decade of the 2000s.<sup>70</sup> The profits from this trafficking were central to the rise of the Cartel of the Suns – a loose trafficking network made up of high-ranking members of the Venezuelan security forces and government.<sup>71</sup> Initially, the Cartel of the Suns was little more than a collection of small cells of military officials paid off by traffickers to ensure the passage of their shipments. ‘Their job was simply to let drugs enter and move through the country, they would also guard shipments and protect them against hijackings,’ Mildred Camero, a former director of Venezuela’s National Commission Against Illicit Drug Use (CONACUID), told InSight Crime.

However, as the European cocaine money rolled in, the ranks of the officials involved got higher and the role they played in the trade got bigger. Today, the president himself, Nicolás Maduro, his family and many of his top lieutenants have been indicted on drug-trafficking charges.

## Brazil

Today, the main trafficking bridge to Europe is no longer Venezuela, but Brazil. Here too, cocaine money has transformed the underworld.

Profits from trafficking to Europe have allowed Brazil’s PCC to complete its transition from a prison gang to a transnational actor with influence in Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay. The PCC was already powerful, running not only prisons but controlling criminal enclaves and running criminal economies (including drug sales) across swathes of Brazil, especially in many of the urban slums known as *favelas*. Its recent explosive growth<sup>72</sup> is due in no small part to establishing control of several cocaine corridors, such as that from Bolivia through Paraguay and on to the port of Santos, opening up what has become one of the most important trafficking arteries to Europe, according to Europol.<sup>73</sup>

Police sources in Brazil, speaking on condition of anonymity, described to InSight Crime how the PCC charge independent traffickers to use this corridor. But the top-level leaders – the *cúpula* – have also leveraged their control over the routes and their growing connections to cocaine brokers and international mafias, such as Italy’s ‘Ndrangheta, to start moving their own shipments into Europe.

## Europe consumes the steroid

The effects of the cocaine steroid can also be seen in Europe. As shown above, the Galicians quickly evolved from cigarette smugglers to drug lords,<sup>74</sup> with such corrupting power over local politicians, judges and security forces that by the 1990s debate raged over the 'Sicilianization' of the region – referring to the Italian mafia stronghold of Sicily.<sup>75</sup> In Italy, the cocaine trade turned the 'Ndrangheta from the poor relations of the Italian underworld to its richest and most powerful actor, far outstripping the famed Cosa Nostra.<sup>76</sup>

But the European market was no monopoly, and as it grew it also opened up, offering access to the cocaine

trade to any criminal actor enterprising enough to get a foothold. Chief among them have been organized crime groups from the Balkans, above all the former Yugoslavian states of Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and Bosnia, as well as Albania.

The Balkan wars in the 1990s opened the door for organized crime to flourish in the region. Networks formed to traffic arms, people and drugs,<sup>77</sup> mostly heroin coming from Afghanistan and Turkey.<sup>78</sup> The wars also hardened people to violence, giving them military as well as criminal experience and skills, and created a huge diaspora as tens of thousands of people fled the conflict.



### The Darko Šarić Network

Darko Šarić

The so-called Balkan 'Cocaine King', Darko Šarić, was born in Montenegro when it was still part of Yugoslavia but has Serbian citizenship. He mounted a billion-dollar cocaine network with connections in both Latin America and Europe with the alleged complicity of powerful Serbian and Montenegrin businessmen and public officials. Authorities first became aware of his activities in 2005, but it wasn't until 2008 that an investigation into his network was opened. Šarić went on the run in 2009 after one of his shipments was seized in Uruguay. He eventually surrendered to the authorities in 2014 and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.



SOURCE: OCCRP and InSight Crime investigations



One of the first Balkan criminals to enter the cocaine trade was Darko Šarić, the Balkan 'Cocaine King' who replicated the model of the Italian mafia by building networks both in Europe and upstream. Evidence collected by investigators showed how he exported cocaine to Europe from Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay while compiling a criminal contact book that included Russian, Italian and Colombian crime syndicates.<sup>79</sup> He also cultivated political ties at home, allegedly with the Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic<sup>80</sup> and the Serb Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić.<sup>81</sup> However, following a multi-year, multinational manhunt, Šarić finally turned himself in to Serbian authorities in 2014<sup>82</sup> and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.<sup>83</sup>

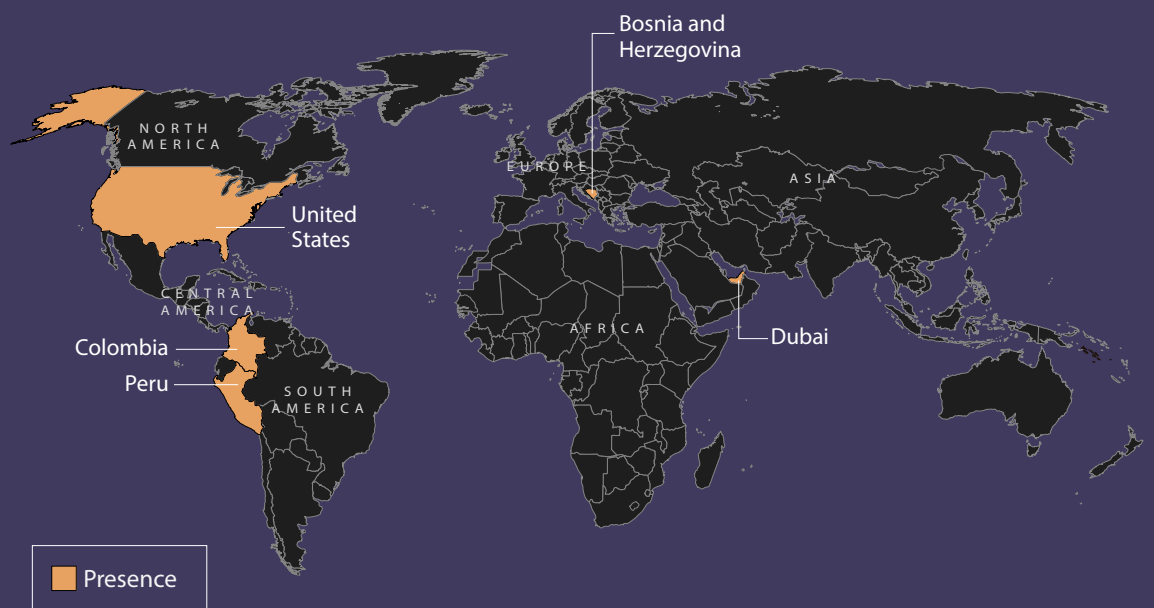
Today, there are no 'kings' of the Balkan cocaine trade, at least not any highly visible ones. Instead, Balkan criminals increasingly apply a 'crowdsourcing business model' to cocaine trafficking, collectively investing in very large shipments, according to the 2019 edition of the annual EU Drug Markets report.<sup>84</sup> These shipments are compiled from multiple sources, with Balkans traffickers buying cocaine directly in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and above all, in Peru and Brazil, before organizing dispatch through ports such as Guayaquil in Ecuador and Santos in Brazil. Once in Europe, the Balkan mafias break down shipments and move them on to different markets around the continent, in some cases even running 'end-to-end' trade – buying in Latin America and selling at the retail level, as some Albanian networks now do in the United Kingdom.<sup>85</sup>



## Tito and Dino Cartel

*Edin Gačanin*

The Tito and Dino Cartel is led by Edin Gačanin, who was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina but was raised in the Netherlands, and started his criminal career by helping the Bosnian criminal Elvis Hodžić organize cocaine shipments from Peru to Europe. His organization, Tito and Dino, is comprised of family members and friends from his old neighborhood in Sarajevo. They are based in Dubai, and predominantly traffic Peruvian cocaine through the Netherlands, but maintain connections to the Balkans through money laundering operations.



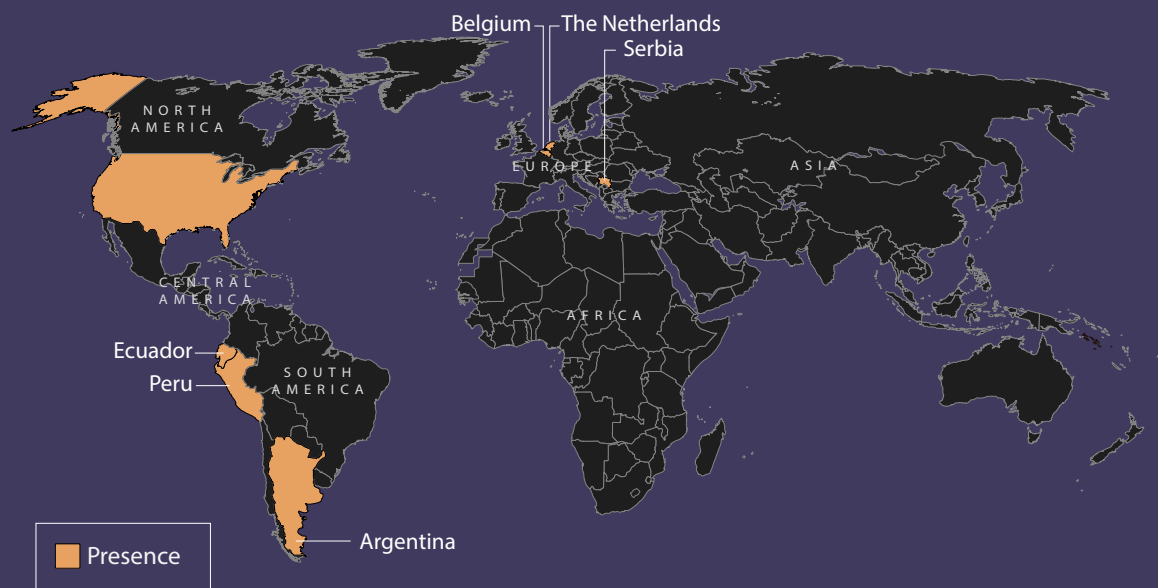
SOURCE: GI-TOC and InSight Crime investigations



## Grupa Amerika

Mile Miljanić

Grupa Amerika emerged in the 1990s. It is rumoured that it was created by the Serbian State Security Department as a death squad at the service of former Serbian President Slobodan Milošević that was made up of Montenegrins trained in the US before the Balkan wars. Initially, Amerika was led by Vojislav Raičević, who used to work for the Italian Mafia in the US, and it began trafficking cocaine and heroin between Colombia, the US and Europe. After Raičević was assassinated in 1996, Mile Miljanić took over the leadership of the group. Today, Grupa Amerika predominantly operates cocaine routes into Europe from Peru, where the group even allegedly masterminded the prison break of one of their suppliers in order to ensure the flow of drugs continues.



SOURCE: Telegraf.rs and InSight Crime investigations

Currently one of the most notorious Balkan networks is the Tito and Dino Cartel.<sup>86</sup> Led by Edin Gačanin, the organization has a strong footprint in Dubai and the Netherlands, and Bosnian police believe it controls one third of the cocaine that enters the port of Rotterdam.<sup>87</sup> The DEA considers the network to be one of the 50 largest drug-trafficking operations on the planet.<sup>88</sup>

The group is now one of the most important international actors in Peru, intelligence sources told InSight Crime. 'Tito is the main buyer in Peru,' said one

Peruvian intelligence agent, who spoke on condition of anonymity. 'He has made connections with dispatch networks at the ports of Callao and Piura to send drugs to Europe.' The network has also played a key role in opening up routes from Chile, the agent added. 'They have migrated to Chile's port of Arica in order to send drug shipments bound for Europe,' he said.

Peruvian anti-narcotics sources said the organization previously worked with one of South America's most established trafficking networks, the Andino Cartel, led by the Ecuadorean trafficker Pedro Bejarano, but

they severed ties some five years ago. Recent reports indicate they have now cut out the middleman by securing exclusive supply deals with four Peruvian crime clans dedicated to cocaine production.<sup>89</sup>

However, according to Serbian organization the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network and investigative journalist Stevan Dojčinović, the Tito and Dino Cartel is neither the strongest Balkan criminal group in Peru, nor in Europe. 'Tito is a catchy nickname,' said Dojčinović. 'Every day you'll find five articles about this, but the truth is there are much more dangerous and bigger players than Tito.'

Grupa Amerika is one such player. Led by Mile Miljanić, Grupa Amerika was born 30 years ago on the streets of Belgrade, Serbia, and today it is one of the most powerful Serb networks in South America.<sup>90</sup> However, evidence of Grupa Amerika's presence in the region is elusive, with only one high-profile arrest linked to the group. This came in July 2016, when Peruvian police captured Balkan War veteran Zoran Jakšić in the city of Tumbes as he tried to cross the border into Ecuador with more than 40 false identities and 10 passports in his luggage.<sup>91</sup> Jakšić is suspected of smuggling hundreds of tonnes of cocaine into the Netherlands and Belgium, and was a wanted man in 25 countries.<sup>92</sup> He was based in Argentina and bought cocaine in Peru and Ecuador, then turned it into liquid form and exported it to Europe in shipments of wine bottles.<sup>93</sup>

European groups such as Tito and Dino, Grupa Amerika, the 'Ndrangheta and the Galicians have grown enormously wealthy and powerful off cocaine. But unlike the Mexican cartels in the US, none of them have the capacity to shut other European actors out of the market. Irish, British, French, Dutch, Turkish and Belgian actors also play a key role in the supply chain both up and downstream, and InSight Crime has also received reports of the growing presence of organized-crime groups from Russia and other former Soviet states in Latin America. Furthermore, in today's increasingly fluid underworld, none of these groups have the capacity to run cocaine routes from production to retail single-handedly. Instead, they constantly form and dissolve networks and alliances with different actors from all across the globe.

In this decentralized and multinational underworld, criminal networks involved in cocaine trafficking are multiplying on both continents. And many of them decide to move up the supply chain closer to the source of cocaine production in order to increase their profits. All they need is money and the right contacts: a broker that can source cocaine and a logistics specialist to traffic it – above all those that have mastered the complex world of container shipping.

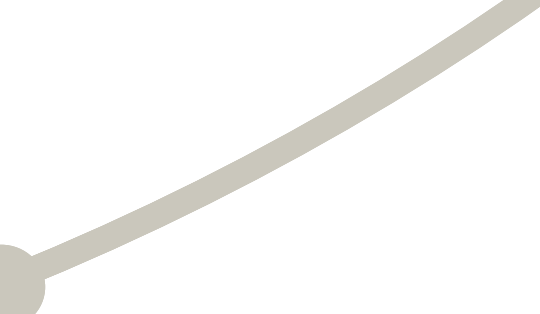
*In the decentralized, multinational underworld, criminal networks involved in cocaine are multiplying on both continents.*



# CONTAINER SHIPPING

## COCAINE HIDE-AND-SEEK

▲ Police guard seized cocaine in the port of Cartagena, Colombia. © Associated Press



It was around 5 am when the MSC *Gayane* cargo freighter docked in the port of Philadelphia on 17 June 2019. Instead of continuing on to its scheduled destination – the Netherlands – it was boarded by federal agents, who spent days using X-rays, sniffer dogs and fibre-optic scopes to inspect the thousands of containers on board. In seven of those, they found nearly 20 tonnes of cocaine.

It was one of the biggest seizures in US history. But the story of the MSC *Gayane* says far more about where the ship was headed – Europe – than it does about the US. It shows how trafficking with containers has reached such levels that traffickers feel confident dispatching multi-tonne cocaine shipments worth hundreds of millions of dollars to Europe. But more than that, it shows the constant criminal evolution in what is today the principal form of trafficking to Europe.

US prosecutors believe that the traffickers behind the MSC *Gayane* shipment used a method authorities call a 'drop off'. Court filings show that two of the six crew members arrested confessed to accepting €50 000 (US\$58 800) to haul aboard cocaine bricks from 14 smaller boats that approached the cargo ship throughout the night from the Peruvian coast.

Peruvian anti-narcotics agents told InSight Crime that it is true they are seeing ever more drop offs as trafficking through the country's main port at Callao becomes riskier. However, they do not believe this is what happened with the MSC *Gayane*. According to these sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity, it would have been very difficult for smaller vessels to pull up alongside the *Gayane* to pass the drugs aboard since its GPS tracking system showed that it sailed through Peruvian waters at high speed and without stopping.

Instead, they believe the operation was an example of another trafficking tactic, the adoption of *rutas frías*, or cold routes – ports with little known connection to the drug trade that have minimal security and raise few alarms. At least some of the cocaine, the agents believe, was loaded in Chile, a country rarely mentioned in connection with the transatlantic cocaine trade.

Whatever the case, it makes little difference to the implications of the seizure. Either way, the MSC *Gayane* haul was a product of the ongoing game of hide-and-seek among containers between traffickers and law enforcement agencies, in which the traffickers are constantly looking for new methods and routes to stay one step ahead of the authorities.

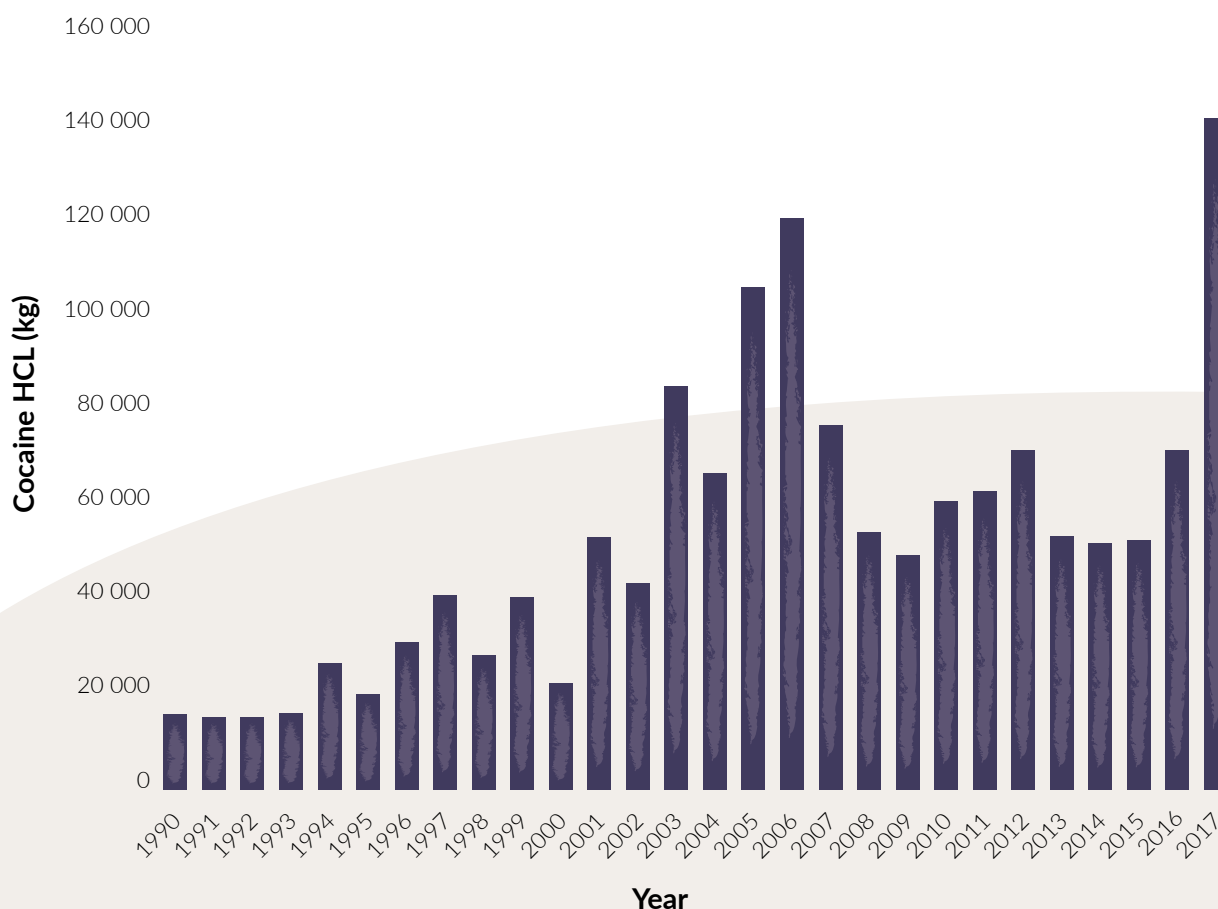
## The move to containers

In the original cocaine boom of the 1980s, the Colombian cartels favoured using light aircraft to reach the US, hopscotching across the Caribbean. But crossing the Atlantic to reach Europe is an entirely different proposition. In the early days of transatlantic cocaine trade, traffickers sent small quantities of cocaine to Europe via commercial air couriers or 'mules', according to the UNODC.<sup>94</sup> Larger cocaine shipments, meanwhile, were often dispatched on 'motherships,' commonly fishing vessels that were met on the high seas by go-fast boats which would bring the drugs to shore – a technique perfected by Galician smugglers.

Over the past decade, container shipping has become by far the most common form of trafficking into Europe. Every year, 750 million containers are shipped around the globe,<sup>95</sup> but less than 2% of these are inspected.<sup>96</sup> This has provided traffickers with the perfect

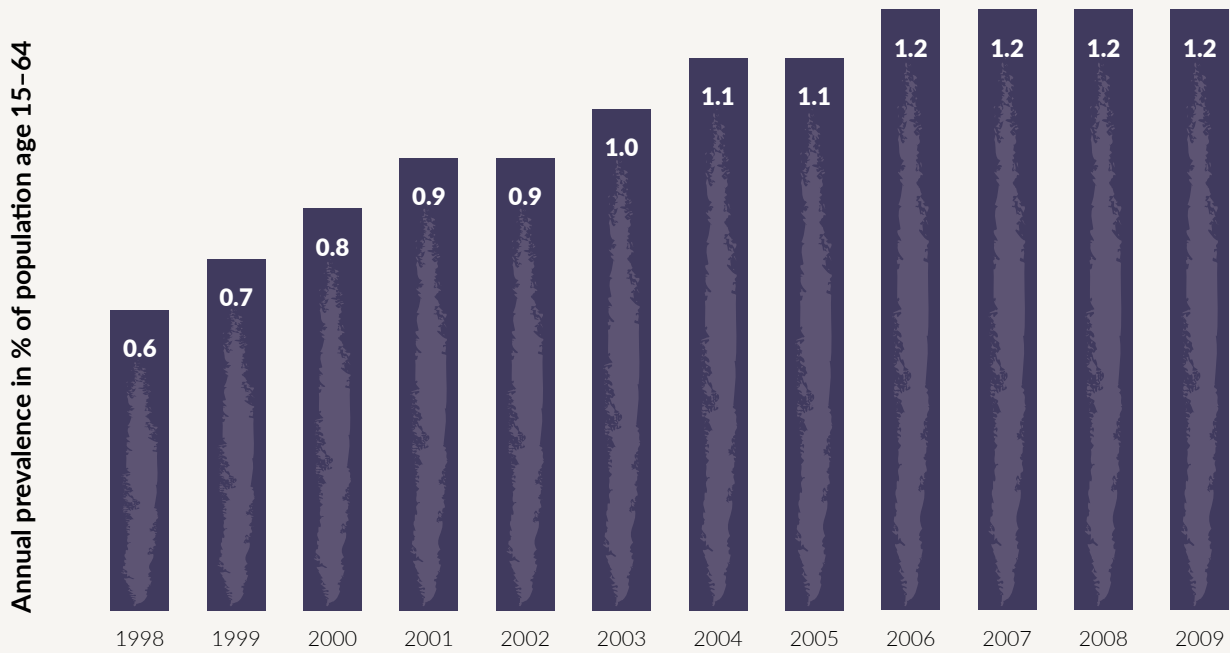
opportunity to reach global markets. The challenge is camouflaging large consignments of cocaine to minimize the risk of seizure, while maximizing profits.

Container shipping was used to move cocaine at least as far back as the 1990s, when the approach was pioneered by the Italian mafia.<sup>97</sup> But seizure figures illustrate a dramatic swing to containers in the first decade of the millennium, which appeared to catch authorities unawares.<sup>98</sup> European cocaine seizures increased rapidly, rising from 32 tonnes in 1998 to 121 tonnes in 2006 (Figure 9). This was followed by a sudden decline from 2006 to 2009 – from 121 tonnes to 53 tonnes – even as other indicators such as use rates (Figure 10), purity levels (Figure 11) and street prices remained stable or increased.<sup>99</sup> The figures suggest cocaine continued to flow uninterrupted, and traffickers had got better at evading official scrutiny.

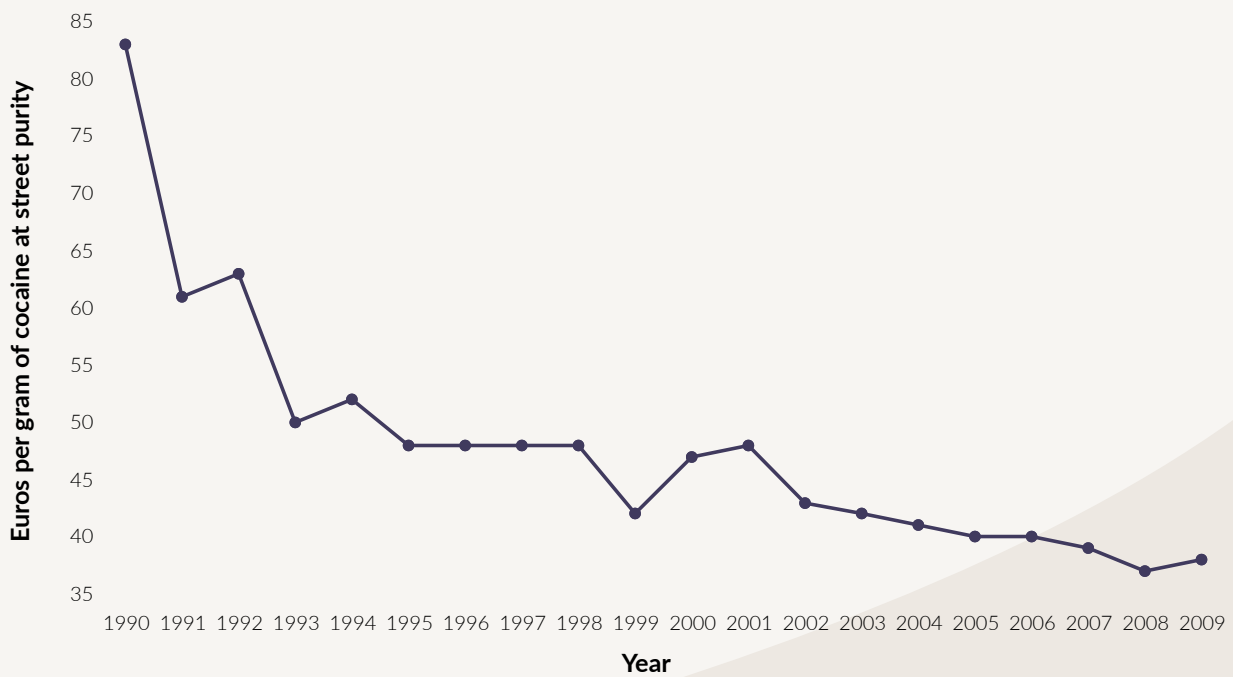


**FIGURE 9** Seizures of cocaine HCL (kg) in Europe, 1990–2017.

SOURCE: EMCDDA



**FIGURE 10** Annual prevalence of cocaine use among EU and European Free Trade Association countries, 1998–2009.  
SOURCE: UNODC



**FIGURE 11** Population-weighted average price of a gram of cocaine at street purity in constant 2009 euros, 1990–2009.  
SOURCE: UNODC

By the time seizure rates began to rise again, containers were the principal trafficking method detected. The 2016 EU Drug Markets report stated that, while containers accounted for 10% of maritime seizures in 2006, that proportion had increased to 75% by 2012 and 2013.<sup>100</sup>

The switch to containers could have been a response to security measures, or simply because traffickers were growing more aware of the advantages. 'Finding drugs in containers is like finding a needle in a haystack,' Damián Zaitch, a University of Utrecht professor and expert on organized crime, told InSight Crime. 'Criminal networks have taken advantage of this security gap and are likely to continue doing so.'

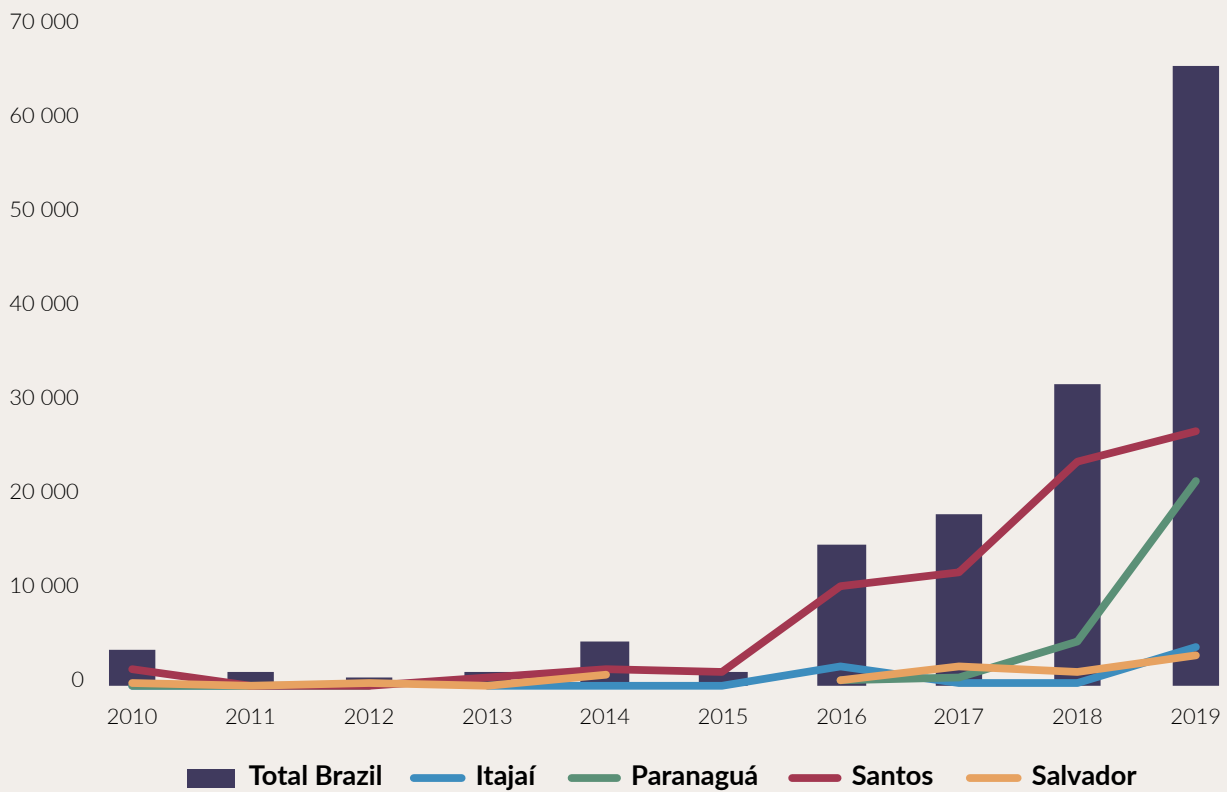
It also could be a sign of the fact that the volume of cocaine needed to feed the booming European market required the type of bulk-transport capabilities offered by containers. 'When Europe became more important in the world market, containers became an advantage,' said Zaitch. 'There was a reorganization of the cocaine business and it became more international.'

## Switching ports and departure points

When authorities began to understand the threat posed by container trafficking, they paid more attention to which shipping lines were most commonly used for cocaine shipments – and from which countries. Traditional hotspots, such as the Colombian ports of Turbo, Santa Marta, Buenaventura and Cartagena, and Callao in Peru, offer proximity to production zones, active shipping lines to Europe and highly sophisticated, long-standing criminal networks and infrastructure. However, shipments from these ports are now routinely red-flagged by European authorities and undergo more advanced security protocols. To combat the growing risk of interdiction, traffickers migrated to other ports around the region, heading to countries such as Ecuador, Costa Rica, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and above all, Brazil.

Brazil's direct connections with production zones in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, numerous Atlantic Coast container ports and a powerful and rapidly evolving organized-crime landscape made it an enticing prospect for traffickers seeking new routes to Europe. The port of Santos became a hotspot, then others such as Paranaguá and Itajaí followed. Seizures, according to Brazilian customs data, soared from 4.5 tonnes in 2010 to 66 tonnes in 2019 (Figure 12).





**FIGURE 12** Cocaine seizures (kg) in the ports of Brazil, 2010–2019.  
SOURCE: Brazilian customs authority

This migration continues today, with evidence suggesting that traffickers are turning to ports with a relatively clean business history that are ill-prepared to stem the flow of cocaine, such as in Argentina,<sup>101</sup> Uruguay<sup>102</sup> and Chile.<sup>103</sup> Another option is the more circuitous route to Europe via West Africa, which witnessed a boom in the first decade of the millennium<sup>104</sup> when cocaine profits fuelled corruption and profoundly destabilized local governance. While this route has waxed and waned over the years, a spate of seizures in 2019 suggests that reports of the route's decline may have been exaggerated, and that it still is a valid option for transatlantic cocaine traffickers.<sup>105</sup>

## Ever-changing modus operandi

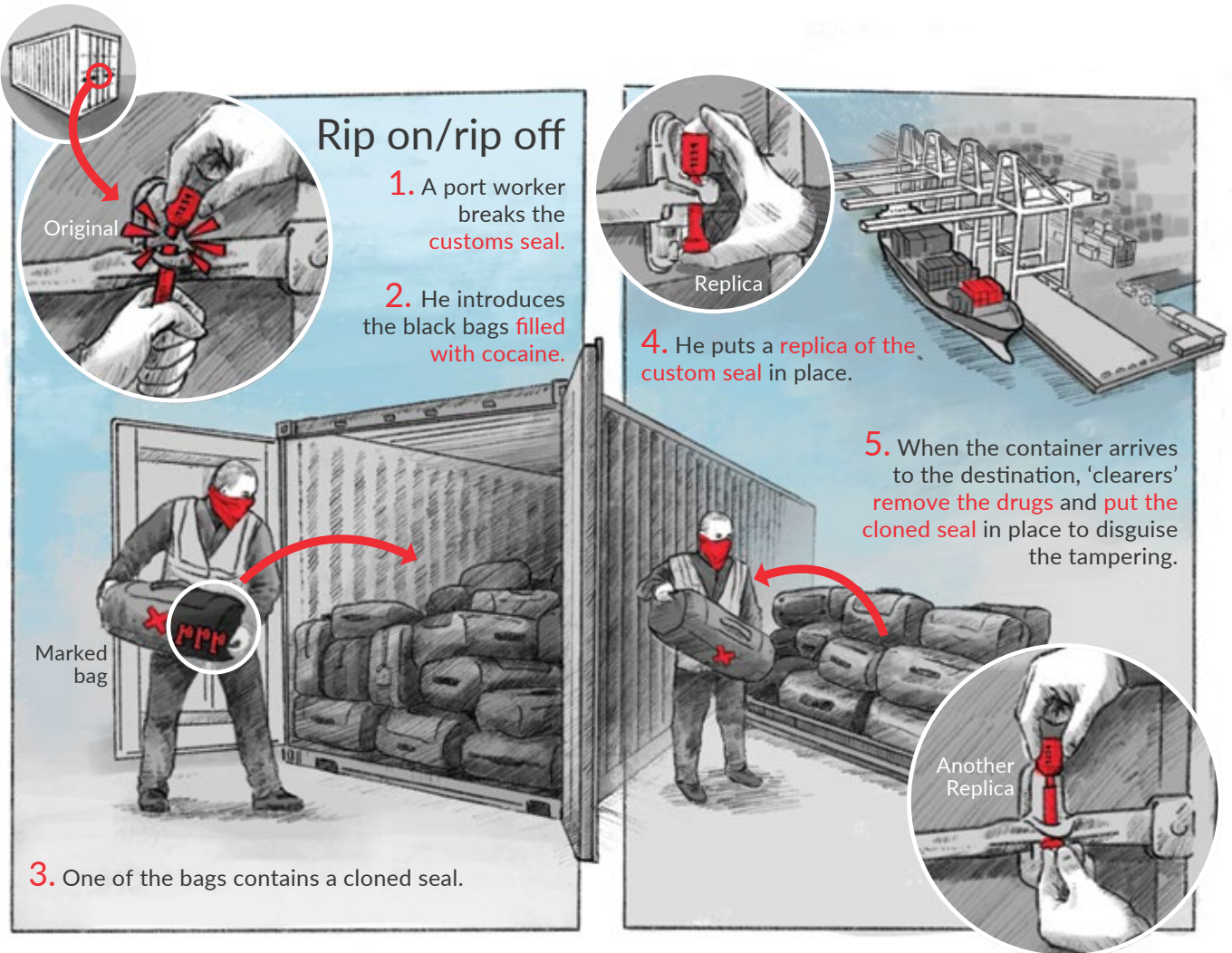
The same pattern can be seen in the traffickers' evolving modus operandi: when authorities implemented new security measures, traffickers responded by changing and improving their trafficking techniques. When authorities adapted, traffickers again came up with new alternatives.



**FIGURE 13** The 'within the load' technique.

Early proponents of container trafficking favoured a strategy the authorities call 'within the load,' where cocaine is camouflaged in everyday exports (Figure 13). The within-the-load technique requires traffickers to run front companies, which they either set up themselves or buy so they can be the owners of businesses with a long history of clean exports. They then hide the cocaine in their ostensibly legal exports. Mostly, this involves simply stuffing bricks of cocaine into boxes of cargo, but in other cases traffickers have used everything from hollowed-out pineapples<sup>106</sup> to barrels of hazardous chemicals, and even chemically transformed the cocaine to disguise it as products such as pet food<sup>107</sup> or fertilizer.<sup>108</sup>

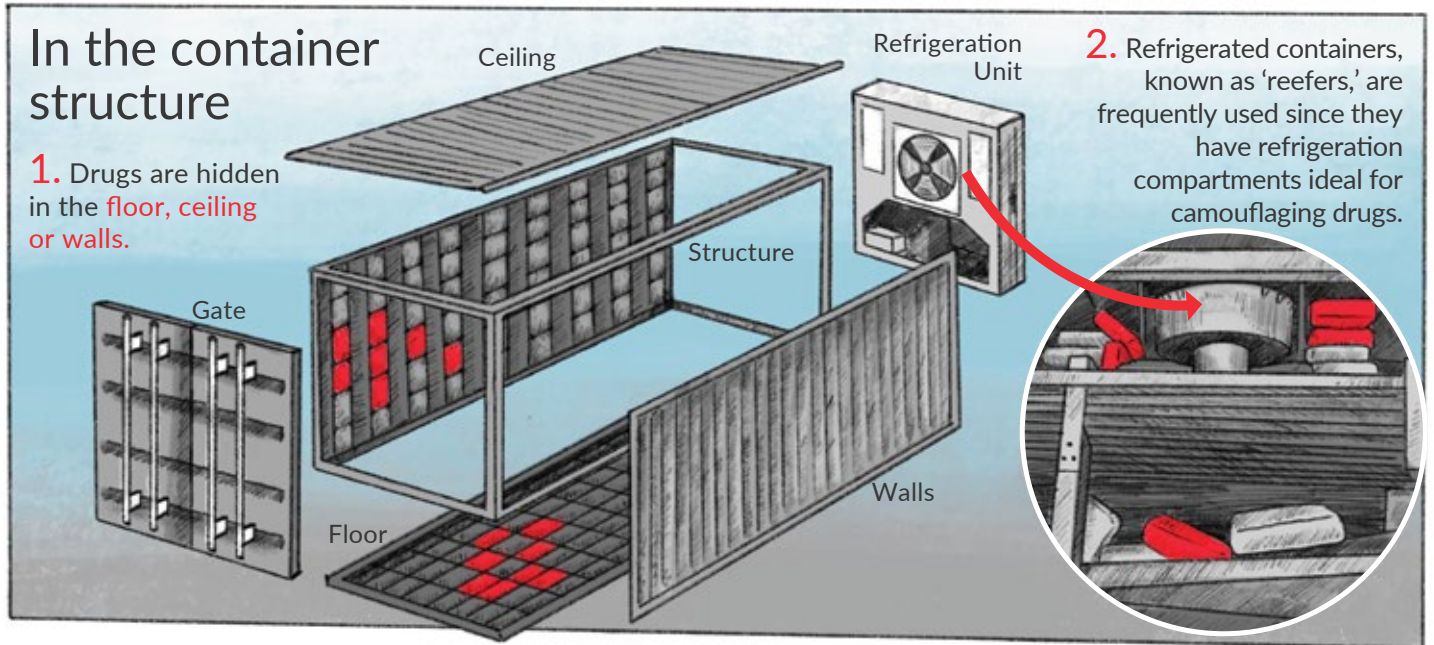
In addition, the within-the-load technique allows traffickers to have direct control over the shipment. However, since authorities began investigating and profiling export companies looking for suspicious patterns, the risk of interdiction has risen. This drove a shift to the rip-on/rip-off method (Figure 14),<sup>109</sup> where traffickers avoid profiling by breaking open containers of legitimate exports to ship the drugs, then use cloned customs seals to conceal the tampering. Initially, rip on/rip off was favoured by smaller traffickers sending tens of kilograms. But as it has grown in popularity, the shipments have grown in size, with multi-tonne hauls now commonplace.<sup>110</sup>



**FIGURE 14** The 'rip on/rip off' technique.

In most cases, the containers are contaminated as they are waiting to be loaded, meaning that traffickers have access to the port areas, either directly or indirectly. While there has been at least one case of so-called 'ninjas' slipping into ports hidden in secret compartments in trucks,<sup>111</sup> it is far easier to recruit port workers. In Peru, for example, the Barrio King gang's violent control of stevedore crews allowed it to enforce a near monopoly on trafficking through the port of Callao. In other cases, traffickers do not even enter the port, such as in Costa Rica, where traffickers recruit corrupt drivers, transport companies and container-yard workers to load drugs into containers as they travel the long road between the agricultural zone of San Carlos and the port of Limón.<sup>112</sup>

Sources in several countries also say that traffickers are increasingly looking to avoid the risks from profiling by hiding drugs in the structure of the container itself (Figure 15).<sup>113</sup> Traffickers stuff bricks of cocaine into cavities in the walls, ceilings, floors and doors, or in the insulation or cooling equipment of refrigerated containers (known as 'reefers').

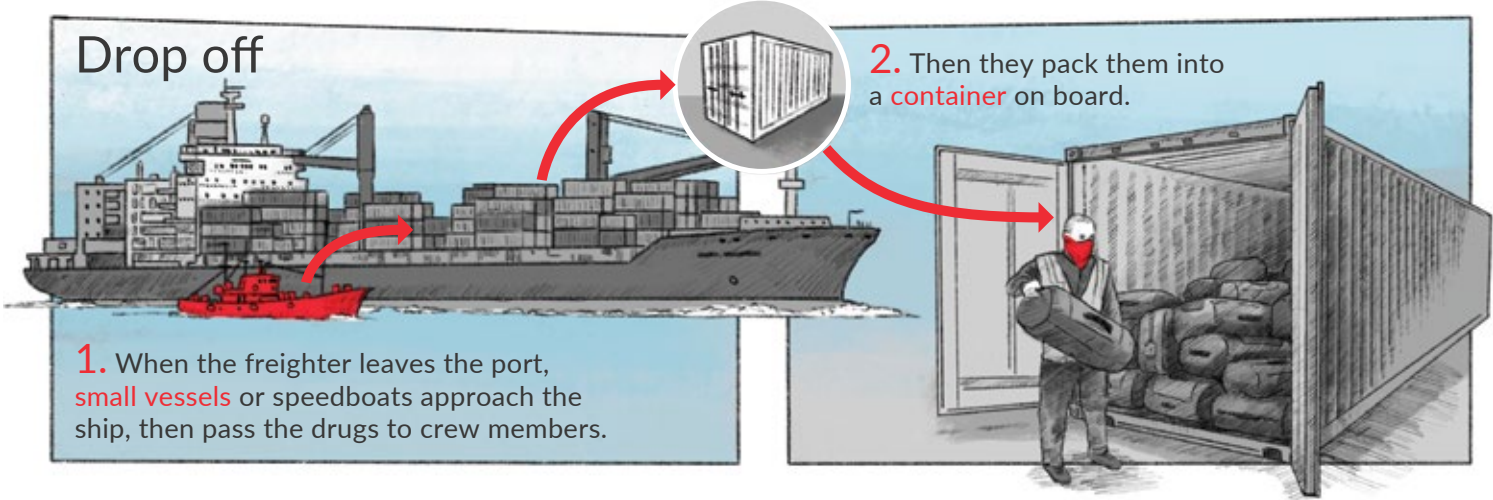


**FIGURE 15** Drugs concealed in the container structure.

Using the container structures lowers the risks of authorities detecting fake customs seals, but it requires complicity from people inside shipping companies or container yards. Some traffickers have worked around this by mounting front companies to tamper with the containers, such as in Costa Rica, where several sources described how traffickers set up a container-maintenance company to mask their activities.

Authorities responded to the rise in these trafficking methods with the use of scanners in ports, which are deployed both at random and as a result of risk profiling. However, in some locations, such as the port of Santos in Brazil, traffickers have responded by contaminating containers that have already been inspected – cracking them open at the last possible moment before loading.

The surest way to avoid security measures, though, is the technique US prosecutors believe was used for the MSC *Gayane* shipment: a ‘drop off’ where the containers are contaminated at sea after the ship has left the port.



**FIGURE 16** The ‘drop off’ technique.

This technique usually depends on extensive corruption among the crew. But authorities in Guayaquil, Ecuador, also report that armed bands are now boarding ships and forcing crews to take loads at gunpoint. Drop offs are now not only happening as ships set sail, but also as they pass through the waters of other nations, with sources reporting the state of Falcón in Venezuela as a particular hotspot.

Authorities are tackling this trafficking method using the vessel’s GPS device, which gives information on the speed of the ship. If a ship suddenly slows down or stops, an alarm sounds. Traffickers, though, are already exploring new options. Anti-narcotics and port officials are talking of the ‘switch’ technique, which consists of swapping drugs to ‘cold’ or non-flagged containers in transit. This risk is especially high in Panama, port officials explained to InSight Crime, as drugs can be switched as they move by rail between the Pacific and Atlantic coasts.

## The future of the container battle

While drug traffickers may have enjoyed a head start in container smuggling, it is now an anti-narcotics priority for authorities on both sides of the Atlantic. Some in both the public and private sectors are betting on smart containers, which collect and transmit data on the container's geolocation, temperature fluctuations and any other signs of tampering,<sup>114</sup> or electronic customs seals, which send real-time information on the container's movement.<sup>115</sup>

However, a port official in Panama, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, said that smart containers are prohibitively expensive and complicated to build or install. They also can lose signal at sea, creating a window of opportunity for traffickers to contaminate containers. 'These are great ideas, but they are also a utopia,' he said.

More grounded solutions can be found in multinational cooperation and initiatives such as the Container Control Programme, a joint initiative of the UNODC and the World Customs Organization. The programme has increased security capacity and built international cooperation networks in both Latin American and

European ports, and has directly contributed to an increase in seizures as well as operations that took down important traffickers.<sup>116</sup>

However, despite these efforts, it is unlikely that authorities will ever be able to shut down container trafficking. It is impossible to inspect even a fraction of the hundreds of millions of containers that are shipped worldwide. And even if they manage to restrict it enough to make traffickers consider turning elsewhere, traffickers have no shortage of other options.

Sailing vessels are also becoming more accessible in price and easier to pilot, and are now dispatched from Brazil and Suriname, as well as Venezuela and the Caribbean. Private charter flights loaded with hundreds of kilograms of cocaine have also been sent from Colombia<sup>117</sup> and Uruguay<sup>118</sup> to the UK, France and Switzerland. And since 2018, there have been the first seizures in Europe of semi-submersibles built to ship cocaine.<sup>119</sup> Whether it is in container trafficking or not, the game of cocaine hide-and-seek has anti-narcotics authorities, for now, condemned to playing catch up.

## The war for ports

The importance of containers has changed the face of cocaine trafficking in Latin America. It has turned port cities with little history of organized crime into sought-after criminal real estate, sparking struggles for domination and the strengthening of local criminal syndicates.

Because of trafficking through ports, street gangs such as Panama's Calor Calor and Baghdad have become major criminal players, and Brazil's already formidable prison gangs, above all the PCC, have become large-scale traffickers whose leaders broker transnational deals. It has also given rise to a new generation of port-logistics specialists, whom traffickers contract to organize cocaine dispatches. Such specialists operate

camouflaged among local elites in countries such as Ecuador, the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica.

The collateral damage of these new criminal dynamics has been high. In recent years, Panama has seen waves of murders, fuelled in no small part by gang wars for control of the ports of Panama City and Colón.<sup>120</sup> In Callao, Peru, Barrio King's campaign to establish a monopoly on trafficking through the port led not only to inter-gang violence, but also a brutal purge of stevedores who resisted their control. And these are far from isolated examples.<sup>121</sup>

European port cities have also seen their share of violence, although on a smaller scale. Since 2018, the two main European ports used for cocaine trafficking

– Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Antwerp in Belgium – have seen gangland killings, bombings and grenade attacks connected to the cocaine trade.<sup>122</sup>

However, violence and intimidation are clumsy tools in Europe. They attract too much attention and are bad for business. Even in Latin America, which has suffered more drug violence than any other part of the world, traffickers are beginning to realize this.

Container trafficking in both Europe and the Americas relies far more on corruption than violence. Without access to corrupt port workers and officials, customs agents, police, ship crews and others, it would be impossible. And this is a broader reflection of the cocaine-trafficking world today, which increasingly favors *plata* – silver – over *plomo* – lead.

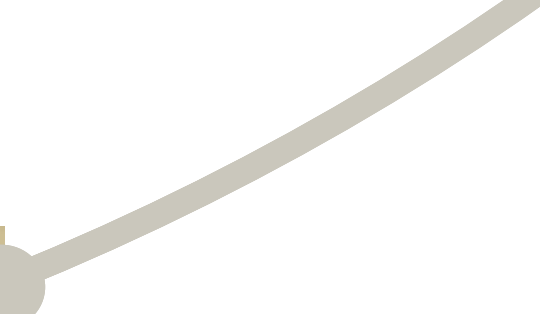


# THE RISE OF PLATA OVER PLOMO

## THE CANCER OF CORRUPTION

▲ Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. © Associated Press





In July 2020, British drug trafficker Robert Dawes was sentenced to 22 years in prison for his role in one of the most high-profile European drug-trafficking cases of the last decade: the 2013 attempt to smuggle almost 1.4 tonnes of cocaine on an Air France flight from Caracas to Paris.

There is only one way to import 1.4 tonnes of cocaine using a commercial airline – high-level and widespread corruption. In Venezuela, the operation not only involved corrupt airport workers and National Guard but also top-ranking state officials. In France, it involved an incarcerated French trafficker who was to arrange the reception of the drugs from the airport in France. And at the centre of it all was Dawes, a transnational, poly-drug trafficker with contacts in high places and corrupt port officials in his pocket all around the world, according to Rob Hickinbottom, who led the investigation by the British NCA into Dawes. The case exposed how the key to cocaine trafficking today is less the extreme violence with which the trade has become synonymous but rather corruption. And it showed the cancerous effects of the cocaine trade, which corrupts states wherever it spreads, eroding capacity and, in the more extreme cases, democracy.

## ***Plomo o plata***

Drug traffickers have two main weapons at their disposal, captured in Pablo Escobar's offer to those whose cooperation he sought: '*plomo o plata*' – silver or lead, meaning money or death. Since Escobar's time, it is *plomo* that has been most connected to the cocaine trade: from the Medellín Cartel blowing up airliners to Mexican cartels hanging bodies from bridges or tossing severed heads onto dancefloors.

Europe has not had to endure the same levels of bloodshed as Latin America, but it too has seen extreme violence resulting from the cocaine trade. The cocaine trade is to blame for rising gun crime in Britain, according to Hickinbottom, who now heads the UK's National Firearms Targeting Centre. 'Our firearms cases and firearms seizures are 99% linked to the drugs war,' he said. Police sources in Spain paint a similar picture, blaming drug-trade disputes for the bulk of the country's murders.

Even the Netherlands, which has one of the lowest homicide rates in Europe, has seen a severed head left as a narco-message, while innocent bystanders have been gunned down in drug disputes. A family member and a lawyer of a witness in a major cocaine-trafficking case were murdered in April 2018 and September 2019 respectively.<sup>123</sup> In July 2020, an ‘underworld prison’ with multiple cells and a torture room that was set up by a cocaine-trafficking group was discovered.<sup>124</sup>

However, while today’s drug traffickers remain more than willing to use extreme violence, they also understand that this is what led to the downfall of many of their predecessors. Violence, particularly extreme violence, creates headlines and draws the attention of authorities. Instead, *plata* is the weapon of choice today for transnational organized crime.

Corruption from drug trafficking penetrates the state at all levels, from police patrolmen to presidents. And it targets all branches of the state: the judicial, legislative and executive as well as the security forces. It has put justice up for sale in many Latin American countries, and seen police and military not only facilitate, but participate in, drug trafficking and even murder. And it has placed certain governments at the service of organized crime, at local and even national levels.

## Venezuela and the Air France smuggling incident

The Air France case highlights perhaps the starkest example of the corrosive power of corruption in the cocaine trade – Venezuela.

The involvement of Venezuelan security forces in the cocaine trade dates back as far as the early 1990s, but the combination of Hugo Chávez coming to power in 1999 and a boom in trafficking through Venezuela to Europe helped deepen the relationship, with profound implications for the country.<sup>125</sup> ‘This was a process that did not happen overnight, but gradually,’ Mildred Camero, a former director of Venezuela’s CONACUID in the Chávez administration told InSight Crime. ‘It developed more with the arrival of Chávez as he allowed the military to get involved in drug trafficking in exchange for its loyalty.’

For Chávez, ‘it was a strategic decision’ to turn a blind eye to cocaine trafficking, added Camero, who describes how she was removed from her position after reporting to Chávez that his generals were involved in trafficking cocaine. Chávez’s tolerance of cocaine trafficking secured the loyalty of the corrupt security-forces leadership – a priority for the president after the 2002 attempted coup against him. It also helped another ally, the FARC, which Chávez supported out of ideological sympathy and as a bulwark against Colombia and the US, given that the FARC was heavily involved in the cocaine trade all along the Venezuela–Colombia border.



Mural of ex-Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez.

Chávez could not, or would not, contain the corruption he had permitted, and tolerance soon slid into complicity. The Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) and other branches of Venezuela's military went from allowing trafficking to purchasing, storing, transporting and selling cocaine,<sup>126</sup> which they sourced directly from the FARC.<sup>127</sup> 'They sold weapons for drugs, it was an exchange,' said Camero. 'Many FARC weapons had the insignias of the Venezuelan Bolivarian Republic.'

When Chávez died in March 2013, the cabal of Chavista leaders that replaced him included numerous military and political leaders who now stand accused of drug trafficking. Among them is not only Chávez's hand-picked successor, Nicolás Maduro, but also government ministers, regional governors and senior security and intelligence officials.<sup>128</sup>

According to NCA investigations, it was shortly after Maduro came to power when Robert Dawes dispatched his emissaries to meet with a British national known as 'Charlie Brown,' who was his upstream connection with the Cartel of the Suns network (see below). Together, they made the arrangements for the Air France shipment.

Months later, on 10 September 2013, more than 30 suitcases filled with cocaine arrived at Simón Bolívar International Airport (Maiquetía Airport) in Caracas. The suitcases were brought in through a workers' entrance to avoid scanners and baggage checks.<sup>129</sup> They had stickers with counterfeit barcodes that were accepted by the Air France luggage system despite not belonging to any travellers.<sup>130</sup>

*Corruption from drug trafficking penetrates the state at all levels, from police patrolmen to presidents.*

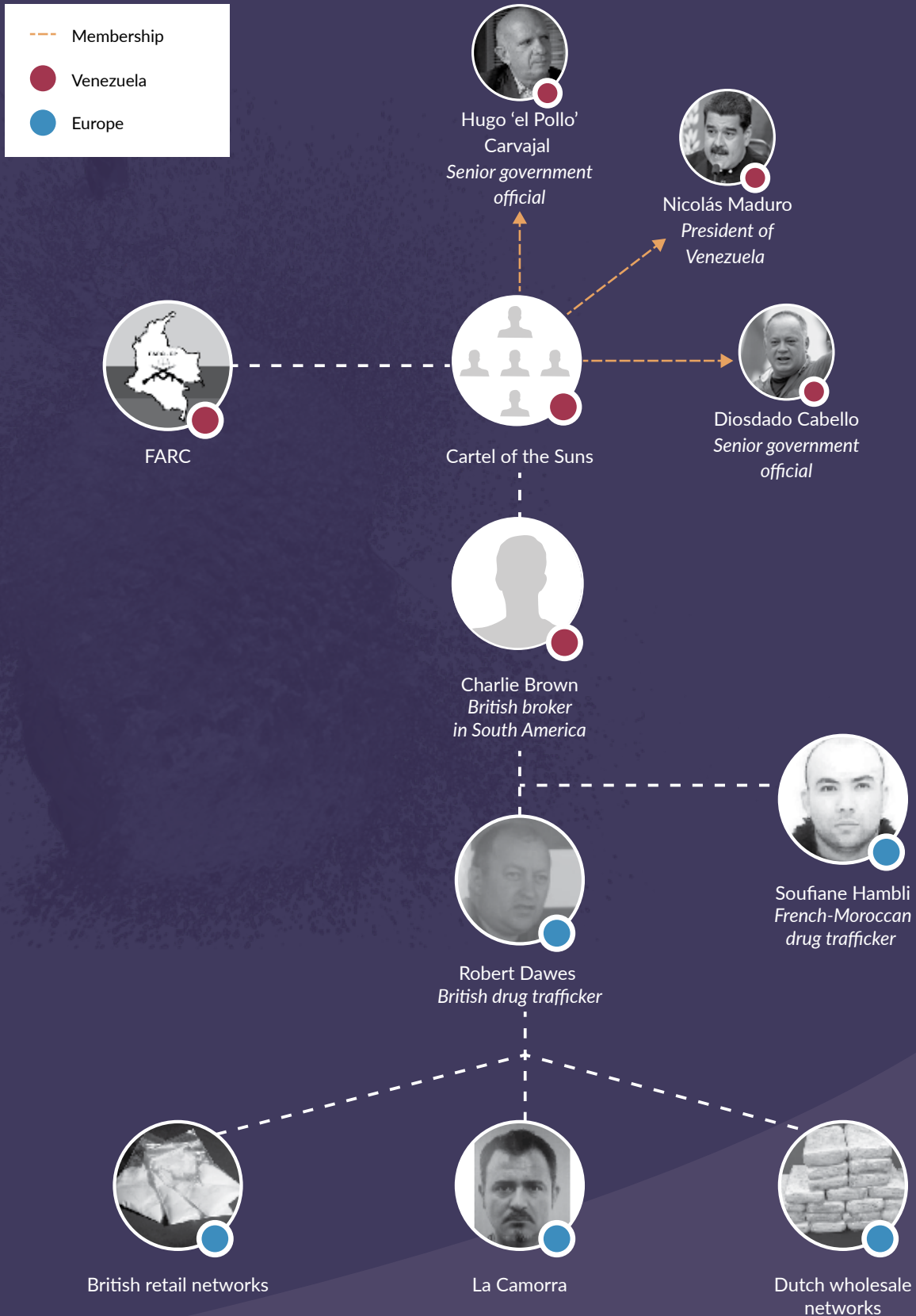
Reception of the cocaine in France was then to be handled by one of France's biggest marijuana traffickers, the incarcerated Sofiane Hambli, according to the testimony of Hambli himself.<sup>131</sup> However, unknown to Dawes and his Venezuelan partners, the operation was compromised. British undercover operatives in Venezuela had warned the French of an impending shipment using an Air France flight, and the French had set up a controlled handover operation, according to sources familiar with the investigation. And Hambli was a collaborator with a French police unit, the Central Office for the Suppression of Illicit Drug Trafficking.

The seizure made international headlines and Venezuela came under pressure to respond. Authorities initially made 27 arrests, including airport workers, low-ranking members of the GNB (which is responsible for security at Venezuela's airports) and Ernesto Mora Carvajal, the GNB lieutenant colonel – and Hugo Carvajal's nephew – who headed the airport's security. Seven airport workers and three GNB officials later received sentences of between 10 and 22 years in prison. Carvajal, however, was quickly declared innocent and released.

There was little doubt that the true masterminds were much higher up. In 2020, the US Department of Justice accused President Maduro, Hugo Carvajal and Diosdado Cabello of involvement in the case.<sup>132</sup> Among the evidence were communications intercepts in which Maduro told Carvajal and Cabello shortly after the seizure that 'they should not have used Maiquetía Airport for drug trafficking' and should stick to established trafficking routes.

# Air France Trafficking Network

In 2013, a multinational network of cocaine traffickers attempted to move nearly 1.4 tonnes of cocaine on a commercial flight from Caracas, Venezuela, to Paris, France.



SOURCE: InSight Crime investigations



Ex-Suriname president Dési Bouterse.

© Pieter Van Maele

## Cocaine corruption in Latin America

Venezuela is not the only example of a nation suffering corruption due to cocaine-trafficking routes to Europe. The former Dutch colony of Suriname was long ruled by Dési Bouterse, first as a dictator and then as an elected president. He allegedly had contact with Pablo Escobar<sup>133</sup> and did arms-for-drugs deals with the FARC in the 1990s.<sup>134</sup> In 1999, Bouterse was convicted *in absentia* as the mastermind behind a shipment of cocaine to the Netherlands. 'It is clear that there are links between the state and the underworld in Suriname,' former Surinamese diplomat and political analyst Martin Schalkwijk told InSight Crime.

In Ecuador – now one of the main dispatch points to Europe – the highest levels of the state have been accused of involvement in drug trafficking. In the previous administration of Rafael Correa, there were narco scandals involving government ministers, presidential allies and even the president himself.<sup>135</sup> Underworld sources in Ecuador, who spoke on condition of anonymity, described to InSight Crime how police, armed forces, judges, prosecutors, public registrars, mayors, governors and even figures in the national government are all on the payroll of cocaine traffickers. 'If you're not corrupt, then they will corrupt you,' said one, who has first-hand knowledge of drug trafficking in the Colombia border region.<sup>136</sup>

Another major dispatch point to Europe to emerge over the past decade is the Dominican Republic, a longtime transit route to the US. Once again, the increase in trafficking through the country has deepened already high levels of corruption. 'In the

Dominican Republic, decades of corruption have made politics a partner of drug trafficking, and today this has reached exorbitant levels,' said Carlos de Peña, an investigator with the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences in the Dominican Republic.

Drug trafficking co-opts politicians from the local to the national level. Sources say candidates for municipal elections are routinely bankrolled by traffickers, while President Danilo Medina has faced scrutiny over his

alleged links to the wife of one of the island's most notorious cocaine traffickers, César Emilio Peralta, alias 'el Abusador'.<sup>137</sup> Factions of the Dominican security forces, meanwhile, have crossed the line from corruption to criminal actors, participating in everything from murder-for-hire to international drug trafficking, according to Dominican prosecutors.<sup>138</sup> The former director of the country's anti-narcotics police was even convicted of stealing nearly a tonne of cocaine.<sup>139</sup>

## Air France: The twist in the tale

Today, few Latin America and the Caribbean countries have escaped corruption associated with cocaine trafficking. But while such top-level corruption seems unthinkable in Europe, further twists in the Air France case show that Europe is far from immune.

The story of the seizure presented by the head of the Central Office for the Suppression of Illicit Drug Trafficking, François Thierry, was that a corrupted luggage handler at the airport in Paris was supposed to get the drugs through the airport but switched sides and told a police informant of the operation.

But Sofiane Hambli had a different version of events. During a court hearing, he claimed that, while incarcerated, he had organized the operation to remove the drugs from the airport in coordination with the police.<sup>140</sup> Hambli's claims to have organized the handover are also supported by a confidential letter from Thierry to the Attorney General signed on 28 October 2015 and seen by InSight Crime. In the letter, Thierry praises Hambli for his work, including for his contribution to the seizure of 1.4 tonnes of cocaine.

Hambli's cooperation with law enforcement, which dated back to when Thierry recruited him in 2009, earned him an early release from prison. However, there is evidence to suggest it may have also earned him and Thierry – at that time one of France's top anti-narcotics police – a lot more. In 2016, an investigation by *Libération* uncovered how Hambli and Thierry's partnership was littered with examples of suspicious behaviour. There were unauthorized operations and loads of drugs arriving and then disappearing.<sup>141</sup> A 2017 *Libération* investigation recorded how customs officials noted that Thierry had picked up 50 kilogram

suitcases from the airport on a weekly basis for several months in 2010.<sup>142</sup> Thierry claimed that the suitcases were fake shipments from Bogotá that he was passing through to give credibility to an informant, but prosecutors could find no records of the operations in either France or Colombia. Further muddying the picture was the fact that Thierry's then girlfriend acted as Hambli's lawyer, even though her expertise is not in criminal but real-estate law.<sup>143</sup>

After reviewing case files and official documents and interviewing several key actors, *Libération* concluded that the 'only certainty [is that] Sofiane H. would go onto establish himself as the biggest trafficker in France thanks to the protection of François Thierry'.<sup>144</sup> Thierry attempted to sue *Libération* for libel over the story but the case was thrown out. In August 2017, Thierry was indicted for complicity in drug trafficking.<sup>145</sup> Two years later he was indicted again for participation in a criminal association, among other offences.<sup>146</sup> In September 2020 the French Supreme Court rejected Thierry's appeal over the August 2017 case, which concerned a 7.1 tonne marijuana seizure.

Emmanuel Fansten, the *Libération* journalist who broke the story, told InSight Crime that the cases remain under investigation and Thierry remains an official of the Interior Ministry. When questioned by InSight Crime, the French Interior Ministry did not deny or confirm this, nor reply to our other inquiries about the cases.

Hambli was rearrested in 2016 but then released after a two-year pretrial detention, according to Fansten, and remains at large.

## The corruption cancer in Europe

Corruption in Europe might not be as widespread as in Latin America, but according to Europol, it is on the rise.<sup>147</sup> The first European mafias to capitalize on large-scale cocaine trafficking – the Galicians and the Italian mafia – already worked in spaces where they were able to penetrate and co-opt the state. But their participation in the cocaine trade took corruption to new levels. Armed with cocaine money, the Galicians infiltrated government institutions, the legal economy and politics at an unprecedented level.

In Italy, cocaine riches have helped organized crime continue to penetrate the state even as anti-corruption measures have broken up old ways of working.<sup>148</sup> In December 2019, Italian military police arrested more than 300 people on suspicion of membership of the 'Ndrangheta – the second-biggest mafia bust in Italy's history. Suspects included politicians, lawyers, accountants, a local police chief and a former member of the Italian parliament within ex-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia party.<sup>149</sup> 'The level of infiltration and control [the 'Ndrangheta] have is worrying and is going to next levels – we're talking about people who are highly educated, white-collar,' said Alessia Cerantola, an investigative journalist at OCCRP and co-founder of IRPI.

When organized crime from the Balkans moved into the cocaine trade, the region's already weak and corrupt institutions proved easily corrupted. As Chief Commissioner Antonio Martínez Duarte, head of the Spanish police's Central Anti-Narcotics Brigade told InSight Crime, countries such as Italy and Spain have more capacity to address corruption today, but similar efforts have yet to develop in eastern Europe. 'In eastern Europe there is less administrative control, and possibly less control on corruption,' he said.

There have been numerous cases linking Balkans politicians and police to drug trafficking, especially in Serbia. In 2009, the head of the Serbian police Ivica Dačić faced corruption accusations after he was twice captured on camera meeting with drug lord Rodoljub Radulović.<sup>150</sup> Dačić was never charged. He managed to survive the scandal and is now the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>151</sup>

Nonetheless, the biggest threat of corruption usually comes at the points where cocaine enters Europe. Here, people on the ground, such as port workers or customs officials, can make the difference between trafficking success and a law enforcement seizure. In the port of Rotterdam, for example, several customs officers have been arrested for participating in drug trafficking, including one officer who earned millions waving through contaminated containers before he was arrested and sentenced to 14 years in prison in 2017.<sup>152</sup>

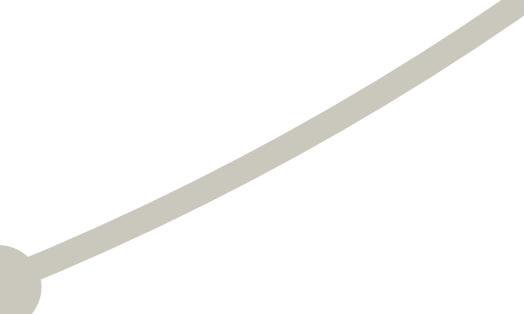
Europe's cocaine corridors are currently evolving and expanding; all of its 20 busiest container ports have seen cocaine seizures of more than 100 kilograms in the past three years. Meanwhile, cocaine routes are opening up all around Latin America, from the ports of the Southern Cone countries to the mouth of the Amazon river. Wherever these new routes go, the cancer of corruption follows. The future of the cocaine trade may well lie in the hands of these corruption networks.





# THE FUTURE OF THE COCAINE TRADE TO EUROPE

▲ A police officer stands guard over cocaine seized in Sydney, Australia. © Associated Press



**T**he flow of cocaine to Europe may have suffered along with most licit businesses due to the coronavirus crisis, but few believe the damage to the drug trade will be permanent. The pandemic has accelerated certain aspects of the evolution of cocaine smuggling that will shape its future.

### **The production of cocaine**

What is not likely to change in the short term is the growth in the supply of cocaine to Europe, as the cultivation of coca appears set to remain steady, or indeed increase, in the three producer nations of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. In Colombia, the government of President Iván Duque is not only struggling with the economic fallout of the coronavirus crisis, but also with an increase in violence linked to the civil conflict (now in its sixth decade) combined with social unrest. The US, desperate to stem the exponential growth of cocaine production, is pushing Colombia to restart the aerial spraying of coca crops with glyphosate chemicals. There is resistance to this from many sectors of Colombian society due to damage the chemicals cause to the environment and to public health. Peru and Bolivia are in the grip of their own political crises and the fight against drugs has fallen far down the list of government priorities, even as coca cultivation rises.

### **Political chaos throughout much of Latin America**

Even before the pandemic, Latin America and the Caribbean were facing the challenges of sharply contracting economies, unsustainable debt and deepening inequality, prompting social turmoil. All of this has lowered state resilience to organized crime and drug trafficking and allowed powerful drug-trafficking organizations to penetrate key state institutions, enabling the free flow of cocaine shipments on their way to Europe.

This situation has been exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic, particularly in the two nations which are crucial to the flow of cocaine to Europe: Brazil and Venezuela. Brazil is deep in crisis, with more than 6 million infected by the coronavirus as of November 2020. President Jair Bolsonaro's government is under investigation for corruption, while the record deforestation of the Amazon under his stewardship has soured relations with several European nations. All of this, combined with the growing power of the Brazilian PCC, with its deepening involvement in the international drug trade and control of key ports, means that there is little resistance to the flow of cocaine through Brazil.

Venezuela is the principal transit nation for Colombian cocaine moving into the Caribbean and then onto Europe, as well as some illegal air traffic to West Africa. Despite international sanctions and constant US pressure, President Nicolás Maduro's grip on power appears undiminished. This failed state is not only facilitating the cocaine trade, but has also become a regional crime hub led by senior figures in the Chavista regime, with zero resistance to the flow of cocaine to Europe.

### **Continuing expansion of the European drug market**

According to EU analysis, the availability of cocaine to consumers in Europe is likely at an all-time high, and consumption rates continue to climb.<sup>153</sup> While the countries with the highest consumption rates continue to be western and southern European nations, the EU's 2019 Drug Markets Report also cited evidence of expanding retail markets in northern and eastern Europe.

The coronavirus restrictions have likely hit cocaine consumption, with the reduction in social interaction, the closing of large-scale party venues, etc. It remains to be seen if these conditions hit the cocaine trade in any permanent fashion, or if the current situation provides nothing more than a temporary disruption to drug consumption across Europe.

### **Increasingly sophisticated game of hide-and-seek in container traffic**

Container shipping remains the principal way to move large cocaine shipments into Europe. While European law enforcement is very aware of the threat and dedicating increasing resources to the tracking and searching of suspect containers, the criminals continue to change their modus operandi in order to camouflage their shipments.

The diversification of cocaine routes into Europe is continuing, with traffickers using different ports to insert their cocaine into containers. Nations such as Chile and Uruguay, with little history of drug trafficking, are becoming more popular for drug-trafficking organizations. An increase in the 'rip on, rip off' method of moving drugs, using unwitting companies and legal products to hide cocaine without the knowledge of owners, will continue apace, neutralizing European efforts to profile suspect companies and points of departure.

One senior European law enforcement official, who could not speak on the record, spoke of a recent phenomenon of 'cloning' containers. 'We have intelligence reports of say a blue container with a certain registration number being placed onto a ship in Guayaquil, Ecuador, loaded up with cocaine. Then a green container with the same number is unloaded in Europe, with the same cargo, but no sign of the drugs. We never found that blue container, nor the cocaine,' he said.

It is not only the departure points from Latin America that are being changed, but reception points in Europe and Africa. With interdiction improving in the mega ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam, traffickers are looking at secondary ports throughout Europe. The interconnectedness of Europe, particularly the 'borderless' EU, is a major advantage to traffickers and a disadvantage to interdiction efforts. As resilience to cocaine trafficking is stiffened in one nation, traffickers quickly and adroitly shift to another, meaning that the overall flow to Europe is maintained. As such, greater cooperation is the only way forward, not just within the EU, but with other nations, especially those in the Balkans, which remain outside the EU but have strong mafias involved in the cocaine trade.

### Development of different smuggling methods

As cocaine seizures in containers increase, traffickers are starting to shift the methods for transporting drugs across the Atlantic. 'Once we hit 20% seizures, then we are reaching a tipping point where traffickers start switching methods. Most of the experts I have spoken to think we have reached the tipping point. There are indications that criminals are now looking for different entry points and different methods. So, we may be about to see a change in the system of how cocaine is smuggled into Europe,' said the senior European policeman.

'Now we are seeing different ways to stash drugs on ships. We have seen torpedoes being used, which are stuck to the hull, and the discovery of the semi-submersible in Spain was a wake-up call,' he added, referring to the 2019 seizure of a narco submarine carrying 3 tonnes of cocaine off the coast of Galicia.

There is clear evidence that more drug subs or semi-submersibles are being produced in Colombia. Colombian Admiral Hernando Mattos reported that 27 drug subs had been seized in the first eight months of 2020 – 14 in Colombian waters and another 13 in international waters – along with more than 31 tonnes of cocaine that they were carrying.<sup>155</sup>

Not only are the drug subs in their various forms very hard to detect, they are not affected by the coronavirus restrictions. Therefore, as cocaine piles up in South



Spanish authorities study the seized drug submarine.

America, the subs are some of the few vessels that can cross the Atlantic without attracting attention. Looking ahead, the use of sailing vessels and pleasure craft to move drugs will likely increase as soon as coronavirus restrictions are lifted. Overall, however, containers will remain important for the foreseeable future.

### Upstream presence of European mafias

The European criminal structures still able to put together multi-tonne loads of cocaine are those with well-established routes and presence in Latin America, able to negotiate with sellers, transporters and corruption cells to keep the flow of drugs moving.

The Italian mafia and organized crime from the former Yugoslavian countries have led the way in developing these networks. According to Kevin Mills, Albanian criminals are now well placed, and their importance in the cocaine trade to Europe is likely to grow. 'The Albanians have had quite a meteoric rise in the cocaine trade, operating in many parts of Europe, the UK and the Netherlands particularly. If anyone is going to have an advantage in the container trade, it is going to be the Albanians. They have a footprint in Latin America and at many exit points. They still conduct the face-to-face meetings by having people up here in the region.'

It is likely that the pandemic is pushing European drug-trafficking organizations to increase their upstream presence. This will in turn promote the evolution of a new generation of brokers within Latin American and the Caribbean to feed the various European trafficking groups.

### **Strengthening of European drug-trafficking organizations**

The growing profits from cocaine are providing a steady and lucrative stream of income for European drug-trafficking organizations. And it is not just the European consumer market that is strengthening criminal structures, but also money that can be made from cocaine in transit to other parts of the world. In the Netherlands, for example, InSight Crime field research found that Dutch criminal groups charge up to €3 000 (US\$3 500) per kilogram to extract cocaine shipments from the port of Rotterdam. Given that seizures at Rotterdam reached 30 tonnes in 2019, suggesting an overall annual flow of around 100 tonnes of cocaine through the port, Dutch organized crime could be earning up to €300 million (US\$355 million) on cocaine going through Rotterdam alone. Almost all of that cocaine was bound for other countries. Colombian underworld sources have told InSight Crime that Chinese and Australian markets are being aggressively developed, with the latter being especially lucrative, with a kilogram of cocaine worth well over US\$100 000.

European drug-trafficking organizations are also strengthened by the common practice of traffickers handling a wide portfolio of illegal narcotics, and therefore engaging in drug exchanges, for example by swapping heroin for cocaine. This allows the European

trafficking groups to maximize profits and quickly adjust to changes in consumer markets.

### **More downstream presence of Latin American drug-trafficking organizations**

It is not just the European criminals who are seeking to maximize profits by participating in as much of the supply and retail chains as possible. Latin American criminals, especially the Colombians, have been selling cocaine in Europe for some four decades.

However, the rise of home deliveries and online sales, boosted by the coronavirus crisis, has spread into the drug trade, meaning the traditional criminal control of 'turf' to facilitate retail sales has become less important, at least for now. This means that Latin American structures based in Europe have also been able to engage in more direct sales in Europe, using not only the dark web, but also more common encrypted-communication applications such as WhatsApp.

It is also worth noting here that the division between Latin American and European organized crime is itself becoming an ever more artificial construct. Most of the cocaine networks operating into Europe have many different nationalities working together, making the division of which particular nationality controls which link in the chain harder and harder to define. Also, different criminal structures, both European and Latin American, 'pool' shipments, meaning that they all share in the profits and spread the losses in the case of interdiction. The days of focusing exclusively on a single drug-trafficking organization or national mafia in the hope of dismantling the cocaine trade are long gone.

### **Use of encryption technology to broker deals**

Due to the fact that European buyers and Latin American sellers have not been able to meet as easily face to face due to the coronavirus restrictions, the use of encryption technology has taken on a new significance to close cocaine deals.

The importance and popularity of encrypted communications for criminals was revealed in July 2020, when European law enforcement agencies broke the EncroChat system.<sup>156</sup> Dutch police alone seized 10 tonnes of cocaine during the resulting Operation

Venetic. British police revealed that an estimated 10 000 criminals in the UK alone paid £1 500 (around US\$2 000) for a six-month contract for the EncroChat handsets. As mentioned above, encryption technology is also used to retail drugs in Europe, although this is still a small percentage of the market.

### **Increase in drug-related violence**

Europol has warned of growing violence in Europe linked to cocaine-trade conflicts as more actors seek a slice of an ever-growing pie. While murder rates are still relatively low, drug-related violence is becoming more common and ostentatious (e.g. the Dutch Taghi organization, or the Montenegrin Škaljari and Kavač clans).<sup>157</sup> There have been reports of Italian organized-crime figures being murdered in Germany<sup>158</sup> and Balkan criminal assassinations in the Netherlands as cocaine networks settle scores.<sup>159</sup>

However, it is generally accepted that the use of extreme violence is counterproductive in the long term, attracting the attention of law enforcement and forcing politicians to take action. In Latin America, proponents of extreme violence, such as the Zetas in Mexico, have been the target of extended national and international offensives that allowed lower profile groups, such as the Sinaloa Cartel, to operate with greater freedom. However, in Europe, some of the rising drug-trafficking organizations, such as the Albanian organized-crime groups, have made use of violence to position themselves.<sup>160</sup> It does seem however that, reputations having been established, many Balkan mafia networks are scaling back violence and concentrating on promoting business, according to British NCA sources.

The most sophisticated criminal groups, both Latin American and European, are increasingly turning to the application of corruption. 'Corruption is creeping up slowly in Western societies in a way we have not seen before. 10 years ago, if you found a corrupt port official or customs agent, this was huge news. Now it is

becoming more common,' said the senior European policeman.

### **The rise of the 'invisibles'**

Many of the more sophisticated drug traffickers have realized that their best protection lies not in a private army and extensive security, but rather in keeping a very low profile. These traffickers, whom we call 'the invisibles,' make Herculean efforts to remain off the radar of authorities, using brokers and ensuring they have no digital or social media footprint, as well as maintaining a solid legal facade for their business.

'There are indications of very smart traffickers, moving huge quantities of cocaine, without attracting much attention,' said the senior European policeman. 'European police do not have the complete overview of the business and we tend to focus on those that use violence. In Spain there are Brits, Dutch and other mobsters with no criminal records moving a lot of dope. Law enforcement is falling behind.'

InSight Crime profiled a Colombian 'invisible' living in Spain who for years moved cocaine into Europe and who at the time of writing has no arrest warrants pending on either side of the Atlantic.<sup>161</sup> Guillermo Acevedo, alias 'Memo Fantasma' (Will the Ghost), is now under investigation by both Colombian and Spanish authorities as a result of our investigation.

### **Europe as a money-laundering centre**

Europe is a major money-laundering centre, and among the worst offenders are some of the more 'respectable' countries such as the UK and the Netherlands.<sup>162</sup> These countries have shown little appetite for serious reform, while eastern European nations have much lower appetite for tackling the influx of drug money into the economy and into the political arenas. Brexit could further exacerbate this, with the NCA saying laundering opportunities will increase as resilience lowers along with cooperation with the EU.<sup>163</sup>

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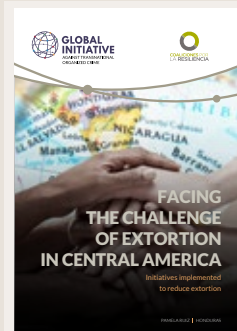
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## WORK OF THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME IN LATIN AMERICA

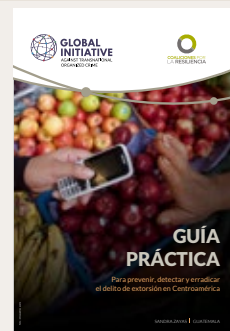
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is an independent civil-society organization. Some of our recent analysis in Latin America and the Caribbean includes the following publications:



23 SEP 2020  
Facing the challenge of extortion in Central America



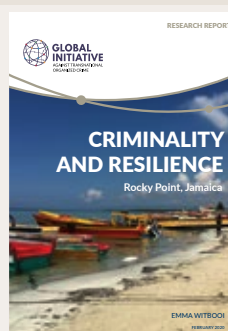
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Documentación y análisis de la intervención del Circuito Judicial Antiextorsión de Honduras



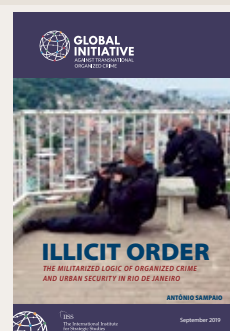
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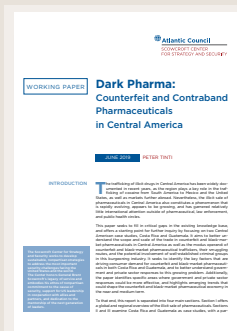
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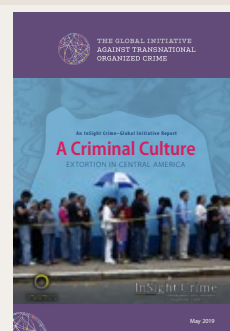
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Through the Resilience Fund, the GI-TOC has invested in community initiatives focused on addressing the issue of extortion in the region. This led to the partnership with Colectivo Artesana, a Guatemalan NGO that works with women in prison and families of prisoners.

The GI-TOC has established an observatory of illicit economies in Central America to monitor and analyze crime and risk in the region and help develop programmes to combat organized crime.



## **GLOBAL INITIATIVE**

**AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME**

### **ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE**

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 500 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

**[www.globalinitiative.net](http://www.globalinitiative.net)**

### **ABOUT INSIGHT CRIME**

InSight Crime is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime.

For a decade, InSight Crime has crossed borders and institutions – as an amalgam of journalism outlet, think tank and academic resource – to deepen the debate and inform on organized crime in the Americas. On-the-ground reporting, careful research and impactful investigations have been the hallmarks of our organization from the very beginning.

Learn more about our work at **[insightcrime.org](http://insightcrime.org)**



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Crime**