



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

COCAINE CONNECTIONS

LINKS BETWEEN THE WESTERN
BALKANS AND SOUTH AMERICA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organized crime groups from the Western Balkans have over the last 20 years established a remarkably strong foothold in South America in their pursuit of cocaine that they ship to and distribute in Europe and beyond. They have evolved from minor European players into prominent international criminal enterprises in this illicit global commodity trade, building durable relationships at both ends of the highly lucrative supply chain.

Their rise has been spurred, in part, by luck. Two key factors have favoured them: an unprecedented surge in cocaine production in South America and insatiable demand for the drug in Europe. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s European Drug Trends Monitor suggests that after reaching record high levels in 2023, and despite a drop in seizures in the beginning of 2024, cocaine availability remains stable, if not on the rise, in Europe.¹ Indeed, record seizures are being documented at key EU ports and the bloc's drugs monitoring agency, the European Union Drugs Agency, announced in March 2023 another annual increase in the levels of cocaine detected in wastewater, continuing an upward trend that began in 2016.²

But guile has played an equally important role in the success of these groups, which have leveraged the smuggling expertise and paramilitary training established during the Balkan ethnic conflicts and civil unrests of the 1990s. Playing the long game, they have learned from and won the respect of the Italian mafia, among others, while retaining an agility that has allowed them to seize market opportunities. This has largely been achieved – so far, at least – without provoking debilitating blowback from rival players.

The research for this report focused on Western Balkan organized crime groups and was conducted within this framework. Consequently, the dynamics observed in South American countries are explored solely in relation to these criminal groups. The report aims to provide a detailed understanding of their presence in South America and the broader implications that this has for their future in the context of the Western Balkans.

Balkan brokers have been crucial to their success in establishing symbiotic local relationships. They have forged strong and enduring connections in the cocaine-producing countries of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, from cartels to coca farmers. They have also been able to establish strong bases and key relationships in dispatching countries such as Brazil, Ecuador and, more recently, the neighbouring Caribbean region.

Not only have they managed to navigate the South America's criminal environment with relative ease, but in some cases they have also proved able to forge relationships within high-level business and political circles in the countries where they operate.³

To avoid disruptions to their operations at the wholesale source, they have intentionally maintained a professional working distance from other foreign criminal organizations operating in South America, especially the infamous Mexican cartels. However, they have managed to expand their footprint in global cocaine markets, partly through arrangements with some of Europe's most prominent criminal organizations, such as the Dutch–Moroccan networks, the Kinahan cartel and Italian mafia groups like the 'Ndrangheta and the Camorra.

They have also displayed creativity by employing various forms of trafficking methods. These extend beyond the use of container ships, to also encompass cargo and leisure vessels and planes.

Their presence in South America and the international cocaine supply chain has left a conspicuous footprint that has been tracked by law enforcement activity. Over the past three years, half of the targets of Europol-coordinated cocaine operations have been linked to individuals and networks from this region, thanks in part to the crackdown on communication platforms such as EncroChat and SKY ECC, which were widely used by criminal organizations from the Western Balkans.⁴ Western Balkan criminals have been accused of transporting tens of tonnes of cocaine from South America to major ports in Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and elsewhere. Although these major European entry hubs appear to be the primary channels for criminal organizations from the Western Balkans, these actors also utilize ports in the Balkans region as transit points for trafficking cocaine elsewhere in Europe.

Their involvement in the global illicit cocaine trade is not confined to the European consumer market, however. Western Balkan groups have been linked to significant seizures on other continents as well, including one of the largest cocaine seizures in US history (more than 20 tonnes, worth more than US\$1 billion).⁵ Western Balkans groups have also, in recent years, been using their strong presence in South America to target even wealthier markets, such as Australia, using Africa and Southern Europe as transit regions.⁶

These criminal entities have also left a trail of blood. Since 2010, at least 19 people from the Western Balkans believed to be linked with cocaine trafficking have been killed in South America, according to GI-TOC records. Their activities have exacerbated instability in certain South American countries such as Ecuador, as they relentlessly secure supplies of cocaine and its safe shipment – at any cost.

This research report identifies the links between criminal actors from the Western Balkans and the South American cocaine trafficking market. It provides an overview of the factors that have impelled the region's organized crime groups towards South America and addresses the implications arising from their presence in that region. The study sheds light on their origins and operations, revealing common patterns despite the diverse backgrounds from which they have emerged.

The study finds that links between the Western Balkans and South America have existed for around three decades but have significantly intensified in the last two. It predominantly focuses on organized crime groups from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, but also makes reference to those from other countries in South Eastern Europe where relevant, in relation to their collaboration in the cocaine trade.

It is important to note that international law enforcement organizations, in their reporting, often refer to criminal groups from the Western Balkans as 'Albanian-speaking networks'⁷ or the 'Balkan Cartel'.⁸ The former is used to denote criminal groups of Albanian nationality that speak Albanian, while the latter refers to criminal groups of Slavic origin that speak the Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian language.⁹ These terms indicate ethnicity and linguistic variations among actors rather than their organizational characteristics.

Inter-ethnic cooperation between organized crime groups in the Western Balkans has a long history, particularly in the trafficking of weaponry and ammunition, cigarettes, fuel and drugs, and human smuggling. In some cases, integrated organized crime groups have emerged bringing together members from different countries within the region. But these groups prefer to retain their independence, and there is no evidence of the creation of cartels in the Western Balkan region.¹⁰

Organized crime groups in the region generally have a clear leadership structure, but Balkan organized crime groups operating in South America appear to prefer a horizontal organizational structure that allows flexibility. Due to the transnational nature of cocaine trafficking, these groups have become adaptable. Often, their trafficking operations in South America are seen as ‘joint ventures’ or ‘projects’ that bring together organizations or groups of criminals from different countries and ethnic backgrounds who happen to be in the right place and have the necessary resources and skills to achieve the desired outcome.

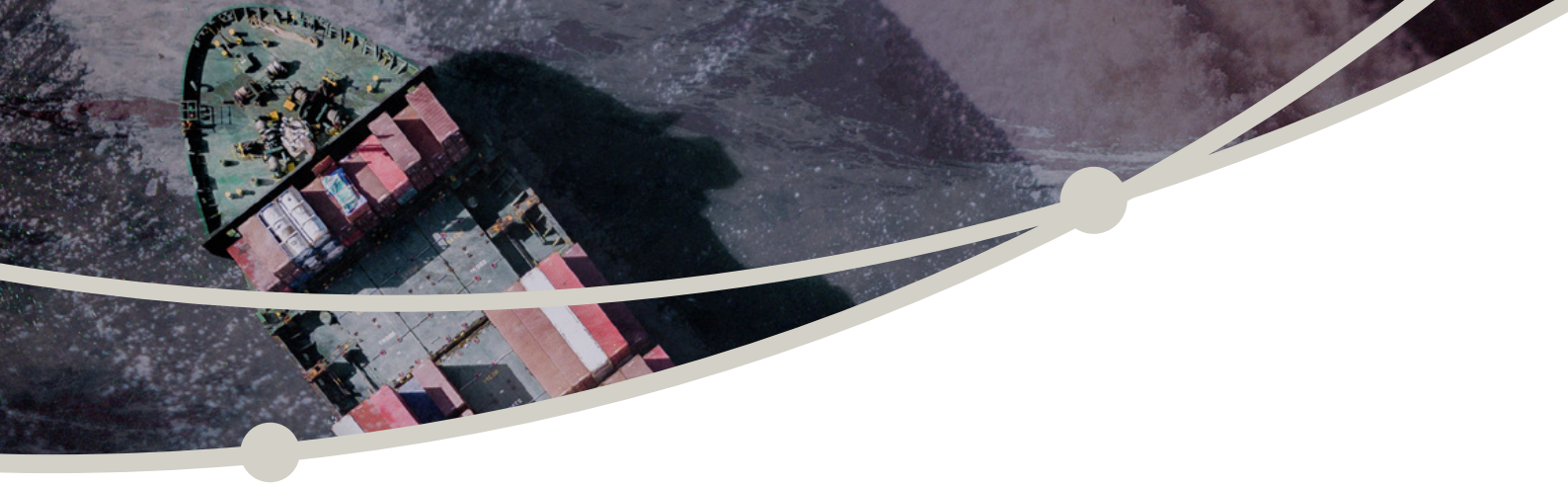
The extensive supply chain coordination needed to procure, transport, process and distribute the drug has prompted enhanced flexibility within these groups. Therefore, in this report, the terms ‘organized crime groups’ and ‘criminal networks’ will be used interchangeably.

Methodology

This report draws largely on primary data collected by researchers in five South American countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru) and in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia). It also draws on data from Mexico, home to the strongest cocaine cartels, although Western Balkan groups tend to maintain a professional distance from these infamous players. A total of over 100 interviews were conducted between October 2022 and November 2023, with half of them taking place in South America and half in the Western Balkans.

Interviews were conducted with representatives from police units, customs agencies, investigative journalists, representatives of civil society organizations and individuals knowledgeable about drug trafficking.

The report also uses secondary data collected from international organizations and government reports, academic and policy literature, and the media. The main findings were developed drawing on the expertise of the GI-TOC’s observatories of illicit economies in South Eastern Europe and Latin America, as well its Colombia programme.



COCAINE CONNECTIONS

Ambitious organized crime groups from the Western Balkans began to establish footholds in South America's cocaine trade in the early 1990s. Instead of confining themselves to retail distribution in Europe's main cities, they sought to enhance their status and profits by gaining a share of wholesale markets that extended into the region. Their breakthrough finally came in the early 2010s, spurred by a surge in cocaine production and criminal fragmentation within South America.

While South America has long been the epicentre of global cocaine production, a doubling of coca bush cultivation over the four years from 2013 – alongside improvements in converting leaves into cocaine hydrochloride – helped annual production in Bolivia, Colombia and Peru to climb from less than 1 000 tonnes in 2014 to a record high of nearly 2 000 tonnes by 2020.¹¹ Although the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the cocaine supply chain, the data suggests that the overall trend of high production levels persists to this day.¹² Meanwhile, the demobilization of major Colombian guerrilla groups that previously exercised control over cocaine production resulted in the emergence of multiple smaller factions.¹³ This dynamic paved the way for Western Balkan groups to establish fresh connections with entities eager to collaborate.

In recent years, the intensification of cocaine trafficking from Latin America has led to the emergence of new hubs and transportation facilities. Ecuador has become a significant dispatching centre for the shipment of large amounts of cocaine to Europe and beyond. Located between major cocaine producers Colombia and Peru, Ecuador has evolved into a strong base for Balkan groups, where they store, sometimes process, and ship the cocaine bought in producing countries. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), a record 200 tonnes of cocaine was seized in Ecuador in 2021.¹⁴

Cocaine is the second most used drug in Europe – cannabis being the most consumed – and in 2021 approximately 3.5 million adults consumed it in the EU.¹⁵ In 2020, an estimated 91 000 offences were recorded involving the use or possession of cocaine in the EU, factoring into a four-year-long up-trend.¹⁶ Furthermore, the prices of cocaine in Europe have remained stable, while its purity has increased, driven partly by rising numbers of secondary processing laboratories in Europe.¹⁷ Taken together, these factors indicate that the availability and usage of cocaine in Europe is at historically high levels.¹⁸

The increased flow of cocaine from South America into Europe has also been reflected in the continued multi-tonne seizures of cocaine at its major ports.¹⁹ A record 110 tonnes of cocaine were seized across 2022 at the Belgian port of Antwerp, one of the main cocaine gateways into Europe.²⁰

Criminal organizations from the Western Balkans maintain a significant presence at key European ports, enabling them to control a cross-continental supply chain that involves both transporting and distributing cocaine as wholesalers and retailers, from producers in South America to consumers across Europe and far beyond.

Establishing a presence in the cocaine trade

Criminal groups from the Western Balkans have a long history of engagement in drug trafficking. In the last 20 years, drug trafficking has emerged as one of the main organized crime threats facing the Western Balkans, given the extensive engagement of criminal groups from the region in this illicit market.²¹ Initially focusing on heroin and cannabis trafficking, these groups quickly diversified into cocaine, recognizing its immense profitability as demand surged.

Over the past two decades, cocaine traffickers from the Western Balkans have not only established a solid presence within their home region but have also significantly expanded their reach to various regions, effectively operating and coordinating their illicit activities across international borders. Although Europe remains their primary market, they have increasingly been involved in trafficking record amounts of cocaine to other continents, such as North America.²² Estimates suggest that approximately 40%–60% of the operations conducted by Balkan organized criminal groups are now conducted internationally, with a significant majority of these activities being linked to drug trafficking.²³ As a result, their presence in international cocaine trafficking is well documented, drawing attention from the media, local and international law enforcement agencies, and researchers alike.²⁴

One of the important indicators highlighting the footprint of Balkan groups is the recurrent seizures of cocaine shipments procured by them in the ports of South Eastern Europe (including the Western Balkans), Western Europe and beyond. Over the decade to 2022, authorities seized more than 3.7 tonnes of cocaine in Western Balkans countries.²⁵ Most was seized in Albania and Montenegro, respectively at Durres and Bar, the largest ports in the region.

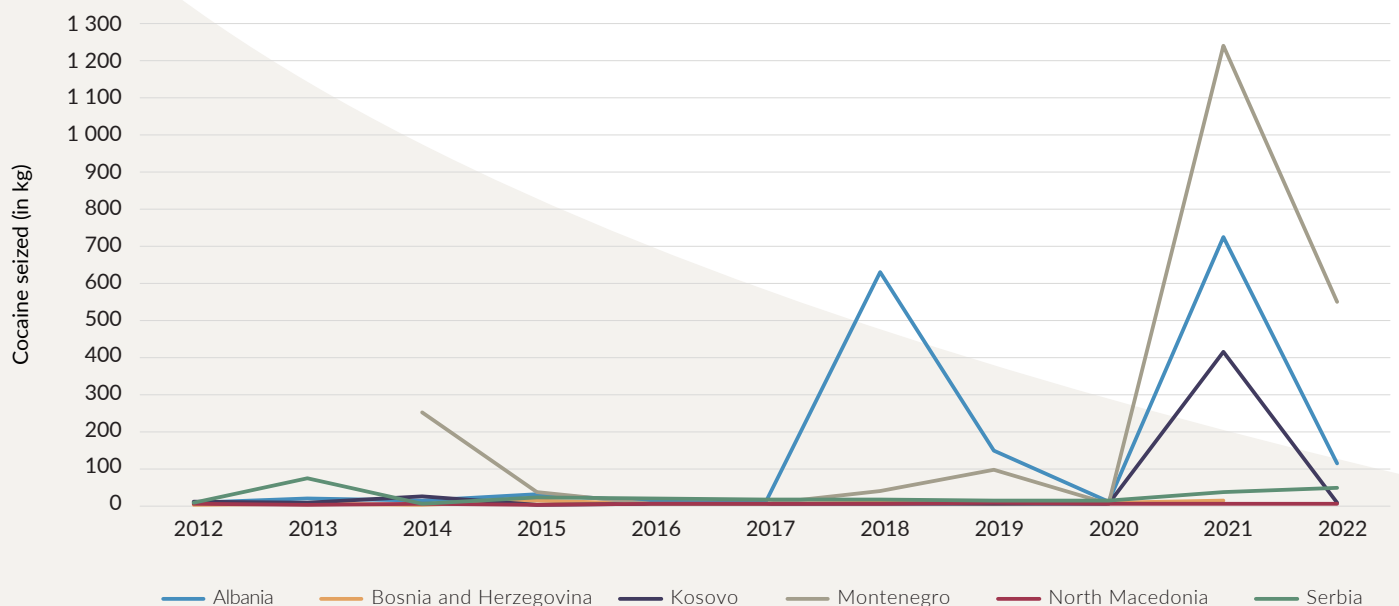


FIGURE 1 Seizures of cocaine in the Western Balkans, 2012–2022.

SOURCE: Data from the national police forces of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Seizures of cocaine peaked regionally in 2021, when approximately 2.4 tonnes were seized in Montenegro, Kosovo and Albania. Out of this total, authorities intercepted 1.2 tonnes in Bar, 414 kilograms in Kosovo and 725 kilograms in Durres. In addition to Western Balkan ports, these groups also rely on various ports in South Eastern Europe. In recent years, authorities have intercepted cocaine associated with these groups at ports such as Varna in Bulgaria, Ploce and Rijeka in Croatia, Piraeus and Thessaloniki in Greece, and Constanța in Romania.²⁶

The ports of South Eastern Europe, including those of the Western Balkans, however, play a secondary role in the influx of cocaine to Europe. Three-quarters of the 213 tonnes of cocaine seized in the EU in 2020 was intercepted in the ports of Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain.²⁷ These ports have long been recognized as the primary gateways for the entry of cocaine into Europe.

Local and international law enforcement operations against criminal groups from the Western Balkans clearly shows that these groups are major players in the arrival of cocaine at Antwerp in Belgium, Rotterdam in the Netherlands, Hamburg in Germany, Algeciras in Spain, Gioia Tauro in Italy, and elsewhere.

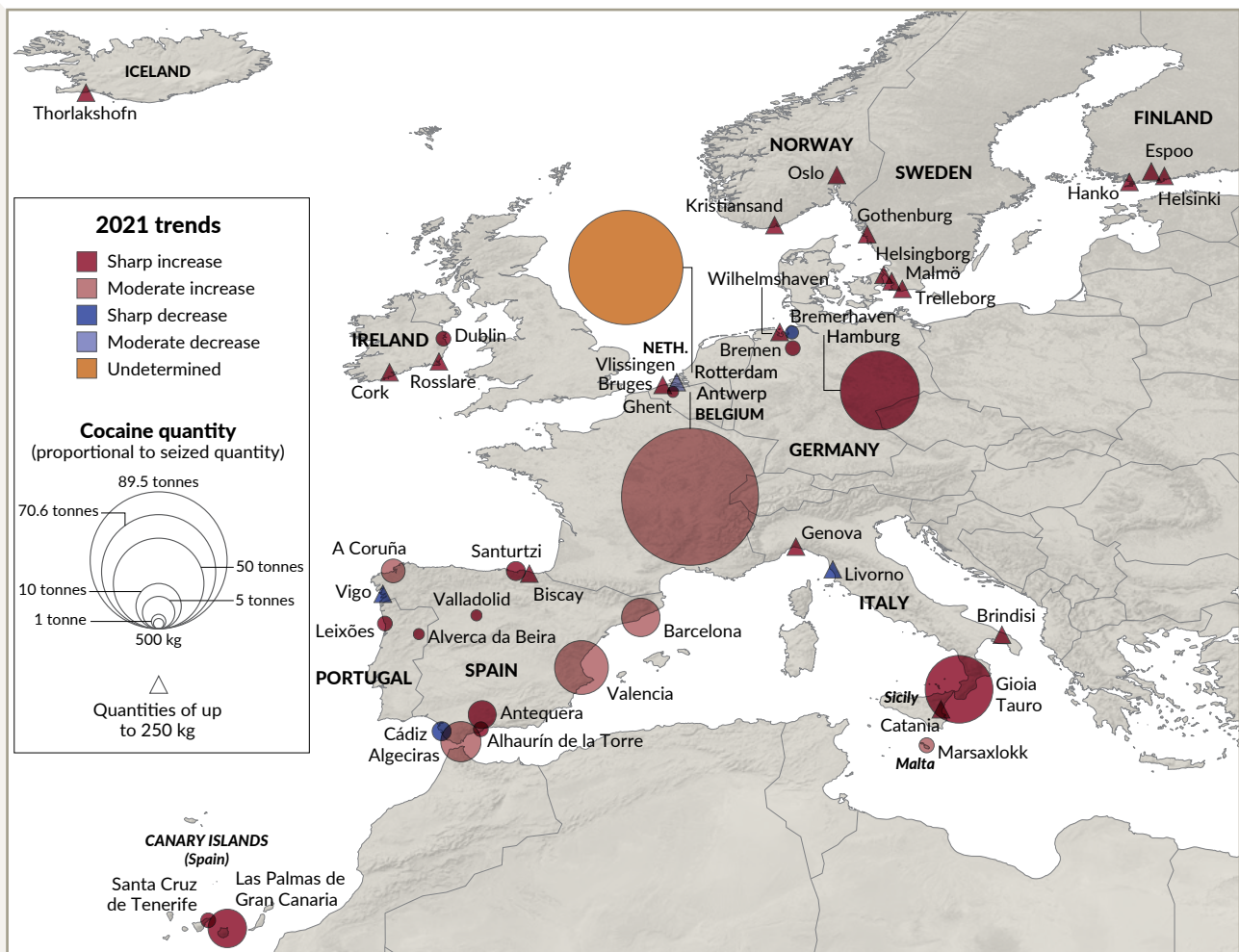


FIGURE 2 Cocaine seized in 2021 by port customs authorities in Western and Central Europe, and trends in comparison with 2020.

SOURCE: UNODC, Global report on cocaine 2023, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf

In 2022, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, Europol, reportedly coordinated nine operations aimed at disrupting cocaine trafficking.²⁸ Notably, three of these operations were connected to individuals or criminal networks from the Western Balkans, including one that spanned Europe and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and resulted in the arrest of high-value drug kingpins who controlled more than a third of Europe's cocaine trade.²⁹ In 2023, Europol coordinated a total of 24 cocaine-related operations,³⁰ 14 of which targeted individuals and networks from the Western Balkans. In 2024, the number of Europol-coordinated cocaine trafficking operations connected with the region was nine.³¹ This indicates that currently, approximately half of Europol's reported cocaine operations have revealed the engagement of individuals or networks from the Western Balkans. Information obtained from the crackdown on encrypted communication platforms, widely used by criminal networks from this region, has similarly indicated the widespread involvement of criminal actors from the Western Balkans in cocaine trafficking.

One-third of Europol's reported cocaine-coordinated operations involve individuals or networks from the Western Balkans.

Criminal groups from the Western Balkans established their presence gradually in South America from the late 1990s. The early 2000s and the decade that followed marked a significant period for these groups, as they expanded and consolidated gains. Many of these groups started to build a presence in key Western European countries and actively engage as retailers in the cocaine trade. By around 2005, influential criminal groups from the region had initiated direct connections with cocaine producers in South America. By the early 2010s, an increasing number of these groups were dispatching their representatives upstream to procure large amounts of cocaine directly from the producers, thus entrenching themselves as wholesalers in the European and global cocaine trade.

Early days: Local vulnerabilities and US connections

In the early 1990s, the Western Balkan region was characterized by significant vulnerabilities, largely due to the collapse of the communist system that had previously dominated much of Eastern Europe. Amid this turmoil, the former Yugoslavia saw a rise in nationalist movements that led to separatist wars. Albania, one of the most isolated communist countries, faced severe economic challenges. These factors contributed to a volatile situation in the region, with ethnic conflicts and wars, economic instability, sanctions and political uncertainty. Consequently, many citizens left the region, mainly for Western Europe. North America was also a key destination.

During that tumultuous period in Balkans history, key individuals fed off the chaos and rose to prominence by providing services to politicians, secret service agencies, military and paramilitary forces. The resulting environment provided fertile ground for illicit markets, including drugs. Speculators and organized criminals accumulated capital through fuel and cigarette smuggling, human and heroin trafficking – thanks to the Balkans' position as a crossroads between the East and West – and cannabis cultivation.

However, those with prior experience in international crime recognized the potential of a different illicit market: cocaine. Based on an analysis of available evidence and data, it appears that the early individuals to establish criminal connections between the region and South America were originally from the Western Balkans, but with prior criminal experience in the US. Equipped with international criminal ties and exploiting the region's vulnerabilities, they were among the first to recognize the strategic location of the Balkans as a key transit point for shipping cocaine from South America to the rest of Europe.



Zoran Jakšić, a leader of Group America, an organization that has had a prominent role in the cocaine trade, is serving a prison sentence in Peru. Photo: YouTube screengrab

A criminal organization named Group America is believed to have played a pioneering role in introducing the region to cocaine trafficking. This group originated in the US and was comprised of emigrants from the former Yugoslavia, mainly from Serbia, during the 1970s and 1980s. From the late 1990s to the present day, the organization has been associated with the seizure of tonnes of cocaine in South America, Europe, North America and Africa.³² Despite investigations into and convictions of many of its members across continents, including leaders Mileta Miljanić and Zoran Jakšić, the outfit is still considered one of the most prominent criminal organizations operating in and from the Western Balkans.

However, not all individuals who initially established connections in South America achieved success or were able to establish enduring criminal organizations. Frederik Durda and Arben Bërballa were two Albanians who escaped communist Albania and met in the US during the late 1970s. In addition to criminal links in the US, Durda also established contacts with Pablo Escobar's Medellín cartel in Colombia during the late 1980s.³³

The duo returned to Albania during a period of civil unrest in 1997³⁴ and began creating import–export companies, purchasing ships and using them as cover for plans to ship cocaine from Colombia through Albania, further trafficking it to Europe and Russia. They were successful in corrupting high-level police officials in Albania to gain support for their operations. But their plans came to the attention of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and a ship carrying six tonnes of cocaine procured by them was seized in Spain in 2000. On 2 February 2001, Durda, Bërballa and their collaborators were arrested and later convicted in Albania for international drug trafficking.³⁵

From local players to global networks

The late 1990s and early 2000s was a period characterized by experimentation for Western Balkan criminal groups, as they were involved in a diverse range of illicit activities, including people smuggling and trafficking illicit commodities. However, these activities were mainly carried out within their home region.

From around 2005, they expanded beyond their region. In the context of cocaine trafficking, these years saw criminal groups from the region concentrating primarily on Western Europe's retail cocaine market. Moreover, certain influential groups from the region started their upstream journey, forging connections with producers in South America and obtaining large quantities of cocaine.

A series of factors contributed to their subsequent success:

- The Balkans' strategic location at the crossroads of Eastern and Western Europe has made it a crucial hub for criminal activities. Heroin trafficking, illicit cannabis cultivation, arms trafficking, human smuggling and cigarette smuggling have originated in or passed through the region. Until around 2005, these activities were the primary sources of income for Balkan criminal groups. The money and experience generated from these illicit activities increased these groups' confidence and sophistication.
- Although wars and unrest came to an end in the Balkans in the early 2000s, they have left behind vulnerable political and judicial systems, offering opportunities for criminal enterprises to exploit corruption within their home countries. Corruption provided them with safe havens, criminal infrastructure and the ability to act with impunity.
- The experience of Western Balkan criminals in the context of wars and violent unrest sharpened their inclination to use extreme violence to achieve their objectives. Their easy access to weapons and willingness to use them, when necessary, further increased their standing. This became a defining characteristic for these groups and earned them a reputation for being highly skilled and in demand in the criminal milieu of Europe.
- In the early 2000s, members of criminal groups from the region began to emigrate and set root in key Western European countries such as Italy, Spain, Austria and Germany, alongside the Benelux nations and Scandinavia. Long-established diasporas from their home countries played an important role in supporting and aiding the new arrivals in what would become key entry points for cocaine into Europe.

Ties with the Italian mafia and other European players

The rise of Western Balkan organized crime groups and their direct involvement in cocaine trafficking from South America can be attributed in part to the Italian mafia.

Collaboration began in the early 1990s. Albanian criminal groups have had a long-standing relationship with the Italian mafia, with the former shipping heroin and locally grown cannabis to the latter. They also partnered in human smuggling. In the 1990s, the Italian mafia established close ties with criminal organizations in Montenegro and Serbia as well, largely to smuggle cigarettes and firearms to Italy.

These links intensified in the late 1990s and early 2000s when many Western Balkan criminals began to settle in Italy. They soon began to showcase their capabilities and penchant for extreme violence on the Italian criminal scene.³⁶ Rather than fighting them, the Italian mafia took advantage of these criminal abilities and began to involve these criminals in some of their most risky and violent operations, including the running of prostitution rings, picking up drugs from ports and aiding in smuggling activities throughout Europe.

During this period, the Italian mafia had gained extensive experience and played a prominent and unrivalled role in acquiring cocaine from South America and distributing it throughout Europe and beyond.³⁷ The criminal groups from the Western Balkans, in aiding the mafia in executing the complex operations of cocaine trafficking from South America, gained experience, picking up tricks as well contacts. Soon after, they started to adopt the Italian mafia's broad operational model, while tailoring it to their own capabilities and advantages. Gradually, the Western Balkan groups became more ambitious, but they maintained good relationships with the Italian mafia, winning respect as partners rather than subordinates.

Connections between Balkan organized crime groups and elements of the Italian mafia, such as the 'Ndrangheta, in cocaine trafficking from South America have been exposed in numerous police operations and court documents.³⁸ Even today, they often collaborate closely and provide support to each other in specific segments of cocaine operations, from South America to Europe.³⁹ In most cases, the Western

Balkan groups and mafia representatives form partnerships, but there have been instances where Western Balkan nationals have been integrated into the hierarchy of Italian mafia structures.

On the other hand, Western Balkans criminals have also forged partnerships with notable criminal organizations operating in Europe to strengthen their foothold in the cocaine trade. Edin Gačanin, a dual citizen of Bosnia and the Netherlands and leader of the Tito and Dino cartel, has been identified as a member of what Europol refers to as a 'super cartel', responsible for controlling approximately

a third of Europe's cocaine trade.⁴⁰ In addition to Tito and Dino, this super cartel included Ireland's Kinahan organized crime group, the Dutch Mocro Mafia, and Italy's Camorra. Together, they co-sponsored and coordinated the shipment of tonnes of cocaine from South American countries to Europe, and further afield to Africa, Asia and Australia.⁴¹

Despite these collaborations, which have increased their presence in global cocaine markets, Western Balkans groups have maintained their independence and retained their core, surrounded by a circle of highly trusted individuals. ■

Consolidation: Runners, emissaries and businessmen

The consolidation of criminal links between the Western Balkans and South America occurred late in the first decade of the 2000s and the beginning of the 2010s when a significant number of traffickers from the region began travelling upstream to procure cocaine. In the overwhelming majority of cases, those who undertook that journey were not major criminal figures or leaders of powerful criminal organizations.

Contrary to popular belief, key leaders of criminal groups from the Western Balkans generally do not settle in South America. Instead, they usually reside in their home countries, major Western European cities, or, in case of trouble, migrate to countries such as the UAE to seek shelter. The success of Western Balkan criminal organizations in South America is mainly due to skilled brokers who work for them either part or full-time.

These brokers came from different backgrounds, but helped the criminal groups make their big breakthrough, ultimately enabling them to take a slice of the trade running all the way from the initial point of wholesale supply to the streets of Europe and beyond.

The runners

Some lower-level criminals from the Western Balkans ended up in South America due to constant pursuit by law enforcement authorities in their own countries or in Europe. South America began to be perceived as a gateway and a safe haven for European criminals to evade arrest while also providing them with opportunities to engage in criminal activities.

With criminal experience, these individuals quickly established important connections with cartels, gangs and other key actors in cocaine trafficking in South America. This was the case for Goran Nešić, a Serbian criminal nicknamed Ciga, who was sentenced in absentia to eight years in prison by a Serbian court for smuggling 24.5 kilograms of heroin.⁴² He had been wanted by INTERPOL since 2003. Fleeing from the authorities in Serbia, he went to Germany, but soon realized that it was not safe for him there either. He then decided to go to Brazil. For many months, he struggled to find support from the Serbian diaspora there and eventually became homeless in São Paulo, sleeping under bridges.⁴³

However, his luck changed when he was introduced to key members of Brazilian cocaine trafficking gangs through a private connection. This allowed him to enter the business, and his Brazilian contacts made him a crucial figure for Serbian criminal groups in procuring cocaine. Law enforcement agencies

have records of Nešić collaborating with Group America.⁴⁴ Around 2005, he was also helping a criminal organization led by Darko Šarić,⁴⁵ considered one of the most important players in trafficking cocaine from South America to Europe.

Many of these criminal ties were forged while serving drug-related sentences in local jails. As a result of these connections, small-timers became powerful brokers for Western Balkan criminal groups, who relied on them for procuring cocaine at a favourable price and for logistics in shipping it to Europe and beyond. Some of them even brokered deals from their prison cells, taking advantage of the low security and corruption in many of the jails across South America.⁴⁶

This was the case for Dritan Rexhepi, a notorious criminal from Albania, who has spent most of his adult life on the run, thanks to repeatedly escaping custody. In 2006, he escaped from pre-trial detention in Albania, while accused of murdering two policemen. Two years later, he was arrested in the Netherlands and extradited to Italy. While serving a sentence for drug trafficking in Italy in April 2011, he escaped from jail. A few months later, he was arrested in Spain for a bank robbery but was later extradited to Belgium, where he was wanted for drug trafficking. He escaped from jail for the third time while in Belgium.⁴⁷ Like Goran Nešić, Rexhepi could no longer find shelter in Europe and in early 2012 he went to Ecuador, where he soon established important links with local gangs. He was arrested in Ecuador in 2014 on cocaine trafficking charges, but was able to forge even stronger connections in jail.⁴⁸



Dritan Rexhepi, an Albanian, has been arrested and has escaped from prison three times in Europe. He fled to Ecuador in 2012, where he was arrested in 2014 on cocaine trafficking charges. In 2021, he disappeared from house arrest in Guayaquil. Photo: YouTube screengrab

In September 2020, Europol dismantled one of Europe's most active Albanian criminal networks, Kompania Bello.⁴⁹ Rexhepi was identified as one of the network's leaders and its key broker, securing cocaine and logistics from his prison cell in Ecuador.⁵⁰ One of the main characteristics of runners is that they maintain their independence and work with multiple organizations. Indeed, even as a leader of Kompania Bello, Rexhepi collaborated with other networks too. His strong links have given him a reputation as a reliable independent broker for many Albanian organizations.⁵¹ At the end of 2021, Ecuadorian authorities granted Rexhepi house arrest, but he soon disappeared from his house in Guayaquil.⁵² Turkish authorities announced on 10 September that Rexhepi had been arrested in Istanbul.⁵³ He was extradited to Albania from Turkey in January 2025.⁵⁴

The emissaries

Criminal groups from the Balkans do not exclusively rely on independent brokers for securing and shipping cocaine from South America. They often have their own emissaries that operate from this region exclusively on their behalf. While it is true that engaging in criminal activities does not typically require a CV, the role of cocaine emissaries is an exception to this rule.

Emissaries are individuals who are meticulously selected from within the ranks of a criminal group and they must meet specific criteria to qualify for the crucial role of representing the group in South America.

Trust is one of the key elements needed for the job. This was axiomatic for Edin Gačanin of the Tito and Dino cartel. Notorious for his involvement in transporting cocaine from South America to Europe, he was sanctioned in early 2023 by the US Department of the Treasury.⁵⁵ Law enforcement agencies around the world have seized tens of tonnes of cocaine linked to him,⁵⁶ and he is considered by US authorities as one of the world's top 50 drug dealers responsible for a significant share of cocaine that reaches the main European ports.⁵⁷

His emissaries in South America played a crucial role in building his criminal enterprise. Gačanin would send loyal members of his organization, many of whom were his childhood neighbours in Sarajevo and shared his passion for martial arts and boxing, to countries such as Peru.

However, two of his key emissaries from Sarajevo, David Cufaj⁵⁸ and Smail Šikalo,⁵⁹ were arrested in Peru in 2017 and 2019 respectively, both while preparing to ship large quantities of cocaine. Their arrests came as a surprise to many in Bosnia and Herzegovina, given their background as educated individuals with no previous criminal records.



Cocaine emissary from Bosnia and Herzegovina David Cufaj is arrested in Peru while attempting to ship 2 tonnes of cocaine, January 2017.

© Ernesto Benavides/AFP via Getty Images

Emissaries are typically assigned to live in a selected South American country for several years, during which time they must establish connections with local gangs and cartels to obtain high-quality cocaine at a reasonable price. They are also responsible for finding ways to transport the cocaine to Europe and beyond. They often choose to live in residential areas close to ports or airports that they use for shipments.

Instead of living extravagantly, emissaries are careful and calculated in every move they make outside their residences, even using armoured cars to get around. They avoid mingling with locals or other foreigners and only maintain contact with gang members from their own country or trusted local business partners.⁶⁰ Major criminal organizations typically deploy multiple emissaries across various locations in South America. These emissaries do not always stay in one location for years; sometimes they relocate every few months after completing a cocaine deal and its shipment.

Some emissaries' contacts are established by their bosses, who usually come to visit them briefly during critical deals and shipments. However, emissaries are largely on their own and are valued by their organization based on their capacity to secure new deals, ship cocaine efficiently and operate under the radars of law enforcement.

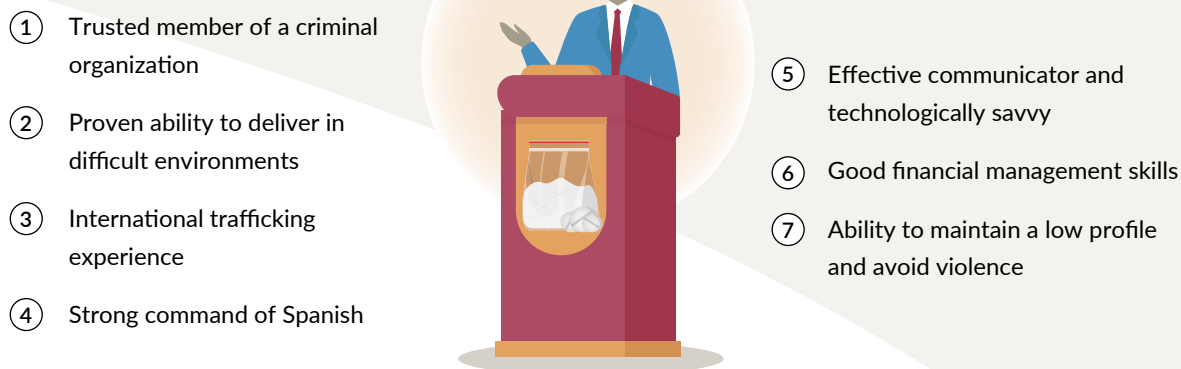


FIGURE 3 Requirements for becoming a cocaine emissary in South America.

The businessmen

Some individuals from the Western Balkans who own ostensibly legitimate businesses in South America also play an important role in cocaine trafficking, alongside loyal members of criminal organizations. These businessmen are often engaged in the import and export of goods and products, which often helps them conduct illicit activities discreetly. South American countries export a wide range of products to Europe, including fruit (mainly bananas, pineapples and avocados), timber, coffee, fish, seafood, flowers and textiles. Most cocaine trafficked from South America to Europe is shipped in containers of food and other goods, so owners of import-export companies are pivotal to trafficking.

Criminal organizations from the Western Balkans are believed to receive assistance in their cocaine trafficking activities from fellow citizens who have settled in South America for many years and established successful businesses.⁶¹ These individuals are often naturalized citizens of their host country and do not appear to be involved in criminal activity at first glance. Some initially built their businesses with legitimate profits, but have been lured by the supernormal profits stemming from supplementary illegal activity. Others incurred criminal records before relocating to South America and established their businesses as a disguise for their criminal activities.

Adriatik Tresa, an Albanian national, arrived in Ecuador in 2011, without being a member of an Albanian criminal organization, although he had previously been arrested for drug trafficking in the United Kingdom.⁶² Upon settling in Guayaquil, Tresa established legitimate businesses, including in pharmaceuticals and woodwork, but used some of them to traffic cocaine from Ecuador to Europe.⁶³ He also secured Ecuadorian citizenship and helped Albanian criminals from the Western Balkans reach South America and engage in cocaine trafficking. However, over time, he broke the golden rule of avoiding conflict in South America and came into conflict with his fellow nationals; suspicions arose of his involvement in the murders and attempted murders of several Albanians in Guayaquil.⁶⁴

In November 2020, seven men dressed as police officers entered Tresa's high-security gated complex in Guayaquil, claiming to have a search warrant. They shot him dead in his luxurious villa. His Albanian family members are working to inherit some of the businesses and properties that he left behind.⁶⁵

Another example involves the case of Dritan Gjika, an Albanian citizen who has lived in Ecuador for nearly a decade. Gjika is currently on the run from Ecuadorian authorities who want him for drug trafficking following a major police operation in Ecuador and Spain in February 2024.⁶⁶ According to Europol, Gjika was the leader of a criminal group that imported 4 tonnes of cocaine a month to Ecuador from Colombia, before shipping it to Europe and distributing it within the European Union. The group used Ecuadorian fruit companies as fronts to import the drugs.⁶⁷ In Ecuador, Gjika stands accused of hiding his criminal activities behind a net of companies. According to investigative media reports, Gjika and his Ecuadorian business partner, Rubén Cherres – who was murdered in April 2023 – had established 12 companies, most of them in the construction and real-estate sectors.⁶⁸

This case has attracted significant political and media attention in Ecuador, particularly because Cherres was reportedly a close friend of Danilo Carrera, the influential brother-in-law of former President Guillermo Lasso, who held office from 2021 to 2023.⁶⁹ The case against Gjika was also cited in unsuccessful impeachment proceedings against Lasso.⁷⁰



The luxurious villa complex in Guayaquil, Ecuador, where Albanian national Adriatik Tresa was shot dead in November 2020.

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Notable Western Balkan groups operating in South America

Group America

Group America was formed in the 1970s in the US by Serbian nationals and rapidly rose to prominence by collaborating with Irish-American crime groups and Italian mafia families such as the Gambinos. When Yugoslavia was disintegrating in the early 1990s, key members of this group returned to Serbia and – allegedly helped by political and intelligence

services – created strong criminal links in South America in the years that followed.⁷¹ The people who took forward the organization at this point were Mileta Miljanić and Zoran Jakšić. The former is facing federal criminal charges in the US,⁷² while the latter is serving a 25-year prison sentence in Peru for international drug trafficking offences.⁷³

Šarić group

The group is named after its leader Darko Sarić, a Montenegrin-Serbian citizen and a key cocaine kingpin in the Balkans. Starting from a very humble criminal background, he quickly rose to prominence in the criminal milieu and from around 2005 was able to ship tonnes of cocaine

from South America to Europe.⁷⁴ He rose to notoriety only in 2009, when a DEA-led police operation code-named The Balkan Warrior exposed him as a leading cocaine trafficker in Europe. After evading justice for many years, he surrendered to Serbian authorities, and in 2018 was sentenced to

15 years. In 2021, he was placed under house arrest, but was rearrested in 2022 on new drug trafficking charges; he also stands accused of planning to kill a witness.⁷⁵

Darko Sarić, leader of the Sarić Group. In 2009, a DEA-led operation exposed Sarić as a leading cocaine trafficker in Europe. He was arrested in 2022 on drug trafficking charges. © Oliver Bunic/AFP via Getty Images



Kotor clan (later Škaljari and Kavač clans)

The Kotor Clan, a criminal organization established in the town of Kotor on the Montenegrin coast in 2010, quickly became involved in international cocaine trafficking. It focused on transporting cocaine from South America to ports in the Balkans and key locations in Western Europe, while primarily operating in Montenegro and Serbia. In 2014, under the leadership of Jovan Vukotić, the Kotor Clan split into two separate branches known as Škaljari

and Kavač, due to fallout triggered by a failed cocaine deal in Spain.⁷⁶ The resultant bloody rivalry between the two branches has killed more than 60 individuals across multiple European countries since 2015.⁷⁷ Jovan Vukotić's brother, Igor, is believed to be the current leader of the Škaljari. He is at large after escaping from a prison in Brazil. Radoje Zvicer, the alleged leader of the Kavač clan, is on the run, with international warrants against him outstanding.⁷⁸

Tito and Dino clan

This group was established by Edin Gačanin, the Bosnian-born Dutch citizen referenced earlier in this report. He relies on international criminal links he cultivated in the Netherlands, and trusted individuals he recruited in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Gačanin stands accused of shipping large quantities of cocaine from South America over a period of

two decades. He has latterly found shelter in the UAE, allegedly enabling him to coordinate international drug operations from Dubai.⁷⁹ He was arrested in late 2022 but is believed to still be in the UAE (for more details, please see section entitled 'Dubai connection: safe haven?').⁸⁰

Kompania Bello network

The name of this Albanian criminal network was coined during a Europol coordinated operation concluded in 2020.⁸¹ Considered one of the most active cocaine trafficking groups operating in South America, it is comprised of highly skilled Albanian criminals with extended previous experience in Europe and beyond. They joined forces at the beginning of 2010 to create a well-connected

network spread over several continents. One of the leaders of the network is believed to be Eldi Dizdari (alias Denis Matoshi), who was arrested in the UAE at the request of Italy. However, he was released and extradition attempts failed.⁸² Dritan Rexhepi, the Albanian cocaine broker and repeated fugitive profiled earlier in this report, was also a key member of this network.⁸³ ■



FIGURE 4 Key Western Balkan criminal groups operating in South America.



BUSINESS MODELS

Western Balkan criminal groups' success in cocaine trafficking has been shaped in part by shifts in South America's criminal, political and conflict landscapes, including the decline of major cartels.⁸⁴ In Colombia, the landscape has fragmented, due initially to the demobilization of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia paramilitary organization in 2006, and more recently catalyzed by the peace process with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).⁸⁵ As a result, smaller cocaine-producing criminal groups have emerged, including FARC splinter groups.

Furthermore, organized crime structures have become more horizontal than hierarchical, resembling more a system of connected nodes.⁸⁶ This fragmentation has made it easier for foreign actors to gain a foothold, despite lacking historical in-country ties.⁸⁷ Criminal organizations from the Western Balkans recognized and quickly capitalized on these shifts, enabling them to procure cocaine directly from local groups without the expense of employing intermediaries.

The organizational flexibilities adopted by these networks have also been significant factors contributing to their success in South America. While these groups maintain a hierarchical structure at their core, they have demonstrated flexibility and pragmatism while conducting transcontinental trafficking operations. They have been open to forging various alliances and creating extensive networks of collaborators, allowing them to pursue their ambitions effectively.

They have not been reluctant to collaborate with their compatriots from different criminal organizations to purchase large quantities of cocaine or leverage each other's contacts to facilitate shipments and explore new trafficking routes. They have established durable cocaine-purchasing relationships in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, and they also have collaborators in countries such as Ecuador, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and the Dominican Republic who facilitate shipment.

Furthermore, they seek to avoid stoking local resentment (and the risk of conflict) within the supply chain by ensuring that key local players are not overlooked. Within important producing countries such as Colombia, Western Balkan brokers appear to have cultivated multiple contacts for the purchase of cocaine. There have been cases where brokers from the region have business ties to Colombia's Clan del Golfo organization in the Urabá region on the Caribbean coast, as well as FARC dissidents in south-west Colombia.⁸⁸

Furthermore, Western Balkan brokers even buy cocaine directly from small producers, in remote areas such as the Peruvian jungle. Their purchases centre largely on the VRAEM area (shorthand for the Valley between the Ene and Apurímac rivers), the epicentre of coca leaf cultivation in Peru, where the starting price for purchases is just US\$1 000 dollars per kilogram.⁸⁹

Ecuadorian gang leaders have often asked their Balkan counterparts to be the godparents of their children.

Western Balkan groups have also been able to forge strong connections with local actors in countries such as Ecuador, where criminality is largely the domain of fragmented local gangs that have a strong penchant for violence. These links, often created in Ecuador's prisons, enable criminal groups from the Western Balkans to transport the cocaine they purchase safely over land – including from neighbouring Colombia and Peru – and out of the country's ports. These business connections tend to run so deep that Ecuadorian gang leaders have often asked their Balkan counterparts to be the godparents of their children.⁹⁰ Investigations and court cases have also revealed that Balkan emissaries and controversial businessmen based in South America often marry local women, further cementing their integration into the societies of the countries in which they operate.

Western Balkan nationals' criminal relationships with small cocaine producers in Peru or local gangs in Ecuador are strong in part because they need each other equally. Criminal groups from these countries do not have the European presence that large Colombian organizations have cultivated, so partnering with Western Balkan organizations gives them reliable entry to one of the big two consumer markets. The local groups meanwhile are satisfied because Western Balkan groups are seen as dependable.

As an investigative journalist with knowledge of the Latin America cocaine scene told the GI-TOC: 'Small producers of cocaine and local gangs in Peru and Ecuador enjoy collaborating with traffickers from the Western Balkans. They are reliable and always pay quickly in cash. In contrast, Mexican and Colombian criminals operating in these countries often tend to pay for the cocaine and services of local partners with drugs or weapons. Mexicans, for example, will pay often with heroin, which has resulted in addiction issues among the population.'⁹¹

Court cases indicate that alongside paying for large quantities of cocaine in cash, criminals from the Balkans often pay 50% of transportation costs upfront, and make good on the other half once the cargo arrives in Europe.⁹² Often transportation costs reach US\$2 000 per kilogram and their emissaries in South America serve as guarantors that the other half will be paid as soon as the consignment reaches the destination port.

Their status as wholesalers of cocaine in Europe and their large network of criminals in key European cities also help Western Balkan organizations to negotiate alternative deals with locals. Sometimes they offer to distribute cocaine at the retail level for their South American counterparts, unlocking more favourable prices and reduced transportation fees.⁹³

No-clash policy

Western Balkan criminal groups, while well established in South America, are not the only foreign players on the continent. To achieve success, they have recognized the significance of cultivating non-conflictual relationships with local actors, but also with other foreign actors operating within the same environment.

Ecuador is a good case in point. In recent years, the country has become an important hub for global cocaine trafficking and traffickers from across the world have flocked around its main port cities, seeking to profit from the emerging opportunities.⁹⁴ Ecuador not only receives hundreds of criminals every year from Europe and the US, but it is also now an important dispatching centre for traffickers from Mexico and Colombia. Mexican

criminals have in turn employed violent tactics in Ecuador. Their activity has turned Ecuador into one of the most violent countries in Latin America.⁹⁵

Aware of the potential risks involved, traffickers from the Western Balkans have adopted a cautious approach towards interacting with these rival foreign groups. They maintain a policy of non-engagement with representatives of the cartels of Mexico and Colombia in Ecuador, focusing only on their relationship with locals. Maintaining this policy is helped by the fact that their trafficking routes are different. Mexican traffickers' primary market is the US, and they use Ecuador as a speedboat launch point on a route that involves several stops in Central and North America ahead of their final destination. Western Balkan groups, on the other hand, exploit container and cargo shipments departing from Ecuador to major European ports.⁹⁶ Furthermore, Western Balkan groups do not seek territorial control in South America.

Exploiting regional fragilities

Criminal groups from the Balkans succeed in their operations in South America also because of their ability to exploit the fragilities of the countries in which they operate. In Ecuador, media outlets and politicians have suggested that Balkan traffickers have infiltrated highly influential circles close to the country's former president.⁹⁷

On the other hand, Ecuador's media has often exposed how criminals from the Western Balkans have evaded justice, including by receiving questionable reductions of their drug trafficking sentences⁹⁸ or being granted house arrest, only to escape soon after.⁹⁹ Both Ecuador and Colombia have recorded cases of judges facing abuse of office charges for irregularities in the process of serving justice to Western Balkans cocaine traffickers.¹⁰⁰

Fear for their lives also often impedes prosecutors and judges in South American countries, who might otherwise adopt a stronger stance toward organized criminals.¹⁰¹ Excessive workloads and local pressure to respond quickly to rising homegrown criminality depletes resources for in-depth trans-continental investigations into foreign criminals.¹⁰²

Police forces, meanwhile, are one of the most vulnerable law enforcement institutions in these countries. Criminals use bribes to local police to avoid surveillance and operate without interference. Furthermore, there is scant cooperation between these police forces and those in the Western Balkans. This situation creates fertile ground for criminals to thrive, expand their illicit activities unchecked and operate with impunity.

The prison crises that have in recent years plagued Central and South America have worked to the advantage of criminals from the Western Balkans operating in these regions.¹⁰³ They have been able to forge important criminal connections and partnerships to conduct criminal activities from behind bars. They have also benefited from shorter sentences and early releases into house arrest, due to the chronic overpopulation of prisons in some countries.

Criminals from the Balkans readily resort to corrupting professionals of every stripe in their host countries. There have been cases where large amounts of money have been paid to bribe doctors and hospital officials to obtain false medical diagnoses facilitating movement from jail to house arrest.¹⁰⁴

Another vulnerability is a general lack of understanding among local law enforcement authorities of how Western Balkan criminal groups operate. A handful of successful operations against these organizations have been led and coordinated by the DEA and Europol, but bilateral cooperation between South American and Western Balkan law enforcement institutions remains in its infancy.¹⁰⁵

Dearth of regional data

Data from Latin American law enforcement agencies on criminals from the Western Balkans is limited and rife with inconsistencies. For example, Colombia officially reports that only one person from the Western Balkans has been murdered in the country,¹⁰⁶ even as the GI-TOC has identified five killed in the country due to cocaine disputes.

Colombian data on the number of Western Balkan nationals detained for drug trafficking is likewise prone to errors. According to the official data, just nine Western Balkan citizens – all Albanian nationals – have been arrested in Colombia for drug trafficking, overlooking other arrests of people from the region, including Montenegrin Ivan Armus, who was apprehended in 2021.¹⁰⁷

Navigating the data on Western Balkan drug trafficking arrests in Ecuador is even more difficult. Such arrests are categorized in Ecuador's national database not by country, but instead solely as European arrests,¹⁰⁸ compromising the scope for detailed investigations from the outset. Individuals from the Western Balkans who are murdered or imprisoned in Mexico are likewise solely categorized as Europeans.¹⁰⁹

Peru reports the conviction of 11 individuals from Serbia, two from North Macedonia, two from Bosnia and Herzegovina, and two from Montenegro in the last 10 years.¹¹⁰ However, this excludes people who are currently in temporary detention until the completion of their legal processes, in a context where the court process might last anywhere from two to five years.¹¹¹ The dearth of solid databases of Western Balkan citizens arrested and imprisoned on drug trafficking charges in South American countries impedes a clearer understanding of the threats emerging from this region. It also reduces the ability of these countries' law enforcement authorities to respond to these threats.

Forged identities

Cocaine traffickers from the Western Balkans present a significant challenge for local and international law enforcement agencies, given the sophisticated model that they have crafted over years to evade detection. One key tactic is the use of forged identities. Assuming multiple identities via passports of both European and South American countries has become *de rigueur* for cocaine brokers. They switch between these identities seamlessly, making the work of law enforcement even more challenging.

In 2016, the Peruvian police apprehended Group America's Zoran Jakšić as he attempted to cross the border into Ecuador using a false passport. Upon searching his luggage, authorities discovered 10 additional forged passports.¹¹² Jakšić was known to have used 40 different identities to evade justice, including false passports from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹¹³

When serial escape artist Dritan Rexhepi was arrested in Ecuador in 2014,¹¹⁴ authorities discovered that he switched routinely between the Greek identity of Ioannys Dionisopoulos and the Albanian identity of Lulezim Murataj. They also discovered that he used documents identifying him as Gramoz Rexhepaj and Rexhepai Dritan. These identities were acquired in Latin American countries, the Balkans and the EU.¹¹⁵

Božidar Ratković, a cocaine trafficker from the Trebinje area of Bosnia and Herzegovina, earned the media nickname 'man of a thousand faces' due to his multiple false identities, in addition to holding legitimate dual citizenship of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. These numerous identities allowed him to move freely between the Western Balkans and South America, effectively evading detection by law enforcement for many years. However, in May 2022, he was apprehended in Argentina while en-route to Bolivia. At the time of his arrest, he was carrying a forged identity document under the name Jeferson do Carmo Pereira, falsely claiming Brazilian citizenship.¹¹⁶

A police operation in North Macedonia revealed that identities of the country's citizens were stolen to produce biometric passports for key criminal players from Montenegro, Serbia and Albania who operate extensively in South America.¹¹⁷ Interestingly, it is believed that Balkan traffickers also procured forged documents for their South American associates. A forged North Macedonian passport was reportedly given to Karine De Oliveira Campos, a Brazilian national dubbed 'Brazil's cocaine queen', on account of her allegedly dispatching tonnes of cocaine to Europe from Santos port.¹¹⁸



A record haul of cocaine was seized at the Macedonian border in January 2007.
© Robert Atanasovski/AFP via Getty Images

Money laundering

Cocaine trafficking is one of the most valuable illicit commodity trades in the criminal world, and the most lucrative one for Western Balkan organizations. They buy cocaine from producers in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia for US\$1 500 to US\$4 000 per kilogram. Transportation and storage costs nearly double that initial outlay. However, as wholesalers in the European cocaine market, they can sell a kilogram of cocaine for between €27 000 and €55 000.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, in countries like Australia, where Western Balkan groups have recently started to operate, a kilogram can fetch more than €100 000,¹²⁰ translating into astronomical profit margins when seizures are avoided.

The ability of these groups to ship tens of tonnes of cocaine from South America each year yields annual profits that comfortably amount to hundreds of millions of dollars. The difficulties faced by Western Balkan states in taming these organizations is neatly illustrated by the fact that the Montenegrin budget is small in comparison to the money that criminal groups have at their disposal, with the country's GDP amounting to just US\$6.1 billion in 2022.¹²¹

Some of the profits are laundered in countries in South America, such as Ecuador, where substantial amounts of money from Europe and other regions flow to emissaries to fund the purchase and shipment of cocaine.¹²² Cocaine revenues are also laundered in the countries where kingpins reside, notably the Western Balkans, Western Europe and, more recently, the UAE. Media investigations have also suggested that cocaine traffickers are funnelling money into shell companies in the Virgin Islands.¹²³

Construction and real estate are the principal channels for laundering criminal proceeds in the Western Balkans.¹²⁴ These sectors are poorly regulated and economically significant. Major cities and coastal tourist development are key to the investment of proceeds. Cash is laundered through casinos and other forms of gambling.¹²⁵

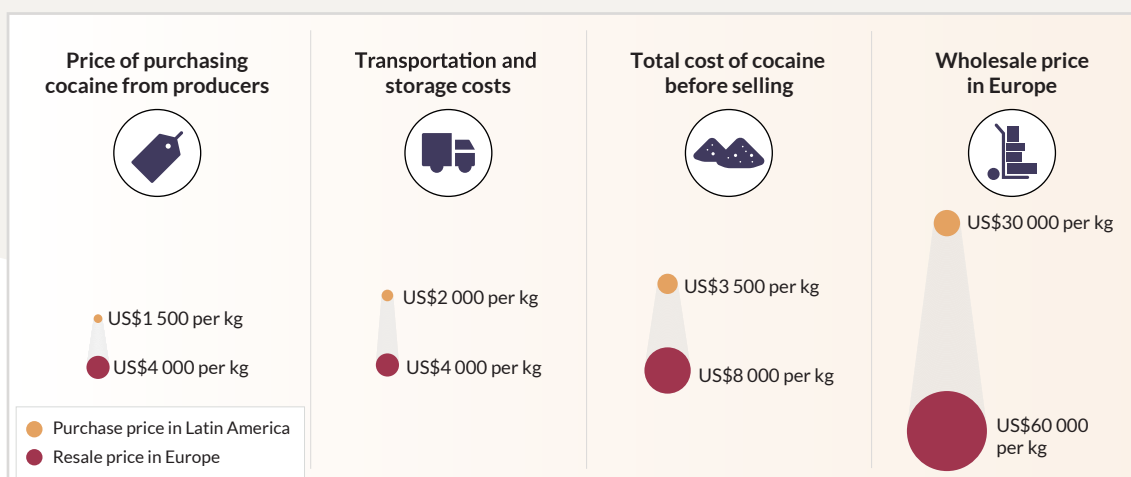


FIGURE 5 Cocaine pricing breakdown.

Criminal cases against some of the most notorious drug traffickers in the Balkans indicate that proceeds are often also invested in the equity of companies operating across a wide range of sectors.¹²⁶ Authorities in the Western Balkans are aware that criminal groups launder money locally, but few resources are made available for such criminal investigations, partly due to the inherent complexities of laundering webs. This shortcoming risks exacerbating future challenges, given the tactical sophistication of criminal groups from the Western Balkans.

Recent seizures of cocaine implicating regional criminals suggest the emerging use of cryptocurrencies.¹²⁷ These developments, which squirrel transactions away from the established global financial architecture entirely, generate extra difficulties for regional law enforcement authorities that lack the technology and human resources to properly investigate cases of this nature.¹²⁸

Dubai connection: Safe haven?

When the US Department of the Treasury announced sanctions in March 2023 against Edin Gačanin, leader of the Tito and Dino organization, it described him as ‘one of the world’s most prolific drug traffickers.’¹²⁹ The readout emphasized that the measure was closely coordinated not only with the US DEA, but also Europol and the governments of the Netherlands, France and Belgium. Media have reported that his criminal organization laundered profits in the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹³⁰

Four months before the US sanctions, Gačanin was arrested in the UAE – where he had set up home – during a November 2022 Europol-coordinated operation dubbed Desert Light.¹³¹ He and other high-value targets arrested in this operation allegedly constituted a super cartel that controlled around one third of the cocaine trade in Europe.¹³² Top Balkan criminals have long resided in the UAE in part because the country makes it difficult to extradite criminals.¹³³ Edin Gačanin was sentenced by the Rotterdam District Court to seven years in prison and a fine of €1 million for drug trafficking, and he is expected to be extradited from the UAE to the Netherlands or Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹³⁴

In November 2020, Europol announced a crackdown on the Kompania Bello organization.¹³⁵ Italian authorities requested the extradition of one of its leaders, Eldi Dizdari, to no avail.¹³⁶ When major EU countries fail in their attempts to extradite key traffickers, the chances of law enforcement in the Western



Edin Gačanin (right), pictured in Dubai months before his arrest.

© Instagram

Balkans succeeding are even lower. It is therefore unsurprising that more and more criminals from the region view the UAE as a safe place to reside.¹³⁷

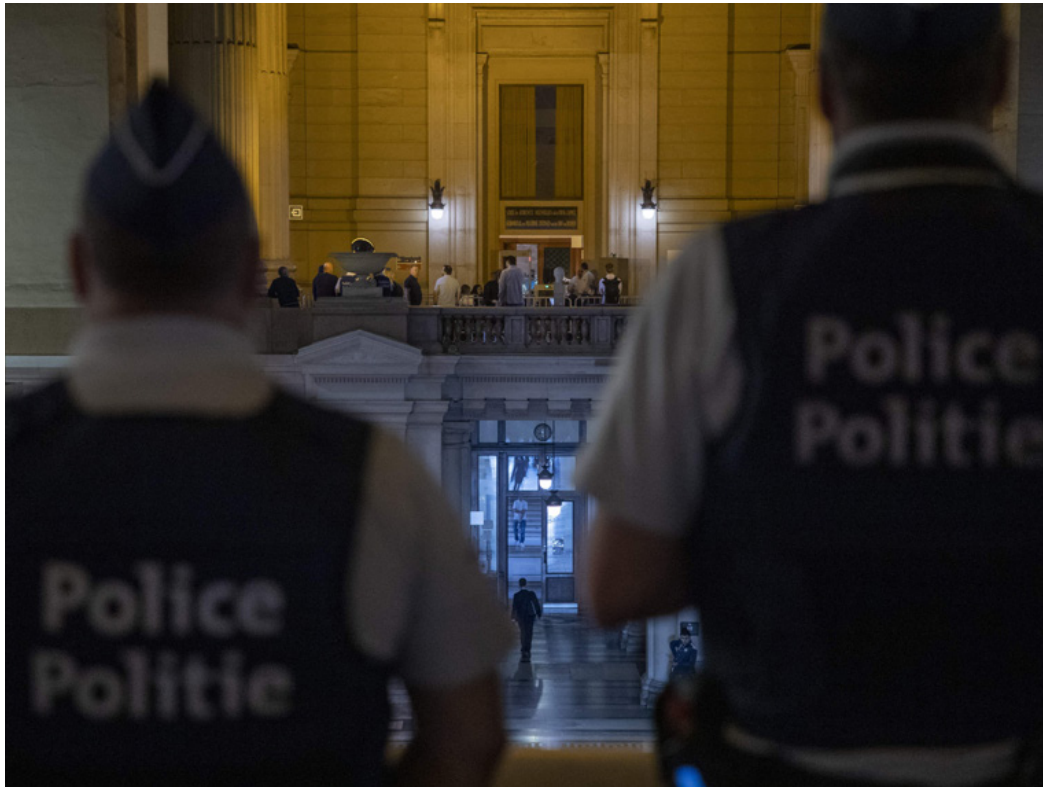
As a result, countries such as the UAE also serve as a place where the proceeds of crimes can be laundered. Multiple accounts indicate that Balkan traffickers spend tens of millions of euros every year buying real estate in this country. Furthermore, under the name of other citizens, they establish companies in the Emirates that allow them to launder the money and funnel it into legitimate financial channels, including offshore companies, enabling them to invest easily in other parts of the world.

Consequently, the UAE's role in facilitating illicit finance has increasingly come under international scrutiny. The Financial Action Task Force placed the UAE on its grey list in March 2022, due to concerns about money laundering.¹³⁸ However, in February 2024, it was dropped from the list.¹³⁹ Transparency International has described the UAE as a 'key piece in the global money laundering puzzle'.¹⁴⁰ Interestingly, the UAE has also sought to promote itself as a haven for cryptocurrency innovation, in a context where US regulators in particular view this evolving financial infrastructure as highly vulnerable to exploitation by organized criminals.¹⁴¹ However, with the UAE assuming a leadership role in the international response to crime, more is expected from this country in terms of a genuine commitment to the fight against organized crime.¹⁴²

Secrets revealed by decrypted apps

For almost a decade, organized crime groups in the Western Balkan relied on what were believed to be secure messaging apps to coordinate their criminal activities, particularly for international cocaine trafficking. Applications such as Sky ECC and EncroChat have been widely utilized by these organizations. But when law enforcement authorities infiltrated these platforms over the period 2019–2021, they gained extraordinarily valuable insights into the activities of these trafficking groups and their links with powerful people within legitimate institutions.¹⁴³ Separately, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation established ANOM, its own encrypted device company, which then sold subscriptions surreptitiously to unaware organized criminals around the world, resulting in an additional treasure trove of actionable intelligence.

The decryption of key platforms was followed by a series of operations against Western Balkan cocaine traffickers at both European and local levels. In seizing this opportunity, Europol established an operational task force nicknamed Balkan Cartel,¹⁴⁴ which announced the takedown of several high-profile individuals and organizations connected to the international cocaine trade. In May 2023, three Serbian cocaine



Officers guard the entrance to a Brussels court building during a drug trial. Decrypted communications on messaging platforms have provided the authorities with intelligence into criminal activities that can be used in trials. © Nicolas Maeterlinck/Belga Mag/AFP via Getty Images

kingpins were arrested in a Europol-coordinated operation, accused of being the masterminds behind multi-tonne cocaine shipments from Colombia, Brazil and Ecuador to Belgium and the Netherlands.¹⁴⁵ During the same month, Europol assisted Bosnia and Herzegovina in dismantling a criminal network responsible for smuggling cocaine from South America to Europe using ships and private planes, often by concealing the drugs in coal or cans of tuna.¹⁴⁶

At the local level, in April 2022, Serbian prosecutors acted on intercepted Sky ECC communications and intelligence that notorious kingpin Darko Šarić had ordered the assassination of his associate Milan Milovać in Ecuador back in late 2020.¹⁴⁷ In addition, decrypted communications played a crucial role in bringing Veljko Belivuk, a notorious Serbian criminal group leader involved in drug trafficking, murders, and illegal weapons possession, to court. The Belivuk group had close ties with the Montenegrin Kavač clan, which operated in South America.¹⁴⁸

The crackdown on decrypted applications has clearly revealed cases of organized crime groups from the region enjoying protection in their home countries. Although their operations are primarily conducted abroad, their home countries serve as recruitment hubs, arenas for settling disputes and rivalries, and locations for laundering money. As a result, securing protection at home from political figures, the judiciary and law enforcement agencies is a priority for these organizations.

Based on intercepted Sky ECC communications, Montenegro's special state prosecutor brought charges against several high-ranking officials due to their connections with Montenegrin criminal clans allegedly involved in cocaine trafficking from South America to Europe, including a senior police officer.¹⁴⁹ The

officer stood accused of being a member of the Kavač clan, an organization that is directly involved in smuggling large quantities of cocaine from Ecuador to Europe and Australia. He allegedly provided the organization with official protection for their illicit activities.

In June 2023, Montenegrin prosecutors charged one of their own, Deputy Special State Prosecutor Saša Čađenović, who stands accused of removing criminal files on leaders and members of the Kavač criminal organization.¹⁵⁰ Several other officials have been arrested or indicted for similar alleged offences, including Budva mayor Milo Božović and the longtime head of the country's supreme court, Vesna Medenica, and her son Miloš. In April 2022, the media published leaked messages purportedly exchanged between Miloš and a police officer, in which they allegedly arranged the purchase of cocaine in the Montenegrin port of Bar.¹⁵¹

Thanks to the ANOM app, police in Bosnia and Herzegovina arrested Milan Matković, a notorious drug baron from Trebinje. He was accused of leading a criminal group involved in trafficking cocaine from South America, with the proceeds laundered through Bitcoin for the ultimate purchase of real estate and luxury cars.¹⁵² The Sky ECC and ANOM apps were also used for illicit purposes by high-level politicians and judicial officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁵³ Bosnia and Herzegovina's Deputy Chief Prosecutor Dijana Kajmaković was found to have collaborated with criminals by helping them avoid investigation and disrupting investigations.¹⁵⁴ This resulted in the US government imposing sanctions against her.¹⁵⁵ Operation Black Tie in Bosnia and Herzegovina exposed a number of public officials who had allegedly been colluding with the Tito and Dino cartel.¹⁵⁶

In Albania, a law enforcement operation in July 2023, assisted by information from decrypted applications, resulted in allegations that a former high-ranking police official and a prosecutor aided a dangerous criminal organization believed to have connections in South America.¹⁵⁷ In addition to law enforcement officials, prosecution in Albania arrested a member of the ruling party who is accused, among other things, of providing information to and supporting criminal organizations.¹⁵⁸ Albanian was reported to be one of the most used languages after English on Sky ECC.¹⁵⁹

These revelations confirmed long-held suspicions that Western Balkan criminals' success in international trafficking is partly due to the high-level protection networks they have established within their home countries.



TRAFFICKING METHODS

The breakthrough of Western Balkan criminal organizations in South America cannot be attributed solely to favourable local conditions. Their employment and perfection of trafficking methods with a touch of creativity is also key, allowing them to capitalize on institutional corruption at the point of arrival. Europol notes that corruption is the key enabler for criminal infiltration of key European ports. Port workers, shipping company personnel, freight forwarders/shipping agents, importers, transport companies, terminals, security companies, law enforcement and customs are vulnerable both to corruption and coercion.¹⁶⁰

Maritime trafficking

Approximately 80% of legitimately traded goods are transported via sea, and maritime routes have also been popular for the illicit trafficking of drugs, particularly cocaine. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, in 2021, almost 89% of cocaine seizures stemmed from maritime trafficking.¹⁶¹

Criminal organizations have employed (or sought to employ) a variety of techniques to transport cocaine from South America to other parts of the world, including container ships, speed boats, sailing vessels, fishing vessels, commercial vessels, semi-submersibles and water-borne drones.

Western Balkan criminal organizations send their cocaine shipments through ports on both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, as well as the Caribbean Sea. Alongside the primary destinations of Antwerp and Rotterdam,¹⁶² these groups also utilize the ports of Algeciras and Valencia in Spain,¹⁶³ Gioia Tauro in Italy and Hamburg in Germany.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, they exploit the vulnerabilities of ports in the Balkans region, including Ploce and Rijeka in Croatia, Bar in Montenegro, Durrës in Albania, Piraeus and Thessaloniki in Greece, as well as Constanța in Romania and Varna in Bulgaria on the shores of the Black Sea.¹⁶⁵ There have also been cases of groups from the Western Balkans using the shores of West Africa to transport cocaine shipments from across the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁶⁶

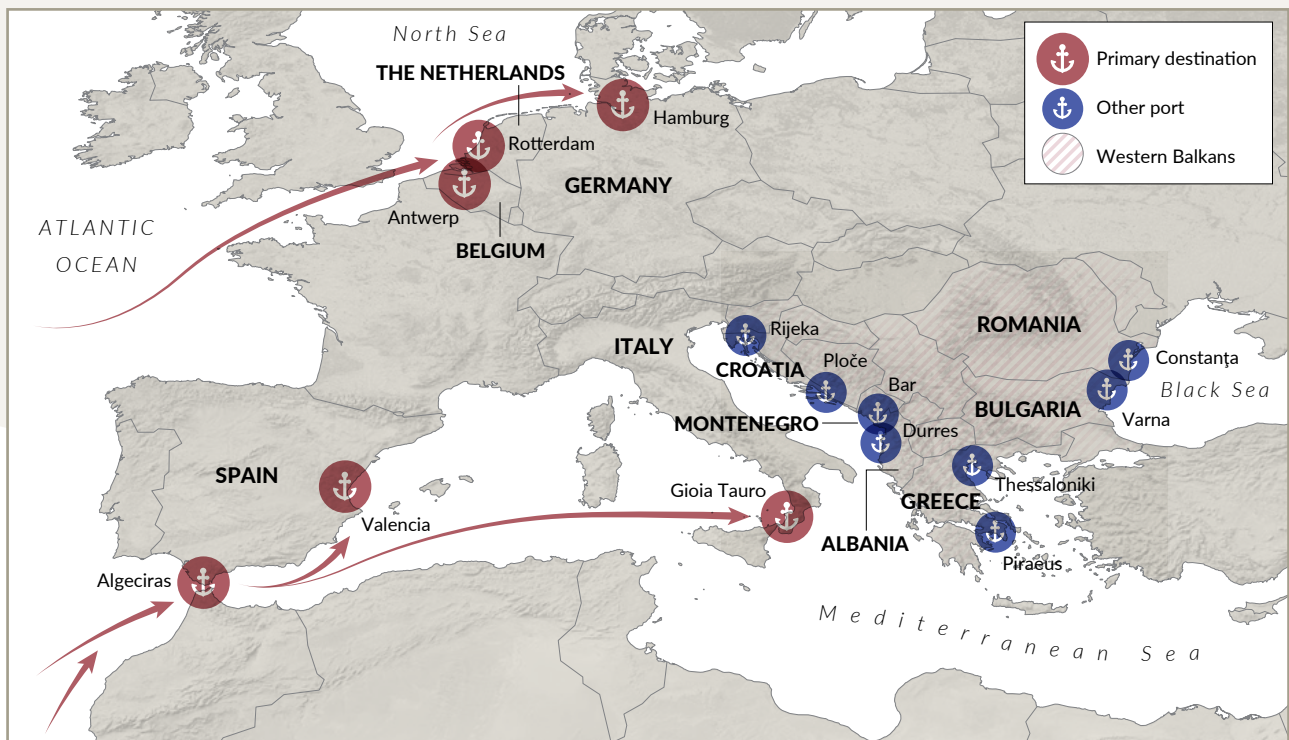


FIGURE 6 Key European ports used by Western Balkan organizations for cocaine shipments.

Container ships

Western Balkan criminal networks generally prefer to use container ships to traffic cocaine to Europe, due in part to their dependability and cost-effectiveness for long-distance transit. The sheer volume of legitimate goods transported by container ships – and the consequent difficulty in scrutinizing loads – is also an attraction. Criminal organizations have taken advantage of the comparatively low risk of detection, as only a tiny percentage of containers, typically 2%–3%, are subjected to routine inspections.¹⁶⁷

The ‘within the load’ technique is used to hide cocaine among bananas and other exotic fruits. However, more creative methods have also been employed, including smuggling cocaine in liquefied forms.

‘Within the load’ technique: Creativity in liquefied cocaine

In November of 2021, Franc Malo and Gentjan Meta, two Albanians reported to have a history of involvement in drug trafficking, arrived in Peru under the guise of being tourists.¹⁶⁸ Once there, they allegedly negotiated with a local manager at an export company to smuggle 2.2 tonnes of liquid cocaine concealed in tins of asparagus.¹⁶⁹ The intended destination was Rotterdam. However, the operation was intercepted by Peruvian authorities and the shipment of drugs was confiscated before departure at the port of Callao.



A consignment of liquefied cocaine concealed in asparagus tins was intercepted in Peru. © TV Perú

Group America used this method from the late 1990s by trying to smuggle cocaine from Peru in deodorant containers, other spray cans and wine bottles.¹⁷⁰ Liquefaction and other chemical methods to mask cocaine are the most challenging forms of drug trafficking for police to detect. It also requires that laboratories be created near the arrival point. Chemical experts are often brought from Colombia to extract the cocaine.¹⁷¹ These laboratories are often created in key arrival countries such as the Netherlands; however, they have also been found in the Balkan region. In 2015, police in Albania discovered a cocaine lab in a village near Elbasan, built to extract cocaine after it had been liquefied and impregnated in clothing. Two Colombian chemists were arrested at the lab.¹⁷² ■

In many cases, cocaine is concealed in the structure of the container, in the floors, walls or ceiling of its refrigerator. Contamination of containers is sometimes carried out by the 'rip on/rip off' technique, which involves contaminating a legitimate cargo shipment with cocaine without the knowledge of the shipping company, ahead of eventual retrieval at the destination port. Operatives break the seals of closed containers and replace them with a replica of the customs seal. In Europe's major ports, groups from the Western Balkans are well versed in retrieving the cocaine. These so-called 'pickers' install cloned seals after removing their hauls, to avoid leaving evidence of breaking into the container. Even in the event of discovery by authorities, cocaine shipped in this manner cannot easily be traced back to owners.

Another technique often used by Western Balkan criminal organizations is the so-called 'drop off'. The technique involves the use of small boats, fishing vessels and submersibles to transport drugs to larger vessels.

'Drop-off' technique: Huge US cocaine seizure and Montenegrin seafarers

Montenegrin citizen Goran Gogić, a former heavyweight boxer, was in October 2022 charged with conspiring to smuggle more than US\$1 billion of cocaine from Colombia to Europe via the US, in what amounted to one of the largest ever seizures of cocaine by US authorities. The plot involved the use of a cargo ship named *MSC Gayane*, with a team of eight seafarers responsible for smuggling 18 tonnes of cocaine via the US on this ship, after an initial two tonnes had been loaded

onto two other ships.¹⁷³ The seafarers, six of whom were from Montenegro and two from Samoa, executed a sophisticated drop-off operation, loading the drugs onto the *MSC Gayane* at night at multiple points near the South American coast and ports using speedboats. They then hid the cocaine within specific shipping containers, using counterfeit seals to cover their tracks.¹⁷⁴ However, the enormous haul of cocaine was discovered on the ship at the US port of Philadelphia in June 2019. Gogić was arrested in connection with the plot when attempting to board a flight from Miami International Airport more than three years later.

Montenegro's sailors and others from the Balkans have often been selected by traffickers organizing large-scale cocaine operations.¹⁷⁵ In 2009, South African authorities seized 230 kilograms of cocaine in Durban in the cabin of a seafarer from Croatia. The drug was stuffed into suitcases, duffel bags and backpacks and amounted to one of South Africa's largest ever seizures.¹⁷⁶ The cocaine had been deposited on board by Balkan sailors – recruited by Group America – in the port of Buenos Aires. The vessel's final destination was initially Croatia. However, the ship was sold mid-voyage, resulting in a change of destination to Durban.

In Colombia, the drop-off technique is referred to as *tuleo*,¹⁷⁷ or as using *tuleros* – the people who deliver drugs to container ships on the high seas.¹⁷⁸ ■

Sailing vessels

Advances in maritime technology have enabled sailing vessels to embark efficiently on long-distance trips. These vessels are now capable of navigating across oceans, and many of them depart from ports along the South American Atlantic coast to destinations in Europe, Africa and even Asia and Australia.¹⁷⁹ The increased accessibility and flexibility of these vessels has attracted the attention of criminal groups, including those from the Balkans, who are utilizing them to transport cocaine. Sailing vessels routinely supply container ships through the 'drop-off' technique on the high seas.¹⁸⁰ The illicit cargo is often GPS tagged, and is collected by other smaller vessels before the container ship reaches port.

Cocaine in luxury yachts

In April 2021, Colombian police announced the seizure of almost half a tonne of cocaine on a luxury yacht that was about to depart from the port of Cartagena to Lisbon in Portugal. Police arrested Ivan Armuš, a Montenegrin citizen and suspected cocaine emissary, for allegedly intending to traffic this cocaine.¹⁸¹

Armuš purportedly maintained an opulent lifestyle for three years in Colombia,¹⁸² where he had allegedly created large criminal networks that were enabling him to traffic large amounts of cocaine to Europe. The use of yachts in transporting cocaine has long been favoured by Balkan criminal groups, and often these vessels are used to take cocaine to container ships. In October 2009, Darko Šarić was identified as the owner of more than two tonnes of cocaine seized from a British-registered yacht named *Maui* near Uruguay's capital, Montevideo.¹⁸³ Besides luxury yachts, catamarans are also used for cocaine trafficking. Following the interception of a catamaran in Portuguese waters in 2018



Luxury yachts and catamarans have long been a preferred means for transporting cocaine for Balkan traffickers. © Europol



carrying around 840 kilograms of cocaine shipped from the Caribbean, Europol announced in 2020 the dismantling of a trafficking group from the Balkans, comprised of citizens of Montenegro, Croatia, Serbia and Portugal.¹⁸⁴ ■

Merchant vessels

Tugboats, general cargo ships and bulk carriers are also used quite extensively in cross-continental cocaine trafficking. They are cheaper and easier to dock in ports than container ships, and sometimes bought by traffickers only for one run.¹⁸⁵ While far from a new technique, traffickers have increasingly resorted to stashing cocaine in these types of vessels due to container ships being repeatedly targeted for searches and seizures by authorities.

Cocaine in fertilizer, coal and construction materials

In November 2022, authorities in Albania and Montenegro announced the successful completion of a four-month-long anti-drug operation that culminated in the seizure of 430 kilograms of cocaine mixed in 24 tonnes of synthetic fertilizer. The cargo had been sent from Colombia and was unloaded at Bar port.¹⁸⁶ The cocaine was detected by sniffer dogs. Even after thorough testing, the seizure was not disclosed by law enforcement agencies; instead, they waited until they discovered the culprits. Police arrested 10 people after tracking the cocaine to a lab that had been established with the help of a Colombian chemist.

In May 2020, Albanian authorities at Durres port discovered around 60 kilograms of cocaine hidden in a bulk carrier loaded with coal that originated from Barranquilla port in Colombia.¹⁸⁷ In November 2022, seven members of a Serbian-led drug trafficking network were arrested simultaneously in Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Serbia in a sweep coordinated by Eurojust, the judicial arm of Europol, for their role in hiding 115 kilograms of cocaine in concrete panels in the Belgium town of Arlon for onward movement to destinations in Europe.¹⁸⁸ Other seizure across Europe have revealed narcotics concealed for the duration of their trans-continental journey inside concrete blocks.¹⁸⁹ ■

Submarines and underwater drones

The usage of submarines and underwater drones in cocaine trafficking is considered one of the most sophisticated methods that traffickers employ and is rarely detected by police forces. Semi or fully submersible, they are usually small in size but some of them can carry up to eight tonnes of cocaine.¹⁹⁰ They are powered by engines and need well-trained staff to operate them. On the other hand, uncrewed water drones used in drug trafficking are smaller and can carry 320+ kilograms of drugs.¹⁹¹ They can move underwater or on the water's surface and are operated remotely. They pose significant challenges to law enforcement given their small size and difficulties in identifying the organization behind the shipment.

Ylli Didani and the submarine prototype

In March 2021, US authorities arrested Ylli Didani, a businessman from Albania, on charges of conspiracy to distribute cocaine. It emerged that Didani was allegedly the leader of an international drug trafficking organization, with strong contacts in the US, Mexico, South America, Europe and the UAE. In the US, Didani allegedly secured funding from Marty Tibbitts, the CEO of a telecom company and co-founder of the World Heritage Aviation Museum in Michigan, who was killed in a plane crash in 2018.¹⁹² With reported experience of being able to unload large amounts of cocaine in key European ports, including Bilbao, Rotterdam and Antwerp, both in container and general cargo ships, Didani allegedly plotted with Tibbitts to take trafficking to another level. They paid U\$12 000 for the development of a submarine/water drone.¹⁹³ It would be equipped with an underwater modem and GPS antenna and would attach to the bottom of a commercial containership. It would be remotely released from the bottom of the ship while off European shores, before being picked up by a fishing boat controlled by Didani's organization. These alleged plans, however, never materialized, due to the death of Tibbitts and Didani's subsequent arrest. ■



The prototype of a submarine/water drone to smuggle cocaine into European shores. © US District Court records

Air trafficking

Air trafficking is a challenging method of drug trafficking for criminal groups in the Western Balkans due to the extensive distance between South America and Europe. However, some Balkan criminal organizations have used this method to move substantial quantities of cocaine over long distances.

Charter planes are frequently used by these organizations to transport cocaine from one region of South America to another before delivering it to its final destination through a port. The types of aircraft used for this purpose might range from small planes with one or two engines to bigger private jets with different load and speed capacities. The challenge of combating drug trafficking in the region is compounded by the presence of illegal runways, which pose significant difficulties for law enforcement in both locating and patrolling these airstrips.

Despite the significant logistical obstacles involved, Balkan criminal groups have also demonstrated their ability to utilize aircraft for intercontinental trafficking of cocaine. This often involves the use of larger cargo planes capable of transporting significant quantities of drugs. Intercontinental departures of cocaine from major airports are believed to have been facilitated by particularly high-level corruption.

Planes to fly cocaine

In July 2019, Europol announced the dismantling of a Balkan cartel that was trafficking cocaine globally using private planes departing from Uruguay and Paraguay.¹⁹⁴ The operation was led by Croatian police in Europe, and authorities in Serbia were also involved. The investigation revealed that the Balkan traffickers were not only bringing cocaine from South America to Europe, via several flights between 2018 and 2019, but they were further transporting it to Asia, notably Hong Kong and Macau.

In July 2021, Colombian authorities arrested the Albanian national Agim Çerma, alias 'Jimmy', in Monteria. He had been living in Colombia since 2014 and the US had requested his extradition.¹⁹⁵ According to investigators, Çerma received money transfers from Europe to purchase cocaine in the coca-producing Cauca region, and to send cocaine through charter flights from Alfonso Bonilla Aragón de Palmira International Airport, which services Cali, the third biggest city in Colombia. Çerma's network – four other collaborators were also arrested – had allegedly corrupted air traffic control and security.¹⁹⁶ During the operation, the Anti-Narcotics Directorate seized 1.5 billion pesos from the organization that Çerma stands accused of leading and 332 kilograms of cocaine. A US investigation found that Çerma was attempting to fly 500 kilograms of cocaine from Colombia to West Africa or Europe.¹⁹⁷ Small clandestine planes to take cocaine out of Peru, Colombia and Bolivia in order to transfer it to the ports of Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina have also been linked with Western Balkan organizations.¹⁹⁸ ■



CONSEQUENCES IN SOUTH AMERICA

Alongside the arrest of emissaries and substantial seizures of cocaine, the expanding footprint of Western Balkan organized crime groups in South America is also highlighted by a trail of blood that they leave in their wake. According to GI-TOC analysis, at least 19 people from the Western Balkans believed to be linked to cocaine trafficking have been killed in South America since 2010. The majority of these killings have taken place in Ecuador, Colombia and Bolivia. Among them, seven people from, or closely linked to, the Western Balkans were killed in the Ecuadorian port city of Guayaquil, indicating the importance of this transportation hub. Nine of the identified victims killed in South America were Serbian citizens and six were Albanian citizens.¹⁹⁹ Cocaine traffickers' routine use of forged identities, including non-Western Balkan passports, indicates that the true number may be higher.²⁰⁰



Ecuadorian police patrol the streets as part of the government's war against drug trafficking, November 2022.
© Rodrigo Buendia/AFP via Getty Images

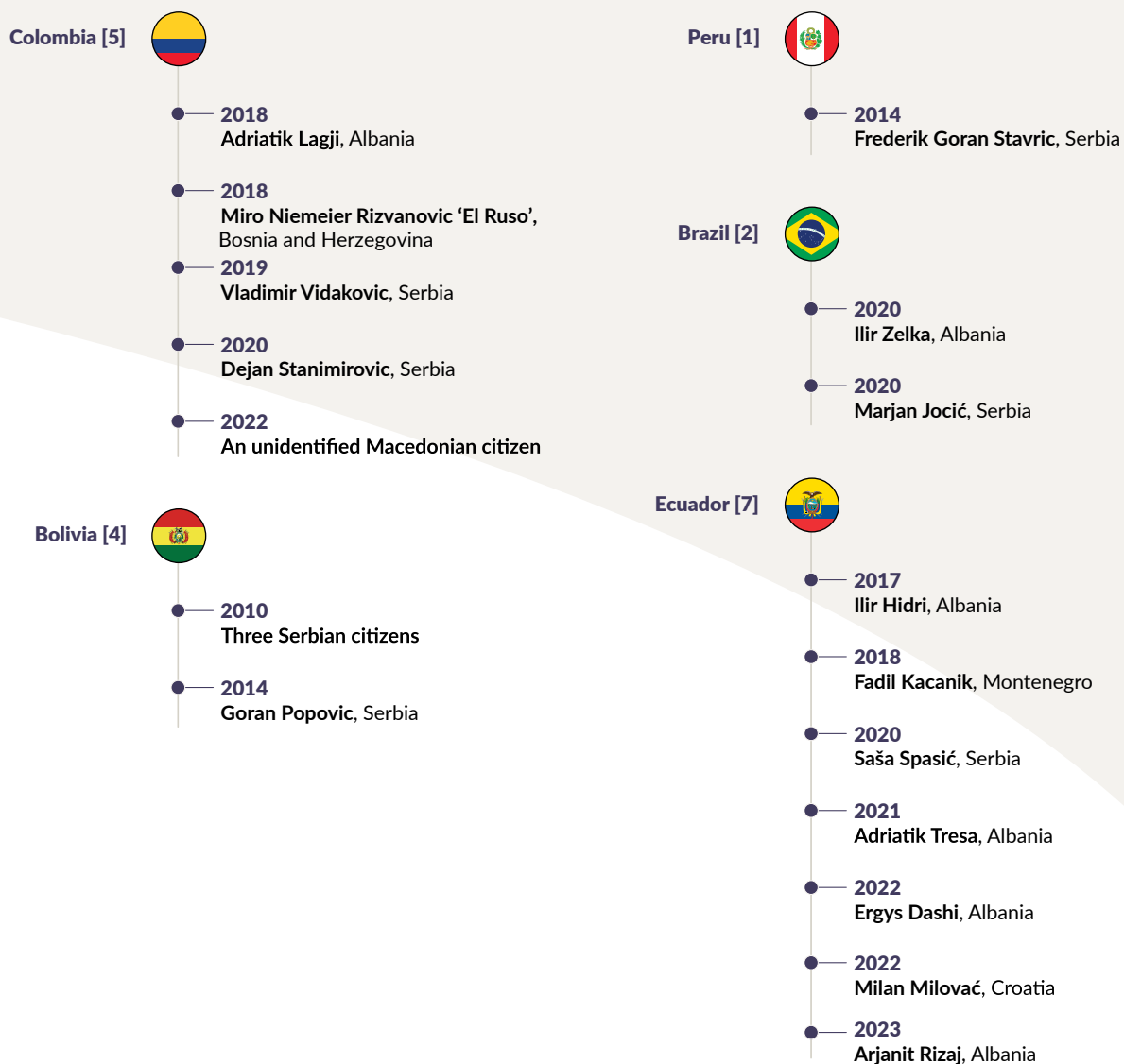


FIGURE 7 Drug traffickers from the Western Balkans killed in South America, 2010–2023.

NOTE: Data gathered from various media sources.

Internal disputes within Western Balkan criminal groups, rather than conflict with South American players, appear to drive these killings. Although the absence of a criminal record is a key criterion for the selection of emissaries, there have been cases where these individuals have broken rank or where problems have arisen with important shipments. Milan Milovać, aka Cigla, a Croatian citizen who was shot in Guayaquil in late 2020 and later died of his wounds, appears to be a case in point. The cracking of encryption app Sky ECC gave authorities in the Western Balkans more insight into this murder.²⁰¹ Milovać was a long-time emissary of Serbian-Montenegrin kingpin Darko Šarić. But he began to operate independently, a step that was considered a betrayal by his superiors. Šarić is believed to be behind the final order to kill Milovać, a move that seems to have contributed to Šarić's reconviction in April 2022.²⁰²

Internal disputes also reportedly account for a failed murder attempt in 2017 against Remzi Azemi, a Kosovo-Albanian, and the killing in 2018 of Montenegrin-Albanian Fadil Kačanik, together with his wife in Guayaquil.²⁰³ It is believed the killings were ordered by a citizen of Albania who was residing in Ecuador due to a deal gone wrong.²⁰⁴

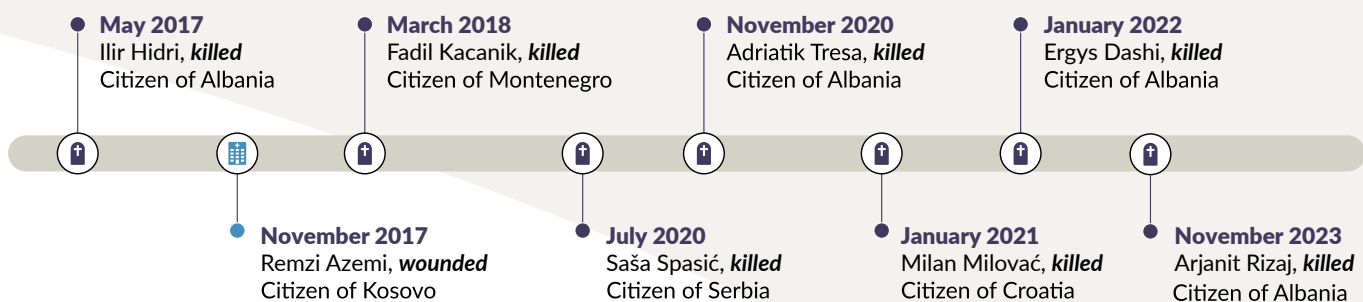


FIGURE 8 Traffickers killed or wounded in Ecuador alone.

NOTE: Data gathered from various news sources. Milan Milovać was shot in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in November 2020, but lost his life in a hospital in January 2021.

Western Balkan criminals prefer to eliminate their associates in South America using local *sicarios* (hitmen) who are often introduced to them by local gangs.²⁰⁵ While the policy of maintaining good relations with local partners generally holds, there have been isolated cases of Western Balkan nationals becoming over-ambitious locally and falling out with their criminal hosts. Adriatik Tresa, the Albanian killed in his luxury residence in Guayaquil in 2020, is one such example.

There are also cases where Western Balkan traffickers establish a very close relationship with a local gang and become a target of the latter's rivals.²⁰⁶ More generally, Western Balkan groups' demand for cocaine fuels clashes between local groups seeking to meet that demand, contributing to a significant increase in violence in Ecuador.²⁰⁷

Western Balkan groups rely on Ecuadorian gangs to ensure safe import from producing countries and shipment from the country's ports; at times they also collaborate in the manufacturing process.²⁰⁸ The money paid by the Western Balkan traffickers for these services creates a valuable source of income for local gangs. Furthermore, in some cases, Western Balkan groups offer to ship cocaine belonging to local gangs to Europe, at very profitable prices.²⁰⁹

The lucrative and symbiotic nature of these relationships spark local disputes over who will provide their services to Balkan criminals,²¹⁰ contributing to an epidemic of drug-related violence in Ecuador.²¹¹ An Ecuadorian presidential candidate, Fernando Villavicencio, was shot dead in August 2023 after leaving a campaign event in Quito; he was a vocal voice against corruption and the links between politics and organized crime,²¹² although there is no indication that a Western Balkan group was directly responsible for his murder.

The trail of blood left by Western Balkan groups has raised both their profile and their vulnerability. It has damaged their operations in South America, resulting in scrutiny by the media and law enforcement agencies.

Alongside the trail of blood, Western Balkan organized crime groups have also exacerbated instability in some of South America's most fragile countries. Their presence in cocaine producing countries such as Colombia and Peru, and operational hubs like Ecuador, have undermined the security of these countries on many levels.

Western Balkan groups' procurement of cocaine not only from well-established cartels and organizations in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, but also from local farmers, has incentivized production, undermining local government strategies to incentivize substitutes for coca production.²¹³ These groups also contribute to the larger criminalization of local communities.

Western Balkan organized crime groups have exacerbated instability in some of South America's most fragile countries.

Strategic forecast: Balkan groups in South America

The future of Western Balkan criminal groups in South America is uncertain. Over the last two decades, these groups have successfully rooted themselves in the region, becoming major players in the highly profitable cocaine trade. Reducing their influence is neither simple nor achievable through isolated measures.

The prevailing uncertainty in numerous South American countries has become a key advantage for these organizations, to the point where they are themselves able to exacerbate this instability. Their foothold in the region will likely persist as long as cocaine production continues to increase in South America and access to it remains fragmented. Diminishing Western Balkan criminal influence will likely require robust measures by South American nations and international partners to reduce cocaine production and address destabilizing factors, including high-level corruption and lax security at critical infrastructure such as ports.

A reduction in these groups' influence might also be spurred by a very different factor. As their footprint has grown, the risk of conflict with other criminal organizations increases, despite the long-held policy of seeking to avoid upsetting local partners and other locally active foreign players. Given the enormous profit margins available between the point of wholesale purchase in South America and retail sale in Europe, one potential risk for these groups is the emergence of new organized crime groups in South America (be they local, Mexican or further afield) that might consider their presence a threat. If such conflict escalated significantly, it could even force Western Balkan players out of the region, given that their strategy relies largely on maintaining a smattering of de facto 'diplomatic' personnel on South American soil, rather than deploying a large number of criminals on the ground.

Just as in South America, the emergence of new and stronger criminal organizations in Europe could pose a threat to Western Balkan groups' presence and potentially diminish their influence. However, given that these groups have built up their presence in South America by cultivating highly durable local ties, alongside establishing criminal infrastructure close to crucial EU ports, their presence at both geographic ends of the supply chain is likely to persist, especially in an ongoing context of rampant consumer demand. Although international law enforcement agencies have been tracking these groups over many years, further diminishing their roles will require coordinated action that traces and impounds ill-gotten gains. Their rise has been a gradual process spanning 30 years, so any decline is unlikely to be a rapid event.

Recommendations

Interlocking measures at the national, regional and trans-continental levels are required to disrupt the presence and the impact of Western Balkan organized crime groups in South America.

Within South American countries, key factors include measures to reduce cocaine production, an enhanced focus on tackling corruption – incentivized by attaching more conditions to aid – and the wider adoption of technology that can detect cocaine at ports and airports.

Secondly, more resources should be devoted to unravelling the links between Western Balkan and South American organized crime groups. This can be achieved through enhanced collaboration and knowledge-sharing between law enforcement agencies in both regions, potentially facilitated by the permanent deployment of Western Balkan investigators in South America. The creation of joint investigation teams would be key here, with the collaboration of the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain – all main entry points for cocaine into the EU.

Investigative cooperation between South American, Western Balkan and EU nations could also be augmented through more targeted EU funding. The success of collaborative operations stemming from the decryption of software in recent years is testament to the potential for disrupting or even disbanding transnational criminal organizations.

Thirdly, it is important that law enforcement in the Western Balkan nations further reinforce their domestic capabilities in uprooting the international links established by organized crime groups originating from their countries. More extradition agreements beyond Europe, and with third countries such as the UAE, are needed. A heavy emphasis should also be placed on financial investigations and money laundering.

Fourthly, since the EU is a key consumer market for cocaine – and given that there is a strong impulse towards membership among Western Balkan nations – this powerful bloc could assist the fight against regional organized crime by intensifying diplomatic pressure on the UAE to dismantle barriers to extradition. This would make the emirates a less attractive destination for criminal players who have come to rely on safe harbour in this long-standing Western ally.



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