

# GLOBAL INITIATIVE

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
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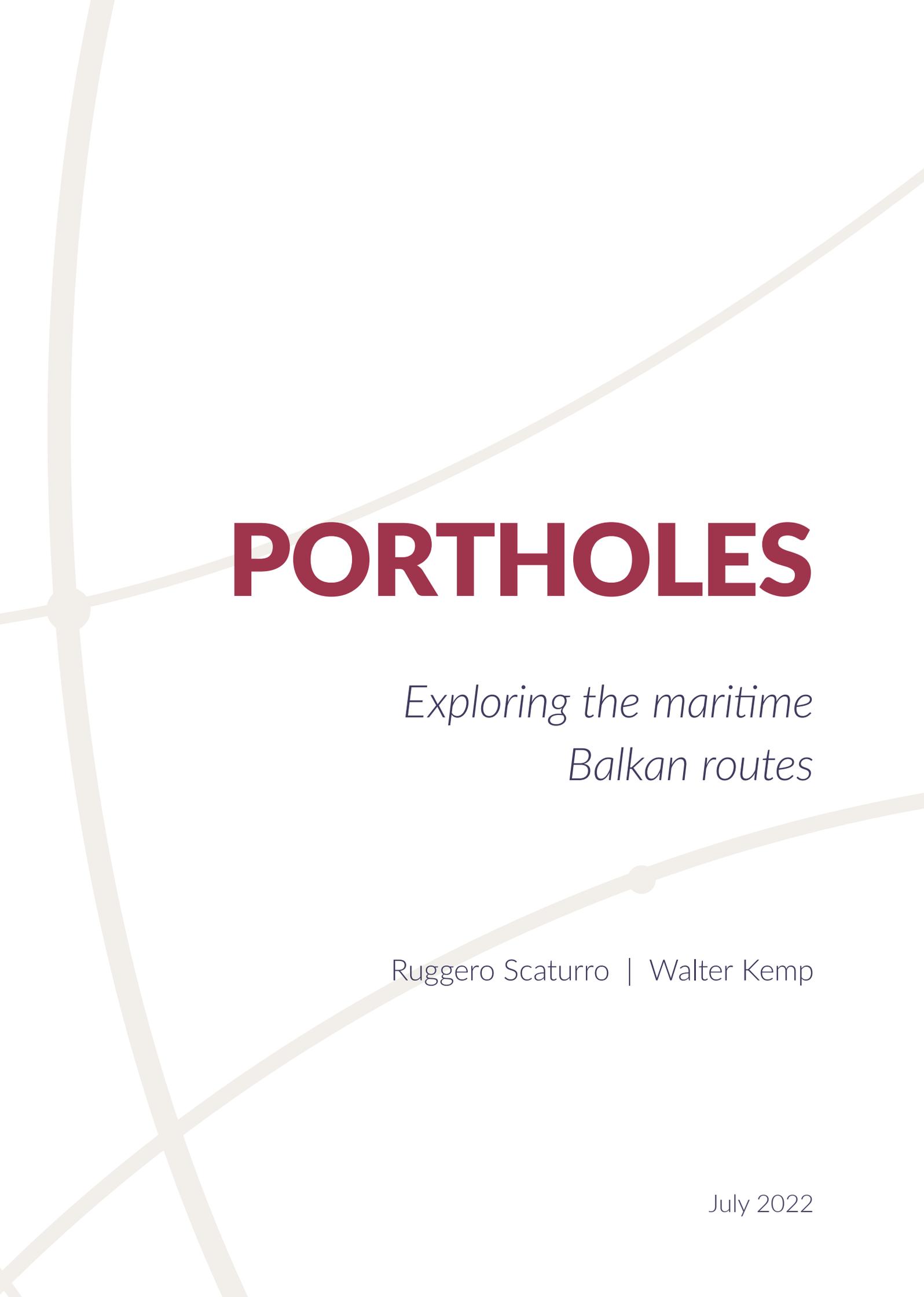
# PORTHOLES

Exploring the maritime  
Balkan routes

RUGGERO SCATURRO | WALTER KEMP

JULY 2022





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Balkan routes*

Ruggero Scaturro | Walter Kemp

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# EXPLORING THE MARITIME BALKAN ROUTES

The port of Piraeus in Athens, Greece, is a major gateway to western Europe. © John Kokotinis/EyeEm via Getty Images

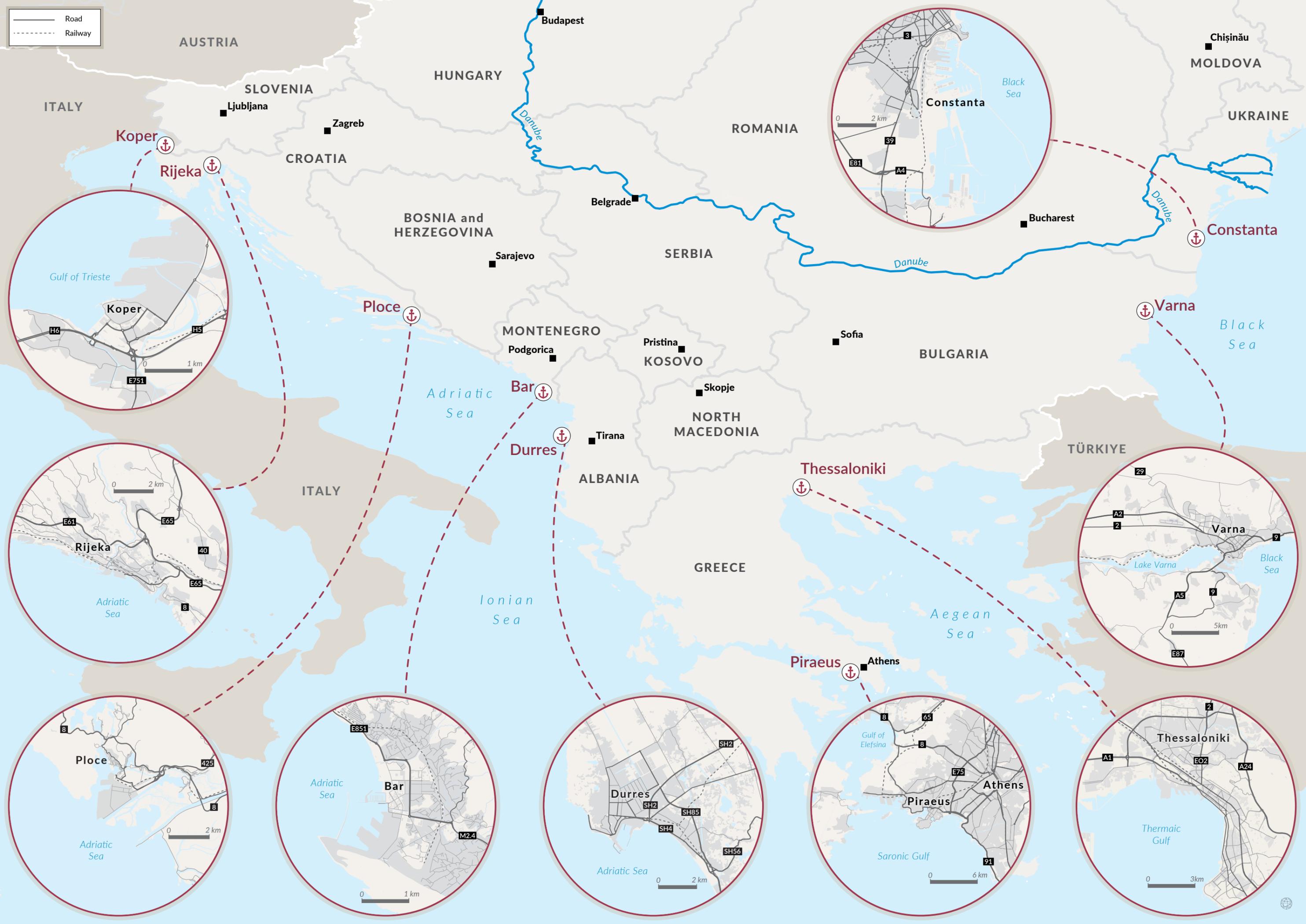


**T**he Balkans is known as a crossroads for trade, not least for the trafficking of drugs, contraband, people and weapons, and the smuggling of migrants. The traditional 'Balkan route' is across land, made up of transport corridors connecting east and west (particularly Türkiye with western Europe), as well as north and south (from the Mediterranean to central Europe).

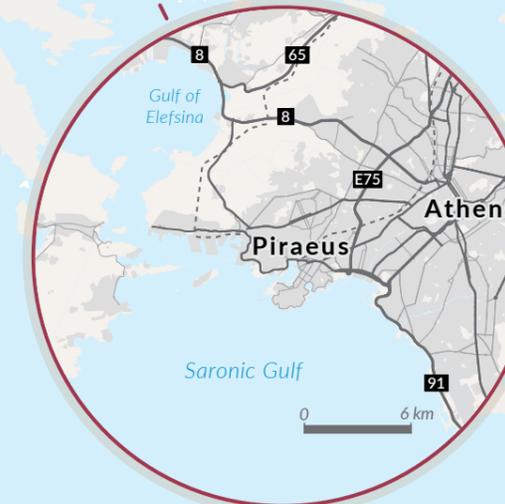
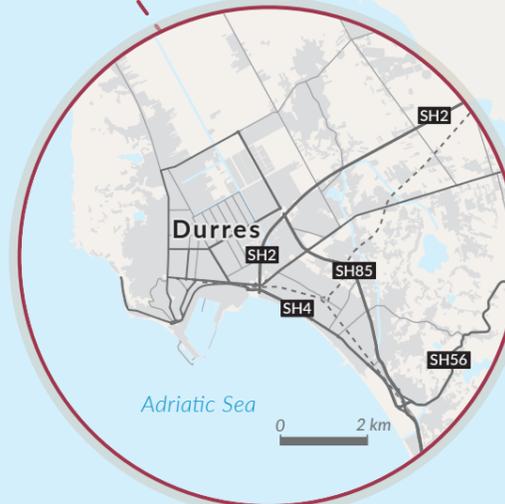
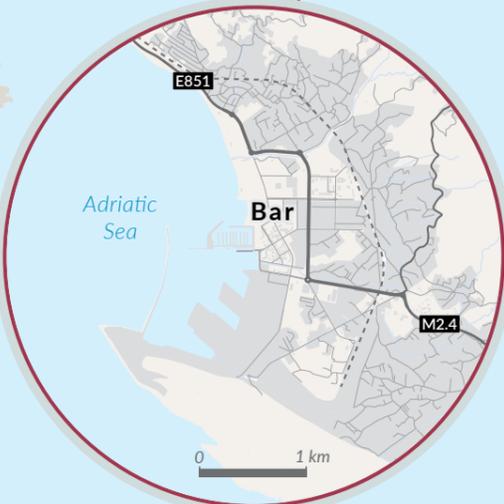
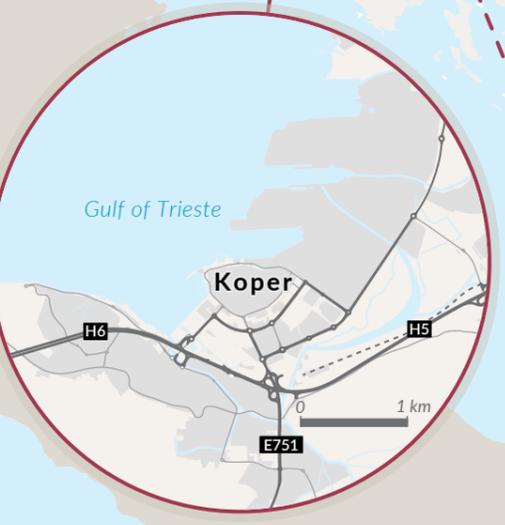
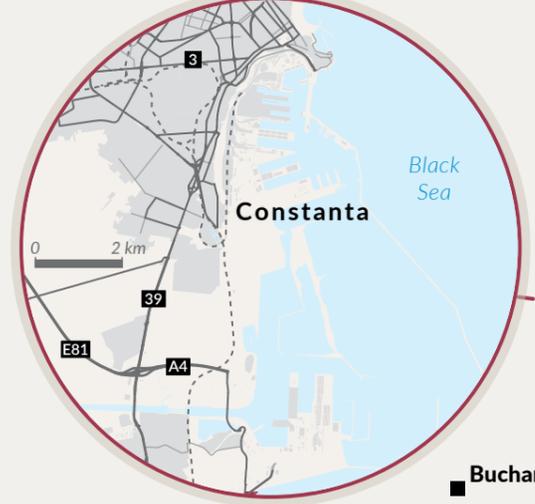
Despite the prevalence of trade over land, South Eastern Europe (SEE) also contains more than a hundred ports and 12 container terminals, which are important entry and exit points for trade in the Adriatic, Aegean, Black and Ionian Seas, as well as along the Danube.

This report reveals that there is also a maritime Balkan route bringing drugs into SEE through key commercial seaports: cocaine from Latin America and heroin via Türkiye and the Middle East. Other commodities being smuggled along this route include weapons, waste, counterfeit goods and cigarettes. In addition, it provides a glimpse of smuggling along the Danube.

The case studies, which feature nine of the region's commercial ports, are a central element of this report. The map below shows the ports (in Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, Romania and Slovenia) that form the basis of the analysis in this study. These ports were chosen to provide an overview of different types of ports (based on size, ownership, location and history of seizures) and to assess their vulnerability to organized crime.



— Road  
- - - Railway



## Main findings

The main findings of the report are as follows:

- Over the past few years, there have been major seizures of cocaine and heroin in container terminals in SEE. Some of these shipments supply local drug markets, but many are transiting the region to supply markets in western Europe.

Port	Country	Twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) (most recent year)	Three highest-value seizures
Bar	Montenegro	53 591 (2020)	2021 – 1.4 tonnes of cocaine
			2022 – 500 kilograms of cocaine
			2019 – 31.5 kilograms of cocaine
Constanta	Romania	643 725 (2020)	2016 – 2.5 tonnes of cocaine
			2021 – 1 452 kilograms of heroin
			2020 – 751 kilograms of amphetamines
Durrës	Albania	145 762 (2019)	2018 – 613 kilograms of cocaine
			2019 – 137 kilograms of cocaine
			2020 – 1+ million packets of cigarettes
Koper	Slovenia	996 000 (2021)	2019 – 730 kilograms of heroin
			2018 – 302 kilograms of heroin
			2021 – 218 kilograms of heroin
Piræus	Greece	5.43 million (2020)	2019 – 5.2 tonnes of amphetamines
			2021 – 350 kilograms of cocaine
			2021 – 4 tonnes of cannabis
Ploče	Croatia	25 717 (2020)	2021 – 575 kilograms of cocaine
			2021 – 62 kilograms of cocaine
			2021 – 18 kilograms of cocaine
Rijeka	Croatia	356 068 (2021)	2017 – 478 kilograms of cocaine
			2020 – 15 million cigarettes
			2018 – 100 kilograms of cocaine
Thessaloniki	Greece	460 724 (2020)	2021 – 324 kilograms of cocaine
			2019 – 10.5 million packets of cigarettes
			2019 – 52 kilograms of cocaine
Varna	Bulgaria	160 000 (2018)	2018 – 6 tonnes of amphetamines
			2021 – 400 kilograms of heroin
			2021 – 58 kilograms of cocaine

**FIGURE 1** Highest-value seizures in selected SEE ports.

SOURCE: The data used to compile this table is taken from GI-TOC research on the case study ports, and is available in that section of the report.

- There do not seem to be highly organized levels of regional connection among the criminal groups involved in trafficking. Instead, larger criminal groups based abroad (including those with members from Western Balkan countries) seem to seek opportunities where they arise, and team up with local groups on a case-by-case basis, some of which are cells of a loosely connected Balkan network.
  - Criminal groups in landlocked countries use ports in their vicinity for trafficking. For example, criminal groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina seem to use the ports of Ploce and Rijeka, whereas groups in Kosovo may use the port of Durres. Those in Bulgaria and North Macedonia have links with the port of Thessaloniki, and Serbs may use the port of Koper.
  - Cocaine shipments are almost invariably in containers with fresh fruit – particularly bananas – often from Ecuador.
  - Drugs are placed using two main concealment methods: the ‘hide-and-seeK’ and the ‘rip on/rip off’ techniques (these are explained later in the report).
  - Seizures show that significant amounts of heroin have been smuggled through the ports of Koper and Varna.
  - Synthetic drugs meant to supply central European markets are increasingly being seized in regional ports (Constanta, Koper, Rijeka, Piraeus and Varna).
  - Smuggling of cigarettes both into and out of the region is a major problem, especially in Greece and Montenegro, although the government in the latter seems to be taking significant steps to address this issue at the port of Bar.
  - There is evidence of trafficking of waste, especially through Black Sea ports; this issue deserves closer attention.
  - The extent of trafficking goods on barges on the Danube seems to be underestimated by law enforcement officials: most major discoveries of contraband are made by accident.
  - China’s increasing penetration in the region, particularly through the port of Piraeus, seems to be increasing the risk of the import of counterfeit products from Asia.
  - SEE countries have made great strides in recent decades to improve port security in line with the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code, thanks to international support from organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Europol, as well as bilateral assistance. However, there are still lapses in security, for example due to insufficient scanners, and incentives for corruption in some ports.
  - Major drug seizures are often followed by arrests of the small fish, yet there are few prosecutions of the kingpins or attempts either to back-track the routes of the shipments or to carry out controlled deliveries to catch the big fish.
- Recommendations are given in the final section of the report.

*Some ports in the region are crime magnets; others are safe havens for the elites who profit from the trade.*

## The 'hotspots' approach

This report applies the 'hotspots' approach that has been used by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's (GI-TOC) Observatory of Illicit Economies in SEE to analyze organized crime in the Western Balkans as well as the activities of criminal groups from the Western Balkans in other parts of the world, as exposed in the earlier 'Transnational Tentacles' report.<sup>1</sup>

When researching hotspots of criminal activity in the Western Balkans and the activities of Balkan criminal groups abroad, it became evident that there were a growing number of seizures of cocaine and heroin in ports in Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, Romania and Slovenia (see Figure 2).

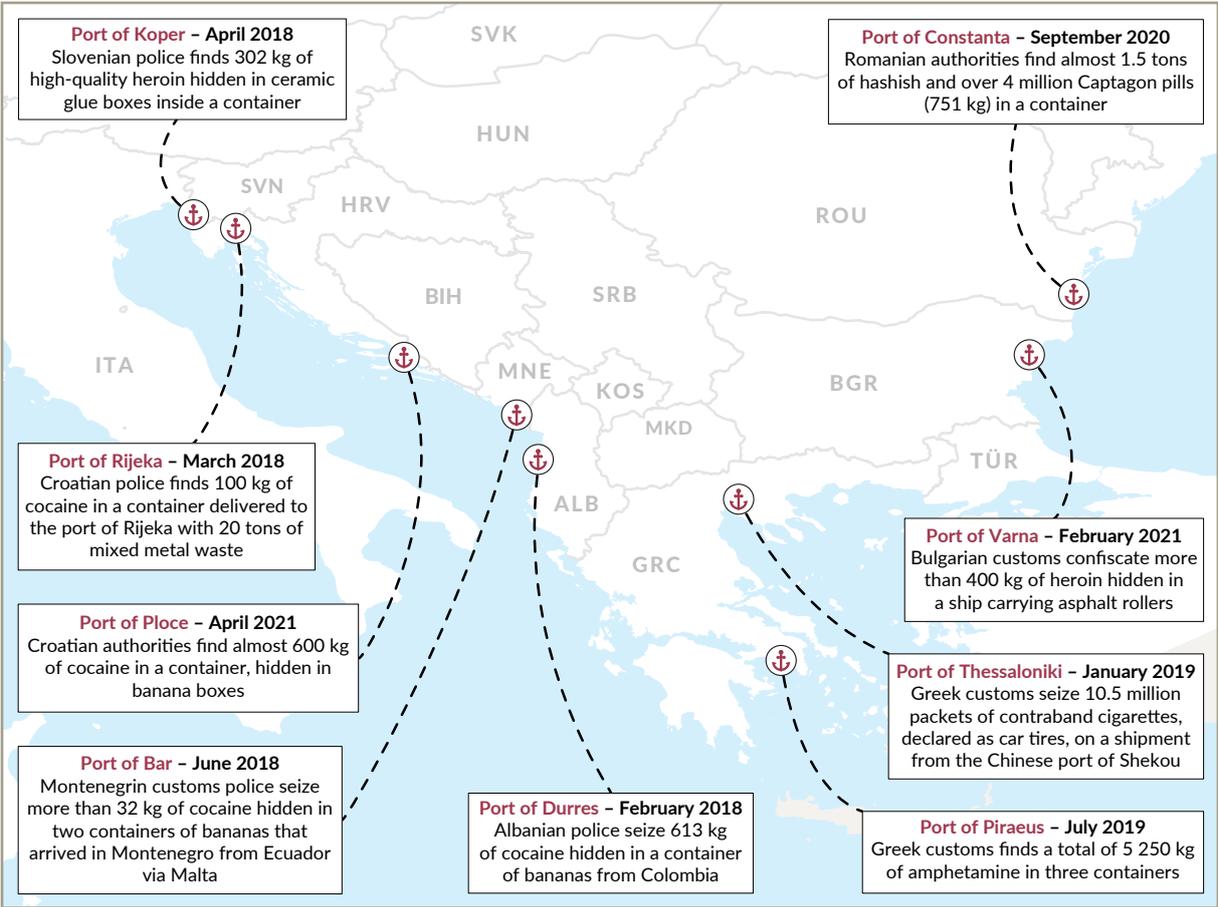
These seizures deserved a closer look, so we decided to carry out an assessment of trafficking through ports in SEE. Although drugs are also being smuggled on pleasure craft like yachts, as well as on car ferries, it was beyond the scope of this study to analyze every port and marina in SEE. Rather, the focus is limited to container ports, as these seem to be the main entry points for major shipments of drugs – either cocaine from Latin America (mainly Colombia and Ecuador) or heroin from western Asia (Afghanistan, Iran and Türkiye).

Together with port security experts, we developed a methodology on how to carry out a risk assessment of ports. Among the issues to be covered by the port analysis were: port ownership; trade volume; security measures; major illicit markets; criminal actors; key law enforcement operations; and enabling factors of illicit activity (such as infrastructure, city governance and local corruption). These assessments were done on the spot in nine ports in the region between October 2021 and January 2022, and involved interviews with more than 100 port stakeholders, including security providers (representatives of customs, coast guard, police, prosecutor's offices and private security companies); port users (owners and employees of shipping companies, warehouses and fruit and vegetable wholesale markets, as well as truck drivers); dock workers and their union representatives; representatives of the local chambers of commerce; and journalists reporting on maritime issues. The findings, outlined in section 4, make up the bulk of this report.

The report also provides a more analytical overview of security in ports, factors of vulnerability in SEE container terminals and how these vulnerabilities are exploited by criminal groups. In particular, it looks at how some ports in the region are crime magnets: places that, because of vulnerable governance or geographical position, attract criminality. Others are safe havens: not just for criminals, but for the political

and business elites that provide protection for smuggling and who profit from the trade, including through money laundering. The report also explains the context of how container ports in SEE are part of a wider regional infrastructure that feeds into a network of trade corridors, particularly servicing the European Union (EU) and as part of the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative.

As opposed to some approaches to analyzing vulnerability of ports to organized crime, which focus on container security, or just port security, this report also looks at ports in the context of transnational illicit flows and smuggling by sea in relation to the ecosystem of adjacent local hotspots. In addition, it tries to get a sense of the criminal groups that are involved in the various trades and activities.



**FIGURE 2** Selected seizures in SEE ports, 2018–2021.



# **FLOWS AND INFRASTRUCTURE: COMMERCIAL PORTS IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE**

The port of Rijeka, Croatia's largest international deep-sea cargo port. © vuk8691 via Getty Images



**T**he Balkan Peninsula is a crossroads for trade from Asia to Europe going east to west, and between Africa and Europe going south to north, and vice versa. Traditionally, the focus on trade in the region has been on land routes. But it is often overlooked that there are a number of sizeable ports along the Adriatic and Ionian coasts, the Aegean and Black seas, as well as along the Danube river. As revealed in this report, some of these ports – particularly container terminals – are nodes in a maritime Balkan route for illicit trade. Much of the infrastructure of these ports suffered with the collapse of communism in the aftermath of the war in Yugoslavia, and later with the financial crisis of 2008. But increased investment is improving port infrastructure in SEE, increasing the size and efficiency of container ports, and the road and rail links needed to bring goods to market. This infrastructure, however, also creates new opportunities for criminal activity.

## Infrastructure development

Over the past 20 years, there has been significant improvement in trade infrastructure in SEE, particularly thanks to investments from the EU, and more recently China and other countries such as the UAE. This includes construction of major highways, bridges, rail links and port terminals. Such projects improve the capacity of the region to import and export products, and can increase growth rates and enhance intra-regional trade.

The EU is by far the biggest investor in the region through projects to improve existing road and rail networks to more closely integrate the countries of the region into EU transport corridors. Efforts are also being made, for example by the EU Transport Community, to shift transportation of freight from roads to more environmentally sustainable rail networks.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, road and rail density are still well below the EU average.



Construction of the Bar-Boljare highway is funded by Chinese investment. © Savo Prelevic via Getty Images

It is often overlooked that SEE has many seaports and container terminals. There are 12 container terminals in the region: Albania (1), Bulgaria (2), Croatia (4), Greece (2), Montenegro (1), Romania (1) and Slovenia (1).<sup>3</sup> The region's ports range from large and modern container terminals, such as Piraeus and Koper, to relatively small, older ports along the Danube. In addition, there are dozens of marinas and small harbours dotting the coasts.

In the past decade, as a by-product of globalization, national governments and foreign investors have taken steps to modernize many of these ports and container terminals. Furthermore, the Transport Community has developed an action plan for the Western Balkans for waterborne transport and multimodality that focuses on ports and inland waterways.<sup>4</sup> The plan puts a strong emphasis on making waterborne transport in the Western Balkans reliable, competitive and sustainable, particularly by supporting the deployment of digital

solutions and green technologies in ports.

The EU also works with countries in the region to align their standards with those of the Trans European Transport Network. Furthermore, it is working with regional partners to introduce digital solutions to improve multimodality and to harmonize legislation, standards and practices to facilitate connectivity to – and compatibility with – EU markets and transportation networks, for example by enabling the use of digital tools such as the European Maritime Single Window and electronic freight transport information.

SEE is therefore well connected and embedded in European trade routes. As can be seen in the map showing the network of pan-European transport corridors (Figure 3), corridor X from Greece to Austria is the major north-south thoroughfare in SEE, while corridor VIII makes a connection from west to east linking the port of Durres with Skopje, and the ports of Varna and Burgas to Sofia. Corridor V links the ports of Ploce and Rijeka to hubs like Zagreb and Sarajevo, while

Constanta is part of corridor IV, which runs from the Black Sea to central Europe. In addition, there are plans to open a corridor XI, which would connect Romania, Serbia, Montenegro and Italy through the route Timisoara–Belgrade–Bar–Bari. It is worth noting that the port of Bar is the only port in the region that is not part of a major transport corridor.<sup>5</sup> This will change with the construction of a major highway from Bar to Belgrade. However, it is not EU money or European companies that are building this major artery, but rather Chinese state-owned enterprises financed by the Exim Bank of China.<sup>6</sup> The highway is meant to connect Belgrade to Boljare near the border with Montenegro, which will, in turn, be linked to the Adriatic Sea by the Bar–Boljare Highway in Montenegro. This is a good example of how China is, quite literally, paving a road to the EU through the Balkans.



**FIGURE 3** European transport corridors.

SOURCE: The European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA) of the European Commission

## Chinese investment in South Eastern Europe

Since the turn of the millennium, China has become a major investor in SEE, particularly in infrastructure. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative and through the 16+1 cooperation framework, Beijing has taken steps to intensify economic, infrastructural and cultural cooperation with countries in the region (with the exception of Kosovo). Such partnerships give China leverage in the region and position it for greater access to western European markets.

The single largest Belt and Road Initiative project in Europe was the purchase of the administration rights for the container terminals of the port of Piraeus in 2008 by the state-owned China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) for €4.31 billion. China now owns a 67% stake in the Piraeus Port Authority. Chinese media has referred to Chinese ownership of Piraeus as the Initiative's 'dragon's head' in the region.

Other major Chinese infrastructure investments in the region include the Budapest-to-Belgrade high-speed railway; the Belgrade-Boljare highway; the Belgrade

bypass road; the upgrade of a major highway in Serbia (known as the Fruska Gora Corridor); the Banja Luka highway in Bosnia and Herzegovina; the Peljesac bridge in Croatia; and two major highway projects in North Macedonia (between Kicevo and Ohrid and between Miladinovci and Stip). China has also expressed interest to build a highway from Belgrade to Timișoara, Romania.

Furthermore, China and Slovenia signed an agreement to bolster trade between Ningbo port in China and the port of Koper in Slovenia. A Chinese company is the majority owner of the port of Zadar in Croatia, and a large consortium of Chinese companies bid around US\$1.5 billion for a 50-year concession for the container port in Rijeka, Croatia (which was rejected). In addition, another Chinese company partnered with a local company in Varna to increase the volume of cargo able to pass through the port, while several Chinese entities and the port of Burgas built a logistics centre and pavilion to facilitate faster delivery times for Chinese and central and eastern European companies.<sup>7</sup>



A dock worker at the container terminal in the port of Piraeus. © Kostas Tsironis/Bloomberg via Getty Images

In short, countries of the Western Balkans and ports in SEE are increasingly connected to pan-European transportation networks. Infrastructure in the region is being upgraded thanks to major investments from the EU and China as well as public-private partnerships. This helps facilitate trade, but also increases efficiencies and opportunities for trafficking.

## Impact of containerization

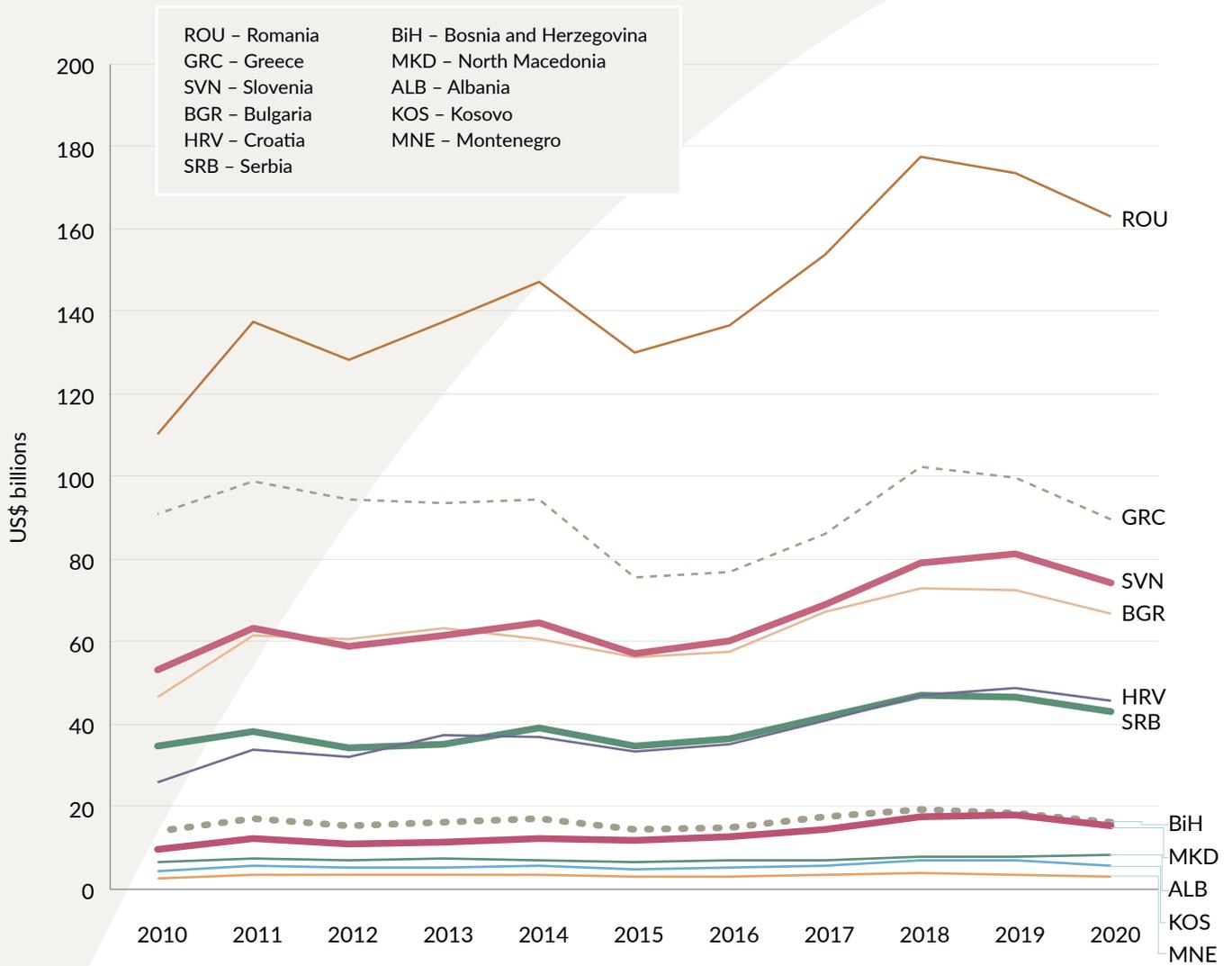
It is estimated that some 80% of all goods that are traded worldwide are shipped by sea, most of it in containers.<sup>8</sup> Only 2–3% of these containers are routinely checked. Therefore, containers are a relatively safe, low-cost and predictable way of moving illicit bulk consignments (such as drugs, waste and counterfeit goods) long distance. Most bulk trafficking along the maritime Balkan route is by container. Cargo capacity for container ships is usually measured in the number of twenty-foot equivalent units (abbreviated as TEUs) they can transport, although ships are increasingly transporting 40-foot boxes.

This mode of moving goods began in the US in the late 1950s; the first container service between the US and China began in 1980.<sup>9</sup> Since then, containers have been the delivery system of globalization: between 2000 and 2018, the volume of container trade tripled, from 224.8 to 792.7 million TEUs, led mostly by China's rapid economic growth. As the volume of container traffic has increased, ports have been adapted or even built from scratch to handle the traffic.

As noted in Figure 4, trade value in SEE countries has increased since 2010, particularly for those that are EU members.

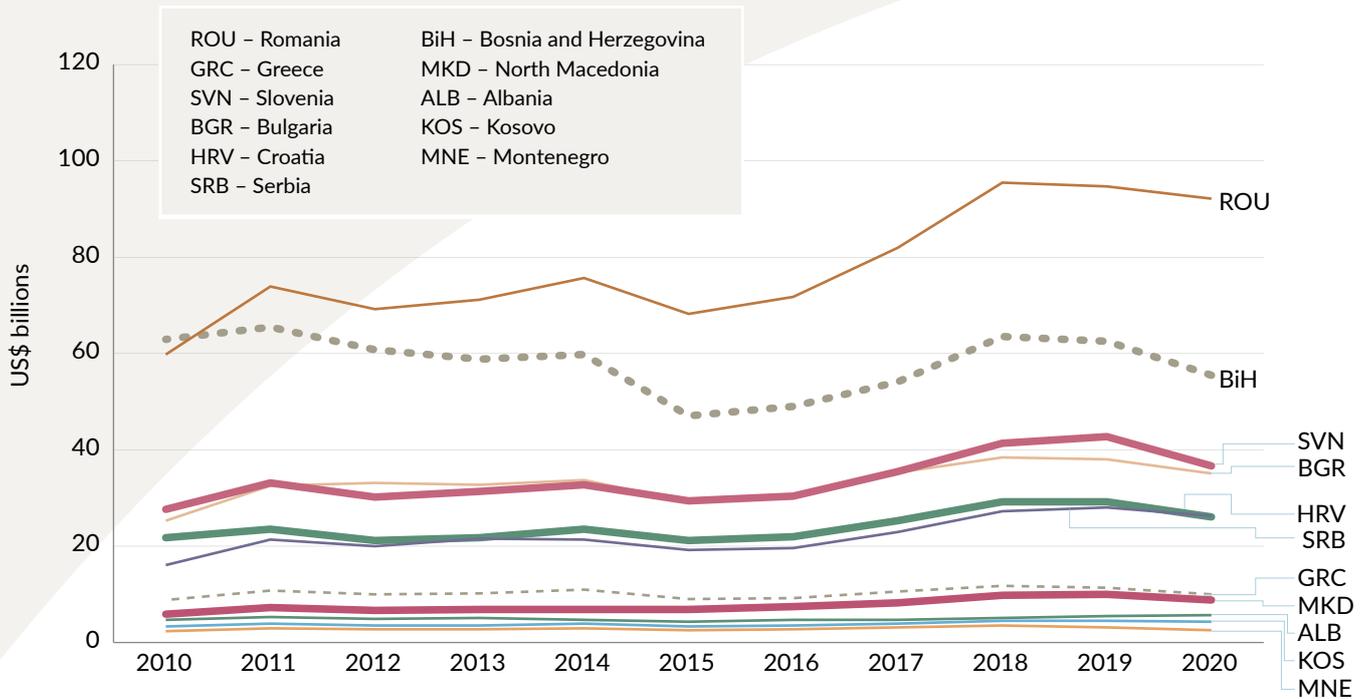
Qingdao, China. The container ship *President Eisenhower* moored at Shandong port. © Yu Fangping/VCG via Getty Images





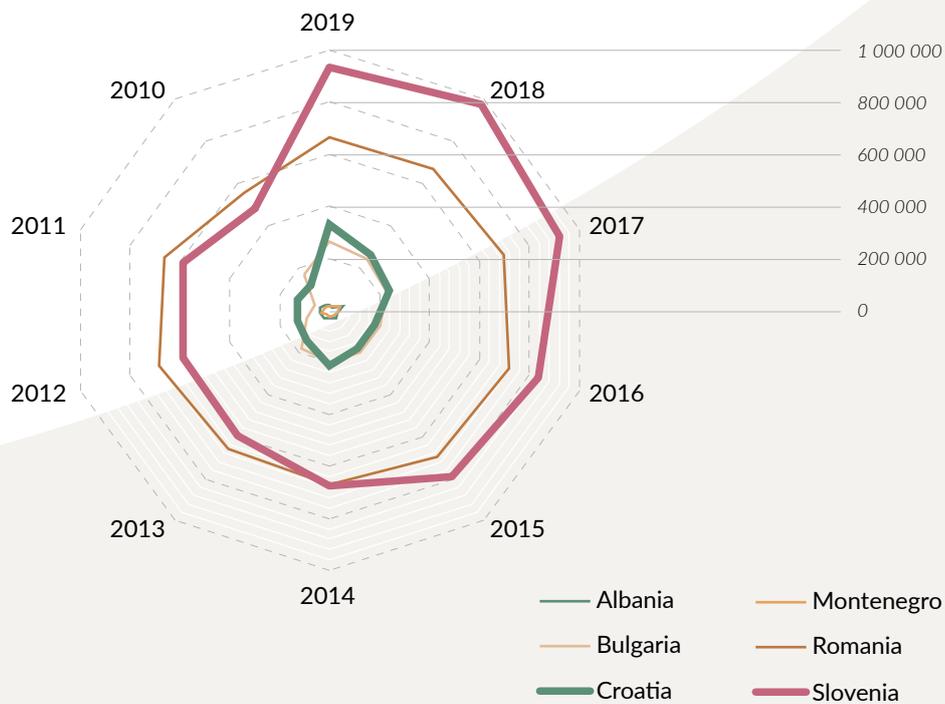
**FIGURE 4** Total trade value in SEE, 2010–2020.

Regarding imports, Figure 5 shows national trends in SEE and suggests that while regional growth is rather slow or almost null, the value of imports in SEE countries that are part of the EU has generally grown faster than that of non-EU members, a gap especially marked by Greece and Romania, which, from 2015 to 2018, registered increases of 35% and 40%, respectively.



**FIGURE 5** Total value of imports of SEE countries, 2010–2020.

The number of containers moving through the region has also increased, particularly in Romania and Slovenia (see Figure 6). The increase in Greece, particularly through the port of Piraeus, has been so dramatic that it is literally off the chart: in 2010, the port handled 1.1 million TEUs, which, by 2019, had increased to 5.43 million TEUs,<sup>10</sup> making it the fourth most active container port in Europe.

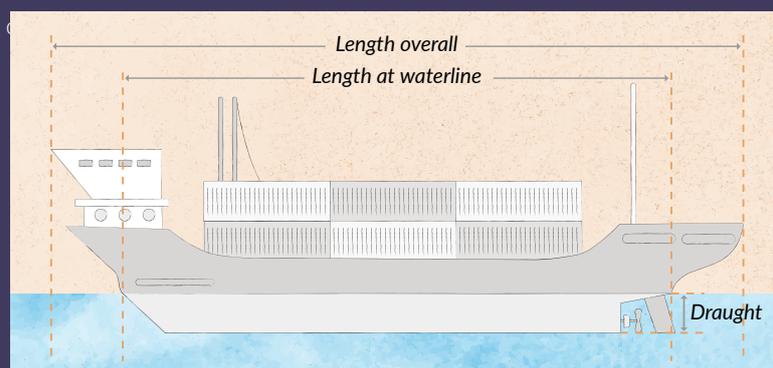


**FIGURE 6** Container port traffic in TEUs in SEE (excluding Greece), 2010–2019.

## Container ships in SEE ports

What kind of ships arrive in SEE regional ports? They vary in size, tonnage capability and, most importantly, depend on the water depth in the cargo berths. Simply put, deeper water can take a bigger draught of the ship's hull (the draught being the depth between the waterline and the bottom of the hull – see Figure 7).<sup>11</sup>

The more heavily a vessel is loaded, the deeper it sinks into the water. Therefore, the draught determines the minimum



**FIGURE 7** Representation of a ship's draught.

Together with other parameters, the draught helps divide cargo ships into seven categories:<sup>12</sup>

Vessel category	Capacity (TEU)	Max length (metres)	Beam (metres)	Draught (metres)
Very/ultra large container vessel	14 501–20 000	366+	49+	15+
Neopanamax <sup>13</sup>	10 001–14 500	366	49	15
Postpanamax	5 101–10 000			
Panamax	3 001–5 100	294	32	12
Feedermax	2 001–3 000	Up to 294	Up to 31	Up to 11
Feeder	1 001–2 000			
Small feeder	Up to 1 000			

**FIGURE 8** Types of cargo ship

The average draught of SEE ports is 11–12 metres, with the exception of the ports of Constanta, Koper and Ploce, where waters around berths reach up to 15 metres – the minimum depth compatible with large ships such as the Neopanamax and Postpanamax.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, despite regional ports being, on average, deep enough to accommodate Panamax class vessels, the Feedermax and feeder are the most common ships calling on regional ports. In fact, if capacity of ports has an impact on trading patterns, their strategic location is key.

Big Panamax and Neopanamax ships traverse the oceans from Asia and Latin America, and arrive at regional hubs, such as Marsaxlokk in Malta, Gioia Tauro in Italy, Damietta and Port Said in Egypt, Iskenderun in Türkiye and Piraeus in Greece. There, in a few days – if not hours – containers are transferred to smaller feeder ships that immediately leave for other SEE regional ports, like the ones analyzed in this report. In other words, few ships come directly from their ports of origin to a port in the Balkans; there is usually at least one stopover in-between, which should be taken into consideration when analyzing trafficking routes, methods and patterns.

Although one could assume that the greater the volume of trade through a port, the greater the likelihood of illicit trade, there are other factors to take into account in this equation. For example, the volume of containers being shipped through Albania, Croatia and Montenegro has been flat, if not decreasing, over the last five years (see Figure 6).<sup>15</sup> However, despite the overall negative trends, Figure 9 shows that the total imports of bananas from Colombia and Ecuador has remained stable or even increased since 2017.

*Determinants other than just volume of shipping enable criminals to move their goods through a port.*

Country	Imports of bananas from Colombia and Ecuador (in tonnes)				
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Albania	12 825	20 814	14 725*	27 100*	-
Croatia	-	18 141*	21 210*	36 678*	25 480*
Montenegro	9 298	9 863	10 745	11 312	11 713

**FIGURE 9** Bananas imported from Colombia and Ecuador, 2017–2021.

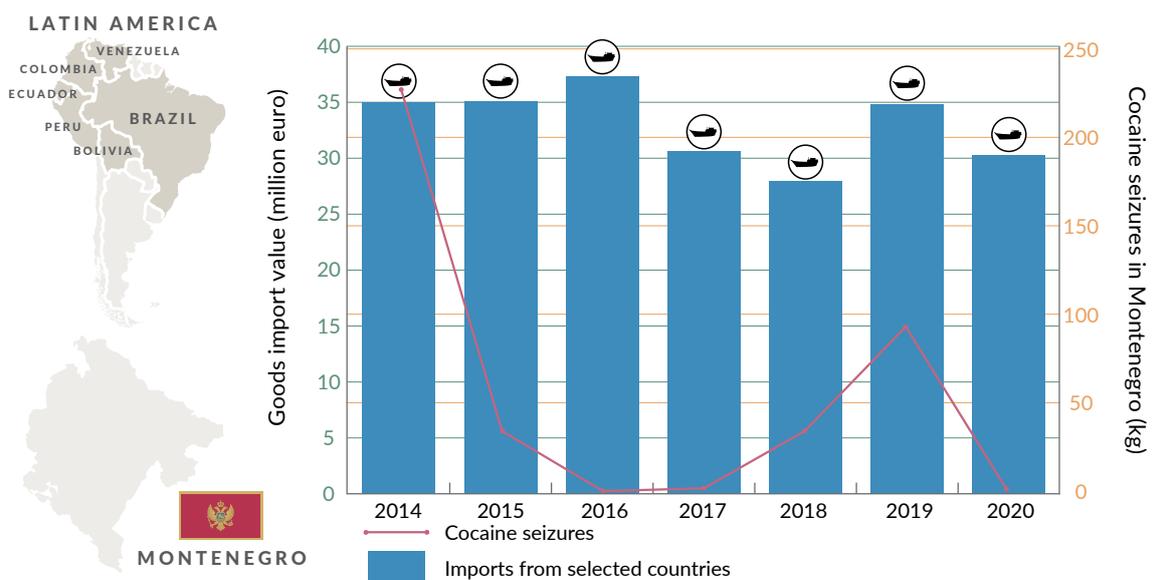
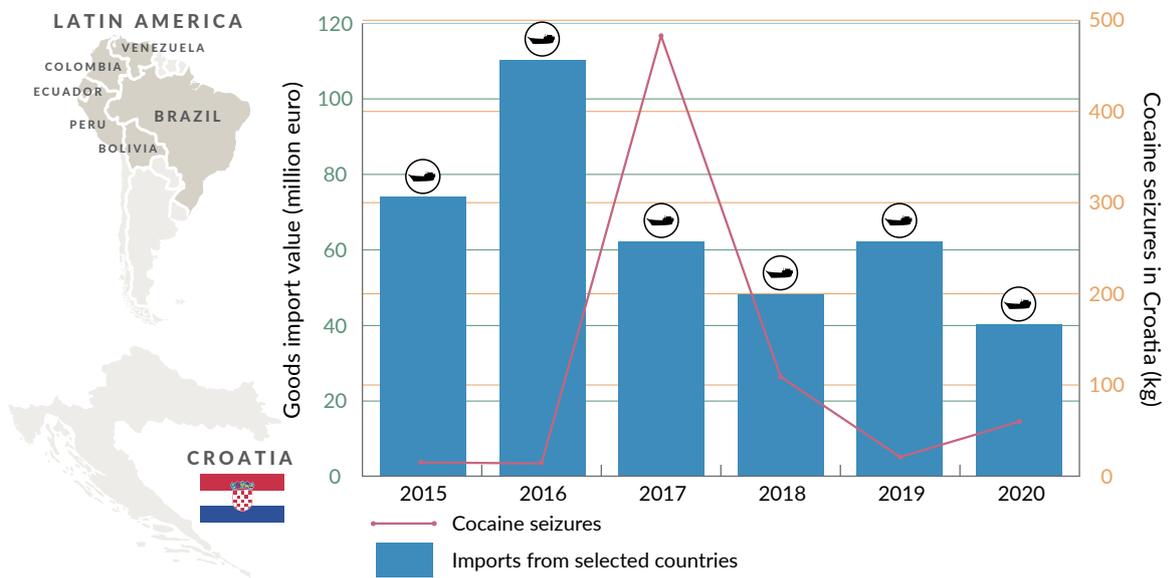
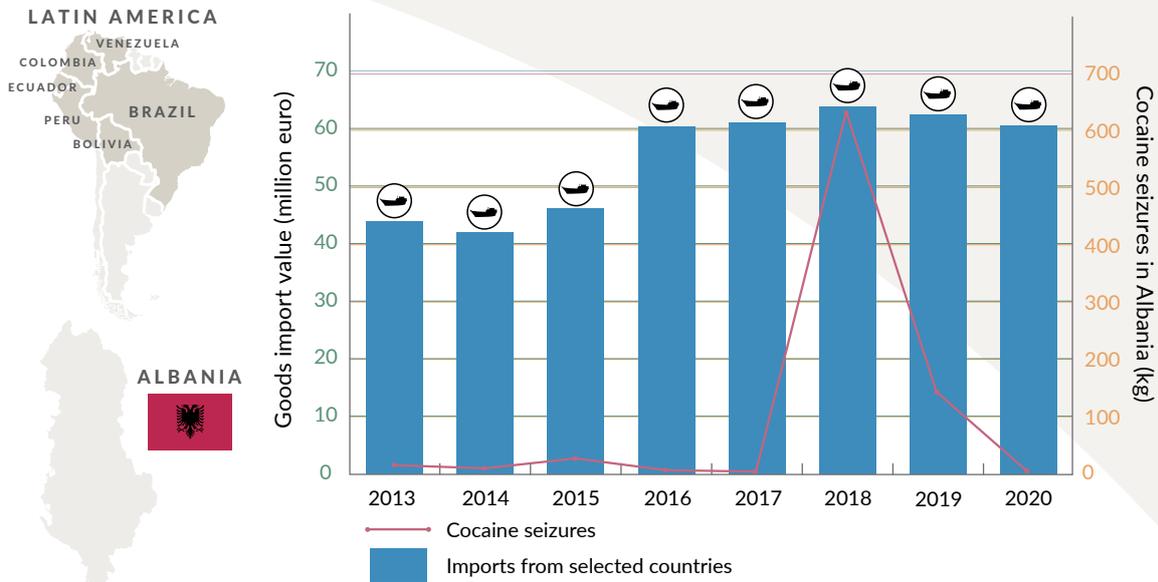
NOTE: \*Data available only on imports from Ecuador.

SOURCE: Data elaborated from UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Comtrade Database, <https://comtrade.un.org/data/>

Using fruit like bananas is particularly convenient for drug traffickers because they offer a reliable and stable chain of logistics from source to wholesale market. Their perishable nature, together with low taxation and high shipping frequency, makes boxes of bananas ideal shipment containers for cocaine, as loads generally get swift clearance through controls, and at a greater pace than non-perishable goods.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 10 shows that over the past five to eight years, Albania, Croatia and Montenegro have been significant entry points of cocaine from Latin America, typically hidden in boxes of tropical fruit (usually bananas). They are usually loaded inside containers coming from either Ecuador or Colombia destined for arrival at one of the region’s small- or medium-sized ports such as Bar, Durrës, Ploče or Rijeka.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, determinants other than just volume of shipping, such as low risk of interdiction, shifts in criminal markets and efficient infrastructure around the port enable criminals and their collaborators to move their goods by sea through a port and into supply chains relatively quickly and easily. These will be analyzed in the next section and revealed in greater detail in the case studies.



**FIGURE 10** Cocaine seizures in Albania, Croatia and Montenegro, 2013–2020.

SOURCE: Observatory of Illicit Economies in SEE, Risk Bulletin 7, GI-TOC, April–May 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SEE-RB07-EN.pdf>

A close-up photograph of a metal locking mechanism on a container. A thick, braided rope is attached to a large, silver metal bolt. The bolt is secured by a red-painted metal nut and washer. A red seal is visible on the nut. A white cylindrical object is attached to the bottom of the bolt. The background is a reddish-brown metal surface.

# POINTS OF ENTRY

Close-up of a seal locking a container. © Ekkaluck Sangkla via Alamy Stock Photo

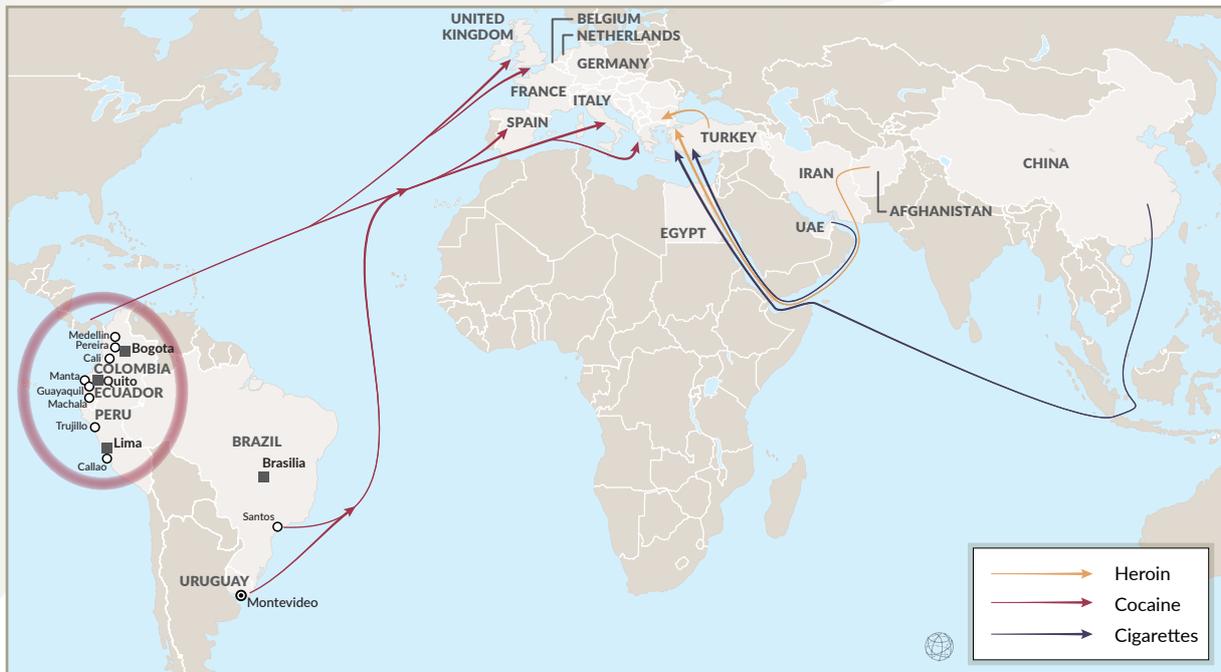


**T**his section sheds light on the vulnerabilities of ports on the maritime Balkan route in terms of security and their exposure to infiltration by organized crime groups. It also analyzes the types of criminal groups involved.

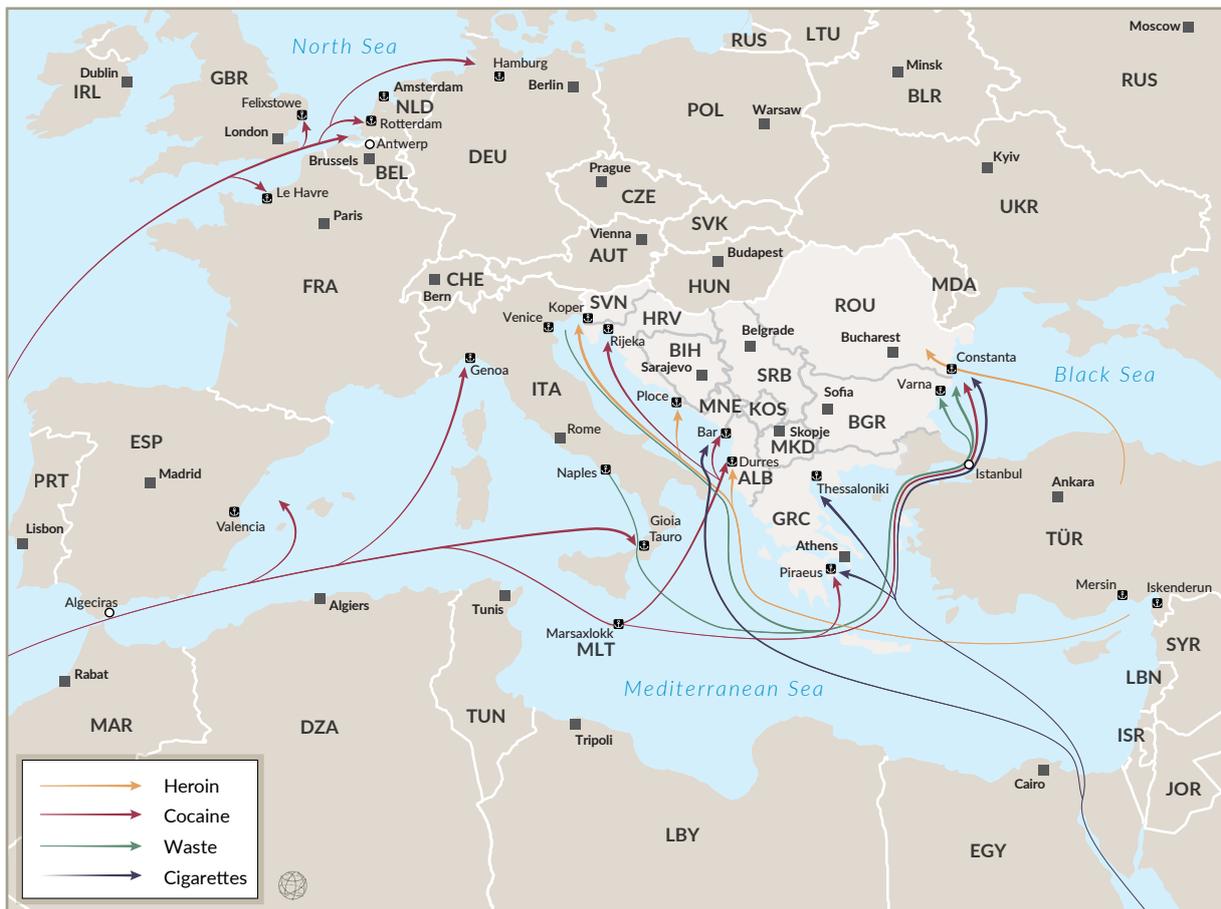
## From safety to security at sea

Organized crime at sea takes different forms, depending, among other factors, on where it occurs. Piracy off the coast of Somalia; illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing in South East Asia; and human smuggling from Libya to western Europe are just three examples of maritime security risks around the globe.<sup>18</sup> As explored in previous GI-TOC publications, criminal groups from the Western Balkans are also involved in the smuggling of drugs – particularly cocaine – from Latin America to western Europe and even South Africa on container ships and yachts.

In SEE, the main type of ‘blue crime’ (i.e. the maritime-based criminal economy) is drug and cigarette smuggling.<sup>19</sup> The region’s proximity to lucrative markets in western Europe, its links to North Africa and Türkiye and increased traffic from Latin America and Asia, combined with vulnerabilities linked to corruption, create ideal conditions for criminal networks to engage in such trafficking.<sup>20</sup>



**FIGURE 11** Illicit flows in containers towards Europe.



**FIGURE 12** Illicit flows along the maritime Balkan routes.

The problem seems to be growing. Between 2018 and 2021, roughly 8 tonnes of cocaine were seized in SEE ports, with Piraeus, Durres and Constanta accounting for half of that total. Cocaine is not the only illicit substance entering the region through ports, however. Opiates, synthetic drugs and counterfeit cigarettes are regularly intercepted in regional ports, along with illegal waste.<sup>21</sup> Seizures are abundant, but regionally integrated port-oriented security responses remain scarce, despite multiple police operations.

## Defining the relationship between maritime security and organized crime

Since the International Maritime Organization's International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) came into force in 1980 and the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation in 1992, the concept of security at sea has often been associated with the notion of maritime safety, a term that concerns the prohibition and punishment of behaviours that may threaten the safety of ships, their crews and maritime navigation.<sup>22</sup>

The interchangeability of the terms 'safety' and 'security' became further blurred after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (for example with the Container Safety Initiative)<sup>23</sup> and the rise in piracy off the coast of Somalia.<sup>24</sup> Concerns about containers being used to smuggle goods that could be used in a terrorist attack led to agreement on the ISPS Code in 2004, which prescribes 'responsibilities to governments, shipping companies, shipboard personnel, and port personnel to detect security threats and take preventive measures against security incidents affecting ships or port facilities used in international trade'.<sup>25</sup>

Recently, the term 'security' has evolved from its association with safety (i.e. prevention of harm, deliberately caused or not). It is now understood as a state's responsibility to prevent harm deliberately caused

by third parties.<sup>26</sup> The modern understanding of maritime security is no longer limited to the concept of 'maintenance of peace at sea'. Today, piracy, migrant smuggling and trafficking in human beings, drugs and weapons, as well as environmental crimes, are all understood as important dimensions of the governance of oceans and regional seas from internal waters to ports.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, the strong maritime element of transnational organized crime is increasingly recognized – hence the term 'blue crime'.<sup>28</sup> The UN Security Council, for instance, held its first-ever debate on blue crime in February 2019 under the title 'transnational organized crime at sea as a threat to international peace and security'. At this meeting, representatives agreed on the significance of such crimes and their impact at the international and national levels, especially in commercial ports.<sup>29</sup>

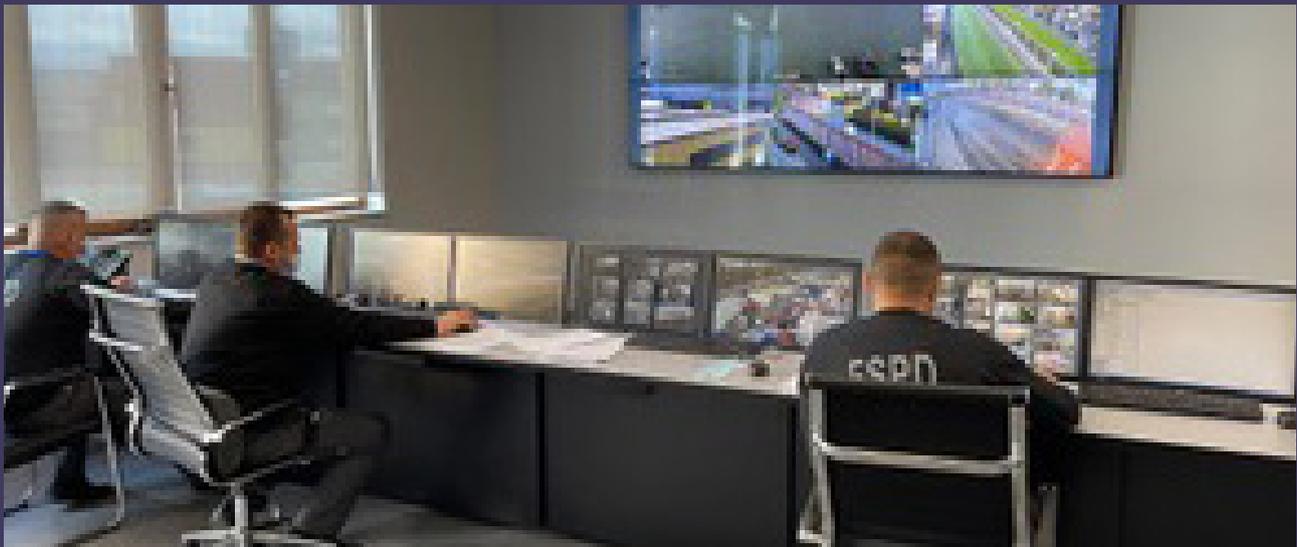
But such crimes do not stop at the water's edge. Because containers start and end their journeys on land, it is vital to factor in the security of ports in any understanding of criminality at sea. Therefore, it is insufficient to look solely at the safety of maritime navigation, containers or ports; rather, one must have a broader understanding of flows through ports using containers to conceal illicit substances and how this has an impact on security.

Members of seven countries participate in an international exercise that is part of a US-led initiative to prevent the trafficking of weapons of mass destruction in the north Croatian port of Rijeka, May 2008. © *Stringer/AFP via Getty Images*



To counter such threats, SEE port authorities implement ISPS Code security measures. However, these are focused mostly on protecting ports from terrorist attacks rather than from criminal activity.<sup>30</sup> Those ISPS Code

measures that potentially mitigate some of the risks of criminal activity are not focused on supply chain or containerized goods flows, which is where most criminal activity concentrates.<sup>31</sup>



The security room of the port of Durres, renovated in 2020. Police can now count on high-definition cameras, which allow them to identify car plates and operate facial recognition. © Geri Emiri

## What is the ISPS Code?

The ISPS Code is a provision of the 1980 SOLAS Convention, which sets minimum security standards for ships, ports and government agencies. The governments of states parties to the convention are the principal actors that delegate various roles to law enforcement agencies, security services and port managers and oversee them.<sup>32</sup>

The ISPS Code requires its members to establish the security levels by which a port operates, and elaborate reaction protocols able to neutralize threats without interfering with the daily flow of goods or port activities. There are three levels:

1. Daily port routine
2. Existence of a significant terrorist threat
3. Terrorist attack taking place

Adherence to the ISPS Code implies that various security services and tools are present at the port, including digitalized procedures such as closed-circuit television (CCTV) monitoring port premises; automated access

control; and alert sensors to support and maintain security.<sup>33</sup> Digitalization of security in ports, however, is contested. While it minimizes the 'human factor' and the corruptibility of port officials, it also offers a new avenue for criminal networks willing to penetrate and sabotage port security systems through cyberattacks, or tamper with automated risk assessments to divert attention away from high-risk containers.<sup>34</sup>

Governments of SOLAS states parties are also required to approve port facility security assessments and port facility security plans, which guarantee proactive adjustments of security measures based on constant assessment of critical facilities.<sup>35</sup> The ISPS Code also requires SOLAS members to monitor through port state control and appoint port facility security officers who are in charge of developing, implementing and following up on the security plans, and cooperate with ship security officers to assess the potential threat particular ships can pose to a port area.<sup>36</sup>

## Container risk profiling

Ports act as national borders and – in certain SEE countries, such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania and Slovenia – also as EU borders. This implies that, as is the case at any other border crossing, persons and goods undergo a control process by either border police or, in the case of cargo and containers, national customs administrations.

At the national level, customs officials coordinate and collaborate with other national and international law enforcement authorities to identify the risks related to certain international trade routes, taking into consideration factors such as the origin and destination of the container, the company involved, the cargo and the route. Based on this information, customs then implements national and, for EU members, a joint regional risk analysis to prevent and suppress fraud and smuggling activities.<sup>37</sup> Customs officers on the ground ensure proper excise duties and compliance with tax regulations, prevent and suppress misdemeanours and criminal offences, and conduct evidentiary actions as necessary.<sup>38</sup> In addition, they apply risk analysis with the use of scanners (if available), perform different physical inspections and collaborate with the police and prosecutor's office.<sup>39</sup>

## Organized crime in ports

Studies conducted in North American and western European ports show that their exposure to criminal infiltration and exploitation is directly proportional to the advantages of increased seaborne transportation: the bigger the port and the role it plays in international maritime trade, and the larger the number of TEUs passing through it annually, the more

In general, risk analysis is performed before containers arrive at the port. It begins once customs receives the ship agent's complete list of incoming goods. It is usually mandatory to send such a manifest a minimum of 24 hours prior to the ship's arrival at the port, to allow customs enough time to conduct an analysis and identify any suspicious containers.<sup>40</sup> The analysis uses different indicators, such as the type and weight of goods, consignor, consignee, number of boxes in the container, port or region of origin, ports of call, etc.<sup>41</sup>

Based on the parameters of the national risk analysis, the system sorts containers and assigns them a colour corresponding to a specific action: green when the container is free to go; yellow when further control of documentation is needed; and red when inspection is necessary. The colour orange is used for random checks. If the system does not specify a risk level, the container is automatically assigned a green code. However, customs officers can decide to perform inspections based on their own evaluation or when the national risk analysis is unavailable. In case of specific risks, the local customs unit informs the national administration, which communicates to the police to initiate a criminal case.<sup>42</sup>

opportunities there are for criminal groups to hide and smuggle illicit goods in containers.<sup>43</sup> Rotterdam and Antwerp, the busiest and second busiest ports in Europe, are good examples: Dutch authorities seized a record 68 tonnes of cocaine in 2021, while Belgian customs in Antwerp seized 11 tonnes of cocaine in April 2021 alone.<sup>44</sup>



Belgian customs officers search for drugs in a container at Antwerp's port, 7 January 2022.

© François Walschaerts/AFP via Getty Images

However, smaller ports or those with weaker security measures can also be attractive to criminal groups. And where state-run ports are used by influential figures in the security sector with close links to business and political elites to smuggle goods (such as drugs or cigarettes), there is a risk of 'captured ports'. Moreover, small ports are more significant if they are close to landlocked countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia rely extensively on these small ports for the import and export of containerized cargo. As a result, small ports can take on an importance disproportionate to their size, including for illicit flows.

Ports are significant as key entry and exit points for large-scale illicit trade as well as being a vehicle for laundering money through investment in and infiltration of private or public contracts.<sup>45</sup> Risk factors that help to determine why some ports are more attractive to crime than others include the governance or jurisdictional structure (i.e. what actors are responsible for security in the port and who they are connected with); the port administrative structure (i.e. who owns the port, and what business entities

operate within it); and the physical structure of the port (i.e. the presence of natural or artificial barriers as well as safety precautions that make the port more or less 'defensible').<sup>46</sup> In addition, the security provisions in place at the port, such as fences, CCTV cameras, underwater drones, scanners, and the procedures used to identify and mitigate risks, also play a role. A final critical factor to consider is the port's proximity to criminal networks. This requires an understanding of the port's commercial profile and cargo trade routes in relation to what kind of criminal actors and markets are active in the vicinity.

But looking only at port security to gauge what goes on inside the perimeter fence fails to reveal why certain flows go through that port, who is enabling the flows and how illicit trade relates to the political economy of the port community. The latter point might include understanding who owns key warehouses and logistics companies, who could be profiting from and protecting smuggling, and where the profits of crime are laundered.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, it is also vital to understand the criminal actors who use the ports.

## Criminal actors in ports

Criminal actors that exploit the maritime Balkan route can be categorized into four types, applying the classification provided by the GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index.<sup>48</sup>

### 1. CRIMINAL NETWORKS

The Index defines 'criminal networks' as loose networks of criminal associates that engage in trafficking but neither control a specific territory nor present any of the other defining features of mafia-style groups. Criminal networks move illicit goods along the maritime Balkan routes and are present in several of the ports analyzed in this study.

Investigations following up on seizures in Constanta and Varna have shown that local criminal groups occasionally team up with corrupt customs officials, dockworkers, truck drivers and business owners to ensure smooth deliveries. In ports such as Koper, Rijeka and Ploce, small cells of what Europol and the media have labelled the 'Balkan cartel' occasionally operate in these ports. One of the main advantages of this criminal association is the absence of language and cultural barriers among Bosnians, Croats, Montenegrins and Serbs. For cocaine trafficking, there are thought to be around 20 criminal cells of different ethnicities from the region that can be mobilized depending on the route and the port used.<sup>49</sup>

### 2. STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS

By state-embedded actors, the Index refers to criminal actors that act from within the state's apparatus. The port of Bar has historically been recognized as the European hub for cigarette smuggling, a trade supported and facilitated by high-ranking officials and political elites. Another example is Varna, where corruption scandals, alleged misuse of funds and

allegations of money laundering characterize the recent history of the port administration.

### 3. MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS

Mafia-style groups are clearly defined, organized criminal groups that have four defining features: a known name, a defined leadership, territorial control and identifiable membership. In SEE, it is possible to identify several mafia-style groups operating in or close to container ports. Examples that we deal with in this report include affiliates of the Lul Berisha clan in the port of Durrës; the Kavači and Škaljari, which allegedly use the Port of Adria container terminal in Bar for cocaine trafficking;<sup>50</sup> and in Rijeka, where Slobodan Kašić and Stjepan Prnjat – two prominent figures of the local criminal milieu – are accused of controlling the cocaine traffic.

### 4. FOREIGN ACTORS

According to the Index, the term 'foreign actors' refers to state and/or non-state criminal actors operating outside their home country, including diaspora groups that have created roots in the country over generations. The latter detail is particularly relevant for the Greek ports of Piraeus and Thessaloniki, where ethnic Albanians with Greek passports reportedly control most of the cocaine trade. In these ports, criminal networks from Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Türkiye are also involved in heroin trafficking. Depending on the illicit commodity, other examples of foreign actors active along the maritime Balkan routes are Italian criminal groups in Rijeka and Piraeus, Montenegrins and Serbs in Koper, Serbs in Constanta and Bulgarian and Turks in Varna.

For more details, refer to the case study section.



## Inside the box: Concealment techniques used by traffickers

How is illicit trafficking carried out through the movement of legitimate cargo? Over the years, in part as a response to increasing law enforcement investigations and adaptations to trafficking mechanisms, criminal networks along the maritime Balkan routes have used several smuggling techniques. This section explores some of the most common techniques that emerged in the case studies of the nine container terminals featured in this report.

### Hide and seek

The hide-and-seek method is probably the most common smuggling technique emerging from regional seizures data and involves camouflaging illicit goods (mainly cocaine and heroin, but also counterfeit cigarettes) in everyday exports.<sup>51</sup> With this technique, criminal networks infiltrate the commercial transaction at its very origin, either by setting up or infiltrating existing shipping companies to conceal the illicit substances among regularly exported goods. Smugglers usually insert packages of drugs into boxes of tropical fruit (especially bananas, pineapples and mangoes), coffee (in the case of cocaine from Latin America)<sup>52</sup> or machine parts (primarily a technique used for heroin or cigarettes from East Asia and the Middle East) before the container is loaded onto the ship. This gives them the possibility to track the delivery from its starting point.<sup>53</sup> This system often implies that traffickers might count on a ship's crew, in addition to company staff, to ensure the success of the operation.



Seized cocaine in crates of imported bananas is seen at the Federal Police Headquarters in Berlin on 7 January 2014. More than 140 kilograms of the drug were found hidden in crates of imported bananas when supermarket employees alerted the police to the unusual load coming from Colombia via a vegetable and fruit warehouse in Berlin. © Odd Andersen/AFP via Getty Images



Seizure of suspected illicit cigarettes in Hong Kong. © Nora Tam/South China Morning Post via Getty Images

### ***Rip on/rip off***

Smugglers using the rip-on/rip-off method to break open sealed containers carrying legitimate merchandise, fill them with packages of illicit goods and then use fake customs seals to disguise the fact that the original seal was broken.<sup>54</sup> In most cases, containers are tampered with in storage areas and warehouses either inside or in the vicinity of ports, as well as in free trade zones before being loaded.<sup>55</sup> This method means that traffickers either have access to these areas or have accomplices on the inside who have been bribed or coerced to assist them, such as truck drivers, longshoremen, private security guards or warehouse employees.<sup>56</sup> This is, however, the safest method for traffickers, as it involves the least number of people to traffic the merchandise.

## Container parts



Packets of cocaine found hidden in the floor of a container at the port of Ploče.

© PU dubrova/ko-neretvanska

To avoid the risks related to infiltrating companies and customs detection of fake seals, traffickers have developed more sophisticated techniques to conceal packages of illicit goods. These mainly consist of filling container cavities, including false ceilings and walls, floors and doors or, as found in the port of Bar in March 2019, in the cooling systems of refrigerated containers.<sup>57</sup> As with the rip-on/rip-off method, this technique requires criminal networks to have direct access to storage premises or, in the case of scanners able to detect the illicit goods, either use lead plates to reduce the risk of detection or access port areas where containers are stored after the scanning process, waiting to be loaded on trucks.<sup>58</sup> As in the hide-and-seek method, this technique might also imply the need for complicity of the ship's crew, in addition to workers in companies or warehouse/storage units.

## Drop on/drop off

This rather sophisticated method consists of loading or unloading illicit goods and inserting them in (or removing them from) the containers at sea, after the ship has left the port and contiguous zones (or before entering them).<sup>59</sup> Small boats come up beside the cargo ship and pass or take the illicit goods to or from the crew. With this method, crew members or the naval officials are the traffickers themselves, or closely collaborate with criminal networks.<sup>60</sup> This method was detected, for example, in a US-led investigation that dismantled a Montenegrin criminal network smuggling cocaine onboard the container ship *MSC Gayane*.<sup>61</sup>

## Other smuggling methods through SEE waterways

In recent years, Balkan criminals have become progressively creative in their smuggling techniques. Evidence from maritime Balkan routes suggests that drugs are being trafficked with techniques that do not necessitate the use of containers, making the job of law enforcement authorities more dangerous and difficult.

### *Hide in the hull*



Hellenic Coast Guard divers find a cocaine cargo hidden behind a grate in the hull of a ship near the Corinth Canal. © *hcg.gr*

In May 2021, the Hellenic Coast Guard released a video showing a practice that is rather common in Latin America, but not yet along the maritime Balkan routes: divers detected more than 46 kilograms of cocaine hidden behind an underwater grate in the hull of a bulk carrier in the port of Corinth, Greece.<sup>62</sup>

### *Magnets*

During an operation on board a container ship in the port of Ploce in November 2021, Croatian police divers found nearly 61 kilograms of cocaine in a metal box attached with magnets to the bottom of a ship from Ecuador or Peru.<sup>63</sup> Despite being a technique rather long known to law enforcement agencies in Latin America, the discovery of the use of magnets is the first of its kind along the maritime Balkan route.<sup>64</sup>

## The swimmers

In recent years, Croatian and Serbian authorities have dismantled an unusual cannabis trafficking route along the Danube river, lending new meaning to the expression 'illicit flows'. In 2019–2020, several hundred kilograms of cannabis were seized while 'swimming'

the Danube. At night, dealers load cannabis into a boat, then push it to the middle of the river and let the current lead the boat downstream. This method of smuggling was recorded in Baranja, along the Croatian and Serbian border.<sup>65</sup>

## Typology of ports

From field research conducted in nine ports along the maritime Balkan routes and drawing on existing theoretical frameworks, we divide regional commercial ports into three categories based on how crime is carried out in them and what types of criminal actors are involved: high-volume ports; crime magnets; and safe havens. It should be emphasized that these categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, a port that has a high degree of corruption and is therefore categorized as a safe haven could, for that reason, also be a crime magnet.

### High-volume ports

The greater the number of containers moving through a port, the harder it is to detect contraband. It is simply not possible to check every container, or even a significant percentage of them. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of sources of incoming containers, the diversity of destinations for exiting containers and the wide variety of goods transiting a port all add to the complexity.

Large European ports – such as Rotterdam, Antwerp and Hamburg – handle a volume of containers every day that make it impossible to check more than a small percentage of the boxes: the usual figure given for routine checks is 2–4%. Most seizures are therefore intelligence-led, or – if authorities are lucky – the result of risk assessments.

While large, busy ports are generally better financed and can therefore afford good security systems,

the size and complexity of such ports create an opportunity space in which criminals can operate. There may also be several different container terminals within the same port. For law enforcement, looking for contraband in these walled container cities is like looking for a needle in a haystack.

In large ports, security may be provided by a number of agencies, including the police, coast guard, customs and law enforcement units specialized in countering organized crime. There may also be private security companies employed by port owners. Where there are so many actors, there is often poor communication or coordination; in other words, bigger ports have more control politics. Therefore, paradoxically, the more security actors present, the more cracks that criminals can exploit to slip merchandise through.

The only port that fits the description of a high-volume port in SEE is Piraeus, close to Athens in Greece. Thanks to Chinese investments, Piraeus has become the fourth busiest port in Europe, handling 5.45 million TEUs in 2020. Furthermore, Piraeus is directly connected (without a stopover) with major container ports in China, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and the Netherlands, confirming the current importance of the Greek hub in world transport and logistics.<sup>66</sup> This illustrates the point that big ports not only offer smugglers more opportunities to conceal their cargo but also contribute to their more efficient movement.<sup>67</sup>



Record seizure of Captagon amphetamine at Piraeus port in June 2019. © [www.ekathimerini.com](http://www.ekathimerini.com)

As a result, Piraeus seems to be a crossroads for a wide range of illicit goods coming and going in many directions. As explored in more detail in the case study on Piraeus, this includes drugs of all kinds, cigarettes and counterfeit goods.

### Crime magnets

Most ports in SEE do not present the administrative complexities and multi-layered security provisions typical of large ports, but their strategic location at transport intersections and links to major trans-shipment hubs makes them crime magnets.

Location is one of the main factors that make certain ports attractive to criminal groups. As noted, several ports in SEE – like Koper, Rijeka, Constanta or Thessaloniki – are connected to major transport corridors. This makes them attractive for offenders trying to get their goods to market as efficiently as possible.

Because most SEE ports are of small or medium size, most containerized trade is carried out through the employment of feeder ships – small- and medium-sized

vessels that, given their limited length and draught, have greater ability to rig in limited spaces and water depths. Feeder ships usually take small quantities of containers from bigger vessels arriving in major ports of reference for the region (such as Piraeus and Gioia Tauro in Italy) and deliver them to the many smaller regional commercial ports.<sup>68</sup> In the case of trade routes from and to EU member countries, this can create opportunities for criminal networks that can exploit the fact that cargo traded between EU ports is subjected to fewer checks than imports from non-EU countries.<sup>69</sup>

To what extent can criminal groups choose to send their illicit cargoes to some ports and not others? For criminal groups in landlocked countries, ports provide a key link to transnational flows. As explained in more detail in the case studies, the ports of Ploce and Rijeka are therefore magnets for criminal groups from Bosnia and Herzegovina (and to a lesser extent Italy, Hungary and Montenegro). Thessaloniki is attractive for criminal groups from North Macedonia and south-western Bulgaria, while Durres provides an outlet to the sea for criminal groups from Kosovo.



Massive seizure of synthetic drugs on a container ship from Syria at the port of Constanta. © *Balkan Insight*

The port of Constanta is the biggest public–private commercial port in the Black Sea, and a gateway into the EU, including via the Danube river. Its location and ‘some criminogenic elements’, including large-scale corruption among customs officials and port management officers, have made the port a magnet for Romanian as well as foreign criminal networks, especially from Türkiye and Bulgaria.<sup>70</sup> This is a good example of how a port crosses the ‘crime magnets’ and ‘safe havens’ categories.

In addition to an attractive location, a port’s reputation can make it a crime magnet. For example, at some point, word must have spread that Ploce has weak security and lacks scanners. Until 2019, it was off the radar of law enforcement as a potential hotspot for drug trafficking – precisely the type of reputation that would be attractive to traffickers seeking to exploit a low-risk entry point.

However, ports that are crime magnets can lose their magnetic power of attraction. For example, it is said that increased naval activity in the Black Sea because of the war in Ukraine has made it riskier to operate around the port of Varna.<sup>71</sup> As a result, smuggling has

shifted: criminal networks are said to have transferred some of their operations to the port of Burgas, or inland to Sofia, Plovdiv and Pazardzhik. Others argue that new hotspots have been established in the north-west at the border with Serbia and further south towards Greece.<sup>72</sup>

## Safe havens

Ports are highly securitized environments. They have been described as ‘defensible spaces’.<sup>73</sup> But by sufficiently infiltrating a port, ironically, criminal networks can exploit the same characteristics originally meant to prevent crime in order to guarantee a safe space for their criminal activities.<sup>74</sup> This may mean that key areas of the port are controlled by groups with close links to those organizing the trafficking. For example, if it is a state-run port, some warehouses or even a free trade zone may enjoy a degree of protection that effectively makes it off limits for law enforcement. This must have been the case in Bar when cigarette smuggling was organized on an industrial scale with the complicity of high-level government officials. In other cases, ports that, for



Packages of cocaine found hidden in a banana shipment in Montenegro. © Prava Crna Gora

example, have a private owner may use port facilities to smuggle illicit goods. Owners may also use the port as a vehicle for money laundering.

Safe havens are therefore those types of ports that can be considered as nodes under the influence of influential figures or mafia-type groups that infiltrate and control them, and the movement of goods through them, from within.<sup>75</sup> Such criminal control in ports is often near total, and manifests itself in different forms, ranging from drug trafficking by offenders infiltrated in the legal port businesses to corruption of individuals involved in port administration, logistics and security.<sup>76</sup> The worst-case scenario of this typology is a 'captured' port.

While it would be an exaggeration to label any of the nine ports analyzed in this report as 'captured', some appear compromised from the inside (for example, because of systemic corruption) or display overly close links between powerful criminal groups and business or political actors. These characteristics make them more susceptible to being transit points for illicit flows than others.<sup>77</sup>

For example, in a number of ports featured in this report there have been significant arrests of customs officials. In the port of Varna, 20 customs officials were arrested in 2017 for demanding bribes for recording reduced customs taxes on goods in containers arriving at the port,<sup>78</sup> while in August 2018 police arrested 10

customs officials from the port of Bar for smuggling cigarettes.<sup>79</sup> Durres authorities arrested 'at least' three port officials accused of smuggling 119 kilograms of cocaine hidden in banana boxes from Latin America in January 2022.<sup>80</sup>

In other cases, such as Thessaloniki, questions have been raised about the integrity of the majority owner of the port while in Varna there have been concerns about lack of transparency in decisions related to infrastructure development at the port (see the case studies). Rather than attracting criminal groups, such ports tend to be an extension of the political economy of the adjacent city: big players in the port are big players in local politics, business and, eventually, also crime (and vice versa). In Durres, for example, it is thought that influential members of organized crime groups own legal businesses such as in the fisheries or logistics sector operating inside port premises, and that they use their workplace as headquarters for their illicit activities.<sup>81</sup>

Although these port typologies are helpful for understanding certain characteristics of ports and their criminogenic vulnerabilities, as an American risk assessor remarked: 'If you've seen one port, you've seen one port.'<sup>82</sup> In other words, every port is different. With that in mind, the next section looks more closely at nine container ports on the Adriatic, Aegean and Black seas, and unpacks the risks posed by organized crime in each of these places.

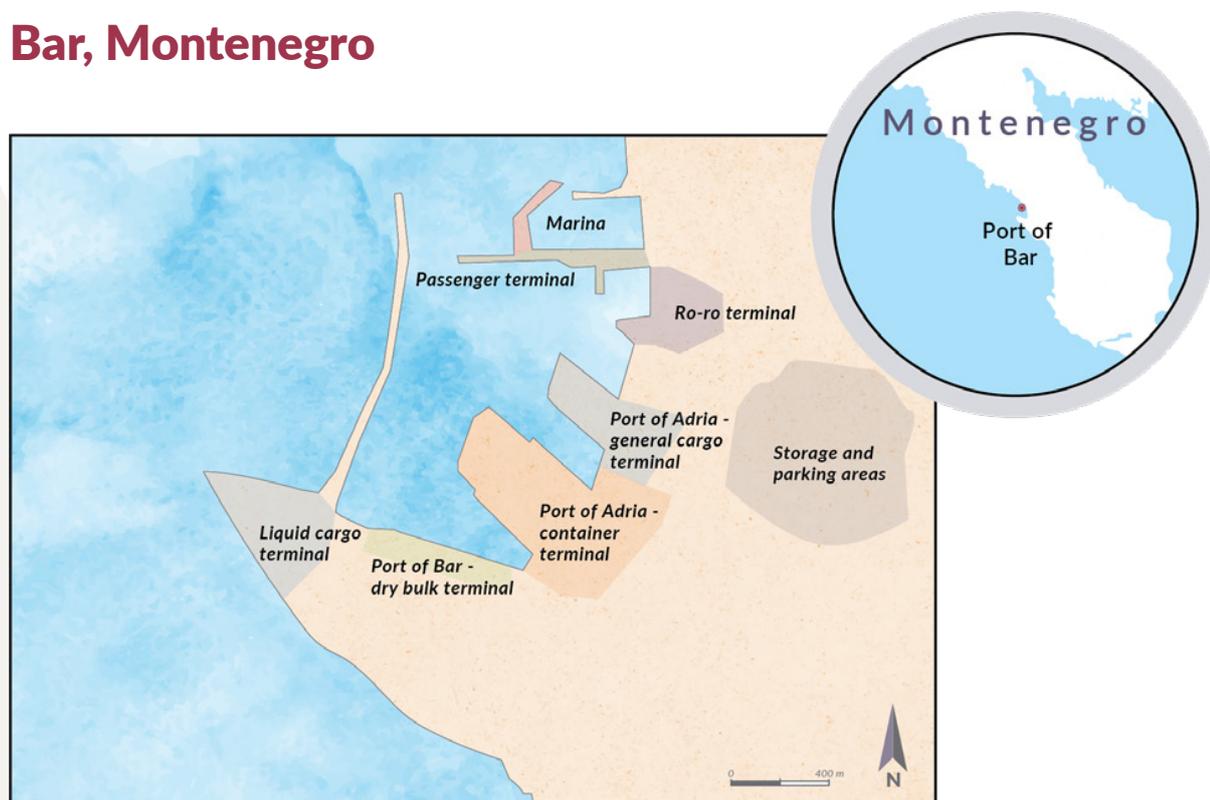
An aerial photograph of a port yard filled with stacks of shipping containers in various colors like red, blue, white, and brown. A yellow gantry crane is visible on the right side. The ground is marked with numbers like 35, 33, 31, 29, 27, 25, 05, 03, 27, and 23. A large white graphic element, resembling a stylized 'C' or a curved line, is overlaid on the image.

# CASE STUDIES OF PORTS ON THE MARITIME BALKAN ROUTE

Despite earlier stagnation after the war in Yugoslavia, the capacity of the port of Rijeka in Croatia is steadily growing. © Matej Kastelic/EyeEm via Getty Images

This section presents the findings of the fieldwork conducted in the maritime Balkan route ports. Each case study offers a description of the port, including information on its ownership, security systems, major illicit markets affecting the port and the criminal actors reportedly involved.

## Bar, Montenegro



<b>Size of the port:</b> Small	<b>Ownership:</b> Public and private
<b>Type of port:</b> Coastal breakwater	<b>Location:</b> South-eastern Adriatic Sea
<b>Type of commercial traffic:</b> Bulk cargo, container cargo	<b>Most common container ships:</b> Feedermax, Feeder, Small feeder
<b>TEUs/year:</b> 53 591 (2020) (port of Adria)	<b>Most commonly seized goods:</b> Cocaine, counterfeit tobacco

**FIGURE 13** The port of Bar.

The port of Bar has been a notorious hub for cigarette smuggling since the 1990s and, more recently, a key entry point for cocaine over the past decade. It is the only commercial seaport on Montenegro's Adriatic coast. The port area spans 200 hectares, 130 of which are taken up by a free trade zone. With a draught of up to 14 metres, the port handles diverse types of vessel, including general cargo ships (48%), container ships (12%), bulk carriers (8%), cement carriers (2%) and search-and-rescue vessels (2%).<sup>83</sup>

### **Two owners, two security systems**

In 2013, Global Ports Holding – the world's largest cruise port operator – acquired 62.1% of the rights for the Container Terminal and General Cargo joint-stock company through its Turkish subsidiary, Global Liman Isletmeleri.<sup>85</sup> Since then, as a subsidiary of Global Ports Holding, the Port of Adria JSC has been managing the Free Zone Bar (i.e. the container, general cargo and timber terminals) under a 30-year concession deal with the Montenegrin government.

Some NGOs have criticized the privatization process, arguing that the government sold a majority stake in Container Terminal and General Cargo JSC – worth €71 million – for only €8 million without including in the contract any pre-agreed clause that would have obliged Global Ports Holding to provide a financial and technical feasibility study of the envisaged port services, an environmental impact analysis, parameters for determining the concession fee or a guarantee for the proposed investment programme worth €21 million.<sup>86</sup>

As for the port's other entity, the Port of Bar JSC, the company had 10 530 shareholders in March 2021, with the Republic of Montenegro (54.05%) as the main partner, followed by Crnogorska Komercijalna Banka JSC (8.07%) and other international investment funds.<sup>87</sup>

In Bar, division at the ownership level appears to have been accompanied by fragmentation at the security level. All entrances and exits are under the Port of Bar JSC jurisdiction – including the main gate – but a large

The port is connected to the Bar–Belgrade railway and road traffic network and could be a vital link in the intermodal transport chain in SEE. The port is a natural junction of the main road (M2) to Albania and Serbia (Herceg Novi–Bar–Ulcinj and Bar–Podgorica–Belgrade), while the city of Bar is the railway departure point to Belgrade. However, despite great potential, local infrastructure is otherwise rather poorly connected with the hinterland.<sup>84</sup>

area of the port belongs to the (privately owned) Port of Adria JSC. The two entities operate within separate security structures with no integrated or comprehensive security system in place. For example, each of the two ports has its own video command room; there is no joint centre. That said, video surveillance has recently improved, and CCTV cameras currently monitor approximately 80–90% of both ports.<sup>88</sup>

In 2016, after the adoption of a new law on ships and ports security and protection in Montenegro, both operators conducted a port facility security assessment, adopted a port facility security plan and appointed a port facility security officer.<sup>89</sup> Both operators received ISPS certificates in 2018.

In addition to security units of the two port operators, revenue and customs officers, police and the National Security Agency play a role in preventing illicit activities in the port. Customs is responsible for container control, and can check goods with a mobile scanner. In addition, the Montenegrin intelligence agency is always present in the port of Bar. It collects, stores, analyzes, assesses, exchanges and guards intelligence on organized crime activities in the port and 'scrutinizes actions of other institutions'.<sup>90</sup> Since 2015, three customs officers, two crime police officers and two border police officers have been working together in the port's joint container control unit.



A view of the container terminal at the port of Bar. © GI-TOC

Despite these security measures, the port of Bar (particularly the state-owned section) is perceived by a wide range of stakeholders and port users to be vulnerable to illicit activity.<sup>91</sup> Concerned by the port and the country's reputation as a hub for illicit trade, the new Montenegrin government elected in December 2020 prioritized port security. As a first step, port authorities increased security in the areas of concern and enhanced institutional cooperation and

### **Major hub for cigarette smuggling**

During and after the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Montenegro was a major hub for cigarette smuggling, facilitated by the political elite.<sup>94</sup> One could argue that the trade was part of a survival strategy: cigarette smuggling accounted for about 60% of gross domestic product.<sup>95</sup> The port of Bar remains a regional and transit hub for cigarette smuggling, both inbound and outbound. In 2017, one billion illicit cigarettes are said to have flowed out of the country.<sup>96</sup> In 2021, the EU's Anti-Fraud Office sent 17 requests to Montenegrin authorities inquiring about suspicious companies in Bar linked to cigarette smuggling.<sup>97</sup>

Most of the time, contraband cigarettes arrive in containers that are unloaded and stored in the free trade zone, where the customs agency has no jurisdiction and neither customs duties nor value added tax is paid for the imported goods.<sup>98</sup> Most cigarettes arriving in Bar are from Famagusta (Cyprus), Gioia

coordination, especially among customs, police and port security units.

The privately owned section of the port is considered to be more secure,<sup>92</sup> although investigations following the seizure of more than half a tonne of cocaine in Podgorica in January 2022 showed that the substance had arrived hidden in a container carrying bananas that passed through the commercial terminal of the private Port of Adria JSC.<sup>93</sup>

Tauro, Constanta, Port Said and Jebel Ali (United Arab Emirates). Genuine cigarettes are smuggled from legal retail chains to the illegal market in another country, arriving at the port of Bar as imports by companies using false documentation showing that cigarettes were exported to third countries. Thus, they avoid paying tax, excise or customs duties on imported cigarettes.

The shippers generally use offshore companies as the recipients, although there are also Montenegro-based businesses.<sup>99</sup> The cigarettes are unloaded from the containers and put onto the black market in Montenegro or smuggled to Serbia, Kosovo or Bosnia and Herzegovina in specially constructed truck compartments, or to Albania by speedboat.<sup>100</sup> According to estimates by customs authorities and investigative journalists, profits from one container filled with contraband cigarettes range from €150 000 to €750 000.<sup>101</sup>



Counterfeit cigarettes, so-called 'cheap whites', are smuggled through the port of Bar to black markets in Europe. © MIA

The containers originally filled with cigarettes are either left empty or filled with other available goods and accompanied by forged documents and customs seals, or sent to other ports.<sup>102</sup>

Recently, Montenegrin police have registered counterfeit cigarettes produced in China (so-called cheap whites) transiting the port of Bar. Their primary destination is black markets in the EU. In addition, some of the original cheap white cigarettes from Russia, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Ukraine and Moldova are intended exclusively for sale on black markets in the Western Balkans and the EU. A large share of cheap whites is sold without duties being paid, usually outside the jurisdiction where they are produced.<sup>103</sup> In the period 2014–2017, up to 840 million cheap white cigarettes were exported from Montenegro by primarily offshore firms using similar routes and often the same 'ghost' fishing boats or small cargo ships.<sup>104</sup> In 2020, Montenegrin authorities seized 62 150 packages in one operation and detected a shortage of 19 026 packages from the customs warehouse. In another operation, 1 160 boxes of cigarettes worth €500 000 were seized.<sup>105</sup> This follows high-value seizures of cigarettes in previous years, valued at €3.9 million in 2019,<sup>106</sup> and €11.5 million in 2018.<sup>107</sup>

Despite these seizures, which give the impression that cigarette smuggling is (still) a big business in Montenegro, there have been very few prosecutions.<sup>108</sup>

Since there are no court-proven law enforcement cases, reports and stories about Montenegrin criminal organizations are often anecdotal. One theory is that this is because certain criminal networks enjoy political protection, or even that there is collusion between criminal groups and state actors to run the business (as was the case in the past). The Grand clan and the Mojkovac clan were frequently mentioned as being close to key players in politics and the security services. These clans allegedly use money earned from cigarette smuggling to engage in legitimate business activities.

Whoever runs the business does so discreetly and wants to keep it that way. People who investigate or speak out about cigarette smuggling in Montenegro are often subjected to intimidation and harm.<sup>109</sup> There is speculation that *Dan* reporter Duško Jovanović was killed for writing about the so-called 'tobacco mafia',<sup>110</sup> *Vijesti* journalist Olivera Lakić was physically attacked and her family threatened,<sup>111</sup> while unknown persons tried to assassinate police inspector Predrag Šuković, who openly said that politicians were behind cigarette smuggling in the country. The evidence Šuković submitted to the prosecution has disappeared.<sup>112</sup> None of these cases has been resolved.

In 2018 and again in 2021, the European Commission expressed its concern about the port of Bar being a 'platform for smuggling counterfeit cigarettes into the European Union [EU] together with legally produced

and illegally traded cigarettes'. It asked the national government to strengthen capacity to address the illicit market.<sup>113</sup> As one of the first steps, the Port of Bar JSC adopted a plan to improve security in March 2021, which it is still implementing.<sup>114</sup> The plan focuses on measures to enhance video surveillance, establish an electronic record of goods in the port of Bar Free Zone and enable the emptying of containers at a single location with constant CCTV surveillance coverage, as well as to connect shippers to a digital system for automatic data retrieval.<sup>115</sup>

In July 2021, in a major step, the new government prohibited tobacco products from being stored in

### ***Cocaine: many seizures, few prosecutions***

Cocaine has been regularly arriving at the port of Bar in relatively large amounts since 2010.<sup>121</sup> The shipments usually originate in Ecuador. The drugs seldom come directly from South America to Bar, but usually arrive by feeder boats, which bring containers offloaded from larger Panamax-class container ships in big commercial ports such as Gioia Tauro, Valencia (Spain) or Marsaxlokk. From Bar, the drugs are transported by truck to markets in central and western Europe, mainly via Kosovo and Serbia.<sup>122</sup>

Cocaine arrives hidden in containers officially carrying bananas and exotic fruit, or other products typically exported to Europe from Latin America, such as coffee, seafood and asphalt roofing. Initially, despite several significant seizures from 2014 to 2018,<sup>123</sup> law enforcement agencies believed that Montenegrin organized crime groups were not heavily involved in cocaine trafficking; the blame fell on Albanian nationals.<sup>124</sup> Police concluded that the port of Bar is not a frequent cocaine smuggling point, primarily due to the small volume of the container traffic and large percentage of containers subjected to control.<sup>125</sup>

That is not to say that Montenegrin criminal groups have not been involved in the cocaine business. Montenegrin sailors have been arrested for their

the port of Bar Free Zone.<sup>116</sup> In December 2021, customs instituted 24-hour supervision of goods and persons in the Free Zone.<sup>117</sup> The decision to prohibit the storage of tobacco products in the Free Zone has apparently resulted in fewer cigarettes arriving in Bar in containers, and customs has registered an increase in the average price per package.<sup>118</sup> However, it is still too early to assess whether these measures will have a significant long-term impact.<sup>119</sup> The government has also announced its intention to sell seized cigarettes, a move that has been criticized by a number of international partners.<sup>120</sup>

involvement in smuggling drugs on container ships or pleasure craft like yachts. In April 2019, police seized 60 kilograms of cocaine on board a Montenegrin navy training ship that was supposed to be exchanged for heroin in Türkiye.<sup>126</sup> However, Montenegrin criminal groups tended to ship cocaine through other European ports, rather than through Bar.<sup>127</sup>

Several major cocaine seizures were made in the port of Bar in 2021. This might reflect a shift in smuggling routes – as a result of a 'displacement effect' on the traditional cocaine routes caused by massive seizures in the major western European entry ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp – or more robust counternarcotics activities initiated by the government that came into power in December 2020.<sup>128</sup>

For example, in August 2021 a suspicious container from Ecuador, which was officially carrying bananas, arrived in Bar onboard the MSC *Charlotte*, via Koper, Slovenia.<sup>129</sup> Law enforcement authorities tracked the container as it was loaded on a truck and brought to a warehouse in Mojanovići, north-west of Podgorica.<sup>130</sup> There it was found to be filled with around 1.4 tonnes of cocaine. Police arrested the two warehouse owners, but a source close to the investigation denied that the owners had close links with the organizers of the shipments.<sup>131</sup>

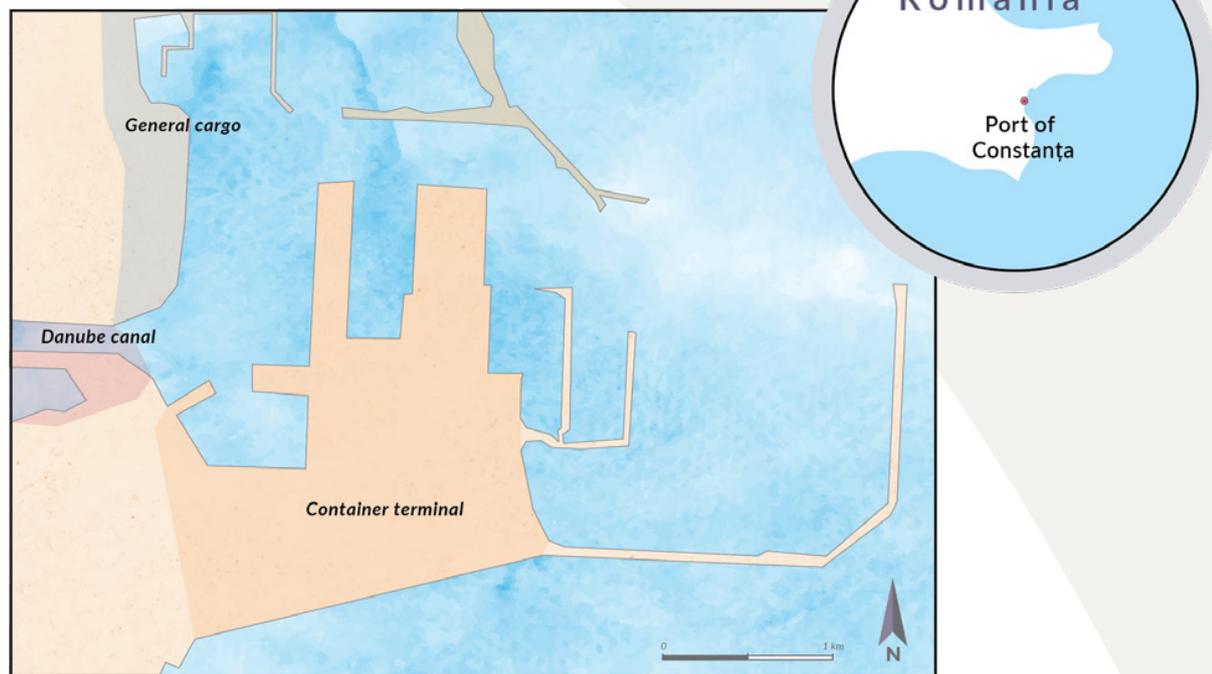
In January 2022, Montenegrin customs and police seized around 500 kilograms of cocaine through another controlled delivery. The load arrived hidden in banana boxes in 70 containers from Ecuador. The delivery was organized by a criminal consortium with members in Montenegro, Slovenia and Ecuador.<sup>132</sup> The prosecution alleged that a criminal organization planned to receive the cocaine in the port of Bar Free Zone and assessed that this scheme had already happened three times in 2021.<sup>133</sup> The drugs were intercepted while stored in a warehouse owned by the trading company Voli.<sup>134</sup> This was the second time since 2018 that cocaine had been found on the premises of the company, which had recently asked Montenegrin authorities to increase inspections in all port and related facilities (at the company's expense), since smuggling activities negatively affect its business.<sup>135</sup> The issue has gained political attention, as the owner of the company is reportedly a close associate of the current president of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović.<sup>136</sup>

Despite these major seizures, prosecution remains the weakest link in the fight against illegal narcotics trafficking in Montenegro. No kingpins or their enablers have yet been arrested or prosecuted.<sup>137</sup>

The criminal groups engaged in cocaine trafficking through Bar do not appear to be the same as those involved in cigarette smuggling through the port. Since 2015, the main players in cocaine trafficking in Montenegro have been the rival Kavači and Škaljari clans, which used to be united as the Kotor clan, whose boss, Darko Šarić, was known as the 'cocaine king'.<sup>138</sup>

*Despite major seizures, prosecution remains the weakest link in the fight against illegal narcotics trafficking in Montenegro.*

## Constanta, Romania



<b>Size of the port:</b> Medium	<b>Ownership:</b> Public-private
<b>Type of port:</b> Coastal breakwater	<b>Location:</b> Western Black Sea
<b>Type of commercial traffic:</b> Bulk cargo, container cargo	<b>Most common container ships:</b> Panamax, Feedermax, Feeder
<b>TEUs/year:</b> 643 725 (2020)	<b>Most commonly seized goods:</b> Counterfeits, waste, heroin

**FIGURE 14** The port of Constanța.

The port of Constanța, the largest on the Black Sea, is an example of how corruption can increase vulnerability to organized crime.

The port is located only 179 nautical miles from the Bosphorus Strait and 85 nautical miles from the Sulina branch through which the Danube flows into the sea. It covers 3 926 hectares, of which 1 313 hectares is land and the rest is water. Two breakwaters located to the north and south shelter the port, creating ideal conditions for activities in its more than 140 berths.<sup>139</sup> The port can manage any type of cargo and in 2020 handled 643 725 TEUs.

The port of Constanța is a public-private seaport owned by the Romanian state under the National Company Administration of Maritime Ports SA Constanța. This company was established by a government decision in 1998, and is a JSC owned by the Ministry of Transport (80%) and Fondul Proprietatea SA (20%). The latter is a JSC that manages various economic and financial assets and is owned by private entities together with the Romanian state.<sup>140</sup>

Constanța is connected with central and eastern European countries through Corridor IV (rail and road) and Corridor VII (inland waterway), to which it is linked



Cranes on a dock at the port of Constanta, Romania. © Nathan Laine/Bloomberg via Getty Images

by the Danube-Black Sea canal, as well as Corridor IX (road) which passes through the Romanian capital, Bucharest.<sup>141</sup> The port has benefited from EU-funded

### ***Past problems of corruption***

In the past, the port of Constanta had a reputation for corruption. For example, in 2012 Romanian prosecutors investigated a significant corruption scheme in the port. The indictments alleged that 30 customs officials, directors of the port and local politicians were accused of receiving bribes. In 2019, the supreme court acquitted all the accused.<sup>142</sup>

A study conducted by the Romanian Ministry of Interior in 2017 included a series of interviews with law enforcement officials in which they expressed concerns about the port's vulnerabilities, highlighting endemic corruption in the port premises and explaining that prosecution is almost impossible because of extreme political pressure.<sup>143</sup> There were said to be self-serving links between port officials and local politicians, two

investments worth €31 million, mainly to renovate existing infrastructure, with another €25 million to repair roads and upgrade green energy sources.

of whom are currently in jail on corruption charges.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, according to a source, customs agents are often directly or indirectly linked by family ties (spouses, cousins, etc.) to local law enforcement officers working in the departments mandated to investigate organized crime and corruption in the port.<sup>145</sup>

According to a representative of the Romanian coastguard, over the past five years, many of the 246 criminal cases investigated in the port of Constanta were related to customs fraud and imports of counterfeit products.<sup>146</sup> In 2021, for instance, a customs official was accused of being part of a criminal network that illegally imported perfume worth €25 million.<sup>147</sup> The criminal group consisted of Turkish and Romanian citizens, including senior police officials from anti-organized crime

units and customs inspectors who apparently received bribes amounting to US\$500 000.<sup>148</sup>

The port's security system for risk profiling also appears to be vulnerable to corruption. According to a former customs officer, companies importing goods via Constanta port are evaluated and categorized as red, yellow or green based on risk. If the company has a green rating, its containers are not checked by customs.<sup>149</sup> This creates risks for 'green companies', as their containers are attractive to illicit trade (because they will not be checked). Furthermore, it creates incentives for customs officers to accept bribes or

'protection taxes' not to open containers of import companies that have a yellow or red rating.<sup>150</sup>

In the past, even when customs officers decided to inspect a given container, there were few scanners available. Other interviewees pointed out that while the port had access to two of the 15 scanners purchased with EU funds for the whole country, law enforcement officers had not initially received the necessary training to use them.<sup>151</sup> A recent news report indicates that the scanners are now functioning, and customs officials use them to actively detect illicit trade.<sup>152</sup>

## POLIȚIA ROMÂNĂ - D.I.I.C.O.T. - EUROPOL



In May 2021, authorities seized 45 million euros' worth of heroin in the port of Constanta, Romania. © Romania Insider

### Drugs

Corruption also seems to facilitate the entry of drugs through the port of Constanta. In 2016, 2.5 tonnes of cocaine was discovered in a container filled with banana boxes that had been shipped from Santa Maria, Colombia.<sup>153</sup> According to Romanian authorities, the cocaine was then meant to be concealed with the rip-on/rip-off method in containers carrying construction materials destined for shipment to

the Netherlands by truck.<sup>154</sup> In commenting on the case, the Romanian Directorate for the Investigation of Organized Crime and Terrorism mentioned that certain facilities offered by the port of Constanta and 'the influence of some criminogenic elements in the administration of control bodies and economic entities' have created ideal conditions for using the Romanian port as an entry point for cocaine arriving in Europe.<sup>155</sup>

According to law enforcement officials, cocaine trafficking to Romania involves individuals from several nationalities – especially Serbian – as well as Romanian expats in Latin America closely working with Colombian traffickers. Usually, locals work as couriers and in extraction labs in Romania and neighbouring Moldova.<sup>156</sup>

Because of its strategic location and the problems of corruption as described here, the port of Constanta also seems to be a gateway for other drugs. For example, in May 2021 authorities confiscated 1 452 kilograms of heroin that were concealed among construction

### *Cigarettes and waste*

Constanta has been known in the past as a haven for smuggling tobacco products, and recent seizures suggest that this illicit trade continues. Investigations following a bust of 17 tonnes of illicit cheap whites in Italy in 2016 shed light on Romania's prominent role in the business of contraband cigarettes in western Europe. In the 2016 case, the complicity between the Italian Camorra and a high-ranking executive at China Tobacco International Europe Company, the Romania-based subsidiary of the world's biggest cigarette producer, China National Tobacco Corporation, appears to have been key to the trafficking operation, despite the official denial of any involvement by the company representative.<sup>160</sup>

In September 2020, officers from the Romanian Service for Preventing and Combating Illegal Migration and Cross-border Crime opened a container based on intelligence and found 412 050 packets of contraband cigarettes. They were concealed using the rip-on/rip-off method in a container supposedly carrying plastic

materials in two containers from Iran en route to western Europe.<sup>157</sup> According to authorities, when it comes to heroin trafficking, Constanta-based networks work with Bulgarian and Turkish groups.<sup>158</sup>

In September 2020, authorities seized what is considered to be the biggest amount of hashish and Captagon pills in Romania's history, with respectively 1.5 tonnes and 751 kilograms found in a container carrying boxes of organic soap that departed from the Syrian port of Latakia.<sup>159</sup>

furniture on a ship arriving from Hong Kong via the United Arab Emirates.<sup>161</sup>

According to a special prosecutor, the port of Constanta is also exposed to the import of illegal waste from western Europe.<sup>162</sup> The criminal *modus operandi* is rather simple; it consists of concealing illegal waste through the rip-on/rip-off method in containers officially transporting either legal waste or second-hand products. In the latter, while the import papers show second-hand products, the containers are packed with undeclared waste that is loaded onto trucks at the destination and brought to dumps.

One tonne of waste can be deposited in Romanian dumps for just €15, while in Western countries, the rates are 10 to 20 times higher. This creates a major profit margin for those involved. An operation reportedly led by the Prosecutor's Office of Constanta dismantled a trafficking scheme involving 2 000 deliveries of waste to be dumped in Romania through the port of Constanta, a business that with all satellite activities funded by EU money would be worth around €10 billion.<sup>163</sup>

## Blue crime on the blue Danube: Illicit flows into the heart of Europe?

Around 2 900 kilometres long, the Danube is the second longest river in Europe, connecting ten countries from Germany to the Black Sea. Although only the first 170 kilometres are navigable by larger ocean ships,<sup>164</sup> the Danube hosts 96 ports, which are mostly accessed by barges and passenger boats.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, around 3 000 cargo and 300 cruise vessels reportedly operate on the Danube.<sup>166</sup> The river is also connected to the Rhein–Main–Donau canal, an artificial waterway linking it to northern European rivers and therefore de facto to the North Sea.

Over the past decade, investment in infrastructure along the Danube has been slow, making it unattractive to many types of business. ‘It is not uncommon that boats need to wait for weeks because the water is either too high or too low,’ explained the representative of a shipping company. ‘Harbours, particularly in Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia, are in bad shape and there are few connections to train tracks or highways, making it difficult to move cargo.’<sup>167</sup> This is not only bad for business, but it also explains why mostly non-perishable (and non-urgent goods) are transported, such as iron ore, scrap metal, coal, wheat, fuel and fertilizer.

Navigation on the river is defined by the 1948 ‘Convention regarding the regime of navigation on the Danube’. As in

other international waters, the river is open for the nationals, vessels of commerce and goods of all states, on a footing of equality with regard to port and navigation charges and conditions for merchant shipping.<sup>168</sup> Yet the space to manoeuvre is usually quite limited, as most vessels ostensibly sail only short distances – and usually in groups of between two and six barges.<sup>169</sup>

Because of the relatively limited number of companies operating on the river, private and public agencies know each other well. ‘We are a close-knit community where everybody knows each other’.<sup>170</sup> Indeed, there are only a handful of shipping companies, with some import/export companies located in the Danube region also working with smaller, family-run operators.<sup>171</sup> Given that the river is the lifeblood for these companies, they have a self-interest in maintaining safety on the Danube and preserving their reputation. As a result, there seems to be ‘a common language’ around certain topics such as preventing alcoholism of the crew, ensuring proper registration of crew members and safe navigation.

However, there also seem to be some blind spots when it comes to monitoring illicit flows.

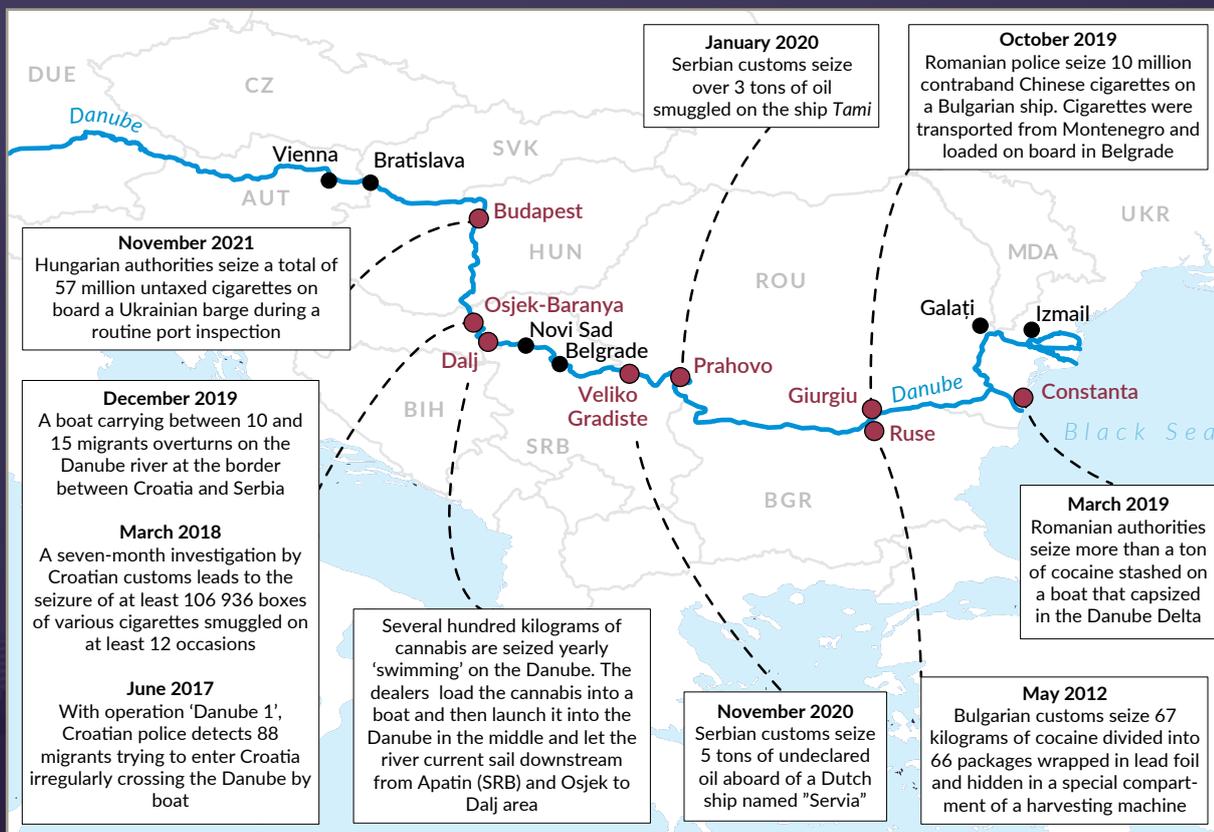


FIGURE 15 Examples of smuggling along the Danube.

## Record drug seizures 'by accident'

While there are elements of cooperation, there appears to be no integrated security management system along the Danube. Although there is a security concept in the context of the Danube Commission, this does not translate into operational cooperation. Countries within the Schengen zone, such as Austria and Germany, seem to have good cooperation. There is also ad hoc cooperation among some countries in the context of Europol or Interpol, and they get together annually for Joint Action Days. Furthermore, law enforcement agencies have created a joint database to which 'red flags' with suspicious activity can be added.<sup>172</sup> But most discoveries of illicit activity seem to happen accidentally.

For example, in September 2006, the Austrian police discovered more than a tonne of cannabis worth €10 million in a container that had arrived from Hamburg.<sup>173</sup> More recently, in March 2019, Romanian authorities arrested two truck drivers from Vranje, Serbia (believed to be part of the Škaljari clan), after a ship capsized in the Danube Delta with more than a tonne of cocaine of 90% purity level.<sup>174</sup> Another ship with a similar amount of cocaine is assumed to have made it to the shore, from where the drugs were transported onwards by truck.<sup>175</sup> In June 2020, several hundred kilograms of marijuana were seized close to Osijek in Croatia, while 'swimming' on the Danube.<sup>176</sup>

Some sections of the Danube are monitored by video surveillance. But it is worth noting that the integrated system for observation, surveillance and control of the traffic at the Black Sea was not working correctly when the mentioned shipment of cocaine was smuggled into the Danube Delta close to Constanta, despite the fact that the system had just been modernized.<sup>177</sup> Coincidence or sabotage?

## Few cargo controls

Unlike the ports analyzed in this study, most of the cargo moving along the Danube is not in containers but rather stored in bulk. This makes it difficult to search the ships. One would literally have to poke a metal rod into a pile of, for example, sand or gravel to see if something was hidden under it. Or some of the cargo would have to be unloaded, which is both time consuming and logistically challenging. In November 2021, the Hungarian National Tax and Customs Administration seized a record shipment of 57 million untaxed illegal cigarettes (2.3 million boxes) that were hidden in salt on a barge coming from Ukraine.<sup>178</sup> The contraband cigarettes were discovered only after boxes fell out during the removal of 1 000 tonnes of salt (in bags weighing 1.3 tonnes each) from the barge.



Border police patrol boat on the Danube Delta near Tulcea, Romania. © Bildagentur-online/Sunny Celeste via Alamy

Usually, barges are not checked very thoroughly as they move up or down the Danube. Even when ships enter the Schengen area at Mohacs in Hungary on the border with Serbia, the papers are checked by Hungarian police or border or customs officers but interviewees report that the inspection of the barges is usually 'a quick look at the barge if it is open. If the goods are sealed, then the seals are checked but not opened.'<sup>179</sup> Furthermore, more than half of the barges arrive at Mohacs at night, meaning that only the papers are checked.<sup>180</sup>

Once the vessel passes Mohacs, checks are only performed on a random basis or when authorities receive a tip. For example, Austrian authorities report that they have a regular, quarterly review schedule for ships, but otherwise only investigate on justified suspicion.<sup>181</sup> Most controls relate to papers of the crew and cargo only, and do not involve inspection of the goods.<sup>182</sup>

An officer of the Danube water police based in Vienna admitted that 'the only way to check ships and the goods they carry is when they arrive at the final destination'.<sup>183</sup> Another interviewee said that 'you can transport anything with a barge. Nobody really knows what is below the bulk goods'.<sup>184</sup> It should be remembered that this is an almost 3 000-kilometre waterway that flows through the heart of Europe.

### **Other types of crime**

Drugs and cigarettes are not the only goods that have been seized on the Danube; waste, plutonium, steroids and cultural goods have also been intercepted.<sup>185</sup> While most illicit goods are smuggled north, into the EU and the

Schengen area, waste is assumed to be travelling in the opposite direction, towards the port of Constanta.

Other types of crime have also been reported on the river. There have been accounts of large-scale fuel theft, where thousands of litres of fuel are drained from vessels going up or down the Danube, loaded into double-bottomed motorboats or transferred onto trucks.<sup>186</sup> According to the Serbian Customs Administration, more than 112 000 litres of oil were stolen in this way between January and September 2021. In December 2021, more than 12 tonnes of sunflower oil and 2 tonnes of diesel were stolen off barges on the Danube in Romania in a single night.<sup>187</sup> Other vessels (heading north-west) have been found to be transporting much more fuel than officially declared;<sup>188</sup> this seems like an organized form of avoiding taxes.

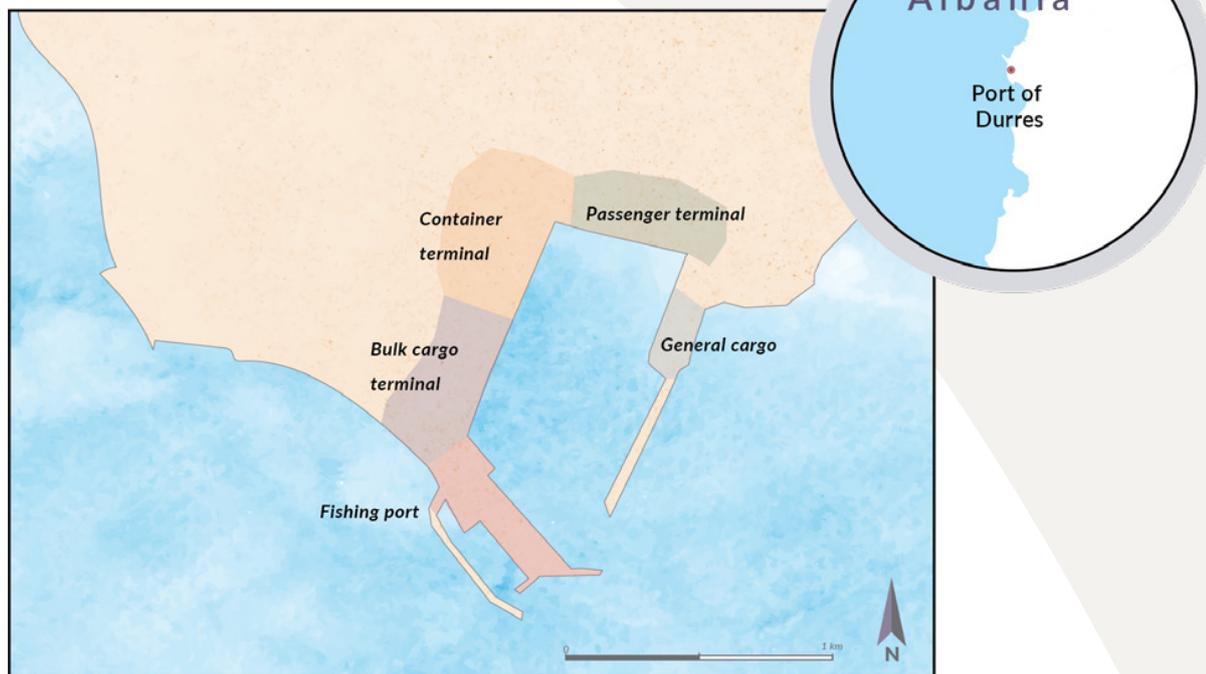
There have even been reports of piracy. In 2007–2008, more than 40 vessels were attacked by armed organized criminal groups in Bulgaria and Serbia to steal cargo, but mostly equipment from the ship.<sup>189</sup> One interviewee confirmed that this is still common practice today, particularly in Romania: 'They are not interested in the goods being transported on the boat but rather in steel cables, drills and scrap metal'.<sup>190</sup> The stolen equipment is then resold on the black market. There is also a market for stolen outboard motors and small motorboats.<sup>191</sup>

There have also been cases of migrants trying to swim across the river<sup>192</sup> or to cross it by boat.<sup>193</sup>

In short, while not much attention seems to be paid to illicit traffic up and down one of Europe's busiest waterways, this may be a characteristic that makes the Danube more attractive to organized crime than we know and deserves closer attention.



## Durres, Albania



Size of the port: Small	Ownership: Public
Type of port: Coastal breakwater	Location: South-eastern Adriatic Sea
Type of commercial traffic: Bulk cargo, container cargo	Most common container ships: Feedermax, Feeder, Small feeder
TEUs/year: 145 762 (2019)	Most commonly seized goods: Cocaine

**FIGURE 16** The port of Durres.

The port of Durres, which is Albania's biggest port, is a major artery for both licit and illicit trade, not only for Albania but also for its landlocked neighbours of Kosovo and North Macedonia. The port is well connected to infrastructure: it is 25 kilometres from Tirana

International Airport and linked to the national railway (going north–south from Shkodra to Vlora). It is also the western end of the new Durres–Kukes–Pristina A1 highway that connects Albania and Kosovo, with further connections to Skopje, North Macedonia.

### *Key gateway for Albania and Kosovo*

The port handles approximately 90% of Albania's international maritime trade and 85% of the country's import–export trade, operating 24/7 on a land surface of 79 hectares and with a capacity of five million tonnes of cargo per year.<sup>194</sup> According to the Durres Port Authority, the volume of cargo in the container terminal in 2020 was 1 549 201 tonnes.<sup>195</sup> It is worth noting

that in 2018, 26% of all Albanian exports were destined for Kosovo, most of which transited Durres. For this reason, the governments of Albania and Kosovo agreed to allow Kosovo customs to open an office in the port to inspect shipments destined for Kosovo, so that once they are cleared in the port they do not have to be rechecked at the border.<sup>196</sup>



View over the port of Durres, Albania, at dusk. © Walter Bibikow via Getty Images

Cooperation between Albanian and Kosovar law enforcement seems to be paying off. In May 2021, as a result of a joint operation – also with Italian authorities – Kosovar police intercepted a truck officially transporting imported meat from Brazil and found 400 kilograms of cocaine, a record amount for Kosovo. The substance was initially found by scanners in the port of Gioia Tauro, and was subjected to a controlled delivery at the port of Durres before being intercepted by Kosovar officers on the way to its final destination of Lipjan, close to Pristina.<sup>197</sup>

The port of Durres is state owned and is administered by the Durres Port Authority on behalf of the Ministry

### ***Strong security with weak links***

The Albanian government designated the Port Authority as the implementing actor for the requirements deriving from adherence to the ISPS Code, which includes a stipulation that the Authority create and periodically update a port facility security plan.<sup>200</sup> The most recent version of the plan was updated and approved by the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure in April 2015.<sup>201</sup>

of Infrastructure and Energy. Although the port is publicly owned, in July 2021, Mariner Adriatic, a company owned by the Maltese holding group Hili Company, was awarded a five-year concession with a value of €30 million for the management of the container terminal.<sup>198</sup>

By 2030, the commercial port of Durres will be entirely relocated about 12 kilometres north of Durres, in the area of Porto Romano. Work has already commenced, also to move the premises of the container terminal. The project is part of a bigger plan to renovate the Durres waterfront and convert the current port into a marina.<sup>199</sup>

The port currently has two layers of fencing: the first surrounds the entire perimeter of the port, whereas the second delimits its internal areas. The Authority invested 12% of its 2020–2021 budget to improve security parameters and ISPS Code compliance through installation of CCTV systems, access control, gates and additional fences.<sup>202</sup>

Customs in Durres have risk management procedures in place. For example, all containers arriving from 'risky places' (such as Latin American ports) are scanned.<sup>203</sup> Indeed, according to customs representatives, around 10% of containers are checked; this is two to three times above the norm. After a first assessment, containers suspected of carrying illicit goods are placed in a CCTV-monitored safe area by the port security officers.<sup>204</sup>

Although the Joint Container Control Unit is small,<sup>205</sup> the port has state-of-the-art equipment and operating procedures. To facilitate cooperation among law enforcement authorities, a joint task force was created with customs and Durres anti-narcotics police who, together with port security officers, have access to a new control room that features enhanced access-control tools: 144 cameras are currently in use, of which 48 are pan-tilt-zoom and 96 are fixed.<sup>206</sup>

However, there seem to be a few weak links. First, a road of 1 kilometre separates the container terminal from the scanning machines and, although it is within the perimeter of the port, the level of security provided is significantly lower than in other port areas. This may give criminal actors operating at the port the space and time to tamper with containers before they are checked.<sup>207</sup> Authorities are well aware of this risk, and acknowledge that the forthcoming relocation of the container terminal might render some investments in new scanning equipment worthless.<sup>208</sup>

The so-called Rromanat case raised concerns about the efficacy of the port's scanning equipment or the possibility that it could be tampered with.<sup>209</sup> In December 2021, 119 kilograms of cocaine were discovered hidden in a container loaded with bananas. The stash was seized in Rromanat, a village on the outskirts of Durres, after the container left the port. Investigations concluded that the container had passed all transit checks at a port in Italy, where Italian customs noticed irregularities in the documents and that several containers of bananas were missing. The container filled with cocaine then arrived at the port of Durres and after passing through customs and even

a scanner check, it was cleared by local authorities, who had not noticed any irregularities.

There is also a risk posed by complicit officials, as demonstrated in 2017 when 12 people were arrested as part of a criminal group that trafficked about 2.5 tonnes of cannabis from the port of Durres with a truck that arrived in the port of Ancona, Italy. Some of those arrested were police and customs officers working at the port, as well as a crime investigation specialist.<sup>210</sup>

In addition, the proximity of the fishing harbour to the container terminal (see Figure 17) makes it vulnerable to a security breach.<sup>211</sup> In general, the container terminal is well secured, but it is also connected to the fishing harbour through an internal road that fishermen can easily access. In addition, it has recently been noticed that containers are also stored outside the premises of the dedicated terminal, in a storage area inside the West Terminal, between the container terminal and the fishing harbour. Although fishermen cannot access the terminal without an official badge, there have been cases in which they attempted to unload drugs from the containers stored in these areas.<sup>212</sup>

One case illustrates this vulnerability. In November 2020, Albania's Special Anti-Corruption Prosecution closed a case concerning the shipment of 137 kilograms of cocaine from Ecuador. The investigation involved Greek authorities and the US Drug Enforcement Administration, and consisted of a controlled delivery from the port of Piraeus where the substance had been found in the refrigerating systems of four containers carrying bananas. The cocaine was replaced with rice and allowed to continue on to Durres.<sup>213</sup> Once the load arrived in the port of Durres, a local owner of a fishing company operating inside the port came to pick up the load. His accomplices included a port security officer and a fisherman.<sup>214</sup> The latter two offenders went to jail, while neither the businessman nor the criminal groups behind the shipment were tried.



Seizure of cocaine in the port of Durres. © Sot News

### **Major seizures of cocaine, but few high-level prosecutions**

Since 2018, there have been a number of major cocaine seizures in Durres port. In February 2018, Albanian police seized a record 613 kilograms of cocaine hidden in the structure of a container from Colombia carrying bananas that had arrived at the port after calls in Italy and Malta. As a result of the operation, police detained two suspects, including the driver of a truck who had transported a double-floor container that concealed 528 numbered packages of cocaine to a warehouse close to the port.<sup>215</sup>

In September 2021, 10 kilograms of cocaine were discovered in another shipment in the port. While the amount was not significant, it was evidence of a pattern: it was the fifth time since 2019 that authorities found cocaine concealed in containers shipped to the same fruit import company – Alba Exotic Fruit. The company had been importing fruit from Latin American countries (particularly Ecuador) since 2011. Only after four cocaine busts between 2019 and 2021 did the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecution decide to launch a probe into allegations that the company was part of a well-structured international drug ring.<sup>216</sup> While his business partner was arrested in July 2021 following interception of another shipment, the owner managed to escape until April 2022, when police located and arrested him on charges related to the production and sale of narcotics and membership in an organized crime group.<sup>217</sup>

In December 2021, Albanian police seized 119 kilograms of cocaine originating from Ecuador, again hidden in banana containers. The police arrested three people involved in the case: two Albanian drivers and the company’s administrator, a foreign citizen residing in Tirana.<sup>218</sup>

The high number of cocaine seizures at the port of Durres indicate not only that the port is a significant entry point for drug trafficking, but also that port authorities and police are improving their interdiction capability. Nevertheless, there is a clear pattern that those arrested are usually low-level criminals who are not engaged in the international drug trade, but are rather a delivery service working for a fee.<sup>219</sup> In fact, these offenders are often solely involved in local logistics to secure or remove the consignment of drugs from the port, snatching it from the container or driving it to a warehouse outside the port. Therefore, while security at the port may be upgraded and law enforcement cooperation is becoming more effective, the port will remain vulnerable if major criminals think that their risk of prosecution is low.<sup>220</sup>

As the port is very close to the Durres city centre, to fully understand the inner dynamics of the port it is necessary to also consider the influence of the city. Certain urban criminal dynamics, in fact, influence criminal activities at the port and vice versa. Organized

crime groups strengthen their power and increase their revenue through illicit markets. Furthermore, since the port is an important economic actor for the city, many of these groups are also involved in port operations through legal companies that offer various services. For example, in March 2021, Edmond Koçi, the owner of a logistics company operating inside the port and a prominent member of the criminal 'Durrës Gang',<sup>221</sup> was shot dead while driving his car.<sup>222</sup> Prior to his assassination, Koçi was well known to the police. Investigations have shown that he was a shareholder and shadow owner of various shipping companies actively operating in the port of Durrës.<sup>223</sup>

In addition, the man regarded by the Special Anti-Corruption Prosecution as the leading member of the Durrës Gang, Lul Berisha, has been accused of involvement in illicit activities over the port's

### ***Smuggling of heroin, cigarettes and cash***

Cocaine is not the only illicit substance coming into the port of Durrës. Heroin also seems to pass through the port – allegedly owing to the influence of a powerful criminal clan – with destinations mostly in Italy and other EU countries. There have been only two seizures in the past six years, however.<sup>227</sup> In 2016, Albanian police seized just over 30 kilograms of heroin heading to Italy.<sup>228</sup> The substance was divided into 52 packages hidden in the cabin of a truck carrying firewood. The police arrested only the driver, a resident of Elbasan.<sup>229</sup> More recently, in October 2021, port authorities seized 45.5 kilograms of heroin hidden in 43 packages, again found in the cabin of a truck headed to Italy. The operation led to the arrest of the truck driver and his associate.<sup>230</sup>

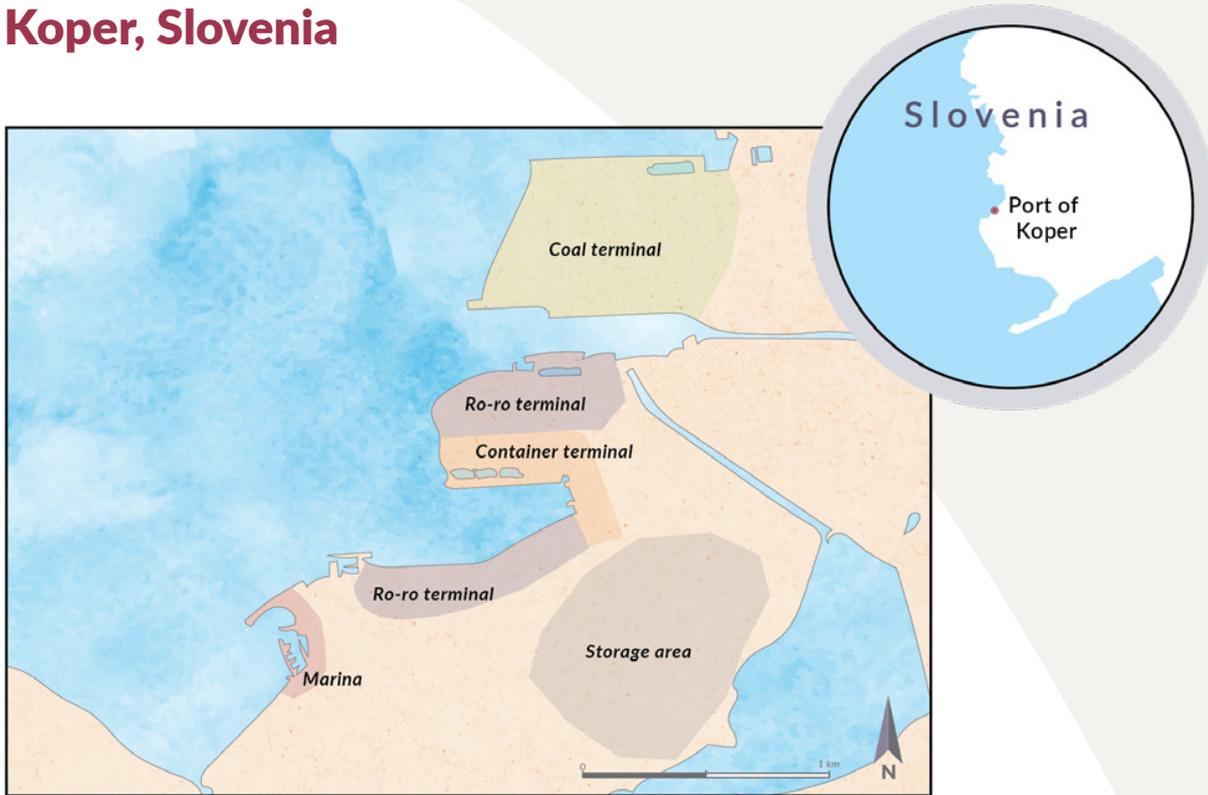
businesses in recent years. In May 2020, the Albanian State Police alleged that, despite his licence being officially withdrawn in 2019, he had imposed his oil retailer company as the sole supplier in the port, forcing local fishermen to purchase his oil at inflated prices. Police ultimately seized 1.2 million litres of oil stored in a customs warehouse.<sup>224</sup>

The city of Durrës and its port unite the interests of many criminal groups in a region that is known as a hotspot for trafficking in drugs and human beings, among other serious crimes.<sup>225</sup> It is also a magnet for criminals from other parts of the country. As an example, in 2018, a gangster from the Vlora region wanted for drug trafficking was shot dead on a highway near Durrës. Upon inspecting the body, police found an entry permit to the port of Durrës.<sup>226</sup>

There have also been a few major seizures of cigarettes. For example, in October 2020 Durrës customs seized over one million packages worth €168 000.<sup>231</sup> Thanks to information shared by international law enforcement partners, Albanian authorities found the packages in two containers from India that were concealed with the rip-on/rip-off method.<sup>232</sup>

In addition, there were several reported cases of attempts to smuggle significant amounts of cash through the port. The biggest was in 2018, when police seized €3.4 million in cash hidden in two cars on a trailer that arrived from Belgium. According to one source, the money originated from 'international cocaine trafficking' and belonged to 'one of the most dangerous drug gangs active in Elbasan'.<sup>233</sup>

# Koper, Slovenia



Size of the port: Medium	Ownership: Public-private
Type of port: Coastal natural	Location: North-eastern Adriatic Sea
Type of commercial traffic: Bulk cargo, container cargo	Most common container ships: Feedermax, Feeder, Small feeder
TEUs/year: 996 000 (2021)	Most commonly seized goods: Heroin, cocaine, counterfeit goods

**FIGURE 17** The port of Koper.

Despite the fact that Slovenia has only 47 kilometres of coastline, Koper is one of the most important container ports on the Adriatic and is second among Mediterranean ports in terms of car trans-shipment.<sup>234</sup> In 2021, the port of Koper processed 996 000 TEUs – a record number. Both China and the EU recognize the importance and potential of the port. In 2018, the port of Koper officially became part of the Belt and Road Initiative after it signed a memorandum of understanding with Ningbo Zhoushan Port Group.<sup>235</sup>

The port is interesting for Chinese investors because two-thirds of the goods in the port are handled for hinterland markets where Chinese companies play a leading supply role.<sup>236</sup> On the other side, members of the EU, especially neighbouring landlocked countries largely rely on Koper for their imports and exports. As an example, in July 2021, the government of Hungary opened a consulate inside the port to facilitate business operations for the many Hungarian companies operating through the Slovenian port.<sup>237</sup>



Shipping containers stand on the dockside at the port of Koper. © Chris Ratcliffe/Bloomberg via Getty Images

### *An active and growing port*

Because Koper is in the north of the Adriatic, goods arriving at the port can be quickly transported into EU markets using various routes: north through Slovenia's capital Ljubljana, or (as for the port of Trieste just 25 kilometres away) into northern Italy, north-west to Austria and Germany or north-east to Slovakia and Hungary. Koper is also connected to the rail network, and a second railway track (estimated to cost between €1 and €1.5 billion) between Koper and Divača is expected to open in 2026 or 2027.<sup>238</sup>

The port of Koper is the 'beating heart' of the area – everything seems to evolve around the port in one way or another. According to a recent study, every million tonnes of cargo handled at the port generates 820 jobs and about €60 million in services and products for the Slovenian economy.<sup>239</sup> The port employs 3 000–4 000 people, although the population of the historic town is less than 26 000.<sup>240</sup> It is also vital for the Slovenian economy: according to estimates by customs officials, 70% of all tax revenue in Slovenia is collected at the port.<sup>241</sup>

The capacity of the port continues to expand. In 2021, the port's container capacity was expanded to handle 1.5 million TEUs,<sup>242</sup> while a new pier was completed. New cranes will arrive in mid-2022. There are also plans to expand the dry port to 25 000 square metres. This may pose challenges to the resources available to law enforcement authorities, both in terms of personnel and funds to purchase new CCTV cameras, fences, etc.<sup>243</sup>

The port is owned by Luka Koper d.d., a Slovenian company listed on the stock exchange. The government is the controlling shareholder, and also owns and operates most of the warehouses and has wider business interests, including providing waste management and tourism-related services, among others.<sup>244</sup>

As in most regional ports, especially those that have both public and private ownership, there are several actors responsible for security: private security guards from Luka Koper d.d. are responsible for security and safety at the port and for checking people and vehicles coming in and out; customs are in charge of collecting taxes, as well as scanning and physically

inspecting containers; the police check the papers of crew members and cargo in the port and of ships at anchor and assist customs with container checks; and the Maritime Administration, which is responsible for safety and security at sea, oversees traffic moving in and out of the port and marinas and checks and approves the documentation of all ships entering Slovenian waters.

Security at the port is maintained by a high perimeter fence, a main gate that is guarded around the clock, CCTV cameras, X-ray scanners and a (brand new) control room that monitors all activity.<sup>245</sup> The port security department has also recently purchased under-water drones and additional rubber dinghies to support police operations.

Despite the modern and up-to-date security items that make it a 'defended' space, the port of Koper presents various criminogenic features that expose it to criminal activities, not least due to its strategic economic role. The port serves Slovenia, but as many as 70 freight trains daily connect Koper with Italy, Croatia, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland and Slovakia, among others. The end markets served by the port of Koper are all illicit market destinations that strategically rely on the trade connection with the port. In addition, limited controls of ships at anchor in the Gulf of Trieste raise the risk of smaller boats off-loading illicit goods using the drop-off method.<sup>246</sup>



In October 2019, at the port of Koper, Slovenian authorities assessed the shipment of 437 rolls of polyethylene foil, which arrived in a container from the United Arab Emirates via Egypt. Upon inspecting the container, the authorities found 730 kg of heroin hidden in 1 421 packages wrapped in foil. © *Romania Insider*

## **Major heroin busts**

Based on information about drug busts at the port of Koper, what stands out are the relatively large seizures of heroin over the past three years, especially when compared with those at other ports in the region. In September 2019, Koper customs agents inspected a shipment of over 20 tonnes of ceramic glue and found 25 bags that differed in shape and weight. After examining the contents, authorities established that the bags contained 302 kilograms of heroin from Iran and were destined for a company based in Slovenia.<sup>247</sup> Two months later, in November 2019, the police seized almost 730 kilograms of heroin with 70% purity – the largest shipment ever intercepted in Slovenia. The drugs were packed into 437 rolls of polyethylene foil in a container that had been loaded onto the ship in Egypt.<sup>248</sup> An investigation determined that these drugs had also originated in Iran, this time destined for a company in Hungary.<sup>249</sup> In 2021, another 200 kilograms of heroin from Iran was seized in Koper, bringing the total amount seized to over a tonne in less than four years.<sup>250</sup>

Besides heroin, there have also been seizures of cocaine, cannabis and liquid synthetic drugs.<sup>251</sup> In 2020, 150 kilograms of cocaine were found in Derby-branded banana boxes being shipped to the Slovenian company Rastoder. Cocaine was also found in boxes of the same company in the port of Bar. The load was following a strange route: coming from Latin America to Bar, then headed for the Italian market via North Macedonia.<sup>252</sup> In an official statement, Rastoder affirmed that suspects apprehended were not linked to the company, and added that accessible data showed that the company was not the subject of any police investigation.<sup>253</sup> Counternarcotics experts in the port are looking out for suspicious containers from Latin America, but note that 'even when you receive a tip-off and you know what you are looking for, the drugs are difficult to detect. The way they are wrapped makes it especially hard to see anything on an X-ray.'<sup>254</sup>

## **Less information on other illicit goods or criminal groups**

Relatively small amounts of cannabis have been detected in the port, for example stashed between containers. Some illicit goods are discovered by accident during off-loading of the shipment, such as in 2019, when 38 000 litres of liquid Ecstasy were found and seized.<sup>255</sup>

As a medium-sized port, Koper imports a wide range of goods, some of which are counterfeit. Indeed, counterfeit shipments are reportedly found in the port of Koper on a weekly basis (in comparison, drugs are seized only five or six times a year). They are mostly goods with intellectual property infringements coming from China and destined for the eastern European market. They include many types of goods, such as bicycles and clothing.<sup>256</sup> Customs have also seized containers full of lottery tickets and fake coupons that were most likely intended for the Chinese community in Italy.<sup>257</sup>

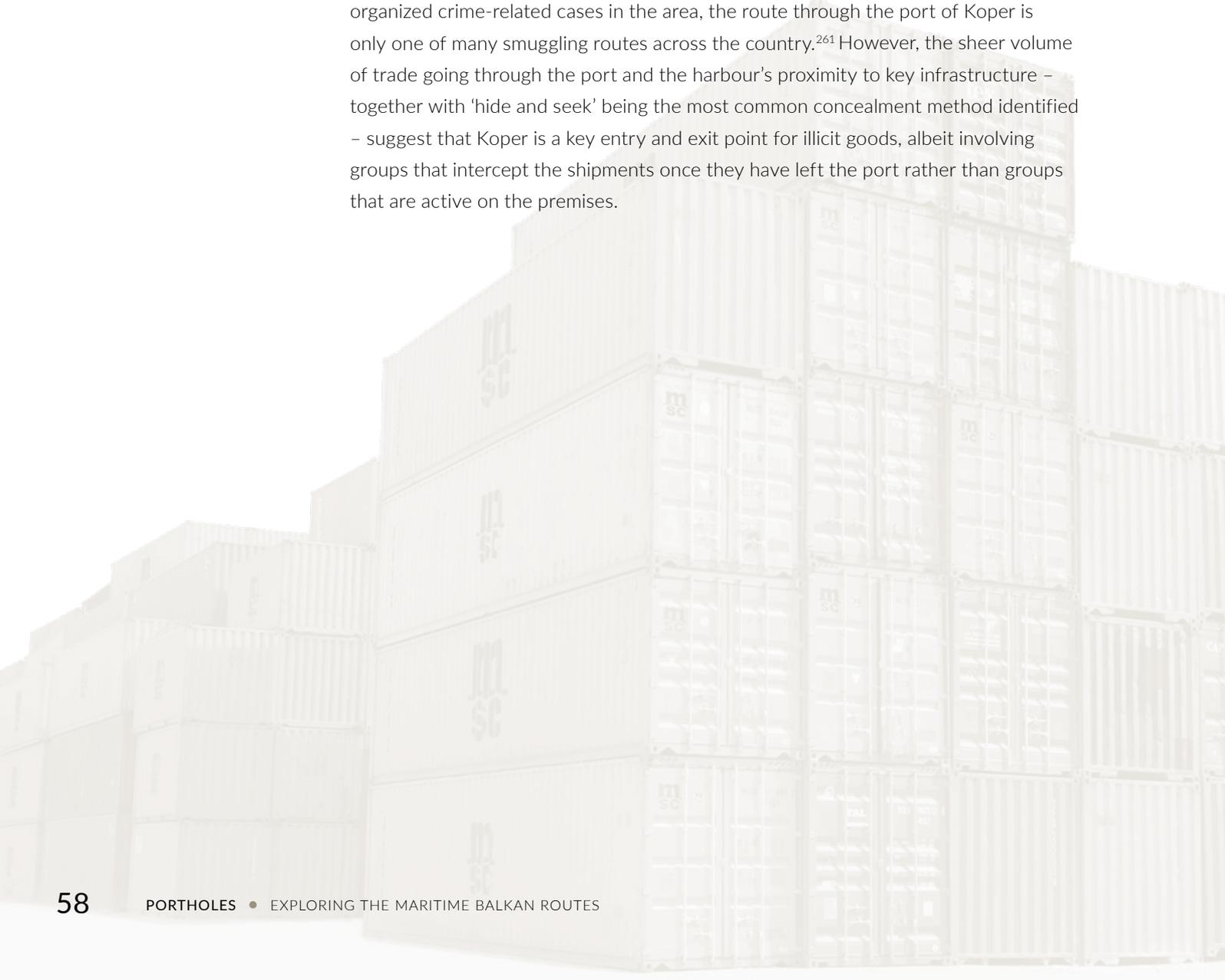
There have also been cases of illicit outbound shipments, including illegal waste destined for African and Asian countries, stolen cars and weapons.<sup>258</sup>

There is little information available on the type of criminal actors involved in the port of Koper or the beneficial owners of companies registered as official consignees of shipments. Most interviewees cited 'internationally operating organized criminal groups' but could not specifically name them. Criminal groups from Montenegro are reported to be operating in or from Slovenia. In November 2021, an official of the Specialised State Prosecutor's Office was arrested under suspicion of having leaked confidential information to important members of the Slovenian cell of the Kavač Clan.<sup>259</sup>

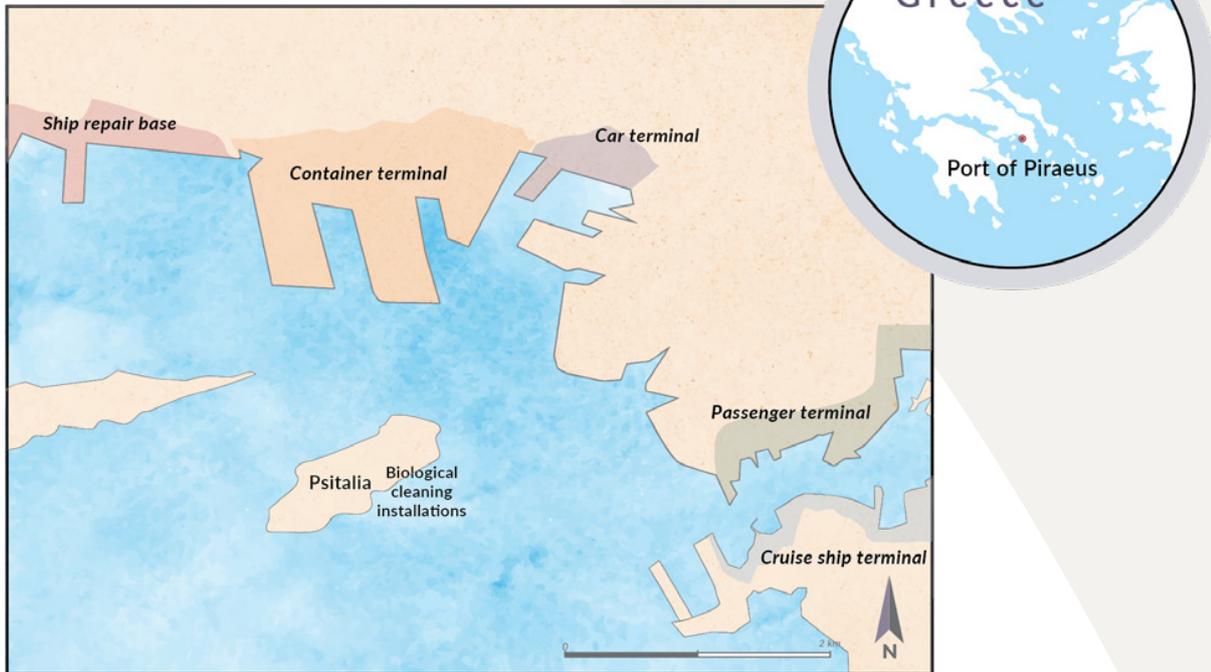
### *Just passing through?*

As in almost every port, there are rumours of crime and corruption involving insiders. All security experts interviewed for this case study agreed that moving goods through the port is only possible with inside support. Although few, there have been some cases of port workers involved in stealing cargo or smuggling cigarettes. But no major cases of corruption or organized crime have been prosecuted in years.<sup>260</sup>

Slovenian police and the public prosecutor in Koper argue that, in view of the few organized crime-related cases in the area, the route through the port of Koper is only one of many smuggling routes across the country.<sup>261</sup> However, the sheer volume of trade going through the port and the harbour's proximity to key infrastructure – together with 'hide and seek' being the most common concealment method identified – suggest that Koper is a key entry and exit point for illicit goods, albeit involving groups that intercept the shipments once they have left the port rather than groups that are active on the premises.



# Piraeus, Greece



Size of the port: Large	Ownership: Private
Type of port: Coastal breakwater	Location: Saronic Gulf
Type of commercial traffic: Bulk cargo, general cargo, container cargo	Most common container ships: NeoPanamax, Panamax, Feedermax
TEUs/year: 5.43 mln (2020)	Most commonly seized goods: Cocaine, cigarettes, counterfeit goods

**FIGURE 18** The port of Piraeus.

The port of Piraeus, which stretches along 39 kilometres of coastline over three municipalities in Attica, Greece, is the largest container port in the Mediterranean and Europe’s fourth largest port in terms of volume, with a record of 5.43 million TEUs in 2020.<sup>262</sup> It is so big that it is estimated to contribute around 0.78% of the overall Greek gross domestic product.<sup>263</sup> It is worth noting that

Piraeus is directly connected to countries around the world with major container ports, such as Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and the Netherlands,<sup>264</sup> confirming the importance of this Greek hub to the global transport and logistics system. The port’s promise is to serve every other European port within 48 to 72 hours, which makes it competitive for European trade.



A view of the COSCO-owned dock and yard in Piraeus. © Kostis Ntantamis/NurPhoto via Getty Images

## Chinese ownership

Since the first decade of the 2000s, the port has undergone a process of privatization and massive changes to its governance structure. The most significant developments came in October 2009 when Piraeus Container Terminal SA, a subsidiary of COSCO Pacific Limited (the Chinese government's state-owned shipping conglomerate), started operating the container terminal. In that year, following an international tender process, Piraeus Container Terminal SA gained the concessions for Piers II and III (container terminals) in Piraeus for 35 years, plus an optional five-year extension. A rapid and significant increase in traffic and trans-shipment volumes followed. Indeed, the port jumped from being Europe's 17th most active container port in 2007 to fourth within just 13 years.

In 2016, COSCO bought 51% of the Piraeus Port Authority SA from the Hellenic Republic Asset

Development Fund, the Greek government's privatization agency, for €280.5 million. The contractual arrangement provided for COSCO to pay €88 million more for an additional 16% stake by 2021, contingent on COSCO's investment in – and expansion of – the port for an additional €500 million. As a result, the port of Piraeus is now majority owned by COSCO, which, with 67% of shares, has moved from being port concessionaire to also being port owner.

For Piraeus, privatization meant a growth in both trade and efficiency. However, an increased volume of container traffic also brought an increase in illicit activity, especially on certain routes in Asia, the Middle East and Europe where COSCO shipping lines, terminals and port operations are established. This is, after all, part of the Belt and Road Initiative, making it cheaper and more efficient to trade from China and Asia to the West than within the West itself.

As the largest port in SEE and the Mediterranean, Piraeus presents a complex and multi-layered system of security providers with different mandates, each exposed to the risk of different forms of corruption. COSCO, as managing entity of the Port Authority, is in charge of the implementation of the ISPS Code. It also works with the Hellenic coastguard, police and customs.

### **Significant increase in cocaine seizures**

In recent years, Piraeus has registered an increase in large cocaine shipments from Latin American countries, primarily from routes via Ecuador (following the establishment of direct trade routes). Greek law enforcement considers Piraeus to be the first choice of many organized criminal groups importing cocaine to Europe because of its direct connection with the Netherlands and the 'displacement effect' caused by increased attention and cocaine seizures in Antwerp and Rotterdam.<sup>266</sup>

The latest annual drug report recorded an increase of 87.46% in the total amount of cocaine seized in Greece in 2020 (1.78 tonnes).<sup>267</sup> This is the largest quantity of cocaine seized in Greece in a single year in the past 25 years, and it is the second year in a row that the seized quantities have been particularly high.

Cocaine is trafficked largely from Latin American countries, with a variety of ports of origin (primarily but not exclusively from Ecuador – Guayaquil port, for example – and Guatemala), which makes the illicit traffic particularly heterogenous at its origin. In 2018 alone, over 700 kilograms of cocaine originating from Ecuador were seized at Piraeus.<sup>268</sup> Greek law enforcement officials do not believe that such quantities are destined only for the local market, which begs the question as to where they are heading.<sup>269</sup>

### **Reduction in flows of other drugs**

When it comes to other drugs, including heroin, cannabis and synthetic substances, country data show different trends than for cocaine in recent years. For example, the annual drug reports for 2019 and 2020 show that seizures of cannabis were halved in one year.<sup>272</sup> Transit shipments of cannabis are usually hidden in food products or concealed in more creative ways,

The massive volume of trade often slows down coordination among different security actors. Furthermore, only seven out of the 17 scanners requested by the chamber of commerce of Piraeus are active in the port. These factors contribute to making Piraeus one of the principal import or transit points in Europe for several illicit or contraband licit goods.<sup>265</sup>

Smuggling methods detected tend to be of the hide-and-peek variety, including: special crypts in empty or full cargo; packages of cocaine in cargoes of bananas or coffee beans; in the walls, roof or back of containers; in other food products; with large loads of timber; or in the cooling compartments in refrigerated cargo. The trend seen elsewhere regarding the random use of containers using the rip-on/rip-off system is confirmed in Piraeus. The availability of warehouses behind the port, usually in areas such as Perama (West Athens), is crucial in facilitating the movement of containers in a semi-legal fashion.

This implies the exploitation of warehouses and import businesses, including warehouse owners, for criminal trade. Law enforcement authorities, including the Hellenic police, coastguard and customs, confirm that when cocaine is found in the goods carried by the container, usually someone from the supply chain, at origin or destination, has been involved.<sup>270</sup> For instance, a retired Greek customs broker was convicted in 2014 for being part of an international criminal group with residents of Belgium and the Netherlands, headed by a Turkish citizen living in Greece, which imported 300 kilograms of cocaine hidden in a container carrying thermal insulation materials packed into pallets and originally destined for the former broker's company in Piraeus.<sup>271</sup>

such as when authorities seized over four tonnes worth US\$40 million in April 2021, in containers carrying industrial cupcake machines arriving in Piraeus on an unnamed container ship from Lebanon. The container was scheduled to be trans-shipped on a train passing through North Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary, with Bratislava, Slovakia, as the final destination.<sup>273</sup>

Like cannabis, heroin peaked in 2019 and almost halved in 2020. Heroin arrives in Piraeus via Türkiye and the Balkan route by truck in addition to cargo. Preferred routes head towards Italy through Piraeus or, even more likely, from the ports of Patras and Igoumenitsa.<sup>274</sup>

Amphetamines from Syria, Sri Lanka and India, headed to Europe or Libya, are concealed in different ways, including in containers of sheets, blankets and towels. Of concern for authorities are Captagon amphetamines, the so-called 'jihadist's drug'. For example, in 2019, 23 million pills were found in three

### **Links to Western Balkan criminal groups**

Very little is known about the importers or the recipients of the drugs seized in Piraeus, but the prevalence of Greek networks operating in support of Western Balkan criminal groups seems clear. In particular, there is a tendency for people to be involved in drug trafficking who are of Balkan origin (particularly from Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and Croatia) but carry a Greek passport. The Greek government's annual drug report 2020 notes that members of organized crime groups involved in drug trafficking

### **Cigarettes, counterfeit goods and waste**

The smuggling of tobacco products – both in the form of counterfeit cigarettes and tobacco – has always been connected to the Greek illicit markets and culture.<sup>278</sup> Even when the illicit product is in transit, it deprives the Greek state of millions in taxes. Some trends can be observed. In 2016–2017 alone, customs seized over 1.5 billion illicit whites in Piraeus in shipments from China and south-east Asian countries as well as the Middle East and destined usually to central and south-eastern Europe (especially Bulgaria and Slovakia).<sup>279</sup> In May 2021, Piraeus authorities found 338 million cigarettes concealed with the rip-on/rip-off method in a total of 35 containers officially transporting 'food items' originating in Dubai.<sup>280</sup>

The port of Piraeus is a transit point for counterfeit goods arriving concealed in containers from the East and headed towards western Europe.<sup>281</sup> In 2019, the EU's Anti-Fraud Office issued a fine of more than €200 million to Greece for failing to stop widespread tax fraud by Chinese criminal gangs importing ultra-cheap

containers that had been shipped from Syria and were on their way to China, via Piraeus, during an operation by Greece's Financial Crimes Squad, in cooperation with the US Drug Enforcement Administration.<sup>275</sup> It remains unclear what the intended use of these substances is at places of destination, but according to the Hellenic police this type of supply does not match the drug consumption of local Greek markets, which suggests that traffickers are sending illicit goods from a European port to avoid further checks at destinations outside of Europe.<sup>276</sup>

in Greece were 46.6% locals, 51.6% foreigners and 1.8% of unknown nationality.<sup>277</sup> Nationals of Albanian descent or origin are believed to make up the largest percentage of foreigners (31.7%) involved in drug trafficking, together with ethnic Albanian Greeks or Greeks, in a rather disorganized and opportunistic manner. The relevance of Greek criminals to facilitate the traffic locally is confirmed by Europol and by case law, showing connections across the Western Balkans, Bulgaria and Türkiye.

goods through the port of Piraeus.<sup>282</sup> The Office's investigation started in 2018, supported by Italian and Greek authorities.<sup>283</sup> It found that Chinese-owned firms run by criminal groups were fraudulently avoiding the charges on large shipments of counterfeit clothing and footwear through Piraeus, and massively understating their value to EU customs to avoid import duties. They gave false details of the goods' consignees, thus avoiding paying value added tax.

Even if there was no evidence of any wrongdoing by the Piraeus Port Authority or COSCO, the investigation highlighted how the shipping routes developing with the Belt and Road project, using Chinese shipping lines, ships and terminals, make Piraeus particularly attractive for illicit trade, not least for Chinese criminals.<sup>284</sup>

Waste and weapons are also trafficked through the port. In December 2021, a case of outbound waste made the headlines when the ship *COSCO PRIDE*, loaded with 37 containers of plastic waste from

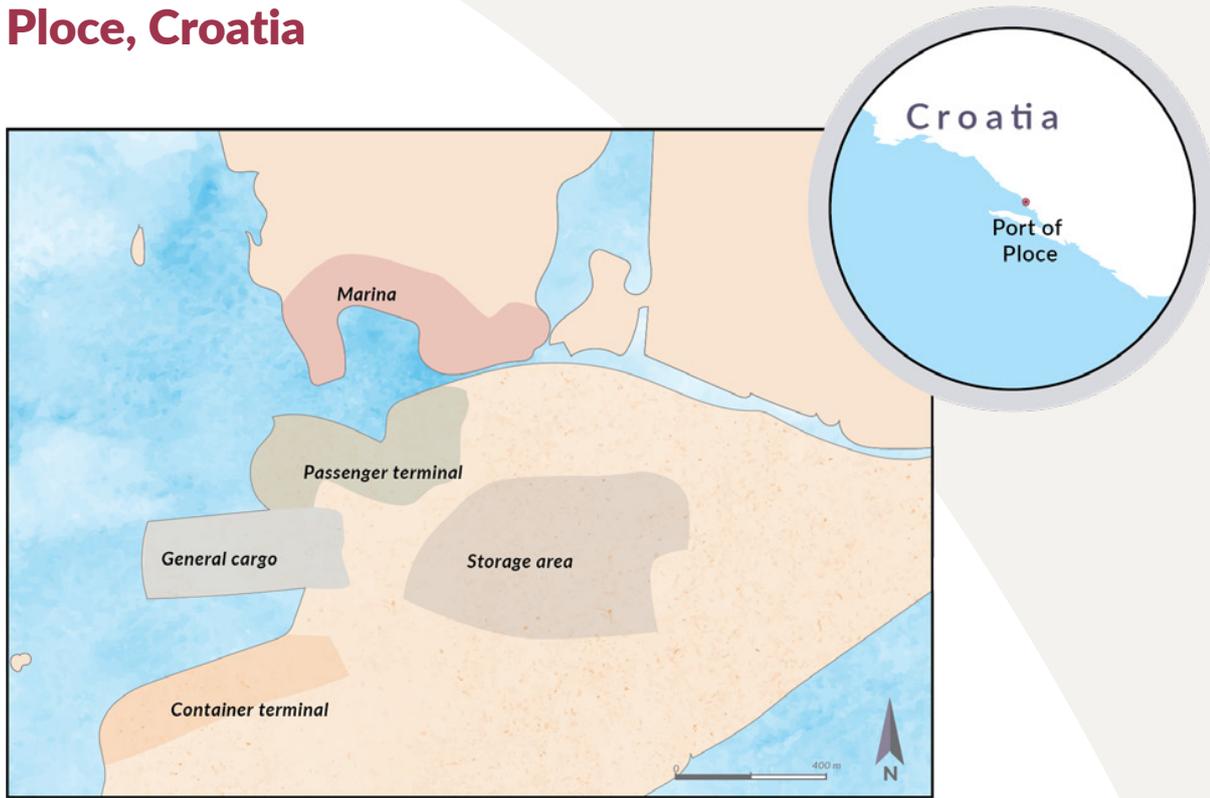


One of the shipping containers holding the hundreds of millions of illegal cigarettes seized at the port of Piraeus.  
© Greek Government

Germany, originally destined for Türkiye and then re-exported to Vietnam, was blocked on its way to Asia upon the request of Greek customs, following a warning letter by the Basel Action Network as part of a coalition effort to prevent European waste from being exported.<sup>285</sup> Apparently, risk profiles for outbound cargoes are not done at the local level in Piraeus, as import remains the priority.<sup>286</sup>

As for the traffic of illicit firearms, the Global Organized Crime Index highlights how Greece is a destination country for illicit arms from Bulgaria, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro.<sup>287</sup> As firearms are also trafficked to Greece from North Africa and the Levant, it is understandable why Piraeus features in this market. For example, in 2016, it was reported that four special guards had been arrested as they tried to smuggle at least six weapons and a large amount of ammunition from Crete to the Piraeus port. According to the tip-off, which has not been confirmed, the weapons were to be handed over to a foreign national.<sup>288</sup>

# Ploce, Croatia



Size of the port: Small	Ownership: Public-private
Type of port: Coastal natural	Location: South-eastern Adriatic
Type of commercial traffic: General cargo, container cargo	Most common container ships: Feedermax, Feeder, Small feeder
TEUs/year: 25 717 (2020)	Most commonly seized goods: Cocaine, heroin, cigarettes

**FIGURE 19** The port of Ploce.

The port of Ploce is a small port with a big problem: cocaine. Although as recently as 2019 Ploce was not considered a hotspot of organized crime, the port is now considered one of the most vulnerable to illicit activities on the Adriatic.<sup>289</sup>

The town of approximately 6 000 people is located at the southern tip of Croatia on the Dalmatian coast. It is connected with infrastructure running along the coast, such as the Adriatic highway, which connects the port of Ploce with Croatian coastal cities and Italy to the north, and to Montenegro and Albania to the south. In addition, the newly built A-1 highway connects Ploce to the Croatian capital Zagreb, while

the port is also connected to Corridor X via Corridor V-c, which links it with Serbia to the east and Austria to the north-west.<sup>290</sup> As Bosnia and Herzegovina is more or less landlocked,<sup>291</sup> Ploce is one of the closest ports to Sarajevo. The country heavily relies on Ploce for its imports and exports. Indeed, in 2020, 76.7% of the port's revenues were generated by Bosnian companies. It is also a key link for trafficking through Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Despite the port's relevance in the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>292</sup> the war in the former Yugoslavia drastically reduced its operation to 5-10% of its capacity. In 1997, two years after the end of hostilities, Croatian authorities



A view of the small port of Ploče. © GI-TOC

established the Port Authority, the entity mandated to build, use and manage the port. Since 2005, the Port of Ploče JSC is the main port operator and, together with three other limited-liability companies, constitutes the Port of Ploče Group.<sup>293</sup>

### ***Security lapses create criminal opportunities***

Ploče Port Authority and Lučka sigurnost LLD oversee compliance with the ISPS Code on safety and security in and around the port.<sup>295</sup> According to the Maritime and Port Security Act, the port security assessment and plan must be renewed every five years to identify vulnerabilities and potential threats posed to port (and port users') security.<sup>296</sup> The current plan was adopted in August 2015;<sup>297</sup> a new one has not yet been adopted, allegedly because of unspecified shortcomings.<sup>298</sup>

The (public-private) port security company surveils the perimeter and controls access to all entry and exit gates. Fencing is in line with ISPS standards (2.4 metres high) and covers the whole perimeter of the port.<sup>299</sup> The port area is partially covered by security cameras; however, many of them are obsolete and need to be replaced.<sup>300</sup> The plan is to install 20–30 cameras, including one thermal imaging camera, which would cover the loading and unloading areas as well as the berths and the railway terminal, which are currently

Ploče's container terminal can handle 60 000 TEUs per year, but in 2020 there were only 25 717 TEUs.<sup>294</sup> This shows that there is not much container traffic through the port, but that does not mean that there is a correspondingly low level of illicit activity.

uncovered. There are control centres in the Port Authority and the Lučka sigurnost LLC. The systems are connected but physically separated.<sup>301</sup>

Customs and police are also present in the port. However, it is worth noting that they worked without a scanner until a mobile one was purchased in May 2021.<sup>302</sup> There seem to be some tensions between the different security providers in the port. State law enforcement agencies seem to have concerns about the integrity of some port security staff to the point of keeping contact with them to a minimum during serious investigations.<sup>303</sup> A police operation in February 2021 led to the arrest of a customs official who allegedly turned a blind eye to containers carrying cocaine.<sup>304</sup> According to various port stakeholders and security providers, criminal activity increased in the port because of its reputation for low levels of security,<sup>305</sup> not least the absence of scanners until May 2021.<sup>306</sup>



Croatian special police agents guard bags of cocaine during a news conference in Dubrovnik, Croatia, on 14 April 2021. The Croatian police seized 574.8 kilograms of high-purity cocaine hidden in a banana container in the port of Ploče. © GrgoxJelavic/Pixsell via IMAGO

### Cocaine finds Ploče

As noted, Ploče is one of the smaller ports on the Adriatic, and certainly not one of the most important in SEE. Yet between 2019 and 2021, the name Ploče kept appearing in police reports about cocaine busts. According to an indictment issued by the Croatian Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organized Crime, between October 2019 and the end of 2020, a criminal consortium of individuals from Croatia, Ecuador and Italy procured and transported more than 100 kilograms of cocaine from Ecuador destined for the Croatian and Italian markets. A customs officer (currently in custody)<sup>307</sup> in Ploče who ensured the transit through the port to the agreed destination, received bribes of €40 000 per container.<sup>308</sup> The cocaine was concealed in banana boxes using the rip-on/rip off method.<sup>309</sup> The Office points out that the criminal organization earned €25 000 per kilogram of cocaine.<sup>310</sup> According to unofficial estimates, 100 kilograms of cocaine is double Zagreb's current annual consumption.<sup>311</sup>

In another case, in 2020–2021, the Office identified a criminal ring in Dubrovnik-Neretva County importing a shipment of 56 kilograms of cocaine from Ecuador. The substance was hidden in the refrigeration system of a container carrying bananas.<sup>312</sup> According to a hotelier from Zagreb who was caught red-handed by police together with two accomplices in Metković, a town 25 kilometres from Ploče, he was paid €50 000 to transfer the cocaine to the marina Sukošan close to Zadar and hand it over to an unknown buyer.<sup>313</sup>

In March 2021, police and customs seized a record shipment of 575 kilograms of cocaine, worth €57 million, originating from Ecuador.<sup>314</sup> The substance was hidden in the structure of containers carrying a shipment of 21.6 tonnes of bananas, mostly inside the floor, between metal sheets. Investigations, which also involve the Bosnian State Investigation and Protection Agency, are still ongoing, but have already revealed that the main recipient of the legal banana shipment

was Prefer Europa, a company from Sturovo, Slovakia. Other recipients have been identified in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>315</sup>

Eight months later, in November 2021 police divers found 62 kilograms of cocaine, worth approximately €17 million, in 54 packages 16 metres below sea level inside a tank attached with magnets and screws to the hull of a ship transporting coal from Colombia via Ploče to Brindisi, Italy.<sup>316</sup>

### **Heroin and cigarettes**

Until the end of 2020, the amount of heroin seized in Dubrovnik-Neretva County (where Ploče is located) was negligible: in 2019, police seized just 21.6 grams,<sup>317</sup> and only 44.9 grams in 2020 (0.36% of the total amount of heroin seized in Croatia).<sup>318</sup> However, in October 2021, customs and police inspected a container carrying lead plates (for a company based in Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina) from Iraq via Türkiye and Ploče, with Belgium as the final destination.<sup>319</sup> Authorities discovered 220 kilograms of heroin in the container, but decided to perform a controlled delivery; unfortunately, the recipients did not pick up the load.

There is also recent evidence of cigarette smuggling through the port of Ploče. In February 2022, customs officers seized 15.7 million contraband cigarettes in a container arriving from Dubai, which was officially carrying glassware destined for a company in Slovakia. Six people were arrested.<sup>320</sup> Croatian authorities allege that this criminal network had previously delivered at least three containers with over 2.5 million boxes of cigarettes, transported through Croatia and sold in western Europe for an estimated profit of at least €3.7 million. Police and prosecution have also started building a case on the possible involvement of customs officers who may have accepted bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye to ensure safe transit of the port.<sup>321</sup>

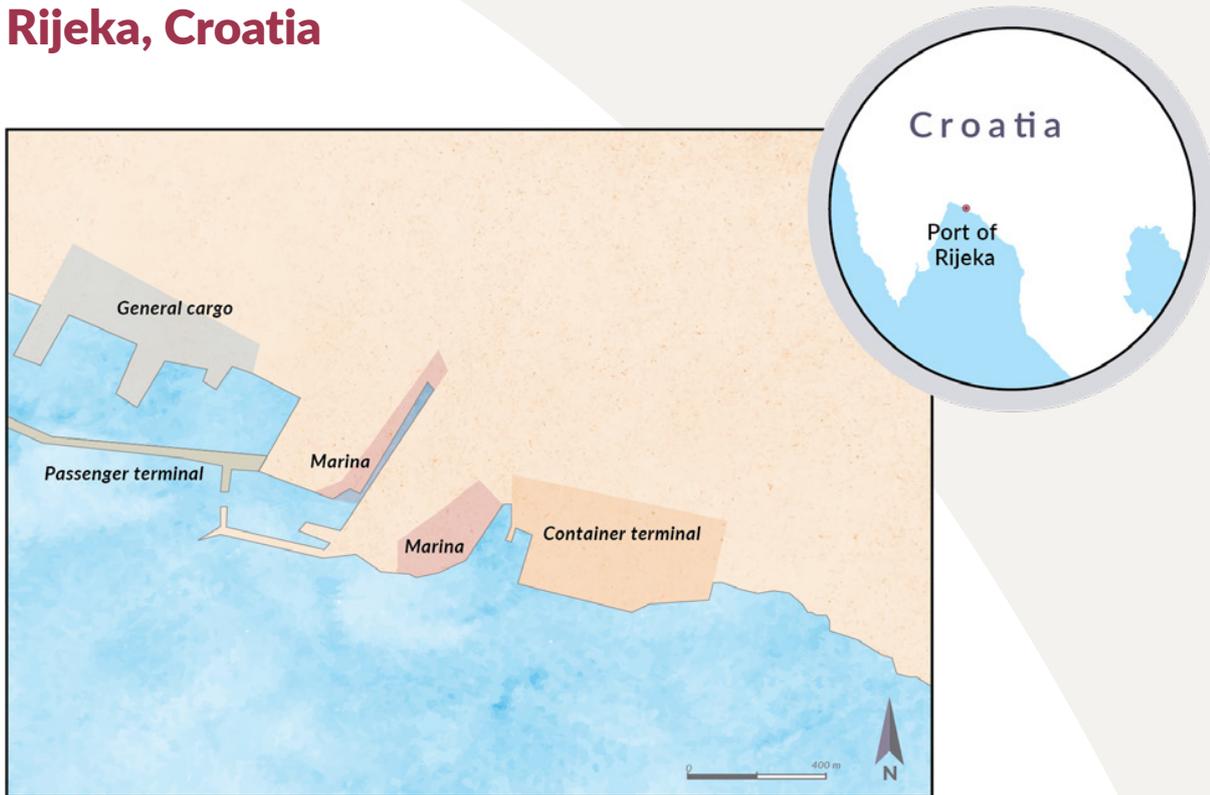
### **A Balkan network of cells**

Two differently structured criminal networks operate in the port of Ploče, both of which are active in cocaine trafficking. The first consists of Croats from the Ploče area, which focus on trafficking of small quantities of cocaine from Ecuador to Croatia and, to a lesser extent, Italy.<sup>322</sup> These criminals seem to operate autonomously, and have no apparent connection with major Balkan criminal networks.

The second criminal group is what has often been labelled by media as the 'Balkan cartel', for which locals in Ploče are useful because of their EU citizenship.<sup>323</sup> In April 2022, Croatian police arrested Petar Ćosić and accused him of leading a criminal association of 14 members that allegedly smuggled cocaine worth more than €17 million from Latin America to Europe via Ploče.<sup>324</sup> Ćosić was not new to the police. In May 2011, Croatian police arrested him, together with other individuals from Serbia, Slovenia and Albania, as a result of international operation Dogma, following up on a seizure of 718 kilograms of cocaine that arrived in Valencia from Brazil.<sup>325</sup> On the same day, Serbian police arrested Darko Šarić – the renowned 'cocaine king'.<sup>326</sup> Both Ćosić and Šarić are suspected of the assassination of a close associate, Milan Milovac, in Ecuador in 2020.<sup>327</sup> Investigators corroborated these claims after decoding communications on a messaging application.<sup>328</sup>

*Criminal activity increased in the port because of its reputation for low levels of security.*

# Rijeka, Croatia



<b>Size of the port:</b> Medium	<b>Ownership:</b> Public-private
<b>Type of port:</b> River basin	<b>Location:</b> North-eastern Adriatic Sea
<b>Type of commercial traffic:</b> General cargo, container cargo	<b>Most common container ships:</b> Feedermax, Feeder, Small feeder
<b>TEUs/year:</b> 356 068 (2021)	<b>Most commonly seized goods:</b> Cocaine, synthetic drugs

**FIGURE 20** The port of Rijeka.

The port of Rijeka is Croatia’s largest international deep-sea cargo port. Located along the north-eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, the port is at the southern end of the Pan-European Corridor V-b, a maritime extension of the rail and road routes connecting central Europe with the Istrian peninsula. Its location along major highways to Croatia, Slovenia and Italy makes it a key entry point for cocaine and synthetic drugs.

The port faced stagnation after the war in Yugoslavia.<sup>329</sup> To rejuvenate the port, the government established the Port Authority of Rijeka in 1996 as a non-profit state institution to manage, construct, use and develop the port.<sup>330</sup> Today, the port covers a total area of almost 40 hectares served by 22 kilometres

of railroads,<sup>331</sup> and can accommodate ships with a maximum draught of 13.9 metres. The port regularly welcomes general cargo ships (34%), container ships (30%), fishing vessels (5%), oil and chemical tankers (2%) and high-speed boats (2%).<sup>332</sup>

The Port of Rijeka JSC, together with three limited-liability companies,<sup>333</sup> has been the concessionaire of the port since 2000 and will enjoy the right to operate in the port until 2042. Since 2021, just over a quarter of the port has been owned by a Polish company, Rubicon Partners Ventures.<sup>334</sup> The container operator is Adriatic Gate JSC, jointly owned by Port of Rijeka JSC (49%) and International Container Terminal Services ICTSI (51%). The latter is a company from the Philippines, which has



A storage area in the container terminal at the port of Rijeka. © GI-TOC

been a strategic partner since 2011, with a concession until 2041.<sup>335</sup>

Rijeka's capacity is growing. From 2011, when the Adriatic Gate Container Terminal became operational, to 2021, annual traffic increased by 136%.<sup>336</sup> There is potential for further growth.

A new terminal, the Zagreb Deep Sea Terminal, is currently being developed. With a depth of 20 metres at the berths, the port will be able to receive container

### Security

Since 1996, the Rijeka Port Authority has secured the entire perimeter of the port: the whole Kvarner Bay and the port terminals (Rijeka, Bakar, Raša, Zamet, Omišalj).<sup>339</sup> Article 13 of its statute emphasizes the Authority's role in port protection as well as ensuring the safety of ships, shores, facilities and the marine environment.<sup>340</sup> With quinquennial assessments and plans,<sup>341</sup> the Port Authority also guarantees the

ships of the Panamax and Postpanamax class. It is worth noting that the procedure for granting the concession began in 2018, although the process was postponed in 2020. There is some speculation that the port was pressured to stop the process when one of the two offers came from a Chinese consortium.<sup>337</sup> In the end, in March 2021, Rijeka's Port Authority granted a 50-year concession to the Netherlands APM Terminals BV and Croatian-based ENNA Logic JSC's consortium.<sup>338</sup>

application of the ISPS Code and standards of the ISO 9001:2015 certification for traffic and security and ISO 14001:2015 for environmental protection systems.<sup>342</sup> Croatia's EU accession also led to the harmonization of port rules with strict standards.<sup>343</sup>

To ensure security, Rijeka's Port Authority also relies on the services of Securitas Hrvatska LLC, a private legal entity in charge of technical security.<sup>344</sup> They provide

specialized physical and technical protection, fire protection, escort of cash and valuables, a central alarm system and response to alarm calls.<sup>345</sup> All employees dealing with port security undergo regular training and testing.<sup>346</sup> The Port Authority of Rijeka and Securitas Hrvatska LLC are in daily communication, and two mobile teams are always operational.<sup>347</sup>

Within the Adriatic Gate JSC container terminal, an organizational unit provides security-related services, primarily cargo care and safety during loading/unloading operations, facility safety and fire protection.<sup>348</sup> They are not responsible for container control or monitoring movements into or out of the terminal.<sup>349</sup>

In addition to the Port Authority, Securitas Hrvatska LLC, Adriatic Gate JSC and customs and police administrations deal with the port of Rijeka security elements critical to preventing illicit activities. Interviews confirm trust among different port security actors, where competencies are respected. Especially at its main entrance, the port of Rijeka is strictly supervised. The Port Authority checks people and vehicle entry and exit, and anyone who wants to enter the port area must log in to a digital system connected to the police database.<sup>350</sup> The implementation of the control system has measurably contributed to improved safety and protection within the port area.<sup>351</sup> Fencing

## Illicit markets

Recent police operations indicate that cocaine and synthetic drug trafficking are the major illicit activities at the port of Rijeka. However, drug trafficking does not seem to have an impact on the security or safety of the city – nor do city officials perceive any serious related security threat.<sup>358</sup> Organized crime is not viewed as a

## Cocaine

Rijeka first became an entry point for cocaine in the second half of the 1990s. In April and May 1997, police seized 557 kilograms of 98% pure cocaine from Ecuador in a container that was meant to reach western Europe.<sup>360</sup> Similarly, in December 1999, a shipment of 661 kilograms of cocaine, worth €43 million, was found in a container officially carrying canned tuna from Ecuador to Antwerp.

and lighting align with the ISPS Code.<sup>352</sup> For example, more than 70 cameras are used at the container terminal by Adriatic Gate JSC, the Rijeka Port Authority and the customs administration. However, the systems are separate; there is no central command centre from which all cameras can be monitored.

Accession to the EU led to enhanced customs procedures in controlling containers in the port of Rijeka.<sup>353</sup> Customs authorities apply risk analysis, use a mobile scanner, perform different physical inspection modalities and collaborate with police and prosecution investigations. Overall, customs scans 3–5% of containers arriving at the port; the exact number is unavailable as they do not keep track of or record the controls performed.<sup>354</sup>

Despite these security provisions, there have been a few incidents at the port. In 2020, Syrian seafarers disembarked from their ship and exited the port through a secondary, unmonitored gate connecting the railway to the port. The gate was open, and nobody asked for their papers.<sup>355</sup> In October 2021, Greenpeace activists entered the port premises and painted 'climate killer' on the ship *LNG Croatia*.<sup>356</sup> Nobody noticed them, although access to the terminals is strictly forbidden. 'Something like that could not happen in larger ports,' affirmed a seafarers' trade union representative.<sup>357</sup>

problem affecting Rijeka, where crime rates are low and drug traffic through the port is believed to be meant to supply other markets, most likely western Europe – a trend likely to increase after Croatia joins the Schengen zone.<sup>359</sup>

In 2007 and 2008, police made multiple seizures of cocaine in the port that was destined for foreign markets. On the first occasion, around 81 kilograms of 80–85% pure cocaine, worth €20 million, was found in a container from Ecuador, officially carrying bamboo materials and parquet flooring. Police made a controlled delivery to the destination in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>361</sup> Police services of Croatia, Serbia, North



Operation NANA, led by the Croatian police and conducted by a number of countries together with the US Drug Enforcement Administration and Europol, dismantled an organized crime group in March 2018. The criminal network was suspected of transporting cocaine from Colombia, Ecuador and Panama to Europe. © Europol

Macedonia, Slovenia, Greece and the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina broke the drug trafficking ring, and arrested six Bosnians and a Greek citizen on suspicion of trafficking.<sup>362</sup>

In 2008, Rijeka customs found 15 kilograms of cocaine hidden in a container that travelled from Ecuador via Hamburg and Malta to Rijeka, with a final destination of Bar, Montenegro. The Bill of Lading declared a load of frozen fruit.<sup>363</sup> Another seizure occurred in June 2008 at the container terminal in Rijeka, when police and customs found 188 kilograms of norephedrine, a base used to synthesize cocaine and other stimulants. The container travelled from India to Malta before transiting Rijeka, with Montreal, Canada, as the final destination. Authorities decided to inspect the container because its recipient was a company whose owner was arrested in Zagreb on suspicion of smuggling 380 kilograms of cocaine earlier that year. A second container with the same declaration was found soon after, with 223 kilograms of norephedrine.<sup>364</sup>

Between 2017 and 2021, there were four significant police actions in Rijeka. First, police seized 480 kilograms of cocaine hidden among legal goods (machines) from Peru to Rijeka in January 2017; four

years later, they arrested 14 people in connection with the crime.<sup>365</sup> The load was worth about €70 million, and the media reported that it most likely belonged to the Calabrian 'ndrangheta.<sup>366</sup> Interestingly, the public did not find out about the seizure until February 2021, nor was it included in the public data on drug seizures.<sup>367</sup> The aim was to avoid the disclosure of sensitive information about investigations carried out by the Italian police in cooperation with Croatian and Slovenian counterparts.

A second criminal investigation, in March 2018, led to the seizure of 100 kilograms of cocaine in a container carrying legal mixed metal waste from Colombia to Rijeka and the arrest of nine individuals.<sup>368</sup> The prosecution charged Stjepan Prnjat – who the media refer to as the 'Croatian Escobar' – and eight other persons for the organization of a criminal association in Croatia, Slovenia and other EU countries.<sup>369</sup>

In December 2020, police seized 1 kilogram of cocaine in a container of bananas from Ecuador. The perpetrators are unknown.<sup>370</sup> With the same modus operandi, in March 2021, 26 kilograms of cocaine were again found in a cargo of bananas from Ecuador. The perpetrators are also unknown.<sup>371</sup>

*Railroad connections between the port of Rijeka and Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are becoming important for drug trafficking.*

### **Synthetic drugs – a new trend?**

According to a senior police official in Croatia, the railroad connections between the port of Rijeka and Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are becoming important for drug trafficking.<sup>372</sup> For example, the Slovak Financial Administration recorded a historic seizure in July 2020 after customs in Nitra discovered 1.5 tonnes of methamphetamine imported from Mexico, valued at approximately €300 million.<sup>373</sup> The decision to inspect the consignment was taken because it arrived from a well-known drug route from Mexico to the port of Rijeka.<sup>374</sup> From Slovakia, it was supposed to be distributed throughout the EU. According to the UNODC, Mexican drug cartels have recently increased their distribution in Europe.<sup>375</sup>

### **Criminal actors**

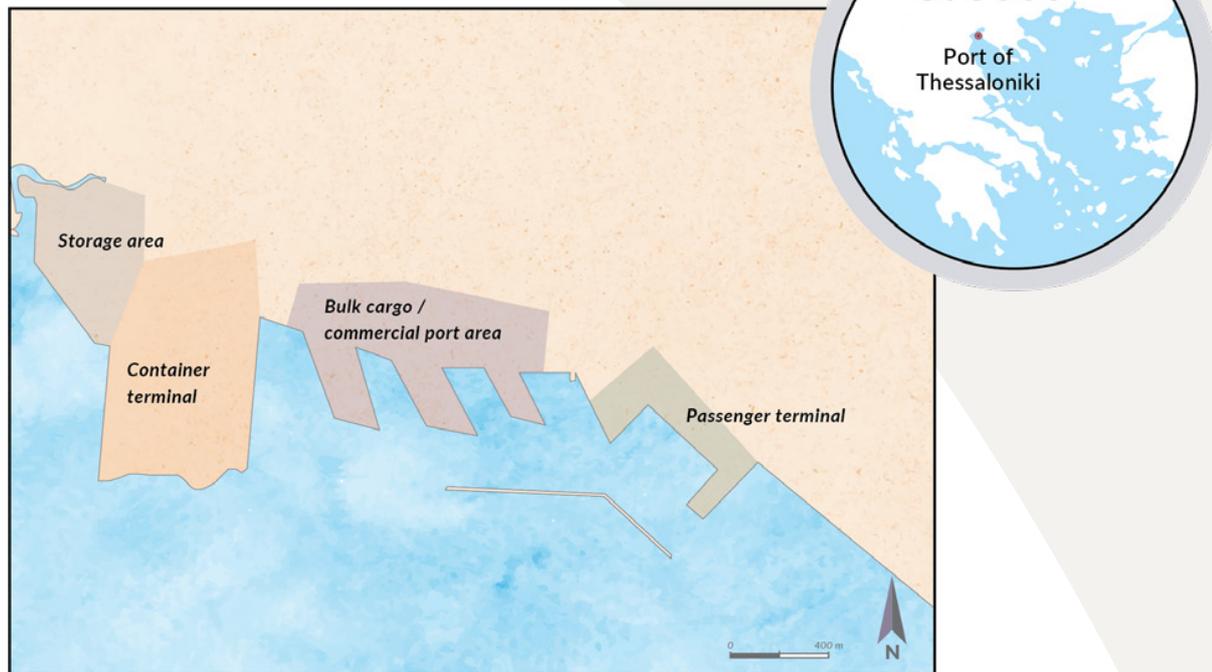
According to Croatian police, a Balkan criminal network operates in the region of Rijeka, with links to around 20 criminal cells operating in SEE and worldwide.<sup>376</sup> In Rijeka, Croats are primarily couriers.<sup>377</sup> They have contacts with other cells depending on the task and the market, and it is thought that they have connections to Montenegrin clans. Foreign criminal groups, such as the Calabrian 'ndrangheta are also reportedly involved in smuggling through the Croatian port, with local assistance.<sup>378</sup> Two names, however, became relevant for the port of Rijeka in the past two decades based on media reporting, indictments and interviews: Slobodan Kašić and Stjepan Prnjat.

Slobodan Kašić, a Croat, has been wanted by the Croatian judiciary for decades because of his involvement in smuggling cocaine from Ecuador to Croatia.<sup>379</sup> After his sentencing to 13 years of imprisonment in 1997, he allegedly fled to Latin America where he is thought to be hiding using a Bosnian passport in the name of Mario Kašić.<sup>380</sup> US Drug Enforcement Administration officials identified him as one of the most important links between the cartels of South America and various European criminal groups, especially from the Balkans.<sup>381</sup> The media report that his role was to establish contact between criminal groups and arrange meetings between cocaine suppliers, buyers and resellers without directly getting involved in the actual trafficking. His profits are believed to have been invested legally, especially in infrastructure projects, and a football club.<sup>382</sup>

In 2008, he was arrested for money laundering in Venezuela.<sup>383</sup> Croatia tried unsuccessfully to extradite him. He moved to Peru, where police arrested him again in Lima in August 2010.<sup>384</sup> Kašić was soon released, allegedly thanks to bribes made to key people. Nicknamed Don Mario, in 2015, he requested the suspension of his prison sentence in Croatia due to the obsolescence of criminal guilt. Rijeka County Court regarded his request as unfounded and rejected it. He is still somewhere in Latin America.<sup>385</sup>

Stjepan Prnjat is a Croatian citizen born in Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Investigators believe that he was the mastermind of cocaine trafficking from Latin America to Europe through the port of Rijeka.<sup>386</sup> After his arrest in March 2008, he agreed to nine years of imprisonment and paid a fine of €500 000. The most recent case that he has been linked with dates back to March 2018, when police found 100 kilograms of cocaine in a container officially carrying metal.<sup>387</sup> According to the indictment, the intercepted drugs were a test shipment for bigger loads in the future. According to investigators, Prnjat organized the purchase as head of a criminal consortium with Colombian and Croatian associates.<sup>388</sup>

## Thessaloniki, Greece



<b>Size of the port:</b> Medium	<b>Ownership:</b> Private (concession until 2051)
<b>Type of port:</b> Coastal breakwater	<b>Location:</b> North Aegean Sea
<b>Type of commercial traffic:</b> Bulk cargo, container cargo	<b>Most common container ships:</b> Feedermax, Feeder, Small feeder
<b>TEUs/year:</b> 460 724 (2020)	<b>Most commonly seized goods:</b> Counterfeit cigarettes, cocaine

**FIGURE 21** The port of Thessaloniki.

The port of Thessaloniki in northern Greece is a key entry point for drugs and cigarettes being smuggled into North Macedonia and Bulgaria. It is also a magnet for criminal groups from these countries, as well as Albanians involved in the smuggling of cocaine and cannabis.

Since the beginning of its modernization in the 1970s, the port of Thessaloniki has been an essential trade hub for the Greek regions of eastern and central Macedonia, Thessaly and Thrace.

Today, the port of Thessaloniki is strongly connected with the port of Piraeus, as almost one third of its vessel calls (28%) are destined for or coming from the port of Piraeus.<sup>389</sup> This, together with the recent development of land infrastructure to the north with Corridors IV and X,

makes Thessaloniki a natural goods conduit, which guarantees that North Macedonia, western Bulgaria, western Romania and south-eastern Serbia indirectly benefit from Piraeus' role in worldwide trade.

The port is owned by Societe Anonyme 'Thessaloniki Port Authority', a private listed company established in 1999, which enjoys the exclusive right to use and exploit the sites, buildings and installations of the coastal zone of the port of Thessaloniki until 2051.<sup>390</sup>

It is worth noting that Ivan Savvidis, aka 'the Russian tsar of Thessaloniki' in the media, a Russian billionaire of Greek origin born in Georgia and who owns a majority of Thessaloniki PAOK football club, de facto controls 71.9% of the port.<sup>391</sup> He is a well-known figure in the region,



Cranes at a commercial dock, Thessaloniki, Macedonia, Greece. © DEA/J.E.SCHURR/De Agostini via Getty Images

not least for being accused of influence-peddling a case in North Macedonia. He was also accused, in media reports, of being involved in the recruitment of Skopje-based football hooligans to riot in the capital.<sup>392</sup>

The port infrastructure includes six piers spread out along a 6 200-metre-long quay and a sea depth of up to 12 metres. Annually, the port serves about 2 000 vessels, four million tonnes of bulk goods and general cargo of 450 000 TEUs.<sup>393</sup> Large investment plans are in progress, with the most important being

### **Security vulnerabilities**

In recent years, the port privatization process has facilitated the introduction of digitalized screening procedures for container-related information, CCTV camera installations and scanning systems in the port, thus improving the overall level of security and the port's compliance with EU regulations.<sup>395</sup>

However, there are concerns that the process of digitalization may be moving too swiftly, reducing the presence of skilled customs officials. Less than 1% of containers arriving at Thessaloniki are checked by local customs officials, and when they are it is often based on decisions taken by central offices in Athens.<sup>396</sup>

Another vulnerability is related to the ecosystem around the port. A few kilometres away from the port of Thessaloniki, a former industrial area hosts numerous warehouses, container storage and a large

the expansion of the container terminal that aims to double its capacity and obtain a deep-sea capability to handle vessels carrying up to 18 000 TEUs.<sup>394</sup>

The port is connected to a dense traffic system that is directly linked to the national and international road network as well as the international airport, bypassing the city entrance. This likely exposes the port to criminal groups interested in gaining direct access to the legitimate stream of containerized commerce without physically entering the city centre.

fruit and vegetable wholesale market, where most of the containers carrying tropical fruit from Latin America wait to be loaded onto trucks bound for Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania on a daily basis.<sup>397</sup> Many of these containers are transported from the port to the wholesale market – where most of the manpower is Albanian and Bulgarian – in 10 to 15 minutes. The facilities have no CCTV cameras or other security measures in place, other than a private security doorman at the entry and exit points.<sup>398</sup>

As cocaine tends to be imported in shipments of fresh fruit, there are concerns that this market area could be a permissive environment for offloading and trans-shipment of drugs or other illicit goods hidden in containers that are brought to the warehouses.

### ***Cocaine in banana boxes – again***

Indeed, there are grounds for concern that Thessaloniki is an entry point for cocaine. There has been a steady increase in seizures in the past decade.<sup>399</sup> Methods of concealment vary depending on the shipment, but the 'hide-and-seek' and 'in container parts' are the most commonly used.<sup>400</sup> As in other ports in SEE, the drugs are usually contained in shipments of fruit from Latin America.

In March 2022, with the use of a mobile scanner and physical inspections, Thessaloniki customs found more than 100 kilograms of cocaine concealed in boxes of bananas inside a container that arrived from Malta. They decided to surveil it while it travelled to its final destination by truck, a company in Veria, south-west of Thessaloniki. Once the truck entered the company's premises, authorities arrested the truck drivers as well as the legal representative and three employees of the company.<sup>401</sup>

In 2019, a total of around 75 kilograms of cocaine were found in less than a week, hidden in two refrigerated containers carrying bananas.<sup>402</sup> More recently, in January 2021, police arrested members of a criminal network consisting of Albanian, Croatian and Greek citizens in possession of over 300 kilograms of pure cocaine hidden in a van.<sup>403</sup> In November 2021, packages amounting to 82 kilograms of cocaine were found in a refrigerated container carrying bananas that arrived on a ship from Ecuador.

### ***Foreign criminal actors***

Regarding the criminal actors, the modus operandi has not significantly changed over the past decades, and suggests the existence of a strong presence of Bulgarian networks infiltrating the legal business and using fake companies as final recipients of shipments from Latin America.<sup>404</sup> The Thessaloniki–Sofia axis is apparently very well known to local law enforcement authorities, and several drug cases confirm the practice of establishing shell and front companies in either Bulgaria or Greece to disguise their illicit activities.<sup>405</sup> It is thought that Albanian nationals provide logistical support with trafficking to Bulgaria and Serbia, as well as for the local cocaine and cannabis markets. The local markets are run by criminal networks made up of Georgian, Pakistani, Algerian and Moroccan nationals, but strongly rely on Greeks and ethnic Albanian Greeks across the city for the drug supply.<sup>406</sup>

### ***Cigarette smuggling***

In the past 10 to 15 years, there have been several major seizures of tobacco products and counterfeit cigarettes in the port of Thessaloniki, making it the regional hub for this type of illicit market.<sup>407</sup> In 2019 alone, customs seized more than 32 million cigarettes in containers shipped from the Chinese ports of Shekou and Yantian.<sup>408</sup>

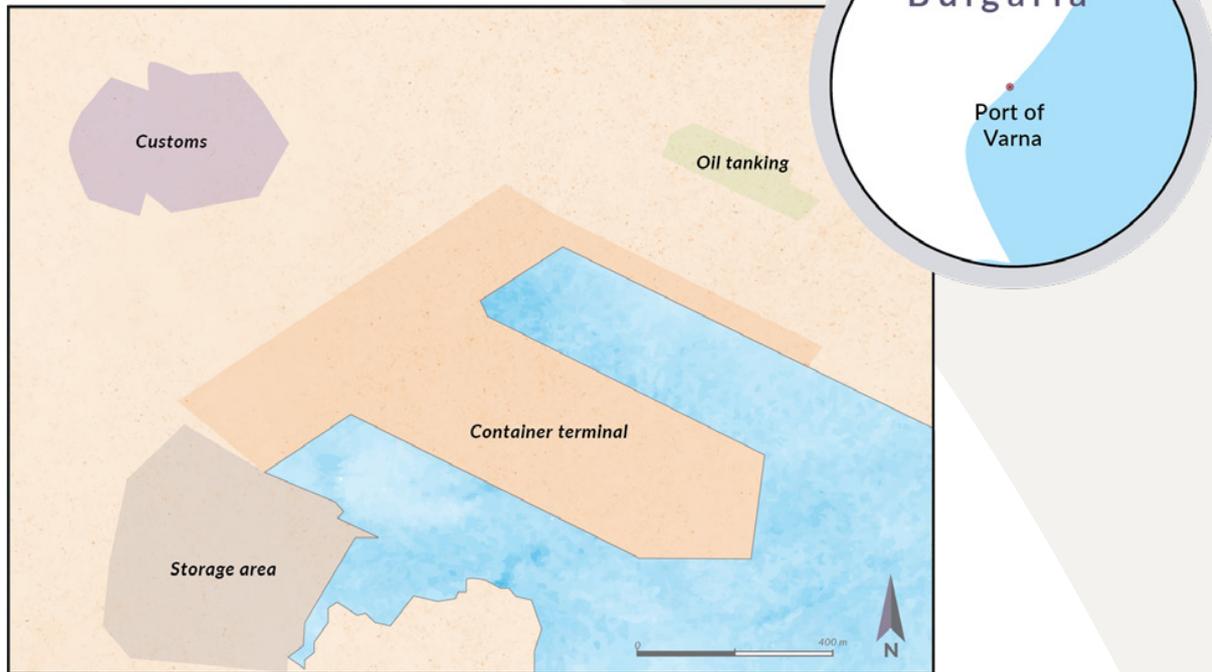


Contraband cigarettes seized in Thessaloniki port. © Ekathimerini.com

According to a customs representative, the majority of cigarettes smuggled via the port of Thessaloniki usually originate in China and pass through Turkish ports either in the eastern Mediterranean or in the southern Black Sea. The Turkish criminal groups frequently use the rip-on/rip-off method to hide cigarettes in containers carrying carpets from Anatolia, and count on a 'functioning structure responsible for the prompt distribution of cigarettes when the packages leave the port premises' and the city.<sup>409</sup> Previous seizures confirm not only the use of the rip-on/rip-off method but also the role of Bulgarian criminal front companies. For instance, in 2014, authorities seized a shipment of 15.2 million cigarettes arriving at the port of Thessaloniki from the United Arab Emirates, hidden in a container officially carrying fabric, to a company in Bulgaria.<sup>410</sup>

No other criminal markets involving containerized cargo reportedly exist in the port of Thessaloniki. It is not clear if this is due to an absence of information or an absence of crime.

## Varna-West, Bulgaria



<b>Size of the port:</b> Medium	<b>Ownership:</b> Public
<b>Type of port:</b> Coastal breakwater	<b>Location:</b> South-western Black Sea
<b>Type of commercial traffic:</b> Bulk cargo, container cargo	<b>Most common container ships:</b> Feedermax, Feeder, Small feeder
<b>TEUs/year:</b> 160 000 (2018)	<b>Most commonly seized goods:</b> Waste, precursors, heroin

**FIGURE 22** The port of Varna-West.

The port of Varna on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast is an important entry point for drugs, counterfeit goods and containerized waste. Recent cases show that the port is also exposed to money laundering and corruption.

The port of Varna-West is owned by a JSC with 100% state participation. Ownership rights are exerted by the Bulgarian Ministry of Transportation and Communications.

Two separate terminals make up the structure of the port in the city of Varna: Varna-East and Varna-West.<sup>411</sup>

However, since Varna-East stopped processing containers in 2015, Varna-West has progressively become the only container terminal on the northern coast of Bulgaria and the largest port facility in the country, handling the largest portion of the maritime container cargo to and from the country.<sup>412</sup> In numbers, Varna-West handled around eight million tonnes of cargo in 2020, with the most recent available annual report of the port showing that 26% was container cargo (160 000 TEUs in 2018).



The Asparuhov bridge over Lake Varna. © DEA/J.E.SCHURR/De Agostini via Getty Images

The port functions as an external border of the EU and is an important hub for the Bulgarian economy. The port's two terminals connect Corridor VIII and the Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia, which is one of the possible branches of the Belt and Road Initiative. The port also has access to the port of Rousse by means of the Varna–Rousse railway, and by extension to Corridor VII. Not least, the Hemus motorway, currently under construction, will likely provide a quick link to the

### **Management of the port raises concerns**

The (under)development of the port has been controversial and multiple sources have expressed concerns over its future. For example, in 2015 Varna-East stopped processing container cargo, leaving the infrastructure unused and without appropriate maintenance. Much of the unused space was later turned into a parking lot with an amusement park and several restaurants. This 'improvement' was carried out under the guise of 'a partial opening of the port territory for public access to achieve optimal integration of the urban area with the sea'.<sup>415</sup> However, a former public servant claimed that these spaces were given to former organized crime leaders to launder their money through cheap concessions.<sup>416</sup>

Another point of contention was the deepening of Canal 1, which connects the bay to Lake Varna and to Varna-West, to accommodate bigger container ships at Varna-West. More than €2 million were awarded by the Bulgarian Ports Infrastructure Company to its subsidiary – state enterprise 'Transport Construction and Restoration'.<sup>417</sup> This 'in-house' model allowed for the money to be paid to the subsidiary with no tender. From

capital, Sofia, and to Corridor IV. Therefore, the port of Varna is – or better, could be – of key strategic importance for the country.<sup>413</sup> The overall volume of cargo, however, has declined over the years. This is due to several factors, including the problematic infrastructure of the port – which is poorly connected to nearby infrastructure – and the subsequent inability of the port to market itself as an alternative to the more advanced ports of Constanta and Burgas.<sup>414</sup>

there, however, the state enterprise outsourced the work to a private company, apparently circumventing the Public Procurement Act.<sup>418</sup> According to media reportage, the private company is owned by two other entities, one of which is registered as an accredited representative of the Russian Hydrostroy (Гидрострой). So, with no clear criteria for selection of an appropriate contractor and with no tender, money from the national budget was awarded to a Russian company.<sup>419</sup>

The canal deepening was questioned, because while it could allow deep-draught vessels to enter the canal, the Asparuhov bridge (which connects the two shores of Lake Varna) has an air draft of 46 metres, too low for the height of Panamax and Postpanamax vessels.<sup>420</sup> Some observers have hinted that the deepening was not an effort to improve infrastructure and allow larger cargo ships to reach Varna-West, but rather served to provide clear access to Port Ezerovo, which is owned by Ahmed Dogan, honorary chairman of the Bulgarian political party Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Leaders of the party were designated for sanctions by the US Department of State in 2021 'due to their involvement

in significant corruption'.<sup>421</sup> Deepening operations have reached Port Ezerovo, but not Varna-West.<sup>422</sup> In April 2022, the General Directorate of National Police launched an operation to investigate the deepening of the canal in collaboration with the prosecutor's office.<sup>423</sup>

A local politician has also accused certain members of the board of directors of the port of being linked to former organized crime group bosses, who use their influence over port management to take advantage of the port's infrastructure.<sup>424</sup> The politician did not, however, provide any further evidence of this. However, after more than ten years of rule by the same political party that built significant networks inside various institutions – the port of Varna included – a new national government emerged in 2021, with serious implications for these networks.<sup>425</sup>

### *Improved levels of security*

Generally speaking, there are adequate security systems currently in place in the port. Inspections are carried out by the State Agency for National Security and if they identify certain security risks, the port facility security officers receive directives, which need to be implemented in a predetermined period.<sup>428</sup> Overall, port security stakeholders agree that security systems in place have improved significantly, especially since the ISPS Code entered into force in 2004.<sup>429</sup> This situation has much improved since the first decade of the 2000s, when there was, apparently, a lack of adequate fencing, insufficient CCTV cameras, and no scanners at entry points or inside the terminal.<sup>430</sup>

The territory of Varna-West where container cargo is processed is now well secured, in line with recommendations coming from annual inspections by the State Agency for National Security.<sup>431</sup> There

### *Seizures of illicit goods*

There have been a few major seizures of various drugs over the past four years. In 2018, for instance, border police found 2.5 tonnes of APAA, an amphetamine precursor, in a container officially carrying 300 sacks of citric acid.<sup>434</sup> Precursors coming from China are a problem, as reported by security officials. These are

While there are allegations of corruption surrounding the operation of the port, there have also been cases of corruption within the port. For example, in January 2017, 20 customs officers of Varna-West were arrested as a result of an operation led by the General Directorate Combating Organized Crime, following investigations of alleged bribes required by the officers and the imposition of additional customs duties different from the ones stipulated by law.<sup>426</sup> Paraphrasing a security official interviewed at the port, if offenders did not have corrupt officials in their pocket, they would not blindly send their illicit cargo to Varna – especially in view of the small number of containers arriving at the port.<sup>427</sup>

are four checkpoints, all of which have appropriate security measures in place. There is CCTV coverage and appropriate fencing on the perimeter of the port, a 24/7 video centre and radiation panes (checking for radioactive materials) at checkpoints, as well as X-rays checking vehicles that enter or exit the port.<sup>432</sup> Walk-through metal detectors and document checks are standard practice. Only staff are allowed to access berth spaces, and truck drivers that enter the port premises go through paper checks and scales. They are then taken to the loading/unloading area by a port staff member, who oversees the process of loading or unloading the cargo. Upon exit from the loading/unloading zone, trucks are again weighed.<sup>433</sup> In addition, customs and border police inspections are carried out at the port, except for when shipments are transiting the port.

bound for western Europe, and probably laboratories in Bulgaria, as the country is an important producer of synthetic drugs.<sup>435</sup>

Regarding heroin, Varna constitutes an additional entry point to the traditional Balkan route, where the substance is offloaded and exported to western Europe



In February 2021, authorities seized 400 kg of heroin at the port of Varna. © Darik News

over land. As an example, in February 2021, Bulgarian customs officials confiscated more than 400 kilograms of heroin from a ship transporting goods from Iran. The drugs were divided into 487 packages and hidden among asphalt rollers the ship was carrying – a shipment likely too big for the Bulgarian market.<sup>436</sup>

Cocaine also arrives at Varna, but the port is not considered a key entry point, especially in view of the port of Constanta's role in the region. However, small quantities are detected periodically and the two most recent operations, both involving the arrest of Dutch citizens, suggest that international criminal networks supplying western European markets exploit the Bulgarian port, especially thanks to the complicity of corrupt officials.<sup>437</sup> For instance, in December 2020, customs found more than 58 kilograms of cocaine in 234 packages concealed in a container carrying wooden boards,<sup>438</sup> while in January 2022, Bulgarian authorities again seized more than 50 kilograms of cocaine in a container full of boards on a ship travelling to the Netherlands.<sup>439</sup>

The import of containerized waste has become a controversial topic in Bulgaria over the past couple of years. Waste entering the port of Varna-West comes

mainly from Italy. A recent investigation identified alleged links between Italian mafia groups and Bulgarian oligarchs. Investigations have shown that the practice has been going on for several years, probably facilitated by a lack of checks on waste imports in Bulgaria or the refusal to exercise formal control over such imports into the country, which involves a lot of paperwork. In February 2020, Bulgarian authorities started sending back the first 54 of 127 waste containers to Italy from the port of Varna-West. The containers arrived in October 2019, and their illicit origin was identified during a joint investigation between Bulgarian prosecutors and the Italian Carabinieri.<sup>440</sup>

The smuggling of counterfeit goods is also an issue in the port of Varna-West. These include counterfeit shoes, clothes, accessories (designer bags, glasses, purses, etc.) and other products mainly originating from Türkiye and China and destined for western Europe.

Trafficking of tobacco products used to be a big business too, playing a significant role in the illicit market.<sup>441</sup> But the last reported seizure dates back to 2014, when Varna customs seized 14 million cigarettes found in five containers from the United Arab Emirates arriving via Türkiye, with a Bulgarian company as final

recipient.<sup>442</sup> Despite the lack of recent seizures, interviewed stakeholders believe that tobacco trafficking through the port is still an active business.<sup>443</sup>

There is limited information on the criminal actors involved, and the networks that exploit the port vary depending on the illicit goods analyzed. Those operating within the city are probably involved for the most part in smuggling counterfeit goods (clothes, shoes, bags, accessories, etc), while groups from other parts of Bulgaria are involved in trafficking drugs, using insiders at the port as well as truck drivers to move the goods to warehouses or other destinations in the country's interior and the capital Sofia, where most businesses registered as the final recipient of illicit shipments are based.

*The maritime Balkan route offers relatively predictable routes for smuggling.*

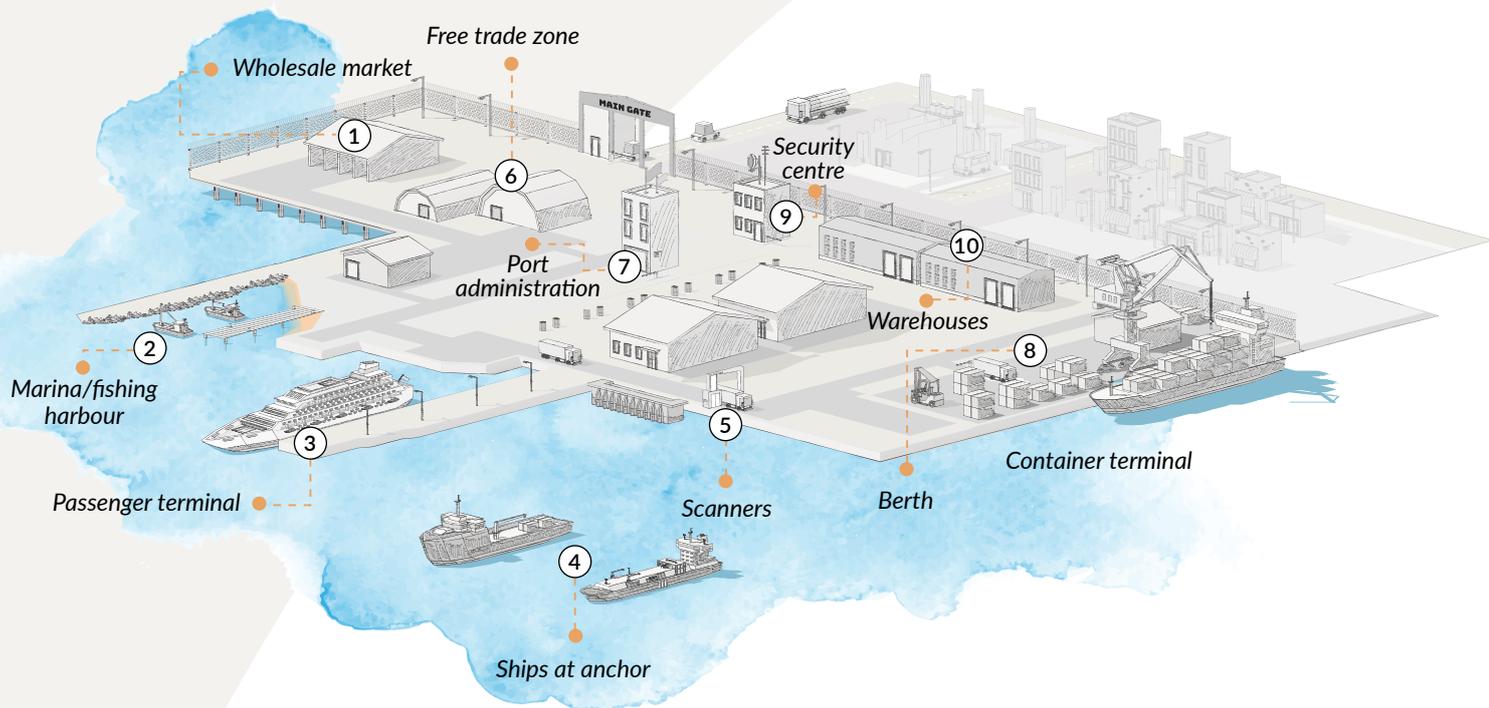
## Summary of observations

We can draw a number of conclusions from the case studies. First, they illustrate that there is a maritime Balkan route, particularly for the smuggling of drugs. It is interesting to note that – even from a layman's perspective – there are relatively predictable routes and modalities, for example for the trafficking of cocaine, heroin and cigarettes.

They also show how criminal groups are linked to the ports, either as locally embedded actors, part of transnational networks (including cells of a Balkan network) or as foreign actors.

This analysis of past seizures as well as ongoing investigations pinpoints common vulnerabilities in ports. The infographic below shows a generic, made-up port highlighting the types of vulnerabilities (or 'port holes') identified in the case studies and field research conducted in ports along the maritime Balkan route.

## TYPES OF VULNERABILITIES IDENTIFIED IN THE CASE STUDIES



- ① **Wholesale markets** in the vicinity of ports and dry ports facilitate the movement of containers in a semi-legal fashion. Loaded on trucks carrying exotic fruit, for example, illicit goods can then leave the port premises and reach their final destinations over land.
- ② **Marinas and fishing harbours** can be a hub for the recruitment of manpower for (un)loading containers carrying illicit substances.
- ③ **Passenger ships or ferries** can be used by criminals to smuggle small loads of illicit goods or cash, often in special compartments of vehicles.
- ④ In the drop-off method, crew of cargo **ships at anchor** pass illicit goods to smaller vessels that come up beside the ship.
- ⑤ **Fixed scanners** located far from the berths expose containers to tampering and offer criminals space and time to operate.
- ⑥ Smuggled substances can be stored in **free trade zones** where national police have no jurisdiction.
- ⑦ Lack of transparency in **port ownership** and investments can enable corruption and money laundering.
- ⑧ If not secured with fencing and monitored with CCTV cameras and patrolling, **berths of container terminals** can offer a space for criminals to conduct smuggling activities.
- ⑨ Lack of trust among **security providers** (customs, coast guard, police and private security firms) can hinder collaboration and information sharing.
- ⑩ **Warehouses** are often owned by criminals or their accomplices and are used to hide illicit goods before leaving the area.

The case studies show that the situation is fluid: increased surveillance in one port can displace the flows somewhere else; new markets are emerging, for example for trafficking waste and counterfeit goods. What stays the same are the market forces: plentiful supply, consistent demand, a ready pool of traffickers and corrupt insiders in the ports.

In addition, they demonstrate another link between organized crime and ports, namely how investments in port infrastructure can be linked to corruption and money laundering.

While there have been some major seizures along the maritime Balkan route, there have been few arrests of major traffickers. This points to either weak prosecution or an umbrella of protection covering illicit activities in some Balkan ports.

And finally, with the expansion and modernization of container terminals in the region, the case studies show how the maritime Balkan route could become even more attractive to criminals.

In the next section, we look at what can be done to close the holes in port security that are being exploited by criminals.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Bulgarian police ships stand moored in Varna. © Eugen Sergeev via Dreamstime.com



**F**rom the main findings of this study, a number of recommendations can be made to try to reduce the vulnerability of ports along the maritime Balkan route, and to improve transnational cooperation to disrupt illicit flows.

### **1. STRENGTHEN LOCAL INVESTIGATIVE CAPACITIES**

The higher the risks of interdiction, the less attractive a port is for traffickers. Therefore, unified task forces or single specialist units (such as Joint Port Control Units established in cooperation with the UNODC) should be formed, comprising all relevant actors such as customs, financial crime/money laundering experts, police, port security officers and the port authority. Special emphasis should be placed on improving the capacity – particularly of customs officials – to carry out local and contextual risk assessments. Attention should also be given to the interaction between the port, local criminal markets and corruption networks.

It would also make sense to strengthen links between the private sector, public authorities and law enforcement in ports by encouraging permanent security networks to clarify who is responsible for what and to periodically review security, risks and emerging threats.

### **2. DEPLOY LIAISON OFFICERS**

Port-specific liaison and security networks enabled by national legislation and by the private sector in the port can support investigations on the supply chains of illicit trades. It would also help if each port had a port crime liaison officer, an expert in organized crime, crime prevention and security, whose role would be to network and keep contacts with local authorities, including police, customs and prosecution offices, and to be the focal point for international partners, including other ports and cross-border policing authorities. Liaison officers could be linked up with peers in other ports in the region to develop a network.

As noted for some of the ports analyzed in this study, it could also be helpful for a customs official from a neighbouring (often landlocked) country to be deployed in a port – such as the official from Kosovo in Durres – to facilitate the flow of trade and to help identify suspicious shipments destined for their country.

SEE ports should also take full advantage of the short-term deployment of regional law enforcement experts (i.e. from the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center and the South East Europe Police Chiefs Association), as well as specialized training from the Container Control Programme of the UNODC and the World Customs Organization. There is also greater scope for deployment of Frontex officers in vulnerable ports. Furthermore, it would be worth exploring how to deploy liaison officers from regional law enforcement agencies in key hubs supplying the maritime Balkan route, such as Guayaquil (Ecuador), Buenaventura and Cartagena (Colombia), Valencia (Spain), Marsaxlokk (Malta), Gioia Tauro (Italy), Iskenderun and Mersin (Türkiye), Port Said (Egypt) and Dubai (United Arab Emirates).

### **3. IMPROVE SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE TECHNIQUES**

Because of the high volume of container traffic and the low level of screening, the chance of finding the needle in a haystack can be increased by closer law enforcement cooperation. Taking advantage of the provisions of article 20 of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime on special investigative techniques, states should take the necessary measures to enable controlled deliveries, electronic or other forms of surveillance, GPS tracking of containers and undercover operations to give them 'eyes inside the stomach' of trafficking operations.

In particular, cross-border investigative capacities should be strengthened between law enforcement and port authorities in SEE and parts of the world where goods are loaded for the region, including Asian and Latin American countries and key trans-shipment nodes such as Italy, Malta and Egypt. Here Europol, Interpol and the UNODC could be helpful.

Greater attention should also be given to improving detection and interdiction of emerging types of crime along the maritime Balkan route, such as trafficking in counterfeit goods and waste.

### **4. ENHANCE TRANSNATIONAL LAW ENFORCEMENT NETWORKS**

Related to the latter point is the need for a sharper focus on the maritime Balkan route and greater cooperation to disrupt it. Rather than developing new structures, it is recommended to make more effective use of existing ones such as the container security task force of the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, and the Integrative Internal Security Governance process of the Regional Cooperation Council.

Concrete forms of cooperation could include: adding a maritime and border security element to regular serious and organized crime threat assessments; exchange of information on concealment and interdiction techniques, as well as on criminal groups active along the maritime Balkan route; updates on changes in drug production and supply mechanisms; and briefings on trading patterns and how this could affect illicit activity.

Promoting greater regional cooperation among port authorities and officials responsible for security in and around ports could lead to a greater shared understanding of the characteristics and impact of the maritime Balkan route and more cohesive approaches to deal with it. It would be useful, for example, to have a database to track seizures, arrests and criminal actors along the maritime Balkan route.

## **5. STRENGTHEN INTEGRITY MEASURES WITHIN PORTS**

The best security systems will be undermined if there is corruption in a port. Therefore, employment procedures should include background criminal checks. Human resources as well as port security staff (public and private) should be specifically trained on the contextualized risks of cross-border organized crime infiltration in the port and its surroundings. Workers' unions and port management should also be involved in briefings on infiltration risks as well as in training designed to strengthen a culture of integrity. Law enforcement and port authorities should be scrupulous in their checks on transport facilitators, such as logistics and haulage industries.

Periodic temperature checks among employees can help to identify discontent and potential risks. Whistle-blowing policies (including protection of whistle-blowers) should be created in cooperation with port management and staff unions to provide early warning or highlight breaches of security, safety or ethics, as well as to provide information if a member of staff, customer, supplier or contractor has in any way acted illegally, accepted bribes or was involved in a fraudulent activity.

## **6. FACTOR IN TECHNOLOGY AND ITS IMPACT**

Technology is playing an increasingly important role in improving the infrastructure of ports, boosting trade efficiency (for example through automation and digitalization) and improving security (from data analysis and CCTV cameras to underwater drones and sophisticated port control rooms). This report reveals that some ports – even big ones like Piraeus – lack sufficient technology, such as scanners. Port owners should see the self-interest in investing in such technology in order to reduce reputational risks and comply with international security standards. On the other side, governments have an interest in preventing potential lost revenue, for example from taxes on cigarettes and counterfeit goods.

While technology can bring benefits, it also has risks. For example, introducing technology in a way that reduces the human element can create resentment among workers who may sell their know-how or access to criminal elements.

Digitalization may reduce the chance of corruption, but computer programmes can be infiltrated to decrease the chance of detecting cargo hidden in containers. And thus far, artificial intelligence has not progressed to the point of replacing experienced customs and law enforcement officials with a ‘nose’ for making threat assessments. In short, technology should be considered as a potential asset to improve port security, but not as a panacea.

## **7. TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT THE DANUBE**

The impression gained in analyzing ‘blue crime’ on the Danube for this report is that there is more than meets the eye when it comes to relatively low seizures. There is plenty of scope for improved cooperation among law enforcement agencies along one of Europe’s longest and most important waterways. The issue deserves further study, and closer cooperation between the Danube Commission, Europol, Southeast European Law Enforcement Center and riparian states. There is also scope for enhancing controls on barges at key entry points to the Danube, such as Izmail (Ukraine) and Constanta, as well as in Mohacs (Hungary), where ships enter the EU Schengen zone.

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# **GLOBAL INITIATIVE**

**AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
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## **ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE**

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