



# The Cocaine Pipeline to Europe

***The Cocaine Pipeline to Europe***

February 2021

***Authors:***

Jeremy McDermott - Co-director  
James Bargent - Project Manager  
Douwe den Held - Researcher  
María Fernanda Ramírez - Researcher

***Designers:***

Elisa Roldán, Graphics Manager  
Ana Isabel Rico, Graphic Designer  
Juan José Restrepo, Graphic Designer



## Table of Contents

<b>1. Cocaine to Europe, an underestimated threat</b> .....	4
<b>2. The Colombian cocaine shift to Europe: a business no-brainer</b> .....	11
<i>The Shift to Europe</i> .....	12
<i>The changing face of the cocaine trade</i> .....	15
<b>3. Spain: The European base for Latin American organized crime</b> .....	17
<i>Birth of the European cocaine trade and the move downstream</i> .....	18
<i>Spain in the new cocaine era</i> .....	20
<b>4. The Italian mafia and the move upstream</b> .....	24
<i>Cocaine brokers and the criminal diaspora</i> .....	25
<i>The Italian mafia and the cocaine migration</i> .....	27
<b>5. Cocaine – the criminal steroid</b> .....	30
<i>The Latin American steroid effect</i> .....	31
<i>Europe consumes the steroid</i> .....	33
<b>6. Container shipping: cocaine hide-and-seek</b> .....	38
<i>The move to containers</i> .....	39
<i>Switching ports and departure points</i> .....	42
<i>Ever-changing Modus Operandi</i> .....	43
<i>The future of the container battle</i> .....	46
<i>The war for ports</i> .....	47
<b>7. The rise of “plata” over “plomo:” The cancer of corruption</b> .....	49
<i>Plomo o plata</i> .....	50
<i>Air France and the cocaine cancer</i> .....	50
<i>European cocaine profits corrupt Latin America</i> .....	53
<i>states</i> .....	54
<i>Air France: The twist in the tale</i> .....	55
<i>The corruption cancer in Europe</i> .....	56
<b>8. The future of the cocaine trade to Europe</b> .....	58



# 1. Cocaine to Europe, an underestimated threat

*Colombian police officers inspect packages of cocaine seized in Cartagena. AP Images*

Over the last five years, the cocaine trade has enjoyed an unprecedented boom, with record levels of production. Coverage of this has largely focused on the United States and its seemingly endless “war on drugs.” However, smarter traffickers have long preferred another market: Europe.

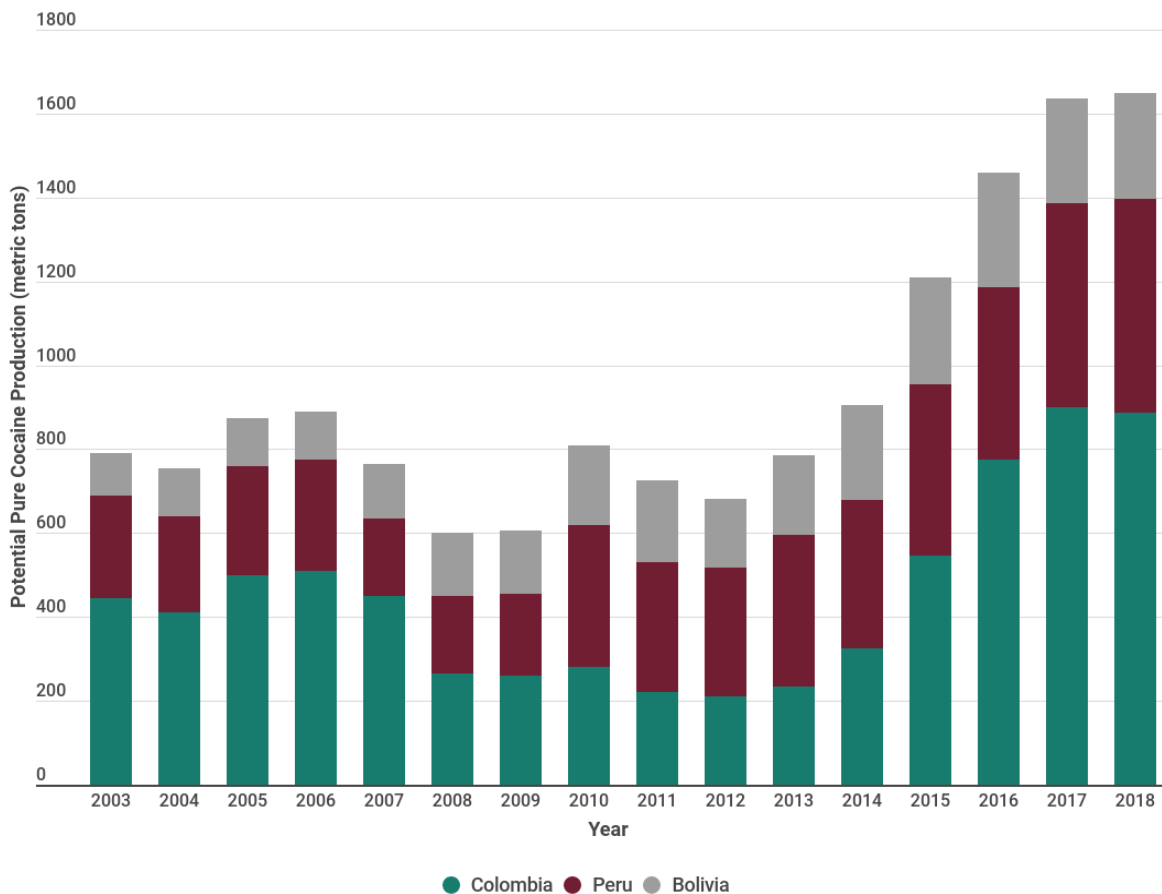
“For 2019 and the first months of 2020, the thinking was that the flow of drugs entering or passing through Europe was between 500 and 800 tons. We base these numbers in part on the notion that we are seizing 10 to 20 percent of the total,” said one senior European police official and cocaine expert,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

This number rivals the estimates of cocaine entering the US mainland. Consumption in Europe is lower than the United States, so it is likely that a significant percentage of the drugs entering Europe is in transit to other parts of the world. However, European organized crime also often profits from these shipments, and this trade is boosting the criminal syndicates that pose a growing threat to European nations and the European Union.

Since production began climbing in 2013, cocaine production has more than doubled. And while the rate of growth has slowed, there is still no sign of it hitting a peak. The world is awash in cocaine, yet prices have not collapsed as traffickers have aggressively explored and developed new markets.

Here is where Europe has far more potential than the more saturated US market. Traffickers are pushing eastwards from the more established markets in western Europe towards Russia and Asia, and feeding every country in between. So, while the United States remains the natural market for Mexican cartels, Colombian groups have increasingly focused on Europe, as well as developing new markets in Asia and Australia.

# Cocaine Production 2003-2018 *insightcrime.org*



Source: ONDCP

August 2020

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

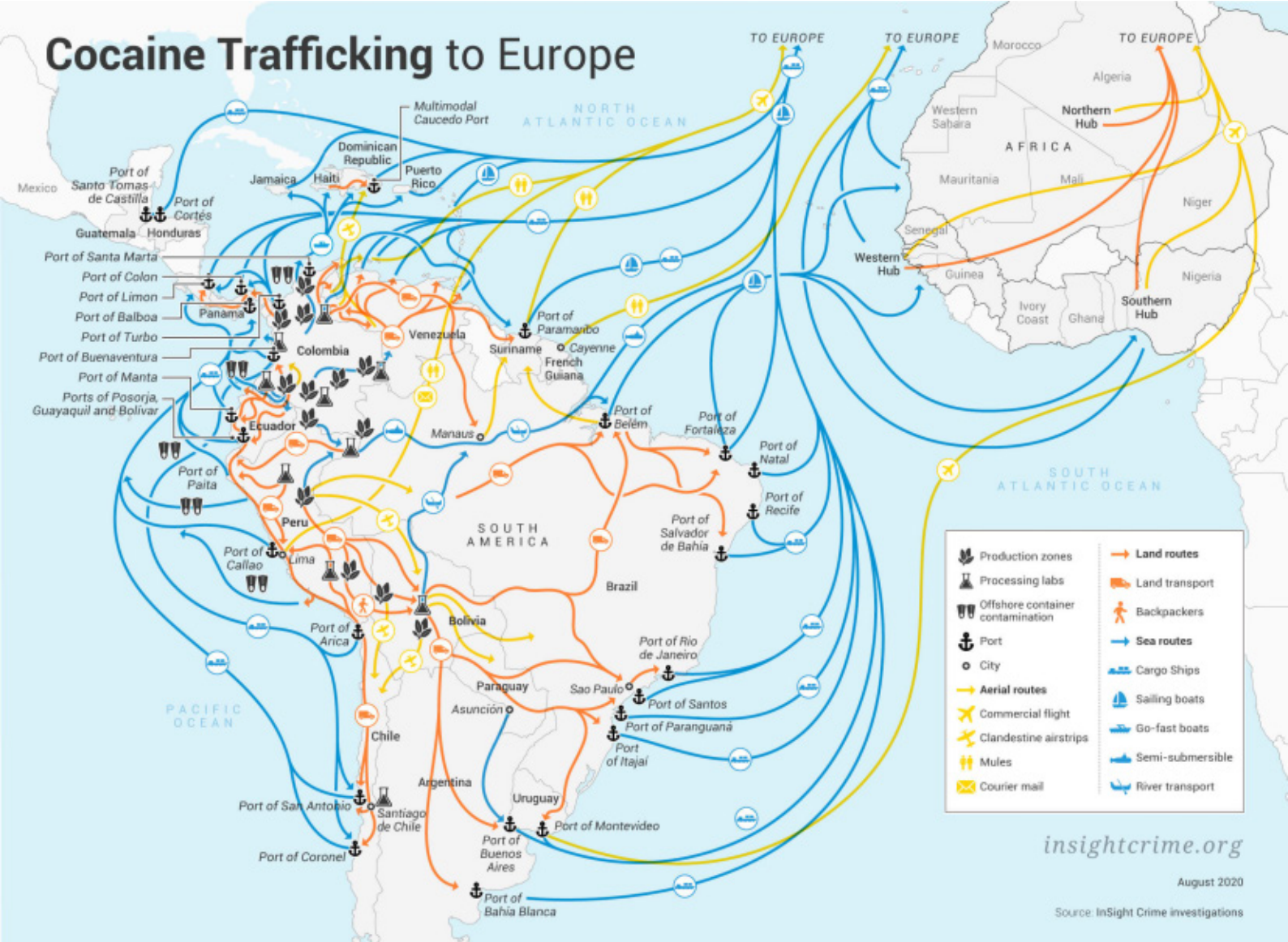
The United States has deployed massive resources in Latin America to fight the drug trade. There is an army of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents on the ground, while other agencies, such as Homeland Security and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), as well as the US military's Southern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

For Europe, unlike the United States, 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 COVID-19, an economic turndown, Islamic terrorism, internal political tensions, and illegal immigration, 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 cocaine trade.

The record flow of drugs is generating billions of euros for European criminal networks and has become a mainstay of mafia groups both old and new. Both Latin American and European criminal syndicates have been immeasurably strengthened in power.

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. The record levels of violence in the region, the growing reach of corruption, the undermining of democracy and the systematic abuses of human rights, all fed by the cocaine trade, should not be some distant concern. Many European nations have former colonies in the region and overseas territories in the Caribbean. The collapse of Venezuela and the evolution of its increasingly dictatorial and criminalized regime means that many European nations with a presence in the Caribbean now have a neighbor exporting cocaine and criminality as well as an exodus of migrants fleeing the collapse of the state and the economy.

From the traffickers' point of view, sending drugs to Europe faces one inescapable hurdle: The Atlantic Ocean. Traffickers, therefore, must move cocaine via sea or air. 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 three tons of cocaine, which at current European wholesale prices is worth up to \$100 million (around 90 million euros). Although Spanish police believe such vessels have been dispatched for years, it was the first to be found in European waters.

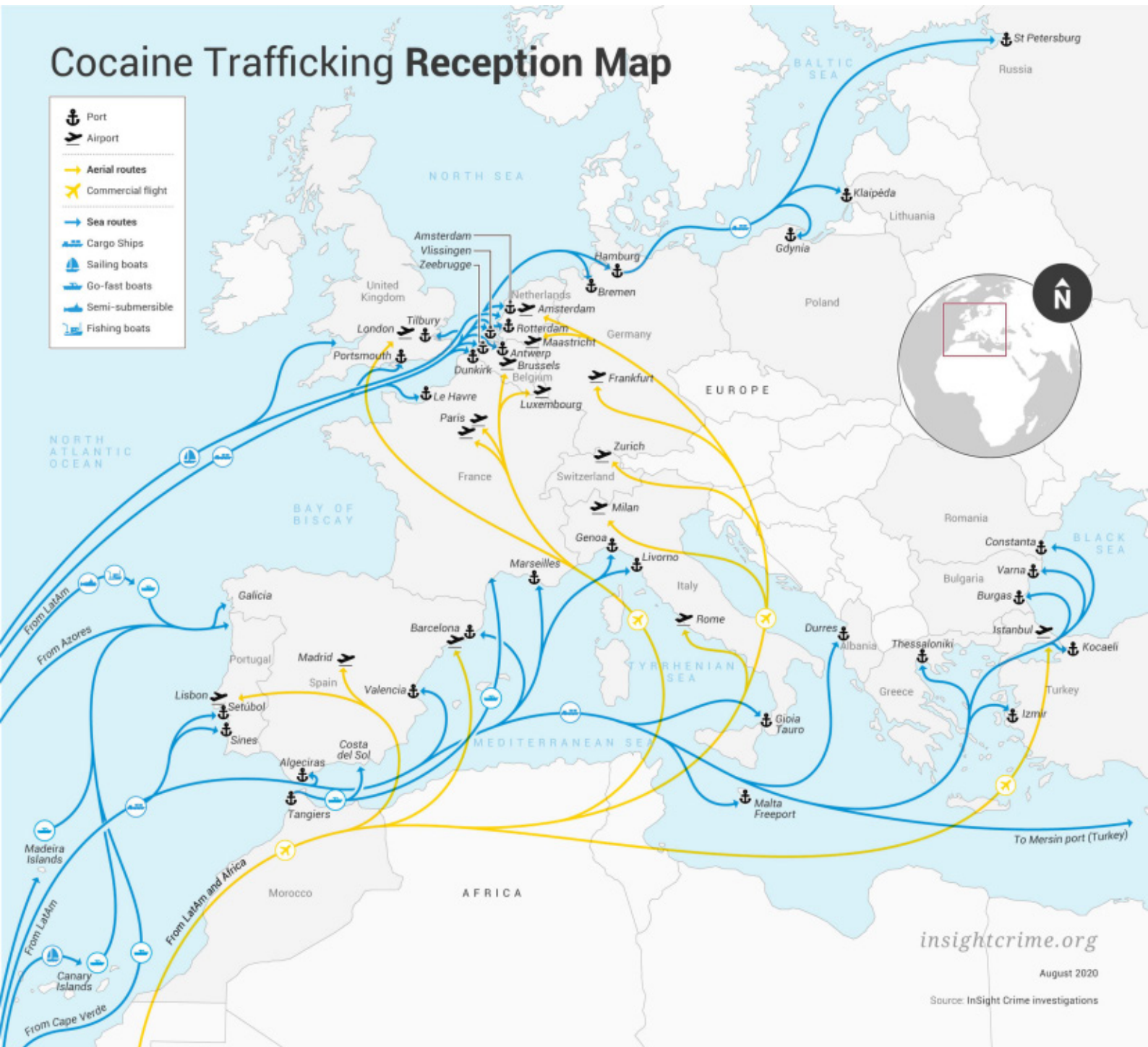
Well aware that European authorities are paying special attention to containers arriving directly from the cocaine-producing nations of Colombia and Peru, traffickers are using other departure points around the region. Understanding that containers and companies are now being profiled by European police 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.

While 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. 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 place a container almost anywhere in Europe. Drug traffickers appreciate that kind of efficiency as much as any other business person, 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 it may be on the upswing again.



As Latin American criminals moved downstream to Europe to sell their wares, so 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 syndicate, 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.

However, despite the boom years it has been enjoying, the cocaine trade, as have all businesses, has been impacted by the Covid-19 crisis.

For Kevin Mills, 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 by the coronavirus pandemic:

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 over the last five months.

“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 a 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 last 2-3 years from the eastern Caribbean. That is completely dead in the water at the moment, because vessels cannot move between countries,” said Mills.

4. 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. The 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. A drop in sales outlets in Europe, with fewer parties, most social venues being closed and people with less money to spend, thanks to the crisis and its economic impact.

However, Mills believes this is a temporary state of affairs and the traffickers are already adapting to changing conditions.





## 2. The Colombian cocaine shift to Europe: a business no-brainer

*Colombia peasants carry loads of harvested coca leaves. AP Images*

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 tons of cocaine and \$10 million in cash, packed into over a thousand cardboard boxes.

The Sylmar haul was – and still is – the biggest cocaine seizure ever recorded. 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 United States, but also across the Atlantic in Europe.

At the time of the seizure, crackdowns on the Colombian cartels’ favored 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 US Drug Enforcement Administration (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 percent 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 United States.

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 U.S. cocaine trade.”

Within a decade, the balance of power in cocaine trafficking to the United States 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 US’ increasingly belligerent anti-narcotics efforts. Or, they could cede the US market to the Mexicans while turning their attentions to new markets with higher prices and lower risks. Markets like Europe.

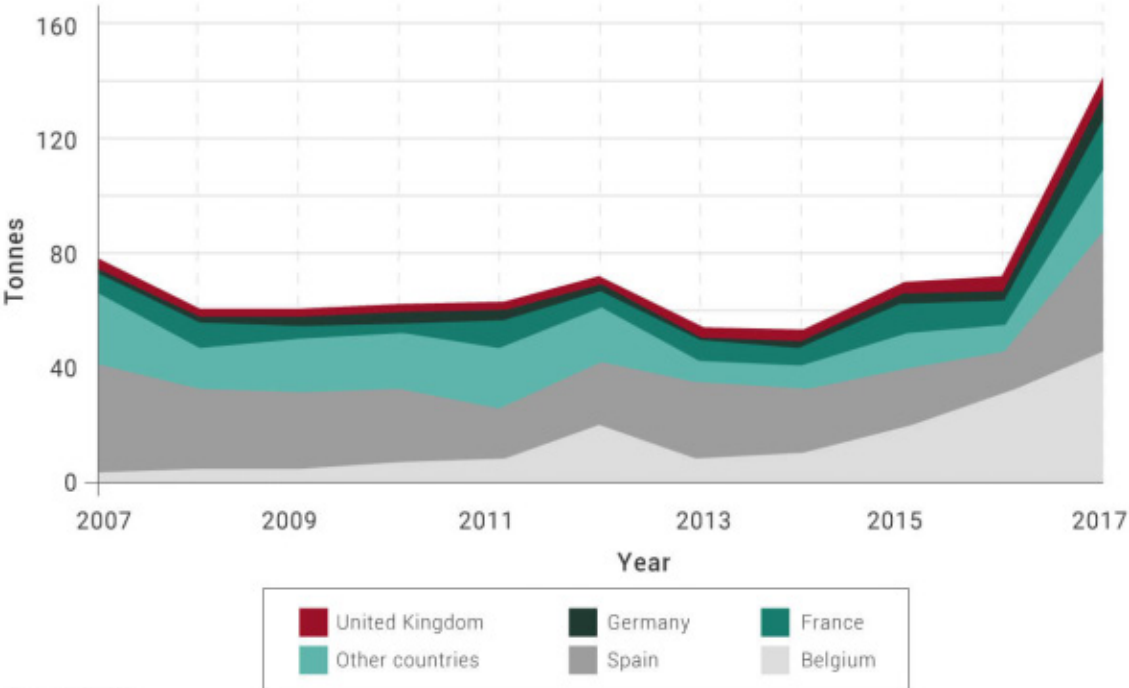
### The Shift to Europe

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that in 1998, as the Mexicans were starting to tighten their chokehold on the US market, 267 tons of cocaine were trafficked into the United States, compared to 63 tons to Europe. Ten years later, the US market had declined 38 percent to 165 tons. The European market, meanwhile, had grown 98 percent, rising to 124 tons.

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.

Cocaine trafficking into Europe is now hitting historic highs. In 2017, authorities in the European Union (EU), Norway, and Turkey seized a record 142 tons of cocaine, twice as much as the year before and over 20 tons higher than the previous record, according to the EU’s annual drug report.

### Cocaine Seized in Europe 2007-2017



August 2020  
Source: EMCDDA/Europol

*insightcrime.org*

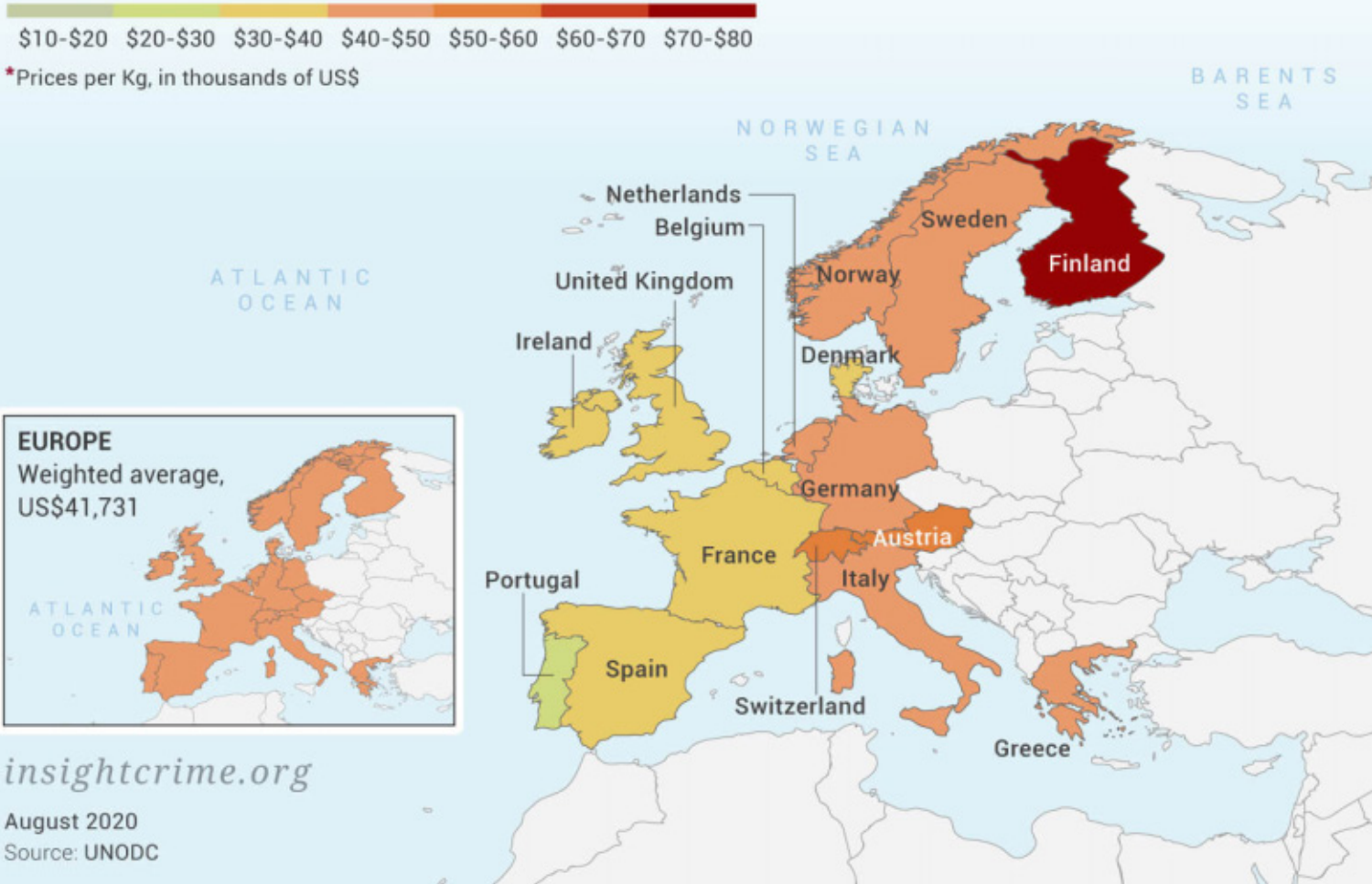
The same report estimates that 100 to 137 tons of cocaine was then consumed in the region that year. However, even at the upper end of this estimate, this would mean European authorities seized over half of all the product cocaine traffickers tried to ship into Europe, which would represent a startling – and highly unlikely – success rate.

International law enforcement and underworld sources in both Europe and the Americas say they expect around 15 to 20 percent of shipments to be seized at any one link in the supply chain. This would equate to 568 to 804 tons successfully trafficked into, or through, Europe in 2017.

Yet even this huge figure may not reflect today’s situation. Since then, major entry points such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Germany have all posted huge increases in seizures. If these are representative of a broader regional trend, the current figure may be hundreds of tons 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. According to the 2019 EU drug report, wholesale prices have been in a long-term decline, while purity levels have been increasing and retail prices remained stable or fell slightly – all indications that the market is not short of product.

# Cocaine Wholesale Prices in Europe \*



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 United States. [Calculations by the UNODC](#) indicate that the average wholesale price in Europe in 2017, weighted by population, was \$41,731, compared to \$28,000 in the United States.

Europol estimates that the EU retail market was worth between €7.6 and €10.5 billion (approximately \$8.4 to \$11.8 billion) in 2017. But calculating using the 568 and 804 ton range and the UNODC prices, then Europe's cocaine wholesale market could be worth between \$23.7 billion and \$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.

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

The United States 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 illustrated with figures. According to [the US Office of National Drug Control Policy \(ONCDP\)](#), the United States spends \$17.4 billion on supply-side reduction, which includes drug interdiction, law enforcement investigations, and prosecutions. While no such precise figures have been published by the EU, the data available suggests the EU spends between \$3 and \$4 billion on supply-side reduction.

Extradition numbers also show the contrast. While 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. In contrast, between 2002 and 2010, the United States extradited an average of 137 people a year from Colombia alone, [according to an investigation by El Tiempo](#).

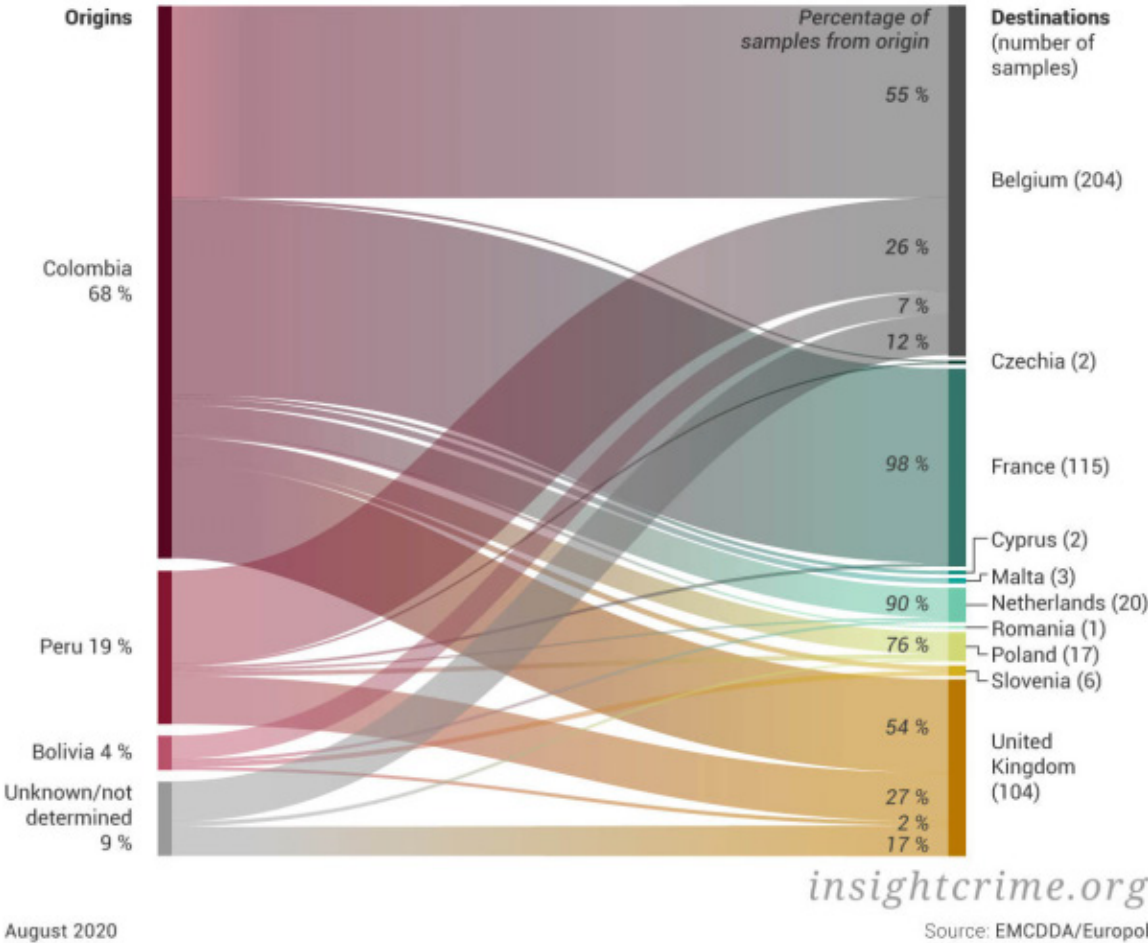
Europe has one final advantage over the United States for the traffickers – it is a far more open market. The Mexican cartels maintain their grip over US borders, controlling them with extreme violence. In doing so, they maintain their monopoly over much of the wholesale cocaine market in the United States, 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 knowhow, 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. The latest monitoring results from Peru and Bolivia, which according to chemical analysis of seized drugs, account for around a quarter of the cocaine entering Europe, show a 36 and 10 percent rise in coca cultivation respectively. The world is awash with cocaine.

## Origins of Cocaine Trafficked to Europe

Samples of cocaine seized in Europe between 2015 and 2018 were chemically analyzed to determine where the drug had been produced.



In Colombia, members of the Mexican cartels are an ever more 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.

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.

From the mighty trafficking federation of the Norte del Valle Cartel (NDVC) to the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de 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 kilo they might sell for \$3,000 to the Mexicans goes for more than ten 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 like China, with its vast population and growing prosperity. Or Australia, where wholesale cocaine prices ranged from \$110,000 to \$154,000 per kilo in 2018, [according to the UNODC](#), a markup that could run as high as over 7,000 percent 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 using 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 kilos. In September 2019, [Malaysian authorities seized](#) 12 tons of cocaine in one shipment alone.

Nevertheless, for the time being, Europe's market size, prices, risk levels, and its shipping infrastructure moving millions of tons of goods to every corner of the earth 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 United States in favor of the old continent. But today, it is a business no-brainer.

---





### 3. Spain: The European base for Latin American organized crime

*A speedboat with boxes of alleged drug cargo. AP Images*

On April 30, 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 United States.

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, like Medellín Cartel capo Jorge Ochoa Vázquez and Cali Cartel head Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, chose Spain.

They lived in luxurious obscurity under false names, collecting opulent properties and high-end vehicles in Madrid, [according to media reports at the time](#). But then 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 legendary smuggler José Ramón Prado, better known by his alias, “Sito Miñanco.”

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 United States, where the crack explosion had democratized cocaine use and around six percent 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. But in this small market – and its higher prices – the Colombians saw enormous potential for growth.

Furthermore, in the 1980s, the United States was beginning to ramp up its “war on drugs” by strengthening agencies like the Drug Enforcement Administration (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 kilometers 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 offense 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 at high sea 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 like the Camorra and the ‘Ndrangheta. For their part, the Galicians earned 30 percent of the profits, according to *Carretero*.

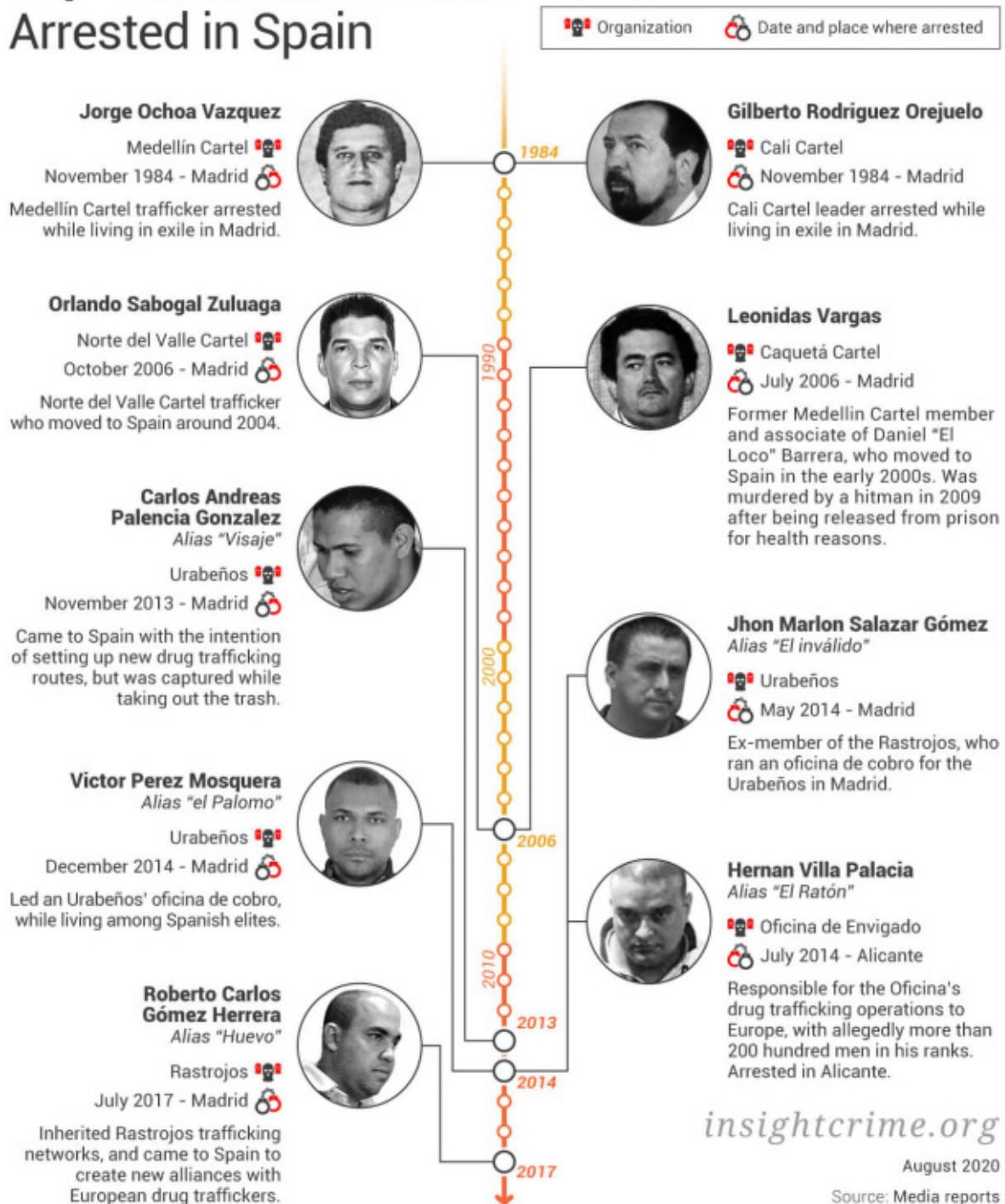
The impact of the new nexus forming between the Colombians, Galicians and Italians soon became apparent. [Data compiled by the United Nations Office on Drugs and](#)

Crime (UNODC) suggests a gradual but steady increase in the size of the European market throughout the 1990s, as seizures climbed while prices fell.

Galicia though, was just the beginning.

New routes began opening all around Spain. By the mid-2000s, the country was recording the third highest cocaine seizures in the world, according to the UNODC. And the seizures were increasingly made outside of Galicia, including in Andalusia, Valencia and Barcelona, as traffickers began to use other modus operandi, especially shipping containers.

## Top Colombian Cocaine Traffickers Arrested in Spain



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 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. Colombian Newspaper [El Espectador](#) reported how the Colombians 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.

The Señores de Ácido were directed from Colombia by Luis Dávalos Jiménez, alias “Pampo,” a member of the Norte del Valle Cartel (NDVC) leadership. The *oficina*'s contract killers were involved in kidnapping, murders, debt collection, and extortion. The group earned its name after dissolving in acid the headless corpse of a relative of a drug trafficker with an outstanding debt.

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. In 2009, Vargas was freed on conditional bail due to health reasons, but he was then assassinated in his hospital bed as the Colombian cartel battles played out on Spanish soil.

Since then, high-profile traffickers from some of Colombia's notorious cocaine trafficking networks, such as the [Urabeños](#) and the [Oficina de Envigado](#), have also been captured in Spain, in one case [reportedly while living in](#) the same gated community as Real Madrid soccer stars Cristiano Ronaldo and Fernando Torres.

## Spain in the new cocaine era

In 2019, the Spanish police stumbled upon their own white whale, which they had pursued without success for over a decade – a drug-filled semi-submersible that had crossed the Atlantic.

The vessel had carried three tons of cocaine over 9,000 kilometers along the Amazon river and across the ocean, but the crew were forced to abandon it off the coast of Galicia after suffering mechanical problems, [according to an investigation by Spain's El País](#).

Spanish police sources told InSight Crime that Latin American traffickers have used semi-submersibles to move cocaine into Spain since the mid-2000s. 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.

The discovery of the semi-submersible, though, offered a glimpse into a new generation of low-profile Galician traffickers that now dominate 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 (Brigada Central de Estupefacientes), told InSight Crime.

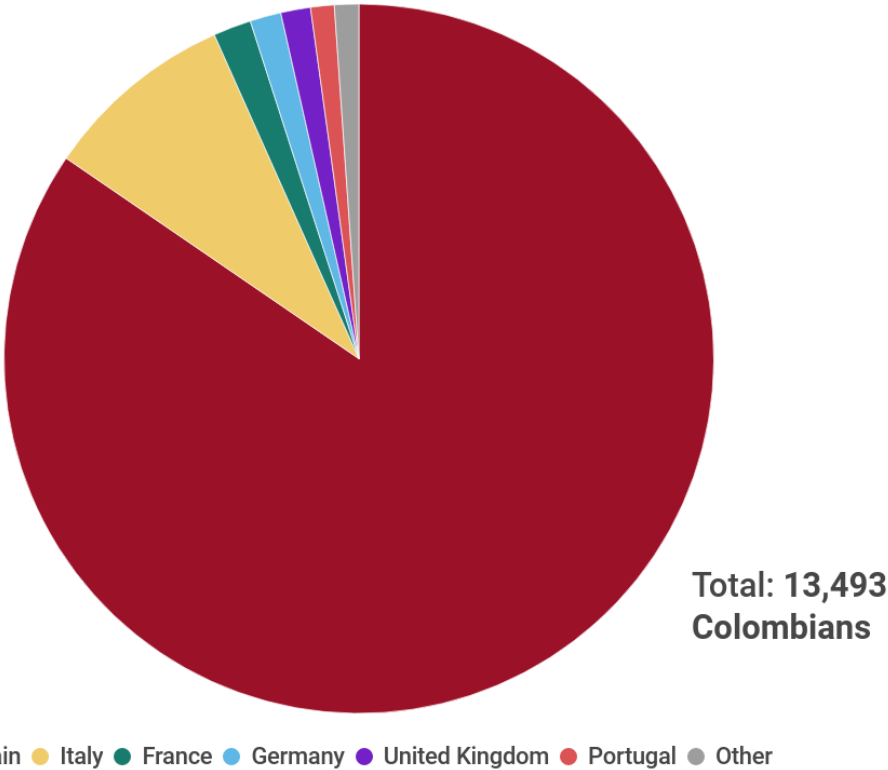
The old guard of Galicians is still active in the cocaine trade. A network of over 30 Galicians, allegedly led by Sito Miñanco, was dismantled in 2018 in [the largest police operation](#) against drug trafficking in Galicia since 1990. The crime group was linked to a four-ton shipment aboard a tugboat seized in international waters and a [616 kilogram seizure](#) made in a container found in Hoorn, the Netherlands, both in 2017.

However, 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.”

## Colombians Imprisoned in Europe for Drug Trafficking *insightcrime.org*



Source: Colombian Bureau of Statistics

August 2020

Colombian traffickers too remain deeply embedded in the Spanish cocaine trade, hiding among a diaspora that has grown from [around 10,000 in 1998](#) to [270,000 today](#). The ongoing importance of Spain to their operations is reflected in the figures – 85 percent of Colombians convicted of drug trafficking in Europe are incarcerated in Spain, [according to the Colombian Bureau of Statistics](#).

Madrid is regarded as a principal operating base, Chief Inspector Emilio Rodríguez, of the police's Specialist Response against Organized Crime Group (Grupo de Respuesta Especializada contra el Crimen Organizado – GRECO), told InSight Crime. 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 Chief Inspector 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.

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.

While 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 like Algeciras, Barcelona and Valencia, where an estimated 40 to 50 percent of all cocaine in Spain arrives. And the loads are getting bigger, as shown by [the nearly nine-ton haul](#) seized in Algeciras in 2018 – a Spanish record.

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.

“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.

And although year after year it has ranked in the top three European nations for seizures, recently there has been a sharp drop off: from a high of 50 tons in 2018 to just 21 tons 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.

---



## 4. The Italian mafia and the move upstream

*Italian Carabinieri police officers look on near a covered body. AP Images*

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-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de 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 the Italians were buying cocaine from Mancuso in Colombia at \$3,000 a kilo 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.

Mancuso, in turn, went into the business with the Italians in Colombia, even opening an Italian restaurant in the Caribbean city of Barranquilla frequented by 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\*](#). 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.

Mancuso did not get his retirement in Italy – [at least not yet](#). He was instead extradited to the United States, 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 ever more European traffickers move upstream in search of cheap cocaine and coordinate its dispatch Europe directly.

Nonetheless, it was the Italians, with their particular brand of organization, entrepreneurship and criminal efficiency, who pioneered the move upstream. 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. 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 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 US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

The more forward thinking mafiosi understood that this experience and criminal infrastructure could be used to traffic the cocaine themselves.

"They came to Colombia so they could be closer to the supply and coordinate shipments to their standards," said Vigil.

By the early 1990s, Italian cocaine brokers were stationing themselves in the country, where they worked quietly reshaping the European cocaine trade. The most infamous was the baby-faced trafficker Roberto Pannunzi, the man 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, Saviano describes in his book *ZeroZeroZero*, Pannunzi began a drug exchange: 1 kilo of heroin for 25 kilos 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.

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, [according to media reports at the time](#). Nevertheless, he was released five years later after [prosecutors ran out of time](#) to bring their case against him.

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.

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 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.

This upstream presence allowed the ‘Ndrangheta to cut out the independent brokers and control more of the supply chain directly.



*Former AUC commander Salvatore Mancuso*

“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.”

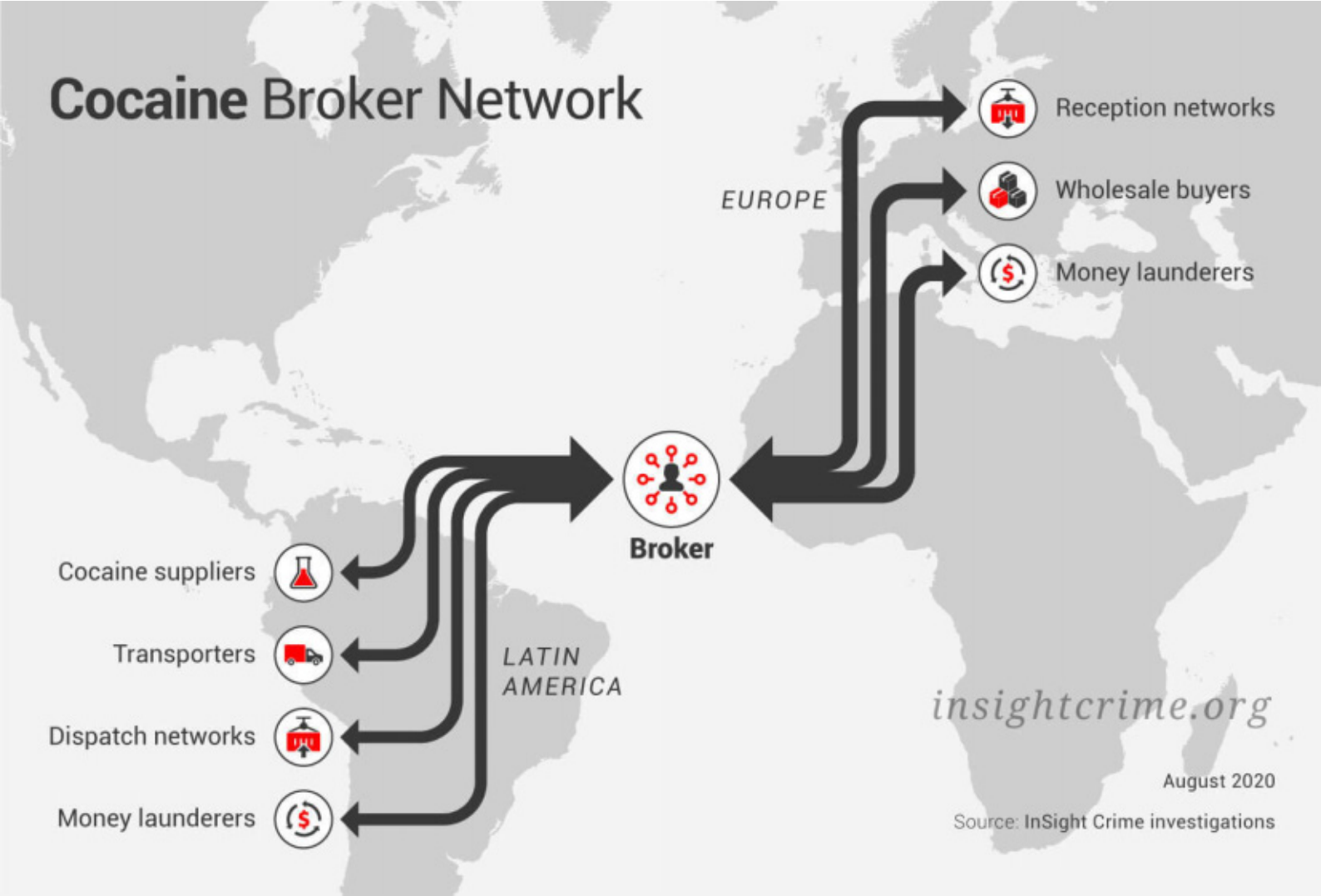
Italian migration was key to the alliance between the ‘Ndrangheta and Salvatore Mancuso, who was the son of an Italian migrant from the southwestern region of Campania, and came from the city of Montería in Colombia’s Caribbean, home to a [significant Italian diaspora](#).

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.

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 percent of European cocaine imports, according to a report commissioned by Italy’s **anti-Mafia commission**.

### 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 and 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 described how they uncovered an alliance between the ‘Ndrangheta and Brazil’s most powerful criminal group, the First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – PCC) in 2017. In Costa Rica, intelligence sources say they 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.

Brokers, many of them resident upstream, remain the lynchpin of their operations, with their connections to suppliers and dispatch networks.

“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.

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 Roberto Pannunzi](#) as one of the pioneers of Italian cocaine trafficking. When he 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.

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 such [Ecuador](#), the Dominican Republic, [Suriname](#), [Guyana](#), [Uruguay](#), [Argentina](#), [Bolivia](#), the Dutch Caribbean, and [Chile](#). The ‘Ndrangheta alone operates in more than 30 countries around the world, [according to European police](#).

However, these networks are far more than just cocaine trafficking cells. They are also master manipulators of 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 coopt 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, the Gaming Board, and within Schotte’s cabinet. In 2016, [Schotte was convicted](#) of forgery, official bribery, and money laundering.

Latin America and the Caribbean are also used as a refuge for Italians 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. 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 Italians’ 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.



## 5. Cocaine – the criminal steroid

*Drug addicts chat next to a wall tagged with the acronym PCC. AP Images*

Cocaine 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.

Today, the European cocaine trade is more democratized and international on both sides of the Atlantic, with networks cooperating across national and ethnic boundaries. And the historic [production boom](#) is offering more opportunities than ever for these actors to get their hands on the cocaine steroid, raising the threat posed by organized crime in Europe.

## 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 tire of a car he had driven up from Ecuador. When he was arrested for the second time – after 15 years spent trafficking countless tons of cocaine into the United States and Europe – he negotiated his own incarceration into a [purpose-built luxury prison](#).

Between these two arrests, he was elected to [Colombia's congress](#), 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.



Medellín Cartel head Pablo Escobar

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.

Escobar ultimately 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. But the cocaine trade retained its transformative power.

One of these federations was the paramilitaries of the [United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia \(Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC\)](#), 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.

The [AUC](#) used the cocaine steroid to turn themselves into the most fearsome drug trafficking military machine in history, employing brutal and often indiscriminate violence to secure control of coca fields, cocaine laboratories and major trafficking arteries. When they demobilized in 2006, more than 30,000 fighters handed over their weapons and their dominion of up to a quarter of the country.

As control of the US cocaine trade shifted to Mexico in the 1990s, it was the turn of Mexican organized crime to take advantage of the cocaine steroid.

Today, the most infamous drug trafficking group is [Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel](#). The Sinaloans 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.

However, the European cocaine trade has – and is – transforming criminal dynamics.

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, according to the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#). The profits from this trafficking were central to the rise of the [Cartel of the Suns](#) (Cartel de los Soles) – a loose knit trafficking network made up of high-ranking members of the Venezuelan security forces and government.

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.



*Venezuela President Nicolás Maduro*

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.

“Now, the problem of drug trafficking goes deeper than you can imagine,” Camero said.

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 most feared criminal group, the First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – PCC), to complete its transition from a prison gang to a transnational actor with influence in Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay, as well as a seat at the top table of the drug trade.

The PCC was already powerful, running not only prisons but controlling criminal enclaves and running criminal economies, including street level drug sales, across swathes of Brazil, especially in many of the urban slums known as “favelas.” Its recent [explosive growth](#) is due in no small part to establishing control of several cocaine corridors, like 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](#).



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, where Galician smugglers and the Italian mafia were the first to get a taste.

The Galicians quickly evolved from cigarette smugglers to drug lords, 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. 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.

**The Darko Saric Network**  
*Darko Saric*

The so-called “Balkans Cocaine King,” Darko Saric, 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. Saric 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.

insightcrime.org  
August 2020  
Source: OCCRP and InSight Crime Investigations

But the European market was no monopoly, and as it grew it also democratized, 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 - mostly [heroin](#) coming from Afghanistan and Turkey. The wars also hardened people to violence, gave them criminal as well as military experience and skills, and created a huge diaspora, as tens of thousands of people fled the conflict.

But it was only after Balkan criminals followed the path of the Italians and Galicians into the cocaine trade that they became major transnational actors with a transatlantic presence.

One of the first to do so was Darko Šarić, the Balkan “Cocaine King,” who replicated the model of the Italian mafia by building networks in both 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. He also cultivated political ties at home, allegedly with the Montenegrin Prime Minister [Milo Djukanovic](#), and the Serb Minister of Foreign Affairs [Ivica Dačić](#).

However, following a multi-year, multinational manhunt, Šarić finally [turned himself](#) in to Serbian authorities in 2014 and was sentenced to [20 years](#) in prison.

Today, there are no “kings” of the Balkan cocaine trade, at least not any 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](#). 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, according to a [Guardian investigation](#).

Currently one of the most notorious Balkan networks is the [Tito and Dino Cartel](#). 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. The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) considers the network to be one of the 50 largest drug trafficking operations on the planet.

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.

However, according to the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) and investigative journalist Stevan Dojčinović, the Tito and Dino Cartel is neither the strongest Balkan criminal group in Peru, nor in Europe.

**Tito and Dino Cartel**  
*Edin Gačanin*

The Tito and Dino Cartel is led by Edin Gačanin, who was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina but 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.

insightcrime.org  
August 2020  
Source: Global Initiative Against Organized Crime and InSight Crime Investigations

“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.”

Grupo 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. However, evidence of Grupa Amerika’s presence in the region is elusive, with only one high-profile arrest linked to the group.

**Grupa Amerika**  
Mile Miljanić

Grupa Amerika emerged in the 1990s. It is rumored it was created by the Serbian State Security Department as a death squad at the service of ex-Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic that was made up of Montenegrins trained in the United States before the Balkan wars. Initially Amerika was led by Vojislav Raicevic, who used to work for the Italian Mafia in the United States, and it began trafficking cocaine and heroin between Colombia, the United States and Europe. After Raicevic 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.

insightcrime.org  
August 2020  
Source: Telgraf.rs and InSight Crime Investigations

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 over 40 false identities and 10 passports in his luggage.

Jakšić is suspected of smuggling hundreds of tons of cocaine into the Netherlands and Belgium, and was a wanted man in [25 countries](#). 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.

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 United States, 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 ever more 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 democratic, decentralized, and multinational underworld, criminal networks involved in cocaine trafficking are multiplying on both continents. And many of them get their hands on the cocaine steroid by moving up the supply chain, thus increasing 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.

---



## 6. Container shipping: cocaine hide-and-peek

*Tons of cocaine in Cartagena, Colombia. AP Images*

It was around 5 a.m. when the MSC Gayane cargo freighter docked in the port of Philadelphia on June 17, 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 fiber optic scopes to inspect the thousands of containers on board. In seven of those, they found nearly 20 tons 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 United States. It shows how trafficking with containers has reached such levels that traffickers feel confident dispatching multi-ton 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 Euros 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 has become 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 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 frias*,” 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.

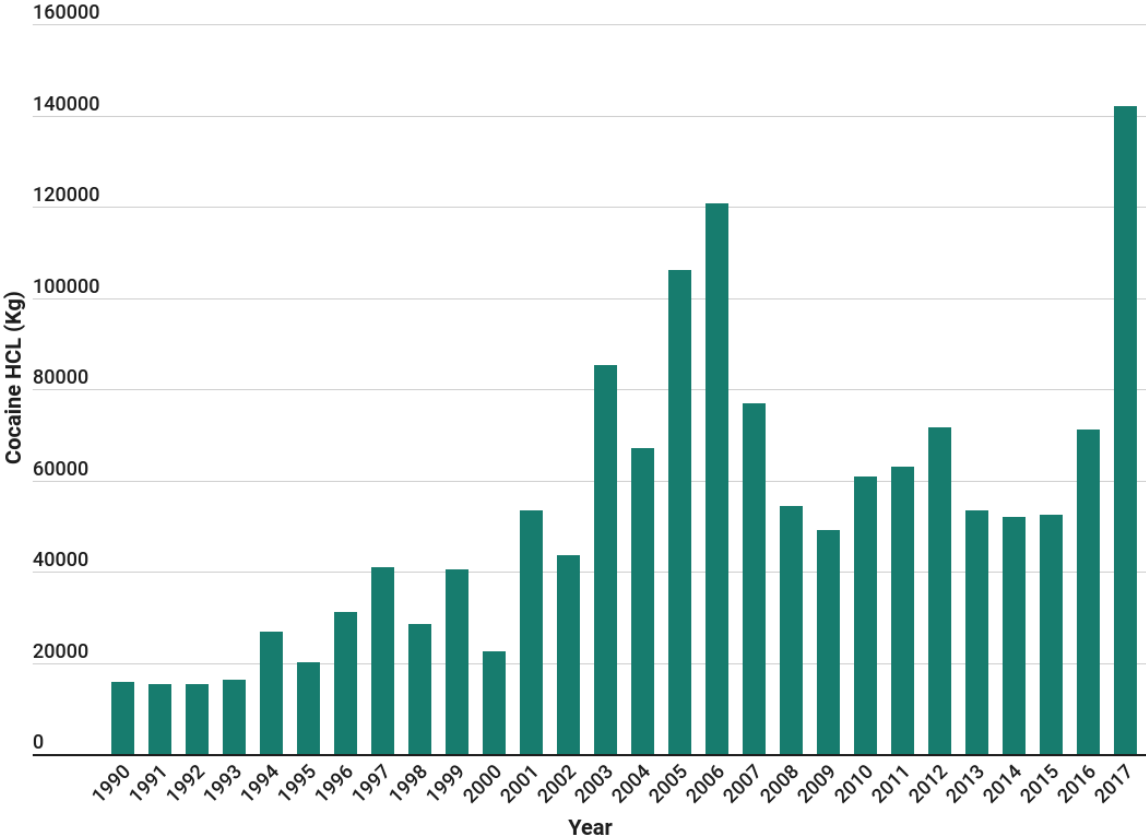
Whatever the case, it makes little difference to the implications of the seizure. Either way, the MSC Gayane haul was a product of the ongoing game of hide-and-seek among containers between traffickers and law enforcement agencies, in which the traffickers are constantly looking for new methods and routes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

### The move to containers

In the original cocaine boom of the 1980s, the Colombian cartels favored using light aircraft to reach the United States, 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,” at the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\)](#). 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.

## Seizures of Cocaine HCL (Kg) in Europe 1990-2017 *insightcrime.org*



Over the last 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, but less than two percent of these **are inspected**. 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.

# Population-Weighted Average Price of a Gram of Cocaine at Street Purity in Constant 2009 Euros. 1990-2009



Source: UNODC

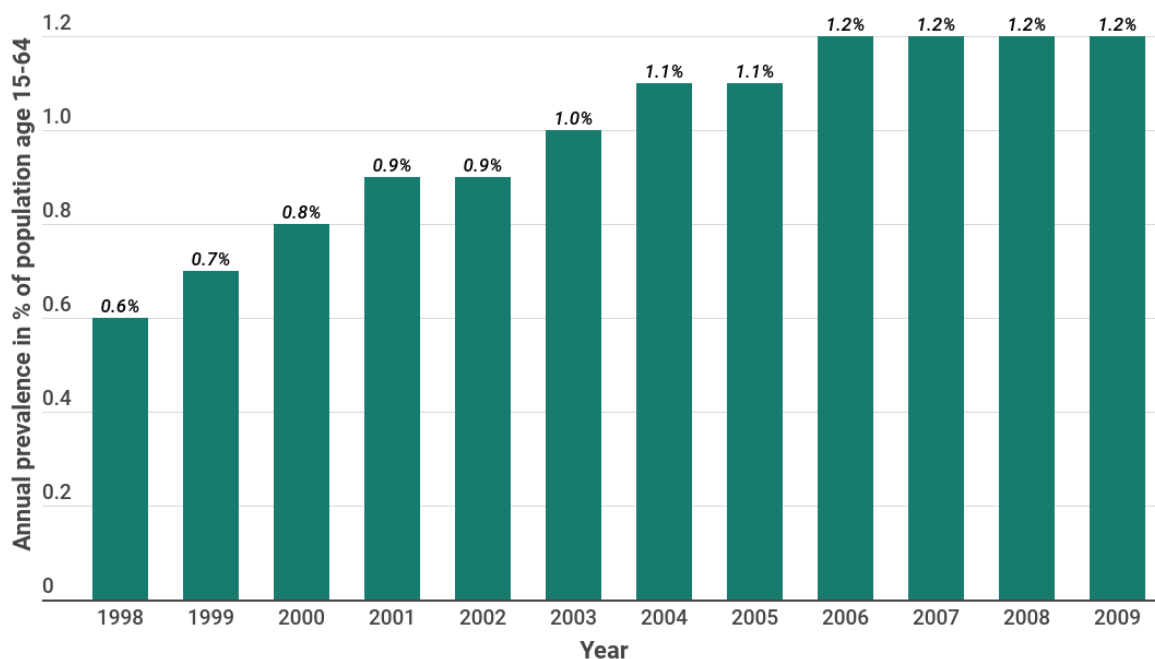
*insightcrime.org*  
August 2020

Container shipping was used to move cocaine at least as far back as the **1990s**, when the approach was pioneered by the Italian mafia. But **seizure figures** illustrate a dramatic swing to containers in the mid to late 2000s, which appeared to catch authorities unawares.

European cocaine seizures increased rapidly between 1998 and 2006, from 32 tons to 121 tons. This was followed by a sudden decline from 2006 to 2009 – from 121 tons to 53 tons – even as other indicators like use rates, purity levels, and street prices remained stable or increased, according to **UNODC** data. The figures suggest cocaine continued to flow uninterrupted – right under the authorities’ noses.



# Annual Prevalence of Cocaine Use Among EU and EFTA Countries 1998-2009 *insightcrime.org*



Source: UNODC

August 2020

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 in 2006 containers accounted for 10 percent of maritime seizures, by 2012 and 2013 that had increased to 75 percent.

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

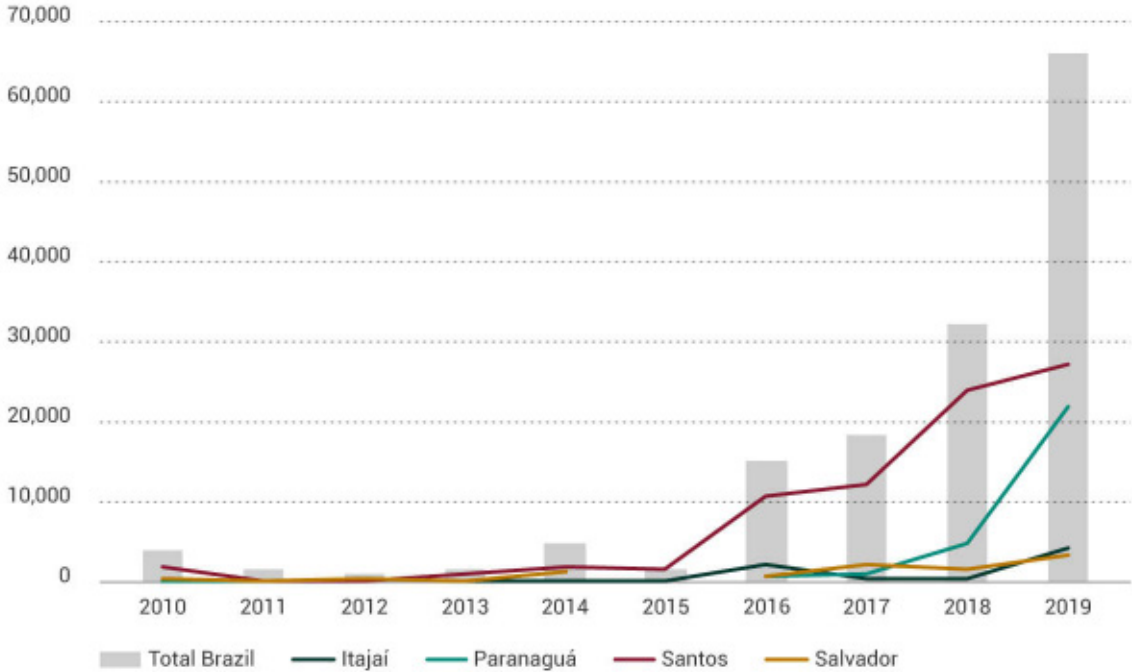
When authorities began to understand the threat posed by container trafficking, they paid more attention to which shipping lines from which countries were most commonly used for cocaine shipments. Traffickers responded by fanning out across the region in search of new ports that raised fewer suspicions.

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 on one side, and numerous Atlantic coast container ports on the other, made it an enticing prospect for traffickers seeking new routes to Europe. Add to this a powerful and rapidly evolving organized crime landscape, and suddenly you have the principal cocaine bridge to Europe.

## Cocaine Seizures (Kg) in the Ports of Brazil 2010 - 2019



insightcrime.org

Source: Brazilian Customs

August 2020

First, 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 tons in 2010 to 66 tons in 2019.

This migration continues today, with evidence suggesting 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](#), [Uruguay](#) and [Chile](#).

Another option may be the more circuitous route to Europe via West Africa, which witnessed a boom in the first decade of the millennium<sup>1</sup> when cocaine profits fueled 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>2</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.

Early proponents of container trafficking favored a strategy authorities call “within the load,” where cocaine is camouflaged in everyday exports.



1 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Transnational Organized Crime in West Africa: A Threat Assessment*, February 2013.

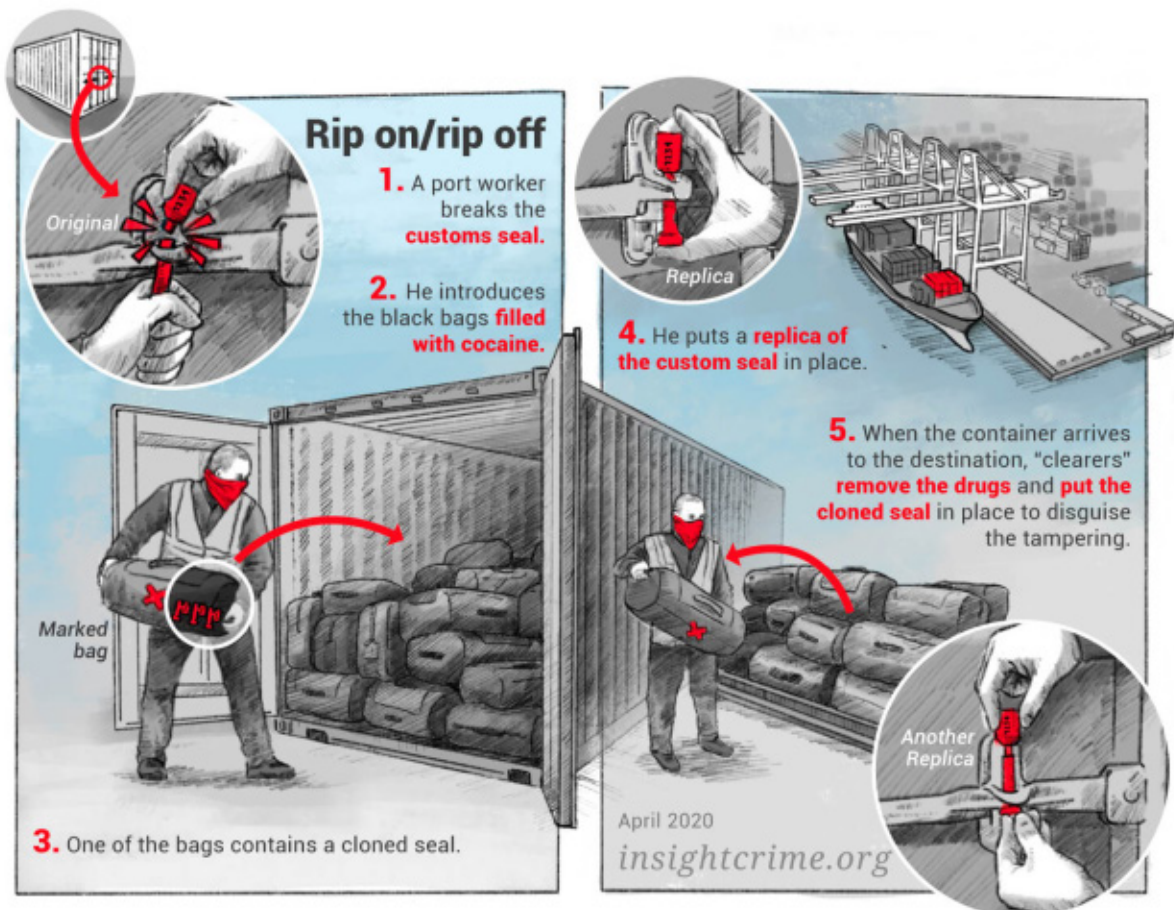
2 Mark Shaw and A. Gomes, *Breaking the Vicious Cycle: Cocaine politics in Guinea-Bissau*, May 2020.

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 to barrels of hazardous chemicals, and even chemically transformed the cocaine to disguise it as products like pet food or fertilizer.

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.

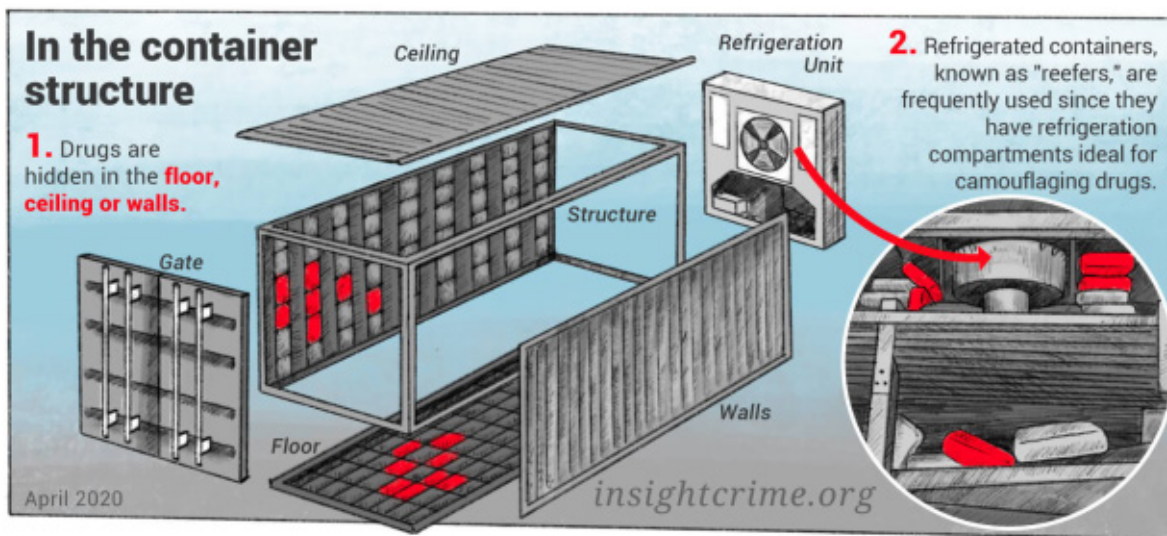
This drove a shift to the rip-on/rip-off method, where traffickers avoid profiling by breaking open containers of legitimate exports to ship the drugs, then use cloned customs seals to conceal the tampering. Initially, rip on/rip off was favored by smaller traffickers sending tens of kilograms. But as it has grown in popularity, the shipments have grown in size, with multi-ton hauls now commonplace.



In most cases, the containers are contaminated as they are waiting to be loaded, meaning traffickers require access to the port areas. While there has been at least one case of so-called "ninjas" slipping into ports hidden in secret compartments in trucks, 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.

However, 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.

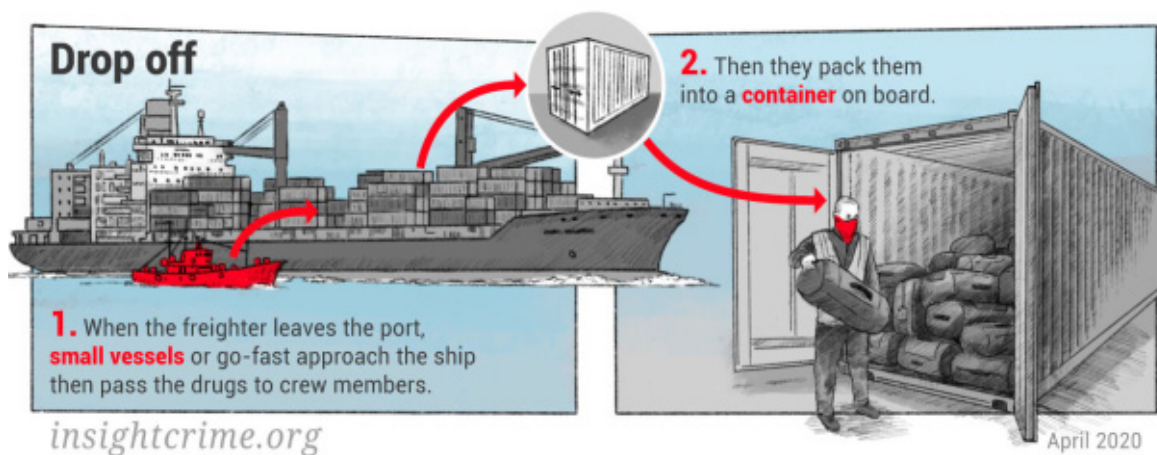
Sources in several countries also say that traffickers are increasingly looking to avoid the risks from profiling by hiding drugs in the structure of the container itself. Traffickers stuff bricks of cocaine into cavities in the walls, ceilings, floors, and doors, or in the insulation or cooling equipment of refrigerated containers – known as “reefers.”



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 the [MSC Gayane](#) shipment: a “drop off,” where the containers are contaminated at sea after the ship has left the port.



This method usually depends on extensive corruption among the crew. But authorities in Guayaquil, Ecuador, also report 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 technological solutions: **smart containers**, which collect and transmit data on the container’s geolocation, temperature fluctuations, and any other signs of tampering; or **electronic customs seals**, which send real-time information on the container movements.

However, these technologies are no silver bullet. A port official in Panama, who spoke to InSight Crime on condition of anonymity, said they are prohibitively expensive and complicated to 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 (CCP), a joint initiative of the UNODC and the World Customs Organization (WCO). The program has increased security capacity and built international cooperation networks in both Latin American and European ports. It has directly contributed to **increases in seizures as well as operations** that took down important traffickers.

However, despite these efforts, it is unlikely 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 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** and **Uruguay** to the UK, France and Switzerland. And the last two years have seen the **first seizures** in Europe of semi-submersibles built to ship cocaine.

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 First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – 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 like 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** fueled in no small part by gang wars for control of the ports of Panama City and Colón. 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.

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.

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.

---





## 7. The rise of “plata” over “plomo:” The cancer of corruption

*President Nicolás Maduro backdropped by a painting of Simón Bolívar. Ap Images*

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 tons of cocaine on an Air France flight from Caracas to Paris.

There is only one way to import 1.4 tons 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. According to a [US indictment](#), among them were President Nicolás Maduro, along with Hugo Carvajal and Diosdado Cabello, two of the most powerful members in the current administration.

In France, it involved a French trafficker turned informant, whose police handler currently [stands accused](#) of helping him use his law enforcement cooperation as a front for trafficking drugs.

And at the center 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 UK National Crime Agency (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.

With trafficking to Europe booming, the cocaine trade is now spreading the cancer of corruption farther, and quicker, than ever on before – on both sides of the Atlantic.

## Plomo o plata

Drug traffickers have two main weapons at their disposal, captured in Pablo Escobar's infamous offer to those whose cooperation he sought: "*plomo o plata*" – silver or lead, or in other words, 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 percent 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 war disputes. A [family member](#) and [lawyer of](#) a witness in a major cocaine trafficking case were murdered in April 2018 and September 2019 respectively. The latest discovery, in July 2020, was of an "[underworld prison](#)" with multiple cells and a torture room that was set up by a cocaine trafficking group.

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.

## Air France and the cocaine cancer

The Air France case shines a light on perhaps the starkest example of the corrosive power of cocaine trade corruption – Venezuela. When Robert Dawes was planning a major cocaine shipment in 2013, he turned to a trafficking network formed from within the state itself: the Cartel of the Suns (Cartel de los Soles), the name given to the network of trafficking cells embedded in the upper reaches of the Venezuelan security forces and government.

The involvement of Venezuelan security forces in the cocaine trade dates as far back as the early 1990s. But it was the convergence of Hugo Chávez coming to power with a boom in trafficking through Venezuela to Europe that would shape the fate of the country.

“This was a process that did not happen overnight, but gradually,” Mildred Camero, a former director of Venezuela’s National Commission Against Illicit Drug Use (Comisión Nacional Contra el Uso Ilícito de las Drogas - 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 support another ally: the guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC).

Chávez supported the FARC out of ideological sympathy and as a bulwark against his geo-political enemies, Colombia and the United States. And the FARC were heavily involved in the cocaine trade all along the Venezuela-Colombia border.



Mural of ex-Venezuela 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 (Guardia Nacional Bolivariana – GNB) and other branches of Venezuela’s military went from allowing trafficking to purchasing, storing, transporting and selling cocaine, which they sourced directly from the FARC.

“They sold weapons for drugs, it was an exchange,” said Camero. “Many FARC weapons had the insignias of the Venezuelan Bolivarian Republic.”

By the time Chávez died in March 2013, the cocaine cancer had fully metastasized, eating away at the legitimacy of his “Bolivarian Revolution.” 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, Nicolas Maduro, but also government ministers, regional governors, and senior security and intelligence officials.

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, according to NCA investigations. Together, they made the arrangements for the Air France shipment.

Months later, on September 10, over 30 suitcases filled with cocaine arrived at Caracas' Simón Bolívar International Airport of Maiquetía. The suitcases were brought in through a worker's entrance to avoid scanners and baggage checks. They had stickers with counterfeit barcodes that were accepted by the Air France luggage system despite not belonging to any travelers.

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.

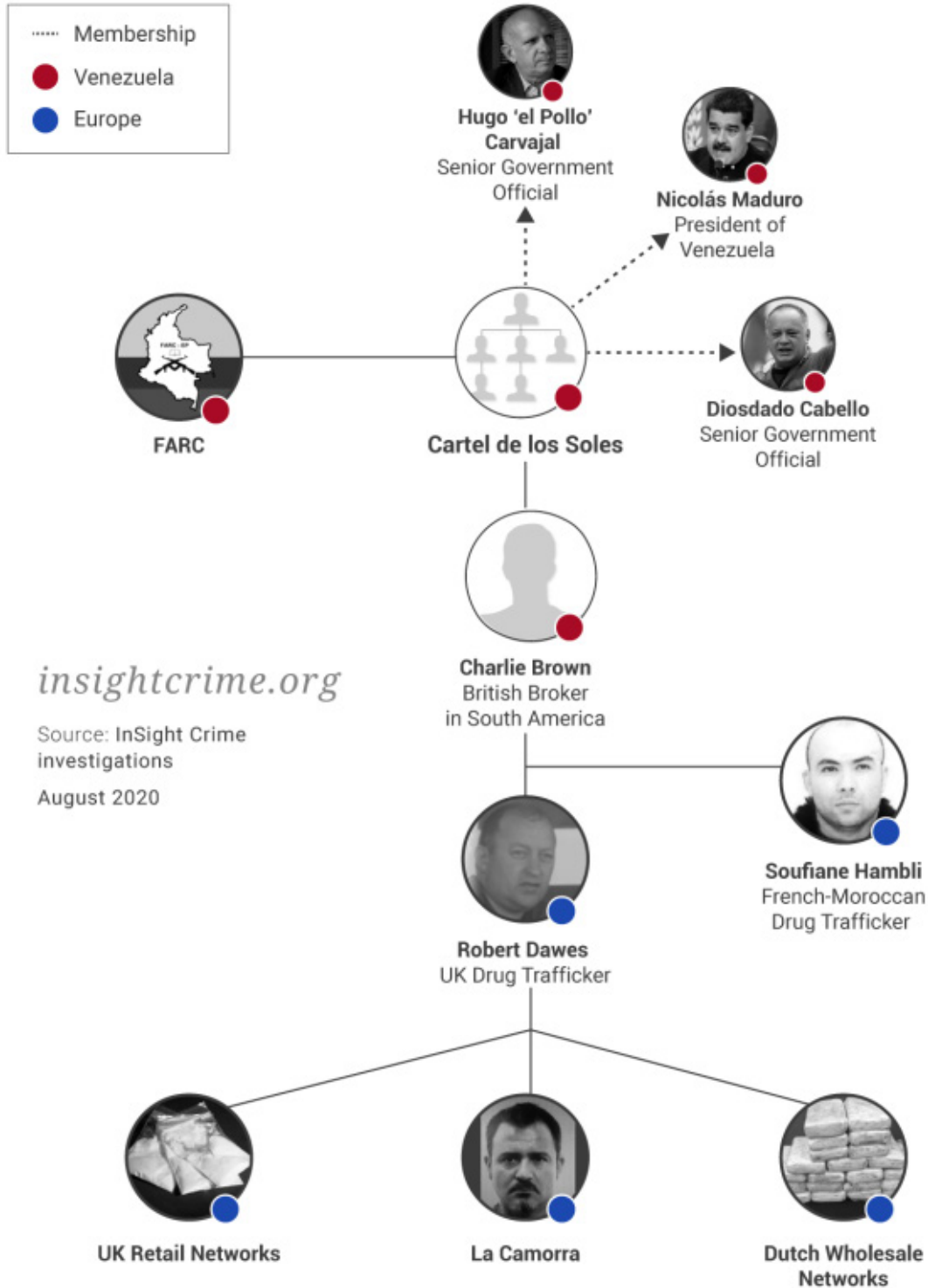
However, unknown to Dawes and his Venezuelan partners, the operation was compromised. British undercover operatives in Venezuela had warned the French of an impending shipment using an Air France flight, and the French had set up a controlled handover operation, according to sources familiar with the investigation. Hambli was a collaborator with a French police unit, the Central Office for the Suppression of Illicit Drug Trafficking (Office Central pour la Répression du Trafic Illicite des Stupéfiants – OCTRIS).

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. Mora Carvajal, however, was quickly declared innocent and released.

There was little doubt that the true masterminds were much higher up. And in 2020, the US Department of Justice accused President Maduro, Hugo Carvajal and Diosdado Cabello of involvement in the case. Among the evidence were communications intercepts in which Maduro told Carvajal and Cabello shortly after the seizure that “they should not have used Maiquetia 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 tons of cocaine on a commercial flight from Caracas, Venezuela to Paris, France.



*insightcrime.org*

Source: InSight Crime investigations  
August 2020

## European cocaine profits corrupt Latin America states



Former Suriname President Dési Bouterse. By Pieter Van Maele

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](#) and did [arms-for-drugs deals](#) with the FARC in the 1990s. 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.

Since then, cocaine routes to Europe have expanded around the region and so has the corruption.

Ecuador, and especially the port of Guayaquil, is now one of the main dispatch points to Europe. Here, 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.

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.

Another major dispatch point to Europe to emerge over the last decade is the Dominican Republic, a longtime transit route to the United States. 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 (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales – FLACSO) in the Dominican Republic.

Drug trafficking coopts politicians from the local level to the national. 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.”

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](#). The former director of the country's anti-narcotics police was even [convicted](#) of stealing nearly a ton of cocaine.

## **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 how Europe is far from immune to the cocaine cancer.

The story of the seizure presented by the head of OCTRIS, 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, as French magazine *Libération* [reported](#) in 2018.

Hambli's claims to have organized the handover are also supported by a confidential letter from Thierry to the Attorney General signed on October 28, 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 tons 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 behavior. There were [unauthorized operations](#) and loads of drugs arriving then disappearing. A later *Libération* investigation recorded how Customs officials noted Thierry [picking up 50 kilogram suitcases](#) from the airport on a weekly basis for several months in 2010. Thierry claimed 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](#).

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.”

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](#). Two years after that he was indicted again for [participation in a criminal association](#), among other offenses. In September 2020 the French Supreme Court rejected Thierry’s appeal over the August 2017 case, which concerned a 7.1 tons of marijuana seizure.

The cases remain under investigation, while Thierry remains an official of the Interior Ministry, Emmanuel Fansten, the Libération journalist who broke the case, told InSight Crime. When asked about by InSight Crime, the French interior ministry did not deny or confirm this, nor reply to our other inquiries about the cases.

Hambli, meanwhile, 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

Like the Cartel of the Suns, the story of Thierry – a top European anti-narcotics official accused of helping to traffic drugs – is an extreme case. But in Europe as in Latin America, it is still just one part of a much bigger picture.

Corruption in Europe might not be as widespread as in Latin America, but its core elements remain the same: structural and strategically planned. [According to Europol](#), cocaine trafficking-related corruption is on the rise.

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 coopt 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 the 1990s, the region of Galicia was “in danger of becoming a Spanish Sicily,” Manuel Antonio Couceiro Cachaldora, president of the Galician Foundation against Drug Trafficking (Fundación Galega contra el Narcotráfico) told InSight Crime.

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.

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.

“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 the Organized Crime and Corruption



Reporting Project (OCCRP) and co-founder of the [Investigative Reporting Project Italy \(IRPI\)](#).

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 (Brigada Central de Estupefacientes) told InSight Crime, countries like 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. Dačić was never charged. He managed to survive the scandal, and he is now the [Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs](#).

Nonetheless, as the Hambli case shows, in most cases the biggest threat of corruption 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.

Europe's cocaine corridors are currently evolving and expanding; all of its 20 busiest container ports have seen cocaine seizures of over 100 kilos in the past 3 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.

---



## 8. The future of the cocaine trade to Europe

*A police officer guards a haul of cocaine seized. AP Images*

The flow of cocaine to Europe may have suffered along with most licit businesses due to the Covid-19 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 Covid-19 crisis, but also an increase in violence linked to the civil conflict, now in its sixth decade, combined with social unrest. The United States, desperate to stem the explosive 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 - Problems in the region are not restricted to the coca-growing nations of the Andes, there is 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 and enabling the free flow of cocaine shipments on their way to Europe.

This is particularly true in two nations crucial to the flow of cocaine to Europe: Brazil and Venezuela. Brazil has been identified as the main bridge for cocaine going

to Europe. Bordering each of the cocaine producing nations, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, Brazil is deep in crisis, now registering well over six million infected by the coronavirus as of November 2020. President Jair Bolsonaro's government is under investigation for corruption, and the record levels of 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 prison gang, the First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – 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. Here there is 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. While the countries with the highest consumption rates continue to be western and southern European nations,<sup>3</sup> the EU's 2019 Drugs Markets Report also reported evidence of expanding retail markets in northern and eastern Europe.

The Covid-19 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 like Chile and Uruguay, with little history of drug trafficking, are becoming more popular for drug traffickers. An increase in “rip on, rip off” methods 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.

---

<sup>3</sup> According to the 2019 EU Drugs Report, six countries, Denmark, Ireland, Spain, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, reported prevalence of cocaine use among young adults of more than 2.5 % in the previous year.

“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” European Union, 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 European Union, but with other nations, especially those in the Balkans, which remain outside the Union 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 percent 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 wake up call,” he added, referring to the 2019 seizure of a narco-submarine (officially described as a self-propelled semi-submersible - SPSS) carrying three tons of cocaine off the coast of Galicia.



*Spanish authorities study the seized drug sub*

There is clear evidence that more drug subs or semi submersibles are being produced in Colombia. Colombian Admiral [Hernando Mattos](#) reported that in the first eight months of 2020, 27 drug subs had been seized, 14 in Colombian waters and another 13 in international waters, along with more than 31 tons of cocaine that they were carrying.

Not only are the drug subs in their various forms very hard to detect, they are not affected by the Covid-19 restrictions. Therefore, as cocaine piles up in South 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 the 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-ton 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. But for Kevin Mills a recently retired 31-year veteran of Britain's National Crime Agency (NCA), 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 kilo to extract cocaine shipments from the port of Rotterdam. Given that seizures at Rotterdam reached 30 tons in 2019, suggesting an overall annual flow of around 100 tons 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.

There is certainly a lot of cocaine passing through Europe on its way to other parts of the world, and Colombian underworld sources have told InSight Crime that Chinese and Australian markets are being aggressively developed, with the latter being especially lucrative with a kilo of cocaine worth well over \$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 DTOs – 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.

The Colombians have permanent presence in Spain with up to a dozen “oficinas de cobro,” criminal structures that provide services to different Latin America criminal groups, like debt collection, protection of shipments and even money transfer services to repatriate the proceeds of drug deals. Now, there are yet more opportunities for Latin American organized crime. 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 – 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 broke [the EncroChat system](#). Dutch police alone seized ten tons of cocaine during the resulting ‘Operation Venetic.’ British police revealed that an estimated 10,000 criminals in the UK alone paid £1,500 (around \$2000) 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, such as in the cases of [the Dutch Taghi organization](#), or the [Montenegrin clans Škaljari and Kavač](#). There have been reports of Italian organized crime figures being [murdered in Germany](#), and [Balkan criminal assassinations in the Netherlands](#), as cocaine networks settle scores.

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, like the Zetas in Mexico, have been the target of extended national and international offensives that allowed lower profile groups, like the Sinaloa Cartel, to operate with greater freedom. However, in Europe, some of the rising drug trafficking networks, like Albanian

organized crime groups, have [made use of violence](#) to position themselves. It does seem however that many Balkan mafia networks, with their reputations established, are now scaling back violence and concentrating on promoting business, according to British NCA sources.

The most sophisticated criminal groups, both Latin American and European, are instead increasingly turning to the application of corruption.

“Corruption is creeping up slowly in Western societies in a way we have not seen before. Ten 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 façade 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. 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 center – Europe is a major money laundering center and [among the worst offenders](#) are some of the more “respectable” countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. 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 European Union.

The panorama for cocaine trafficking to Europe is a dark one for authorities. While European and Latin government struggle to contain Covid-19 and the economic carnage the coronavirus is leaving in its wake, organized crime sees new opportunities. Although, the Covid-19 crisis has also presented challenges to transnational organized crime, the evidence suggests it is adapting quickly. If European cocaine consumption recovers quickly and new markets in eastern Europe are further developed, Europe could rival the United States in terms of its cocaine problem. Indeed, if huge cocaine consignments controlled by European mafias transit the European Union on their way to other markets in Asia, the challenges could even surpass those faced by the United States.

# Organizations



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

We fulfill this mission by:

- providing high quality and timely analysis of news events linked to organized crime in the region;
- investigating and writing reports on organized crime and its multiple manifestations, including its impact on human rights, governance, drug policy and other social, economic and political issues;
- giving workshops to journalists, academics and non-governmental organizations on how to cover this important issue and keep themselves, their sources and their material safe;
- supporting local investigators through these workshops and by publishing, translating and promoting their work to reach the widest possible audience;
- developing a region-wide network of investigators looking at organized crime;
- presenting in public and closed-door sessions to governments, non-governmental organizations, academics and stakeholders on best practices, strategies and pitfalls in implementing citizen security policy on the ground.

Learn more about InSight Crime [here](#).







**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.

Learn more about The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime [here](#).