

## PRESS RELEASE

# REPORT HIGHLIGHTS VULNERABILITIES OF PORT SECURITY IN THE BALKANS

Container ports in south-eastern Europe are increasingly vulnerable to trafficking of illicit goods, according to a report entitled 'Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes', released today by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. Highlighting a number of major seizures of cocaine, heroin and cigarettes since 2018, the authors suggest that the traditional 'Balkan route' for trafficking across land is being supplemented by maritime routes into ports in the Adriatic, Aegean and Black seas.

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*'There seems to be a shift in trafficking patterns,' said co-author Walter Kemp. 'Because of measures designed to restrict migration flows and COVID; the displacement effect of major seizures of cocaine in Belgium and the Netherlands; and disruption caused by war in Ukraine, traffickers are looking for alternative routes.'*

Major busts of cocaine – usually concealed in boxes of bananas – in ports such as Durres (Albania), Ploce and Rijeka (Croatia), and Thessaloniki (Greece) have aroused suspicion that south-eastern European ports are becoming more attractive for traffickers. This has been compounded by major seizures of heroin in the ports of Constanta (Romania), Koper (Slovenia) and Varna (Bulgaria) as well as the long-standing problem of cigarette smuggling, particularly through the ports of Bar (Montenegro) and Piraeus (Greece).

Based on case studies of these nine commercial ports in the region, the report traces the main trafficking routes and explains the concealment techniques used. It also looks at the ecosystem of ports and their vulnerabilities and describes the criminal actors who operate in and around the ports. *'In some ports, there seem to be cells of criminal groups that operate as part of wider transnational networks,'* said lead author Ruggero Scaturro. *'Several ports are crime magnets, not only attracting local criminal groups but also those from land-locked countries that need an outlet to the sea.'*

*'Increased investment in infrastructure will make Balkan ports more attractive for business – licit and illicit. It is therefore important to improve the security of regional ports as well as increase cooperation between law enforcement bodies along the maritime Balkan routes,'* he added.

The report notes that port security in south-eastern Europe has improved in the past decade due to greater investment in technology, harmonization with international security standards, as well as support and training from organizations like the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and EUROPOL, and bilateral assistance. But, as in other ports around the world, technical improvements are sometimes undone by corruption.

The report also highlights the vulnerability of the Danube river to trafficking. *'The Danube seems to be a blind spot and deserves greater attention, especially because of the potential for fuel smuggling,'* said Kemp. *'The threat posed by black markets around the Black Sea should trigger closer regional law enforcement cooperation,'* he suggested.

The authors also recommend greater cooperation between port managers, police officers, shipping companies and customs agencies along well-known trafficking routes, for example between Latin America, Western Europe and the Western Balkans.

*'We need to move from just looking at the security of ports to following and disrupting transnational flows,'* concluded Scaturro.

## About the Global Initiative

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a network of professionals working on the front lines of

the fight against the illicit economy and criminal actors. Through a network of global civil society observatories on the illicit economy, we monitor evolving trends and work to build the evidence basis for policy action, disseminate the expertise of our Network, and catalyze multisectoral and holistic responses across a range of crime types. With the Global Initiative's Resilience Fund, we support community activists and local non-governmental organizations working in areas where crime governance critically undermines people's safety, security and life chances.

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