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WESTERN BALKANS' COCAINE OPERATIONS IN WEST AFRICA

Lucia Bird | Saša Đorđević | Fatjona Mejdini

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lucia Bird is the director of the Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa at the GI-TOC. Previously, she worked as legal and policy adviser to the Punjab Government, Pakistan, and before that held the same role at the Ministry of Finance, Ghana.

Saša Đorđević is a senior analyst at the GI-TOC, with over 15 years of experience researching organized crime, state capture, violent extremism, security and policing.

Fatjona Mejdini is the director of the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe at the GI-TOC. Previously, she worked as a journalist for regional and international media, reporting stories from different Balkan countries.

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Please direct inquiries to:
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland
www.globalinitiative.net

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AIS	Automatic identification system
AML	Anti-money laundering
EUDA	European Union Drugs Agency
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
MAOC-N	Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre–Narcotics
OCCRP	Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project
PCC	Primeiro Comando da Capital
PWUD	People who use drugs/person who uses drugs
TEU	Twenty-foot equivalent unit
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Western Balkans criminal groups, comprising both Albanian- and Slavic-speaking networks, have become dominant players in the global cocaine trade. While their influence in Europe and Latin America has been well documented, their growing role in West Africa has largely flown under the radar.

Since 2019, these groups have expanded their operations in West Africa, using the region as a critical logistical, storage and redistribution hub for cocaine shipments en route to European consumption markets and beyond. This expansion has been shaped by their effective leverage of geography, governance weaknesses and infrastructure, both hard and digital.

Initially limited to occasional trafficking links, the Western Balkan groups have deepened their presence across West Africa's coastal states, including Senegal, Sierra Leone, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Cabo Verde. This growing focus on West Africa was driven by rising demand for cocaine in Europe, increased enforcement on direct routes to Europe and strengthened partnerships with Latin American cartels, especially Brazil's Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC).

Western Balkan groups now operate through multiple trafficking methods in West Africa, exploiting fully containerized routes, non-containerized shipments (i.e. shipments not stored in containers, but hidden elsewhere on vessels) by other types of vessels, trans-shipments at sea and in-region containerization to conceal the cocaine's origin.

They have embedded brokers in West African countries who organize logistics, establish infrastructure and liaise with local actors. In Sierra Leone, for example, they have reportedly established companies to launder funds and warehouses to store and repackage cocaine, coordinating onward shipments through formal seaports using legitimate cargo. These brokers are key to operations and are often shared among the different groups. The groups' structures are flexible and typically consist of small, trusted units supported by collaborators. Groups leverage local vulnerabilities to build relationships with corrupt law enforcement, port operators and security services.

Particularly significant Western Balkan groups in West Africa include the Montenegrin Kavač clan and its rival, the Škaljari clan. The Kavač clan's operations have been linked to ports in Brazil and Sierra Leone, with brokers overseeing logistics from Freetown. As we explain in this report, in some cases a single broker will work with more than one group from the Western Balkans.

In parallel, Albanian-speaking groups, which have a strong presence in Spain and Brazil, have been operating through countries including Senegal and Gambia, sometimes collaborating with the



Seized cocaine at a police station in Bissau. Guinea-Bissau has become as a major transit point for cocaine smuggled from Latin America to Europe, with Western Balkan criminal groups playing a prominent role. © Issouf Sanogo/AFP via Getty Images

Italian ‘Ndrangheta or the PCC. The example of an Albanian national who, according to Brazilian law enforcement investigations, is a major European supplier coordinating shipments through West Africa from Brazil, exemplifies the growing use of multi-tonne cocaine operations routed through the Gulf of Guinea.

Looking ahead, Western Balkan groups are likely to further entrench themselves in West Africa, gradually relying less on their alliances with the ‘Ndrangheta, the PCC and other Western Balkan groups and instead investing directly in infrastructure and protection mechanisms. As in Latin America, their growing presence is likely to be accompanied by deeper corruption, potential violence and fragmentation into more autonomous cells.

To address the growing role of Western Balkan criminal groups in West Africa, a coordinated response should focus on three key pillars. First, strategic cross-continental partnerships should be built with law enforcement, port authorities and international actors, underpinned by a political-economy analysis, to strengthen cooperation and to identify aligned priorities. Second, an enhanced data picture, drawing on a wider range of formal and informal sources, is needed to map trafficking routes and financial flows more effectively and to empower regional and international actors to tailor their risk assessments of specific routes, to profile criminal actors and to develop viable strategies for detection and disruption. Third, smart targeting strategies that prioritize brokers should be adopted, supported by parallel financial and criminal investigations.

Methodology

This report examines the role of West Africa in the cocaine trafficking operations of organized crime groups from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. It also considers the involvement of groups from Croatia and Slovenia, due to their close cooperation with Slavic-speaking groups. It tracks the evolution and driving factors of Western Balkan groups’ expansion into West Africa, their entrenchment in the region’s criminal ecosystem and the criminal alliances that have underpinned it. It explores the groups’ preferred operational methods and the characteristics that make countries particularly vulnerable to entrenchment, maps key networks and actors, and analyzes why these groups are in such a sharp phase of expansion. Finally, this report leverages existing data to explore how the situation is likely to develop and provides recommendations.

A preliminary scoping exercise, drawing on data collected from ongoing monitoring of cocaine markets in West Africa by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) and additional key stakeholder interviews, found more indications of Western Balkan group operations in the 'western hub': the coastal countries from Senegal to Sierra Leone. Therefore, the research focuses on the following countries: Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cabo Verde. In-depth analysis of the situation in other West African countries requires further research.

Recognizing the globally interconnected nature of these groups' operations, data was collected across the cocaine supply chain to Europe. Over 70 semi-structured interviews were conducted with investigative journalists, law enforcement officials, judicial representatives, academics, public officials and private-sector employees at maritime ports and airports, actors within the cocaine trade, people who use drugs (PWUD), health professionals, researchers and community members. Their identities have been kept anonymous. Interviews were conducted in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, Brazil, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Senegal and Sierra Leone, supplemented by interviews with stakeholders based in Cabo Verde, Türkiye and Western Europe and experts from international organizations.

Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of encrypted communications between various actors was conducted. These messages were intercepted by European law enforcement and included in more than 10 criminal indictments of individuals arrested in various jurisdictions.¹ The status of these criminal cases is, in most cases, ongoing and the formal acquittal of any of the individuals remains a possibility. The exact status of each of the relevant cases is set out in the table in the Annex. The purpose of this report is not to analyze these criminal cases in detail.

These messages offered valuable insights into the activities of Slavic-speaking networks under prosecution in Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia, shedding light on their internal structure and distribution of roles within these groups. Relevant court cases from Brazil were also incorporated.

Open-source intelligence techniques were used to deepen the analyses of key actors, trading data and routes, vessel movements, and company registration and shareholder structures, as well as to identify entry points for further fieldwork.

The research also draws on wide-ranging secondary sources related to Western Balkan groups and cocaine markets across the supply chain to Europe, including official documents, news articles and investigative reports.

Key points

- West Africa is operating as an increasingly important warehousing, redistribution and containerization point for Western Balkan groups trafficking cocaine on Europe-bound routes. The region also seems to play such a role for emerging cocaine markets in Asia and Australia.
- The Kavač and Škaljari clans – the most powerful criminal organizations in Montenegro – have operated in West Africa. Their leadership remains at large and probably continues to operate in the region.
- Europe-supplying Albanian buyers based in Dubai have operated through West Africa and are likely to have continued to route consignments through the region.
- A strong alliance between the PCC and Western Balkan groups underpins a significant proportion of Europe-bound cocaine flows. Strengthened since the mid-2010s, it was critical in opening the West Africa route for Western Balkan groups.

- A significant proportion of cocaine volumes trafficked by Western Balkan groups via West Africa seems to have travelled through non-containerized imports from Brazil, Suriname and Guyana, containerization in West Africa and containerized exports towards Europe.
- West Africa's role as a containerization point makes its maritime ports – those with significant export potential and trading links – particularly vulnerable to criminal infiltration. Within the western hub, the Port of Dakar has the most direct maritime trading routes with Europe, particularly Spain.
- The year 2019 marked a significant expansion of Western Balkan groups in West Africa, alongside a notable increase in the overall scale of the region's cocaine market. This was partly shaped by increasing cocaine production in Latin America, the growing profitability of the European consumption market and growing law enforcement pressure on direct routes from Latin America. Significant law enforcement operations against the 'Ndrangheta since circa 2020 weakened the organization, creating space for Western Balkan networks to capture greater market share on Europe-bound routes.
- There are indications that general aviation is a used, yet poorly understood, modality for routes between West Africa, Latin America and Europe, and also for intra-continental aerial routeing by Western Balkan groups.
- Dubai continues to operate as a major hub for accommodating Western Balkan fugitives from justice and facilitating money laundering. West Africa may play a growing role in both functions.
- There are indications that, in some transactions, Europe-based buyers purchase cocaine warehoused in West Africa directly from the region, including from Western Balkan groups.
- Western Balkan groups operating in West Africa have largely worked through brokers of Western Balkan nationality that are members of the relevant network. However, there appear to be instances of regional intermediaries, including in Guinea-Bissau. Over time, the physical presence of Western Balkan nationals is likely to increase.



INTRODUCTION

The global cocaine trade is at an unprecedented level and growing fast, particularly in Western Europe, supercharging trafficking routes to this increasingly lucrative market. Between 2011 and 2024, the presence of cocaine residues in municipal wastewater across Europe increased by 149%, indicating sharply escalating use.² In parallel, cocaine production in Latin America has exploded, and growing supply has made cocaine increasingly affordable in Europe. The European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) tracked a 45% increase in the affordability of cocaine between 2015 and 2020.³

The impacts are significant. Cocaine treatment cases in Europe have increased by 60% since 2016 and, by 2022, cocaine had become the second most common drug reported by people entering specialist drug treatment for the first time.⁴ Violence associated with the cocaine trade has ballooned, especially in the Netherlands.⁵ As profits have surged, the corrupting power of criminal actors in the cocaine trade has risen steeply.⁶ West Africa is an under-scrutinized – and crucially important – third node in cocaine trafficking routes between production and transportation hubs in Latin America and Caribbean and European consumer markets (see Figure 1).

West Africa has been an important hub on cocaine trafficking routes to Europe since the 1990s.⁷ However, its significance has expanded since around 2019, when growing law enforcement pressure drove traffickers to take more indirect routes. Some international analysts posit that roughly 30% of Europe's cocaine is now routed through West Africa and predict it to rise to 50% by 2030.⁸

Between 2019 and 2024, increasingly large volumes of cocaine were reportedly stored in the region. Many PWUD report increasing availability over this time, and retail cocaine powder prices decreased across many urban areas in West African coastal countries. In Guinea-Bissau, for example, PWUD report that the retail price of 1 gram of cocaine hydrochloride dropped from US\$20 in 2022 to US\$14 in March 2024. Similarly, in Ghana, real prices decreased by 60% between 2019 and 2023.⁹ While drug seizures indicate patterns in disruption and protection and are unreliable indicators of underlying volumes, a rapid escalation of cocaine seizures since 2019 supports other indicators of growth (see Figure 2). Some cocaine trafficked to West Africa remains in the region for local consumption, feeding a growing market for crack and cocaine powder. But this is a small – if growing – share. A much greater portion is trafficked onwards, largely to Europe, either directly or via North Africa or Türkiye.

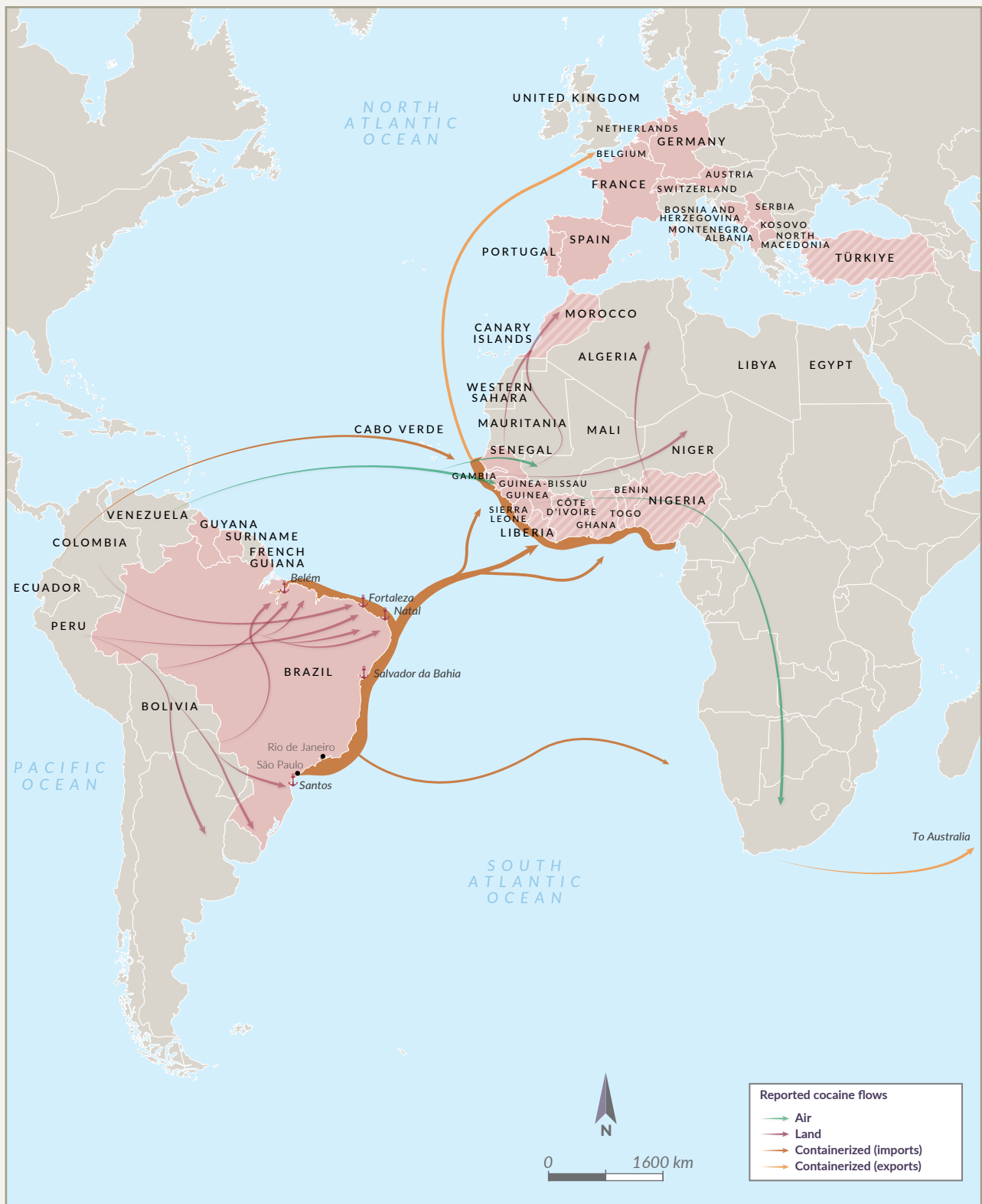


FIGURE 1 The containerized cocaine supply chain from Latin America to Europe via West Africa.

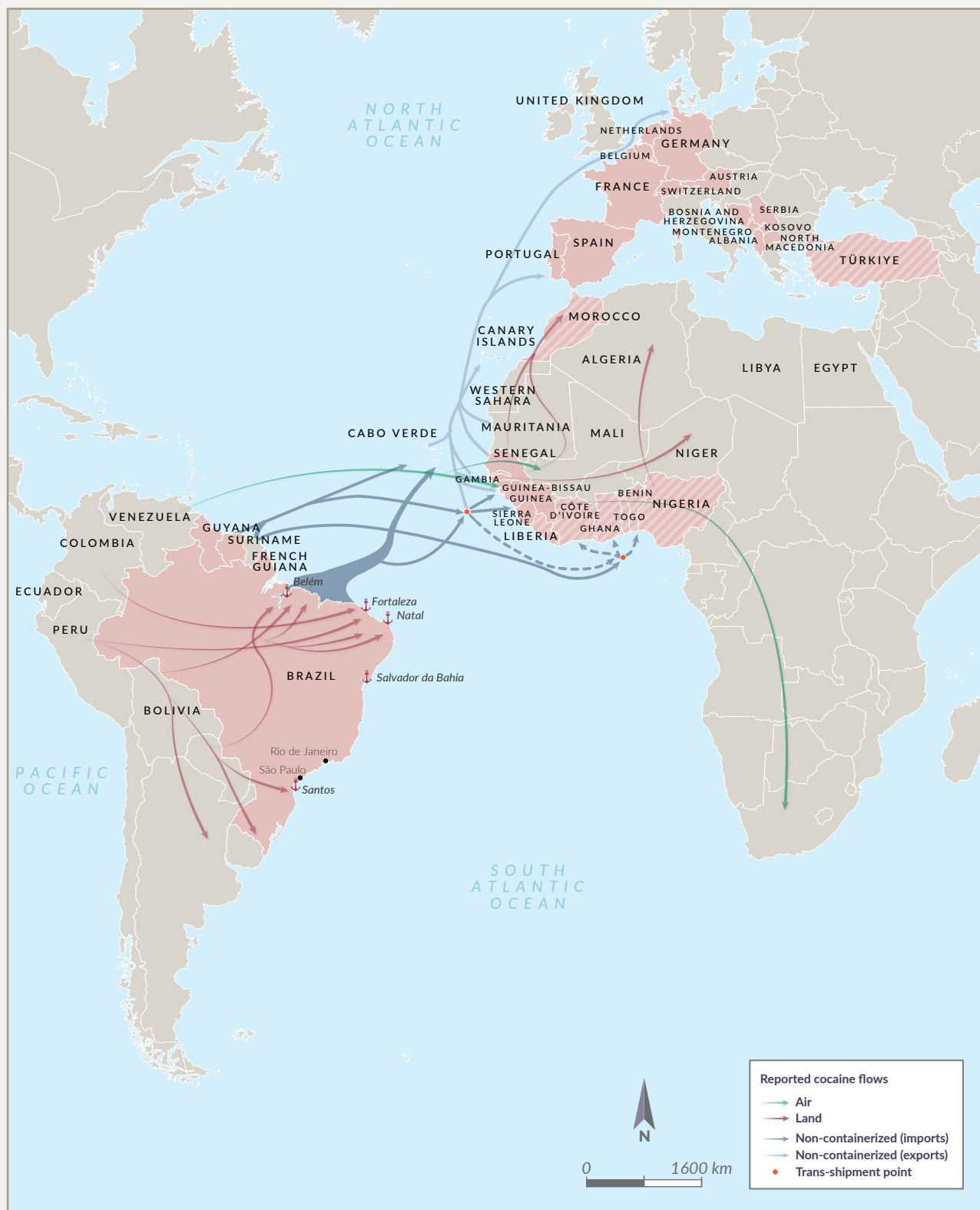


FIGURE 2 The non-containerized cocaine supply chain from Latin America to Europe via West Africa.

According to the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index, an expert-led assessment of the scope and scale of criminality and resilience to it, cocaine trafficking was the fastest-growing criminal market in West Africa between 2021 and 2023. Unsurprisingly, the region is also subject to one of the highest levels of foreign criminal actor influence, second only to South East Asia in 2023 and second to none in 2021.¹⁰ Nationals from Latin America (particularly Mexico, Colombia and, more recently, Brazil) and Europe have long been prominent in West Africa's cocaine market. In the past five years, European brokers have apparently become entrenched across key hubs in the coastal countries, staying for months or years at a time.

Western Balkan groups have been among the sophisticated groups expanding their influence across the cocaine supply chain. Establishing themselves in Europe in the late 1990s and Latin America in the early 2010s, they moved into West Africa around 2019. More recently, these groups have utilized West Africa as an operating, storage, redistribution and logistics hub in transnational cocaine trafficking operations, leveraging the region's strategic location and widespread vulnerabilities to criminal infiltration.

Today, Western Balkan groups are some of the most influential players in wholesale cocaine markets across the European continent. Approximately half of the targets of Europol's cocaine-related operations reported between 2021 and 2024 involved individuals or networks originating from the Western Balkans.¹¹ Information uncovered through the dismantling of encrypted communication platforms – which are widely used by foreign criminal networks in West Africa – has further confirmed their extensive involvement in cocaine trafficking.¹²

Western Balkan groups have proven particularly adept at exploiting the opportunities presented by an increasingly globalized world, exhibiting a steep rate of expansion and growing global reach. Their use of West Africa as a hub for international cocaine operations appears to be in its early stages and, until now, their growing presence has remained largely unremarked. However, the trajectory mirrors patterns previously observed in Latin America. Initially, these groups rely on one another, but over time, and through the development of stronger ties with local actors, they establish supporting infrastructure and deepen their entrenchment. If this pattern is replicated, Western Balkan groups look set to become increasingly important actors, with permanent brokers and representatives managing the growing volumes of trafficked cocaine and expanding and entrenching their presence in West Africa.



WEST AFRICA'S ROLE IN THE COCAINE SUPPLY CHAIN TO EUROPE

Four key factors make West Africa an increasingly attractive hub for cocaine trafficking: geography, gaps in governance, weak law enforcement collaboration and intelligence-sharing between Latin America, the Western Balkans and Western European countries, and ever-stronger transport infrastructure. Each is considered in turn.

Situated between cultivating countries in Latin America, European cocaine consumption markets and emerging cocaine nodes in Türkiye, North Africa and the Middle East, West Africa is perfectly positioned to operate as a key logistics node.

The coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea cluster towards the bottom of the 2023 Fragile States Index, but none falls within the two most fragile categories of 'rampant insecurity' and 'failed state'. Their gaps in governance thus create an enabling environment for organized crime without the excessive operational risks posed by active conflict or collapse.¹³

Traffickers have exploited these weaknesses and loopholes in surveillance and security to buy protection from different elements of state institutions, decreasing the risks of disruption. This typically attracts the greatest media attention when protection of the trade is tracked to the more senior levels of state, but the widespread protection of the cocaine trade at its entry and exit points – many of the maritime ports and airports – is crucial to enabling uninterrupted trafficking.

Western Balkan groups have proven adept at exploiting governance gaps to infiltrate points of entry and exit across their sphere of operations, including Ecuador, Brazil, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and the Western Balkans. Members of major Western Balkan groups have also boasted of their connections in maritime ports and airports in African countries. For example, a Bosnian national who led a significant cocaine trafficking network, reportedly had connections in the port of Benin, according to intercepted messages forming part of the criminal case (named, 'Bosnian 1' for this report).¹⁴ Similarly, according to intercepted messages available in the indictment, Montenegrin national Radoje Zvicer claimed that he could easily 'extract' containers from the South African port of Durban and that his network had 'total control in Zambia at the international airport, and we have a guy here who knows everything about it and is with us'.¹⁵



View of the Port of Dakar, Senegal. West Africa's strategic coastal position and corruption risks in ports have made the region a key target for foreign criminal networks, including groups from the Western Balkans. © Mtcurado via Getty Images

Increasingly well-connected but poorly regulated formal financial systems create ample opportunities for laundering funds. Currently, three West African countries – Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria – are on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list, indicating significant gaps in processes for preventing money laundering and terrorist financing.¹⁶

A lag in recognizing West Africa's importance in the cocaine supply chain by authorities in Europe has led to limited investment in intelligence – and therefore a comparatively poor intelligence picture – and few frameworks for collaboration. Similarly, authorities in the Western Balkans report limited knowledge of the West African context and characterize their frameworks for collaboration on cocaine trafficking as 'virtually non-existent'.¹⁷

Within West Africa, the likelihood of illicit cargo being intercepted through domestic intelligence is diminished by corruption and resourcing shortfalls across many specialized drug and crime units and among numerous authorities charged with port security and management. Law enforcement and security agencies in many West African ports report that seizures are predominantly based on international intelligence. However, international intelligence on cocaine trafficking through West Africa remains patchy. Even where it does exist, a lack of trust in many of the region's potential partners poses an obstacle to it reaching regional counterparts.¹⁸ The lack of intelligence also makes interdiction at European ports less likely.

West Africa's expanding maritime, overland and aerial transport infrastructure underpins cocaine trafficking through the region. Maritime infrastructure is pivotal because most of the cocaine flows through the region are believed to be trafficked by sea. While much of this involves non-containerized consignments – often bypassing formal ports – containerized trafficking remains critical, which means that maritime ports are still critical nodes in the supply chain. West Africa has the highest concentration of seaports on the continent, handling 26% of Africa's sharply increasing total container

volume.¹⁹ Between 2010 and 2022, container traffic in Africa grew by 57%, a rate surpassed only by Asia, reflecting significant development in the maritime sector.²⁰ This has positioned the region as an important hub for container trans-shipment.

Sustained investment in seaports over the past decade has spurred major expansion across West Africa, including in Freetown (Sierra Leone) and Conakry (Guinea).²¹ Plans for further expansion across a number of ports, including Dakar (Senegal) and Banjul (Gambia), herald further connectivity. However, investments in expanding throughput capacity have not always been matched by improvements in cargo screening and inspection.

Containerized trade is especially vulnerable to criminal infiltration as the scale of operations makes full screening virtually impossible. Across Africa and Europe, port authorities typically inspect fewer than 2% of containers.²² This means that cocaine seizures in containers are overwhelmingly intelligence-led.²³ Limited intelligence thus vastly diminishes perceptions of risk and the likelihood of detection and disruption of containerized trafficking, both within West Africa and on West African routes at European and Western Balkan ports of entry.²⁴ Western Balkan groups are among the main criminal actors that have infiltrated legitimate maritime shipping companies operating via West Africa to transport cocaine from Latin America to Europe.

In addition to maritime routes, West Africa's international, military and secondary airports may also contribute to the region's status as a logistics and redistribution hub. Cocaine is trafficked using commercial air routes by couriers who swallow consignments or conceal them in personal luggage (often 10–20 kilograms) or freight shipments (up to 90 kilograms).²⁵ Private aircraft are also used to transport cocaine from Latin American countries, particularly Brazil and Venezuela, into West Africa, taking advantage of both official and informal airstrips. Western Balkan groups have explored the use of private planes not only to import cocaine into West Africa but also to move it within the continent, including to destinations such as South Africa.²⁶

Looking ahead, West Africa's growing prominence in the cocaine trade appears likely to continue. Production in Latin America and consumption in Europe show no sign of diminishing; political volatility, conflict and economic stresses pose significant obstacles to regional governance; and planned investments in transport infrastructure are significant. The intelligence picture is arguably the factor most susceptible to change in the short term, should investments in improving the data picture increase.



WESTERN BALKAN CRIMINAL NETWORKS IN WEST AFRICA

Over the past 30 years, criminal groups from the Western Balkans have become key players in the global cocaine trade. This section tracks their growth from expanding into Western Europe and Latin America to establishing a presence in West Africa. It explains how changes in supply and enforcement since 2019 provided opportunities for these groups to use West Africa as a transit and logistics hub.

Operational development

1990s–early 2000s: Expansion across Europe and early infiltration in Latin America

Since the 1990s, Western Balkan groups have expanded beyond their region of origin. First, they established a strong presence in Western European countries, particularly those with major port infrastructure and thriving drug markets. Group Amerika, a major Slavic-speaking group, was already operating outside the Western Balkans in the 1990s.²⁷ Latin America provided a pivotal platform for the groups' expansion into West Africa, but this came later.

In this period, West Africa received growing international attention for cocaine trafficking from Latin America to Europe.²⁸ The Western Balkan groups were apparently more involved with direct routes from Latin America to Europe at this time.²⁹ There are few early indications of their involvement in the West African route, with only one documented case in 1999 involving containerized trafficking via Banjul, Gambia, which ended in an acquittal of the accused.³⁰

2010–2019: Entrenchment across Latin America and alliance with the PCC

By the early 2010s, Western Balkan groups had expanded their operations in Latin American countries, including Brazil, and strengthened local alliances. Slavic-speaking groups such as the Montenegrin group of Darko Šarić were particularly prominent in exports from Brazil, in both containerized and non-containerized routes.³¹

WESTERN BALKAN ORGANIZED CRIME GROUPS IN LATIN AMERICA AND WEST AFRICA

Latin America

West Africa

late 1990s

Group America start operating in Latin America.

mid-2000s

Šarić Group start operating in Latin America.

2010s

- Kotor group (later Skaljari and Kavač clans)
 - Tito and Dino cartel
 - Kompania Bello network

Rapid proliferation and institutional partnerships

2014

Entrenchment in Cabo Verde route

2011

Goran Nešić, one of the first cocaine brokers for Serbian and Montenegrin groups, is arrested in Brazil. His son, Aleksandar Nešić, follows in his footsteps.

2014

- Small boats from north-east Brazil to Cabo Verde (Šarić and Kavač, no PCC).
- Strengthening institutional partnership with PCC (Šarić and Kavač).

2014

Dritan Rexhepi, one of the leaders of Kompania Bello and a pioneer of Albanian cocaine trafficking, is arrested in Ecuador.

2017

First killing of Western Balkan citizens in Guayaquil, Ecuador, followed by six more in subsequent years.

2016

West Africa grows as transit point from Latin America, particularly Brazil.

2019–present

2019

- Montenegrin seafarers smuggle 18 tonnes of cocaine aboard the *MSC Gayane* from Colombia to Philadelphia's port – the largest cocaine seizure in US history.
- Europol dismantles organized crime groups comprising Serbian and Croatian members that trafficked cocaine using private planes from Latin America to Europe and Asia, including Hong Kong and Macau.

2019

- Pacani (Albanian buyer) visits Brazil, operating on fishing vessels via Cabo Verde/West Africa mainland.
- Broker linked to Amerika group/Škaljari/Kavač operating from Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Material expansion across West Africa

Growing independence and fragmentation

2020

- Kavač clan able to use fishing vessels from Suriname/Guyana via West Africa.
- Hasselt seizes 1.2 tonnes of cocaine exported from Freetown, Sierra Leone (Kavač-ally group).

2021

Authorities in Albania and Montenegro seize 430 kilograms of cocaine shipped from Colombia to the Port of Bar.

2022

- 5.7 tonnes, *Alcatraz I* (fishing vessel) near Cabo Verde (Šarić).
- 4.6 tonnes, *Peroua* (fishing vessel) – (Albanian Pacani and 'Espadarte').
- 850 kilograms, *Mamsini Sonko Faye* (Albanian organized crime group with Gambian network).

2022

Europol arrests Edin Gačanin, a Bosnian-Dutch cocaine trafficker and member of the 'super cartel' that controlled about one-third of Europe's cocaine trade.

Opening the Cabo Verde route: Milan Rataj

One of the first Šarić-linked networks found to be using West Africa as a transit point between Brazil and Europe was led by Milan Rataj, a Slovenian operative who was first affiliated with the Šarić group and later with the Kotor clan. From around 2014, Rataj reportedly coordinated logistics for cocaine trafficking from northern Brazil on pleasure craft via Cabo Verde, his permanent base.³² Until his arrest in 2017, Rataj worked in partnership with a Brazilian national who had long been exporting cocaine from Paraguay directly to Europe by sea, and who was part of a criminal network that included Spanish and Moroccan nationals and trading companies incorporated in the Netherlands, Belgium, Brazil and Spain used to move funds. The network used private planes and helicopters to transport cocaine from Paraguay to Brazil, before transporting it onwards by sea. Rataj appears to have driven innovation in the network, using sailboats to traffic hundreds of kilograms of cocaine at a time, first to Cabo Verde and then on to Europe.³³ Rataj was sentenced to six years in a Brazilian prison for attempting to smuggle 51 kilograms of cocaine in December 2017.³⁴ ■

From 2014, Cabo Verde's role in non-containerized maritime routes towards Europe grew, with cocaine operations predominantly flying under the radar. Senior members of Western Balkan groups moved in and out of the archipelago with ease, as did sailors from the Western Balkans linked to cocaine trafficking.³⁵

In the early 2010s, the Western Balkan groups' alliances in Brazil were primarily with smaller Brazilian criminal networks as well as Italy's 'Ndrangheta, with whom they had long-standing business relationships.³⁶ This changed in the second half of the 2010s, with the rise of the PCC, currently Brazil's most sophisticated organized crime group.³⁷

From around 2016, the PCC turned to exporting, realizing that it held greater profits than the São Paulo cocaine base paste markets it had previously controlled. Cocaine exports from Brazil to Europe surged. In response, Brazilian authorities implemented an ordinance that required all containers leaving the Port of Santos for Europe to be scanned.³⁸ Brazilian law enforcement then 'began to notice that some ships leaving Brazil for Spain, England, France, Holland and Belgium stopped off on the African coast'.³⁹ A growing proportion of cocaine seizures in the Port of Santos between 2016 and 2022 were destined for, or transited through, Africa. Over 60% of Africa-bound shipments were either destined for or shipped through West Africa.⁴⁰

The PCC quickly became a critical partner for Western Balkan groups. These groups – all of them operating franchised, decentralized structures – were natural partners. Over the 2010s, the relationships strengthened.⁴¹ By 2017, major Western Balkan groups, most prominently the Kotor clan (successor of the Šarić group, preceding its 2014 splintering into the Kavač and Škaljari clans),⁴² were operating in close partnership with the PCC.⁴³ It was to become among the most important alliances shaping the global cocaine trade.



The Port of Santos in Brazil is a key hub in the global cocaine trade, serving as a central point for shipments coordinated between Western Balkan groups and Brazil's PCC. © FG Trade via Getty Images

2019–present: Expansion and entrenchment in West Africa

Shifts across the cocaine supply chain created a perfect storm for the trade's rapid expansion in West Africa, and Western Balkan groups were perfectly positioned to take advantage of it. With an estimated 50 active units operating in Latin America by 2024, according to Europol,⁴⁴ the groups had a launchpad to expand operations across West Africa's western hub. This was a direct response to three key factors:

- Rising demand in Europe drawing a larger share of unprecedented volumes of cocaine.
- Increased law enforcement pressure and seizures on direct routes between Latin America and Europe.
- Brazil's growing role as a logistical node in the cocaine trade facilitated links with West Africa, due to its geographic accessibility.

Due to the factors outlined in the section above ('West Africa's role in the cocaine supply chain to Europe'), West Africa was a logical alternative for traffickers seeking maximum profit and minimum risk. It also made strategic sense for Western Balkan groups, which already had presence in Brazil, to expand further into West Africa. This shift was not isolated but part of their broader global positioning.

Cocaine production in Latin America had been steadily increasing since 2017, reaching record highs in 2020, which were exceeded in the following years.⁴⁵ Data also indicated a sharp climb in European consumption. By 2020, Europe accounted for 21% of global cocaine users, according to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates.⁴⁶ With its rising demand, the European market held an increasing share of global cocaine consumption, supercharging the trafficking routes to Europe.⁴⁷

European law enforcement increased their efforts to disrupt the trade through stricter border controls, port inspections and joint international operations, focusing on direct routes from Latin America to Europe. From 2022, this included shipments from Ecuador, where Albanian-speaking groups, in particular, had established a strong presence.⁴⁸

Seizures on direct routes spiked from a total of 201.9 tonnes in 2019 to a record 424.1 tonnes in 2023.⁴⁹ They were concentrated in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain, key entry points for cocaine shipments and operating nodes for Western Balkan groups.⁵⁰ The law enforcement hacking of secure messaging platforms Sky ECC and EncroChat in 2021 provided unprecedented insights and contributed to the increased arrests and seizures. Between 2022 and 2024, retail prices in Europe remained broadly steady, indicating consistent supply.⁵¹

When the growing cost of doing business on direct routes drove traffickers to search for safer, less scrutinized routes, West Africa emerged as a clear favourite. From 2019, trafficking surged, as did seizures (see Figure 3), and Western Balkan groups started operating through the region.⁵²

Displacement from direct routes: Armando Pacani

According to investigations by Brazilian authorities, Albanian Armando Pacani, working with a significant network in Brazil, started to coordinate shipments via West Africa around this point, following a spate of seizures and losses on the network's direct routes to Europe.⁵³ Dubai police arrested Armando Pacani based on an INTERPOL red notice in July 2024. Authorities in Brazil had 30 days to submit an extradition request.⁵⁴ In November 2024, having found deficiencies in the extradition process launched by authorities in Brazil, a court in Dubai ordered his release. Pacani's lawyer has made public statements, reported by the press, emphasizing that Pacani is innocent, that he is seeking removal from INTERPOL's red list, and dismissal of evidence from encrypted Sky ECC communications, whose validity Pacani is reported by the press to reject.⁵⁵

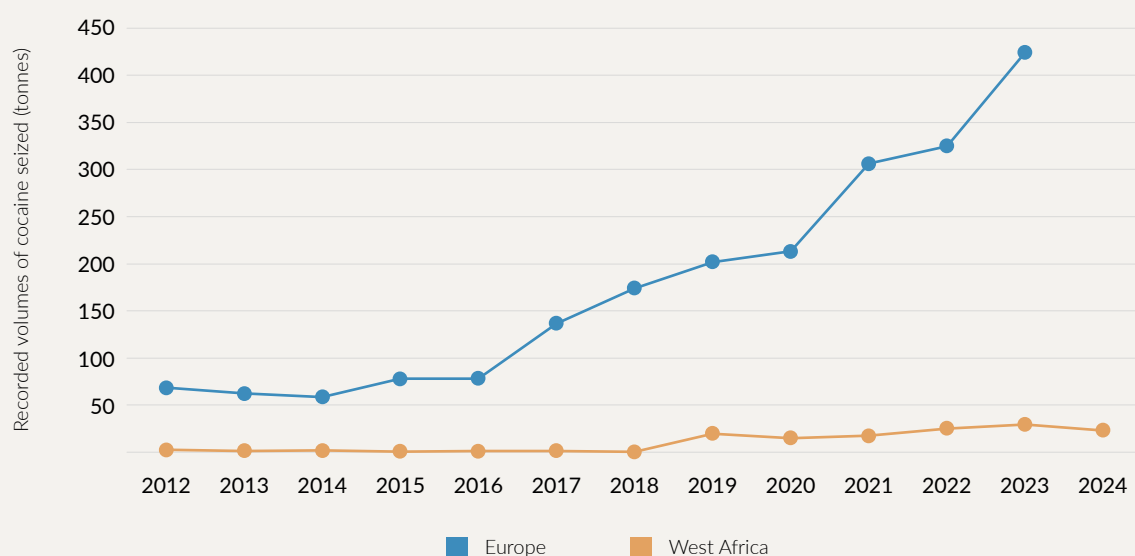


FIGURE 3 Total cocaine seizures reported in West Africa and Europe, 2012–2024.

NOTE: Fully reliable data for 2024 for Europe is not yet available. However, GI-TOC monitoring indicates that, after reaching record levels in 2023, cocaine seizures declined during 2024.

SOURCES: Data collated by the GI-TOC, primarily including latest data from the UNODC Annual Reports Questionnaire, the UNODC Individual Drug Seizure database and the EUDA Statistical Bulletin. For major cocaine seizures that are not reflected in UNODC and EUDA data, the data set has been complemented by official government and law enforcement data (including confidential seizure data as well as press releases), media publications, grey literature and peer-reviewed papers in academic journals.

The Western Balkan groups' growing use of West African routes was also motivated by changes in Brazil – in trade, in law enforcement and in the operational responses of organized crime groups. Growing trade between Brazil and West Africa provided convenient opportunities to conceal drug shipments within legitimate cargo. According to Brazilian shipping data, the number of containers shipped from Brazil to West African ports increased threefold from 2006 to 2020, from 3 741 to 10 160 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs).⁵⁶ Brazilian authorities recognized the growing prominence of West Africa as a transit point for cocaine and, in 2019, amended the 2016 ordinance to mandate the screening of all cargo destined for Europe and Africa from the Port of Santos. By 2022, inspection was mandatory for all cargo leaving the port, regardless of destination.⁵⁷

While 2020 saw fewer seizures than in 2019, in part linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, seizures on West Africa-bound routes increased in 2021.⁵⁸ Again, organized crime groups reacted – including Western Balkan groups already operating through the Port of Santos. Containers exported from Santos were increasingly contaminated with cocaine after leaving the port. Containerized exports were dispersed across various ports in Brazil. Crucially, there were more non-containerized exports to West Africa, which enjoyed more loopholes in enforcement, and they were largely sent from points in the north and north-east of the country, geographically closer to West Africa.⁵⁹ Western Balkan groups were key adopters of this non-containerized routing.

Non-containerized routes from Brazil to West Africa, particularly to its western hub, underpinned a growing flow of cocaine, often trans-shipped in the Gulf of Guinea, with increasing use of go-fasts as daughter (receiving) vessels.⁶⁰ To then containerize the cargo in West African ports enabled organized crime groups to conceal its Latin American origins from vessel journey trackers, and thus to evade heightened scanning at European ports. Within West Africa, risks of disruption were also lower for containerized exports, as the screening and scanning capacity at ports, limited by resources, focused on imports. Increases in containerized exports could pass unnoticed. West Africa became a warehouse, redistribution and containerization point for Western Balkan groups, who became increasingly visible on the mainland.

Active modes of maritime cocaine trafficking

The influence of Western Balkan groups in West Africa remains at a more nascent stage than in Europe or Latin America. Nevertheless, they move nimbly between countries of the western hub, adept at leveraging the specific vulnerabilities of each state. They clearly have strong levels of intelligence, with encrypted messages showing that key leaders are well-informed about law enforcement operations and maritime port capacities. For example, encrypted messages allegedly from Radoje Zvicer of the Montenegrin Kavač clan, mentioned an interception in Cabo Verde's economic zone and identified Guinea-Bissau as risky due to increased law enforcement attention.⁶¹

The groups have also explored general aviation routes. Brokers or leaders have discussed links with pilots in West Africa, including in Senegal, and considered using private aircraft to move consignments between different countries in Africa, e.g. from Sierra Leone to South Africa.⁶²

However, the sea is by far the most important means of cocaine trafficking in West Africa and Western Balkan groups are active in all four of its principal modalities (see Figure 4).

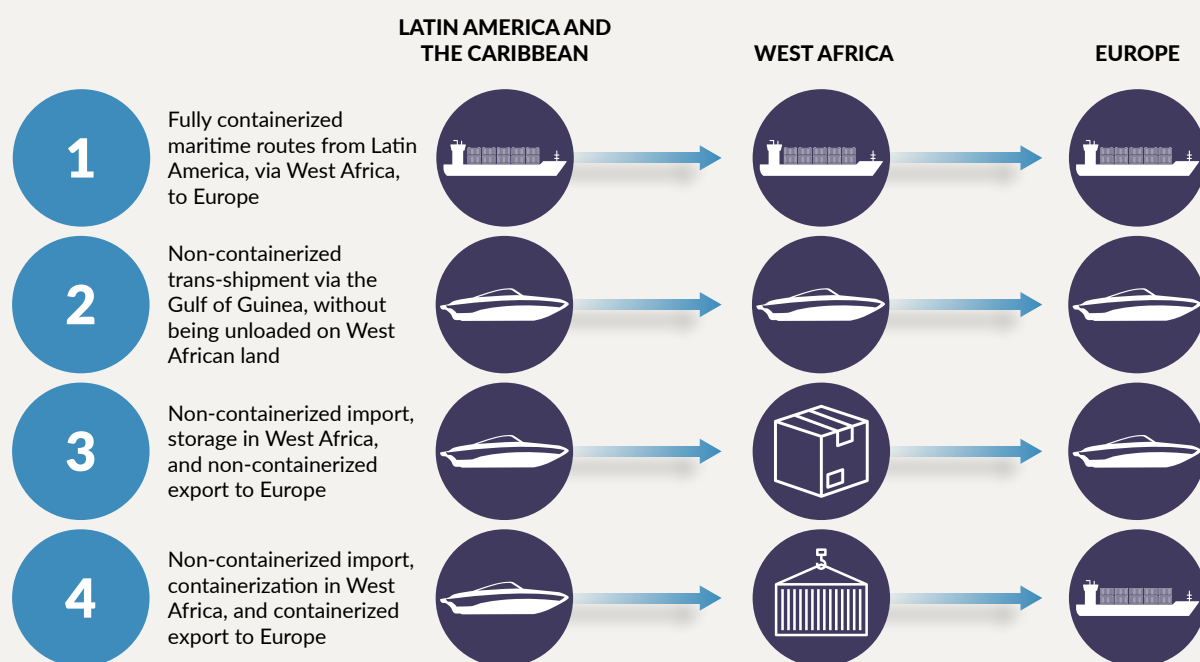


FIGURE 4 Maritime cocaine trafficking modalities for Europe-bound shipments via West Africa.

NOTE: This figure does not capture routings that includes land or air passages. Western Balkan groups are suspected of using general aviation in cocaine trafficking operations in West Africa, but there is no hard evidence of this.

While seizures in West Africa are rare, it is likely that a significant volume of cocaine is still trafficked along fully containerized routes.⁶³ Data up to 2022 shows consistent seizures in the Port of Santos in Brazil, where West Africa features as a transit or final destination.⁶⁴ In 2023 (the latest accessed data), West Africa is less prominent than previously. This could be linked to changes in contamination methods and displacement to other ports (supported by an overall decrease in seizure volumes between 2022 and 2023), or could support the growing importance of non-containerized exports.⁶⁵

A large proportion of cocaine – including multi-tonne shipments – arrives in West Africa non-containerized, with the cocaine hidden in ship hulls, for example.⁶⁶ The cocaine is often trans-shipped on to smaller vessels in the Gulf of Guinea. This flow utilizes bulk cargo vessels, fishing vessels, pleasure craft, go-fasts and container vessels.⁶⁷ Geography dictates that Brazil, Guyana and Suriname are particularly prominent export points and that the western hub of West Africa provides common disembarkation zones for non-containerized routing. The Montenegrin Kavač clan, for example, was allegedly connected to actors coordinating fishing-boat routes out of Suriname or Guyana, which transported 1.2 tonnes of cocaine every two weeks to the Gulf of Guinea, with reported stopovers in Cabo Verde and Nigeria.⁶⁸

Non-containerized export routes (modalities 2 and 3), tend to lead to southern European countries, most prominently Spain, particularly the Canary Islands.⁶⁹ In recent years, the latter has become more important in non-containerized cocaine trafficking, particularly for sailing boats. Spanish authorities report a dramatic escalation since early 2024.⁷⁰ Western Balkan criminal groups appear to have used the Canary Islands as a logistical hub connecting to the Gulf of Guinea since at least the late-2010s.

Western Balkan networks trafficking cocaine to the Canary Islands

By 2020, according to his indictment, the Croatian national Nenad Petrak allegedly operated sailing boats from the Canary Islands, picking up shipments from West Africa.⁷¹ By January 2021, a Montenegro-based, Škaljari-allied group led by a Bosnian national was using Gran Canaria as a key logistics and distribution hub for direct routes from Brazil and West Africa, including Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone.⁷² According to intercepted communications that formed part of investigation, the Bosnian-led group allegedly boasted that there was no need to move cocaine beyond Gran Canaria, reportedly because ‘the English buy everything there’ and ‘the price is good’, noting they had recently sold a consignment for €29 000 per kilogram.⁷³ ■

The fourth modality, where consignments are containerized in West Africa, effectively sidesteps the heightened screening of Latin American exports at European ports. Western Balkan groups have proved adept at using under-scrutinized transit areas, in West Africa and elsewhere, to containerize cocaine for shipment to Europe. Since around 2022, both Albanian-speaking and Slavic groups have containerized consignments in countries across the Caribbean, including the Dominican Republic.⁷⁴ While it is difficult to comment on the relative volumes moved through different modalities, available evidence indicates that this one is key for trafficking by the Western Balkan groups.

For this modality, traffickers consider the export potential of various maritime ports for the roles they can play (including infrastructure and capacity, connectivity, port-city integration, efficiency of cargo handling and turnaround times for ships). Western Balkan groups are keenly aware of the limited export potential of many of the western hub's maritime ports. Radoje Zvicer, for example, complained in intercepted communications alleged to be sent by him to a senior Kavač-allied figure that ‘Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau are countries whose ports don't have significant export potential, so the MSC [container shipping] company doesn't visit them, they just pass by their coasts’. Zvicer allegedly noted that the speed at which MSC vessels bypassed these ports – 15 to 17 knots – reduced opportunities for illicit cargo to be smuggled onto the ships.⁷⁵

Activity by country

This section outlines the tracked presence of Western Balkan groups in five of the seven western hub countries. The evidence from Guinea is limited, and no trace of Western Balkan criminal activity was identified in Liberia. Further research is required to understand the situation in both countries.

Guinea's cocaine trade is booming, with availability increasing, retail prices dropping and stakeholders reporting significant trafficking of bulk consignments.⁷⁶ Research for this report identified only a handful of instances relevant to Slavic- and Albanian-speaking groups operating there.⁷⁷ However, the intercepted EncroChat communications showed a high concentration of Albanian-speaking exchanges geolocated to Guinea, with exchanged photographs linked to both maritime routing and private planes.⁷⁸ INTERPOL recorded one incident related to cocaine trafficking involving a Serbian national in Guinea.⁷⁹ PWUD in Conakry also reported the involvement of Albanian nationals in domestic distribution.⁸⁰

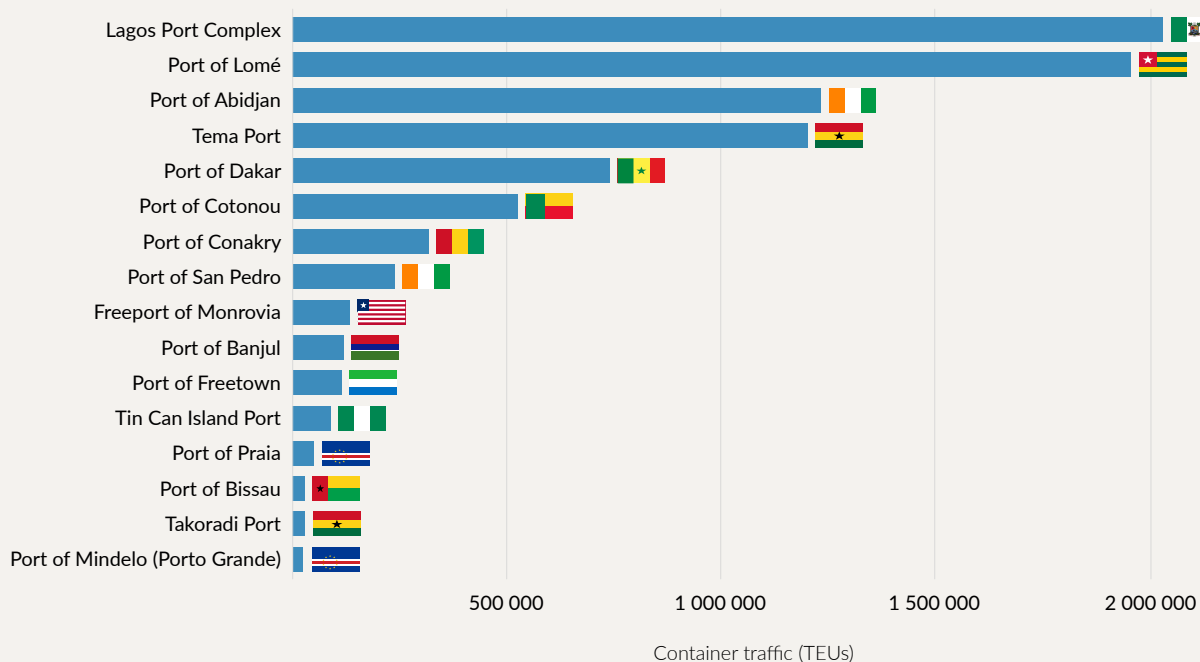


FIGURE 5 Container traffic in selected West African seaports, per annum.

NOTE: Latest available data as of February 2025.

SOURCES: Data collated by the GI-TOC, based on various sources: African Development Bank Group, Africa Global Logistics, Logistics Cluster, Further Africa, Nigerian Ports Authority, APM Terminals, Togo First, DP World, EHS Africa Logistics, Africa Ports and Airports, Enapor: Portos de Cabo Verde, Marine Insight.

Senegal

The Port of Dakar has by far the greatest annual throughput in the western hub: close to 900 000 TEUs in 2024.⁸¹ It also has the best connections to European ports, a number of which operate as major cocaine gateways and have a significant presence of Western Balkan groups. At least nine direct routes connect Dakar with ports in Spain, including Algeciras, Las Palmas and Valencia – all ports where Western Balkan groups are known to operate.⁸² The Port of Dakar is thus very attractive for cocaine trafficking networks.

The Port of Dakar is also well connected by road to neighbouring countries – including Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone and Guinea, all points of maritime cocaine import. A spate of Dakar-bound cocaine seizures in south-eastern Senegal since 2022 evidences land routes from neighbouring states, and their likely use for moving consignments for containerized exports from the Port of Dakar.⁸³

Migration flows from the Western Balkans to Senegal – common enablers of criminal activity – are limited but do exist. According to official data, between 2022 and 2024, 1 445 nationals from the Western Balkans visited Senegal, mostly from Serbia, Montenegro and Albania.⁸⁴

'Good connections'

In intercepted communications, Radoje Zvicer allegedly boasted of 'good connections' in Senegal that could be leveraged for both maritime routes and the use of private aircraft.⁸⁵ Encrypted communications of the Kavač-allied group led by Serbian national Miroslav Starčević indicate that they used Dakar as a refuelling, food and water, and unloading stop in transatlantic cocaine trafficking schemes using cargo vessels and concealing cocaine among cement shipments.⁸⁶ There is no sign that the cocaine was unloaded or loaded in Senegal, but the network's contacts with logistics handlers at the Port of Dakar,⁸⁷ and communications that Dakar was used as a strategic stop-off, indicate the group's ability to manoeuvre logistics in the country. This same group also operated in Sierra Leone, indicating cross-regional coverage. ■

There are also indications that Albanian-speaking groups have a presence in Senegal, hold alliances with established actors in the country and leverage its transportation infrastructure. They reportedly operate in the capital and in Mbour, a fishing town and port about 70 kilometres south of Dakar.⁸⁸ Mbour is widely believed to be a convenient warehousing area for cocaine, close to Dakar's port and airport by road, heavily transited by fishing vessels and dotted with houses owned by foreigners, many of which stand empty for long periods at a time, offering convenient storage facilities. Interviews indicate that Albanian nationals are involved in import and export using containers in the port and in domestic wholesale markets, with deliveries organized both in restaurants and private homes. A transaction for 5 kilograms was mentioned, suggesting that the Albanian groups deal in slightly larger quantities than between 0.5 and 5 grams, which is typical for street-level transactions.⁸⁹ Some groups reportedly traffic hashish alongside cocaine in Senegal.⁹⁰

Albanian-speaking groups reportedly operate in alliance with small numbers of Senegalese nationals, who provide support with logistics and intelligence (including on law enforcement operations and political developments) and connect network members to systems of protection.⁹¹ They also reportedly have connections with the Netherlands and Belgium. Belgian nationals (including one of Guinean origin) have been arrested in operations linked to Albanian-speaking groups in Senegal.⁹² Dakar-based actors, who reside in the country permanently, reportedly travel regularly by land to Guinea-Bissau, Gambia and Guinea to liaise with network members based there, indicating a regional presence.⁹³

One Albanian-speaking group, with senior figures based in Dubai and elements based in Gambia, Senegal, France and Belgium, used Senegalese and Belgian nationals as intermediaries in Dakar and surrounding areas. In some cases, they trafficked consignments overland from Gambia to Dakar to be exported in containers, through the Port of Dakar, to Europe.⁹⁴ Police investigations revealed that the Dubai-based Albanians had kidnapped and tortured a family member of someone in the group who was suspected of having stolen from the consignment in Senegal.⁹⁵ This demonstrates the significant international reach of groups who keep Senegal as a node in their trafficking operations, largely feeding the European market.

Gambia

Cocaine consignments are brought directly into Gambia in containers, including from Ecuador,⁹⁶ as well as trans-shipped onto fishing vessels from larger boats, including from Brazil.⁹⁷

This latter method was linked to an Albanian group that trafficked cocaine on fishing vessels from Brazil for trans-shipment to Gambian-flagged fishing vessels departing from Gambia. Based in Spain and with an extensive presence in Brazil, the network also had connections with the 'Ndrangheta and Gambian nationals.⁹⁸ Its modus operandi was displayed in the 2023 seizure of 805 kilograms of cocaine on the *Mamsini Sonko Faye*, a Gambian-flagged vessel intercepted en route to the Port of Banjul. Among those arrested on the vessel was an Italian national, allegedly linked to the 'Ndrangheta, who worked with two Italian nationals permanently based in Banjul.⁹⁹ The ship's Gambian owner, who has assets in both Senegal and Gambia and is married to a Senegalese national,¹⁰⁰ is reportedly involved in a criminal network based in Spain.¹⁰¹ This network possesses a substantial maritime infrastructure in Brazil, from which it charters vessels carrying large quantities of cocaine to be transferred to specific locations within the Gulf of Guinea.¹⁰² It also cooperated with an Albanian criminal group based in Spain.¹⁰³ This suggests that Albanian-speaking groups may have leveraged alliances with the 'Ndrangheta, which has long operated across many countries in West Africa, to establish a foothold in the region, potentially as a step towards operating more independently.

According to law enforcement, at least one Albanian-speaking group has sought to establish a broker in the country. One member of this group reportedly visited Banjul, the capital city, on a number of occasions, and explored how to obtain a residency permit and open a bank account.¹⁰⁴



The seizure of cocaine from a Gambian-flagged fishing vessel in early 2023 was linked to an Albanian group that trafficked the drug from Brazil. Photo: Senegalese navy

Cabo Verde

Cabo Verde's geographic position in the Atlantic Ocean makes the archipelago a strategic transit point for maritime cocaine trafficking from Latin America to Europe, particularly exports from Brazil and, more recently, Guyana and Suriname.¹⁰⁵ A wide range of foreign actors have operated on the Cabo Verde cocaine route. The 'Ndrangheta is reported to be significantly engaged,¹⁰⁶ and Italian, French, Spanish and Russian nationals have been arrested for trafficking offences.¹⁰⁷ Russian nationals have also been implicated in some smaller cocaine seizures in Cabo Verde since 2017.¹⁰⁸

Western Balkan groups have been prominent in leveraging the archipelago's strategic location, largely with non-containerized trafficking modalities. They appear to use Cabo Verde as a key logistics hub, and also a safe place to conduct meetings, with individuals arriving for only brief periods of time.¹⁰⁹ Montenegrin and Serbian groups have also featured in Brazilian exports.¹¹⁰ In court documents in Brazil, Milan Rataj, the Slovenian national linked to the Montenegrin Šarić group, was found to be an early route adopter. Operating in the mid- to late-2010s, the court found that Rataj was permanently based in the archipelago and shaped trafficking from Brazil via the islands.¹¹¹

From the late 2010s, Western Balkan groups often operated on this route in partnership with the Brazilian PCC. For example, Serbian national Aleksandar Nešić, the Brazil-based intermediary of the Montenegrin Kavač clan arrested in Guarujá in 2023,¹¹² allegedly worked closely with the PCC, according to Brazilian police investigations.¹¹³ Nešić's lawyer has denied his client's involvement.¹¹⁴ In this partnership, fishing vessels departed from north-eastern Brazil, including sites in the states of Pernambuco and Ceará, and transited through Cabo Verdean waters en route to entry points in southern Europe, including the Canary Islands.¹¹⁵

Albanian-speaking groups appear to operate on the Guyana–Cabo Verde route, most likely targeting entry points in Spain. In September 2023, for example, a joint operation of Spanish, Portuguese and US authorities seized a tonne of cocaine from an unflagged fishing boat 600 miles west of Cabo Verde. The agents arrested the six crew members – two of them of Albanian nationality and the rest Guyanese nationals – and secured the boat.¹¹⁶

When cocaine consignments are not to be disembarked there, vessels sometimes moor at Cabo Verde for refuelling and provisions. In other cases, support vessels bring fuel or food to the vessel from the archipelago and offload supplies within Cabo Verde's special economic zone.¹¹⁷ The latter, in particular, requires local connections in the archipelago to operate discreetly and avoid detection.

When cocaine is disembarked in Cabo Verde, the vessels utilize myriad smaller harbours and entry points on the coastline.¹¹⁸ Tarrafal, in the north of Santiago, and the island of Boavista, closest to the West African mainland, are reportedly heavily transited by vessels involved in cocaine trafficking.¹¹⁹

Sierra Leone

Both Slavic- and Albanian-speaking groups have operated in Sierra Leone, sometimes in partnership with the PCC,¹²⁰ overseeing trans-shipment, storage and re-export through brokers established in Freetown.¹²¹ Imports are often non-containerized, with fishing vessels and motorboats operating as daughter vessels, utilizing numerous fishing harbours and beaches as disembarkation points.

Containerized exports from Sierra Leone move directly through Freetown's port, Elizabeth II Quay, where trafficking flows enjoy a high degree of political protection. Seizures in the port are rare, with none reported in 2023 or 2024. As in all maritime ports, screening and scanning focus on imports.¹²² Law enforcement representatives acknowledged that exports have a lower priority and that they 'only know when there was a problem if there is a seizure elsewhere'.¹²³

Cocaine from the Port of Freetown has been seized in the UK;¹²⁴ and in Belgium, Sierra Leone was the second most prominent point of origin for seized cocaine in 2024, underpinned by regular direct shipping routes between Freetown and Antwerp.¹²⁵ Notably, Belgium's prestigious chocolate industry, with its significant imports of cocoa products from West Africa, creates a channel for concealing illicit trade.

The Starčević group in Sierra Leone

The routing and concealment method allegedly adopted by the Serbian-led Starčević group used Sierra Leone as a storage and containerization hub. In March 2020, the group allegedly exported 1.2 tonnes of cocaine on a fishing boat from Brazil to the coast of Sierra Leone. There, it was transferred to a waiting speedboat and moved to a warehouse in Freetown.¹²⁶ Prosecutors allege that Mario Krezić, the group's broker, oversaw the storage and later repackaging of the cocaine into a shipping container filled with sacks of cocoa husks. After clearing customs, the container was loaded on to the Italian-flagged *Grande Dakar* roll-on/roll-off cargo ship.¹²⁷ In May 2020, it travelled via the port of Antwerp to Hasselt, Belgium, where it was intended for distribution across Europe, primarily Germany. Belgian authorities intercepted the shipment in June 2020, seizing 1 247 kilograms of cocaine.¹²⁸

Notably, the vessel's home port is listed as Palermo, Italy, and it regularly stops in the port of Gioia Tauro in Reggio Calabria, heartland of the 'Ndrangheta. While not conclusive, this does raise questions regarding potential links to an organization that Western Balkan groups operate very closely with. Between March and May 2020, the *Grande Dakar* journeyed across the Gulf of Guinea, docking at Cotonou, Benin; Lomé, Togo; Tema and Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana; and Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. The vessel was twice recorded as loitering, off the coasts of Ghana and Togo, which is often associated with maritime encounters such as ship-to-ship transfers. There were also instances of automatic identification system (AIS) signal loss, which obscured the vessel's unique identification, position, course and speed. Compared to the *Grande Dakar*'s loitering and AIS signal patterns for the years 2015–2024, the signal loss, route direction and loitering events of 2020 were highly unusual.¹²⁹

This could support reports that Krezić and the Starčević group also operated in other West African countries. Krezić, who stayed in Freetown for months at a time, allegedly had local connections and access to both motorboats and the maritime port. The group used front companies to create a façade of legitimate trade. A Belgium-based company was used to conduct business with a Sierra Leone-registered entity that handled cocoa husks, the cargo used to conceal the cocaine.¹³⁰

According to encrypted Sky ECC messages alleged to be between the two men, Krezić, authorized by Starčević, also operated as a broker for the group allegedly led by Nenad Petrak, retrieving 905 kilograms from storage in Sierra Leone and delivering it to the *Majic* sailing boat at a designated offshore location nearby. The *Majic* then set sail for the Canary Islands but was intercepted en route, leading to the conviction of its crew.¹³¹ Judging by the intercepted communication, Petrak's network allegedly included elements based in Andalusia, Galicia and the Canary Islands. This case highlights the role of Sierra Leone as a storage hub, from where the group could sell consignments directly. ■



A Balkan cartel specializes in the smuggling of cocaine using yachts and sailboats, such as the Croatian-flagged *Majic*, from which nearly a tonne of cocaine was seized in 2020. Photo: Guardia Civil

Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau has played a role in international cocaine trafficking dynamics since the late 1990s and remains a critical strategic node in the supply chain to Europe. Senior political figures and members of the military are closely involved in the cocaine flows, with the latter providing not only protection but also logistical support. The significant level of protection shapes the country's role as an important import, warehousing and redistribution point, as shipments can be safely stored until it is convenient to move them onwards.¹³²

Bosnians in Bissau

It is precisely in a storage role that Western Balkan groups appear to have utilized Guinea-Bissau. Bosnian 1, a prominent leader of a group from Bosnia and Herzegovina, reportedly used Guinea-Bissau (as well as Sierra Leone) as a storage point and for non-containerized shipments onward to Gran Canaria, which served as a distribution hub for resale to mainly European buyers. The evidence suggests that this network stored significant amounts in Guinea-Bissau: 3 tonnes, in one case. The network also reportedly operated in Benin and boasted of connections in Cotonou's port. If true, it is likely that these were involved in export, as the communications detailed trans-shipment to a smaller vessel 60 miles off the coast of Benin as the import approach, suggesting this was the point of import into the region from Latin America. In addition to Europe, this Bosnian-led network also reportedly operated in southern Africa, supplying China and Australia alongside Europe.¹³³ This pattern – importing cocaine through unmonitored maritime routes from Latin America, storing it in Guinea-Bissau or Sierra Leone, and exporting it to Europe or beyond – highlights the region's function as a logistics and redistribution hub. ■

In 2021, following a dispute with the government, the giant Maersk shipping company stopped operating in the Port of Bissau, decreasing its throughput and posing an obstacle to containerized cocaine shipments. This may lead to greater reliance on non-containerized routes that take advantage of the country's porous coastline and road connections to neighbouring country ports.¹³⁴

While linguistic ties would appear to facilitate entrenchment of the PCC, for now, the group is believed to have only had representatives temporarily based in Bissau, linked to specific ad hoc needs. For example, the PCC allegedly had a consignment stolen in Guinea-Bissau in 2022 and sent a representative to the country for a few months to try and recover it.¹³⁵

Although actors from the Western Balkans are clearly operating in Guinea-Bissau, as shown by the case of the Bosnian-led network, they have not been particularly visible. This could be because they are working with well-established Bissau-Guinean intermediaries, without significant physical oversight from Balkans nationals. However, this is rare in the modus operandi of both Slavic- and Albanian-speaking groups.

At least one of the current handful of Bissau-Guinean kingpins operating in the country reportedly supplies buyers from the Western Balkans in Europe.¹³⁶ This kingpin has long-standing relationships with Colombian networks and was widely reported to be linked to the 2.63 tonnes of cocaine seized in Bissau's international airport, in September 2024, on a private plane arriving from Venezuela.¹³⁷

Mapping the actors

Shared language and cultural ties facilitate cooperation among Western Balkan groups, with two dominant nets: groups that speak Albanian and groups that speak Slavic languages, namely Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian and Montenegrin. Today, they operate through flexible structures that enable extensive collaboration. Networks typically consist of small tight-knit groups with flexible membership, usually consisting of around 10 to 20 individuals.¹³⁸

The structure of the Slavic-speaking groups is shaped by personal relationships and leadership styles, making them highly adaptable. Albanian-speaking groups are often built around family ties, with a second layer of close friends from hometowns, reinforcing trust and loyalty within the group. Both groups remain highly adaptable and willing to collaborate with external partners who can create new opportunities for profit.

Although Albanian- and Slavic-speaking groups generally function independently, there have been cases of cooperation in specific criminal enterprises when their interests align.¹³⁹ In rare cases, Albanians become members of the Slavic-speaking groups.¹⁴⁰

The organizational structure of the groups involved in cocaine trafficking in West Africa comprises distinct roles, typically including the following:

- Leaders, who negotiate directly with cocaine producers in Latin America, issue orders for transportation and manage finances, including allocating expenses and profits.¹⁴¹
- Brokers, who organize and oversee operations logistics, plan smuggling routes, coordinate with local contacts from West Africa, effect financial transfers and oversee operational security. Brokers are pivotal in West Africa operations, whether established in the region permanently or for a period of months. These individuals have the required connections in West Africa and – directly or indirectly – with regional protection structures. In some cases, networks appear to rely on local entrepreneurs to oversee logistics, without physical oversight in West Africa, although this is less typical in the modus operandi of Western Balkan groups.¹⁴²
- Enforcers, who are typically locals from the areas where operations are conducted, collect and deliver drugs, secure storage locations and maintain safe houses. This research did not identify enforcers in West Africa, or incidents of violence linked to them.

Mario Krezić believed to be a key broker in West Africa's cocaine trade

Mario Krezić, nicknamed 'Franky', was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina and holds Croatian and Dutch citizenship. Croatian police believe he is a senior member of different Western Balkan groups. According to information contained in indictments and interviews conducted with law enforcement sources, he appears to have been central to West African operations run by Western Balkan groups.¹⁴³

According to prosecutor filings, Krezić worked for the Serbian Miroslav Starčević, managing logistical operations, planning smuggling routes, coordinating with local contacts in West Africa and ensuring operational security and financial arrangements for cocaine shipments.

Freetown was a key operating base, where he is alleged to have coordinated at-sea pickups and drop-offs through ship-to-ship transfers; imports into nearby coastal areas; and storage, containerization and export through the Port of Freetown towards Antwerp. Media reports suggest that Krezić operated not only in Sierra Leone but also in Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁴⁴

According to the Petrak indictment, Krezić is alleged to have been a skilled logistician and a key contact point between different groups involved in operations. For at-sea transfers, his role allegedly included negotiating the trans-shipment location, identifying and sharing GPS coordinates, and pre-arranging the format of recognition signalling (using lights) to identify the relevant vessels.¹⁴⁵

According to press reports, following the June and August 2020 cocaine seizures linked to Sierra Leone, Krezić travelled to Dubai, UAE, and was arrested there in 2024.¹⁴⁶ Spanish authorities expect his extradition,¹⁴⁷ but, as of August 2025, it remains unclear whether this has occurred. ■

Slavic-speaking networks

Members of Slavic-speaking groups, often mislabelled by law enforcement and the media as 'the Balkan cartel', are from Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁴⁸ These groups are engaged predominantly in drug trafficking and have prominent operating nodes in Belgium, Colombia, Brazil, Croatia, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the Western Balkans.¹⁴⁹

The two main Slavic-speaking groups operating in West Africa are the Kavač and Škaljari clans,¹⁵⁰ along with their allies. These Montenegro-based groups maintain extensive ties with groups in Serbia and other Western Balkan states, plus Croatia and Slovenia. While the Kavač clan has established network elements in West Africa, the Škaljari clan operates mainly through associates from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania, highlighting the group's larger multinational structure.

Both Montenegro's clans originated from the Kotor clan, which was formed around 2010 and had links to convicted drug trafficker Darko Šarić.¹⁵¹ When Šarić went into hiding after Operation Balkan Warrior in 2009, where law enforcement seized 2.1 tonnes of cocaine,¹⁵² his group lost influence and the Kotor clan took over parts of the cocaine trade. Internal tensions within the Kotor clan escalated into a violent split, sparking the formation of the Kavač and Škaljari clans and a deadly rivalry.¹⁵³ Some individuals and logistical assets previously associated with Šarić's network are believed to have aligned with the Kavač clan, partly due to conflicts between him and the Škaljari clan. Notably, in the mid-2010s, the Škaljari clan reportedly burned down Šarić's nightclub in Kotor and killed a key associate.¹⁵⁴ From 2020 onward, Šarić apparently developed ties with Kavač clan leader Radoje Zvicer, including cooperation in the assassination of a high-ranking member of the Škaljari clan.¹⁵⁵

Zvicer, the subject of several arrest warrants,¹⁵⁶ and survivor of multiple assassination attempts,¹⁵⁷ has been central to the Kavač clan's operations in West Africa and beyond.¹⁵⁸ His associates were embedded within Montenegro's security sector, establishing a powerful state-linked protection ecosystem.¹⁵⁹ There are several ongoing criminal proceedings against him in Montenegro and Serbia,¹⁶⁰ but, as of April 2025, Zvicer remains a fugitive and is believed to continue operating.¹⁶¹



In November 2024, at the request of Austrian authorities, Europol updated its arrest warrant for fugitive Radoje Zvicer, a suspected leader of the Kavač clan, a notorious criminal organization from Montenegro specializing in cocaine trafficking. *Photo: Europol via Europe's Most Wanted*

In the Škaljari clan, Bosnian 1, a national of Bosnia and Herzegovina operated as a key broker in the West Africa route.¹⁶² Operating under multiple identities, Bosnian 1 is linked to bulk cocaine trafficking from Latin America to Australia, Africa, China, the Netherlands and Belgium. Investigations revealed the involvement of Bosnian 1 in organizing the attempted assassination of Zvicer in Ukraine and in money laundering activities, notably through the Sarajevo restaurant Dos Hermanos.¹⁶³ Despite an INTERPOL red notice issued by Belgium, extradition efforts have been hindered due to the acquisition of Turkish citizenship by Bosnian 1.¹⁶⁴

Edin Gačanin's role in West Africa

Edin Gačanin, a Bosnia and Herzegovina native with Dutch citizenship, is a key figure in international drug trafficking and leads the Tito and Dino cartel.¹⁶⁵ Available data indicates that Gačanin operated across several countries in Africa, particularly South Africa. In January 2021, authorities in Rotterdam seized 739.5 kilograms of cocaine from a container ship arriving from Durban, highlighting the use of South African ports as transit points for drug shipments to Europe.¹⁶⁶

Gačanin's network has reportedly operated in Ghana, although this remains unconfirmed.¹⁶⁷ If so, it is likely that he has invested in significant infrastructure there, as this is his typical pattern. He reportedly introduced Škaljari clan associate – Bosnian 1 – to the cocaine business.¹⁶⁸

Gačanin has been convicted in absentia of trafficking large quantities of narcotics into Europe from Colombia, Peru and Ecuador. In 2023, the US government sanctioned him, labelling him as the leader of the Tito and Dino cartel. This organization is believed to be part of a wider super cartel comprising groups such as Ireland's Kinahan organization, the Dutch Mocro Mafia and Italy's Camorra.¹⁶⁹ ■

According to his indictment, at least one major Serbian-led group, believed to be led by Miroslav Starčević,¹⁷⁰ operated in West Africa, coordinating shipments from Brazil, until at least 2020. Mario Krezić was allegedly a key broker for the group, which leveraged West Africa – including Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire – as a warehousing and trans-shipment point and included members from Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Netherlands and Germany. In January 2024, Serbia's court confirmed the indictment filed by prosecutors against 20 members of the group,¹⁷¹ and the trial remains ongoing.¹⁷² While Krezić is named in the indictment in both Serbia and Croatia, charges have not been brought against him. However, according to the media, Belgium have issued an arrest warrant against him.¹⁷³ Krezić also allegedly provided services to other cells within the Slavic-speaking net leveraging the West Africa route, including a network led by Croatian national Nenad Petrak.

According to his indictment, Petrak appears to be particularly highly connected, reportedly with over 50 people from Latin America, EU member states and the Western Balkans. The Petrak group allegedly procured large quantities of cocaine in Colombia and Bolivia, largely transporting it directly to the EU for onward sale by its well-organized distribution network within Europe. Operations were concentrated in Germany, particularly Frankfurt, the Netherlands and Croatia. His group also allegedly purchased cocaine stored in West Africa from Krezić, acting on orders of Starčević.¹⁷⁴

Western Balkan groups exploiting digital technologies

Western Balkan groups have been early adopters of technological advancements to coordinate business and evade interception. For example, in the 2000s, they used basic tactics, such as drafting emails in shared accounts without sending them, to bypass surveillance.¹⁷⁵

As more sophisticated solutions emerged, such as encrypted phones and messaging apps, these groups were again early users. Europol analysis of the hacked Sky ECC chats identified Albanian and Slavic languages such as Serbian and Croatian as the most frequently used, alongside English.¹⁷⁶ Given that Slavic and Albanian languages are rarely used by non-nationals, unlike English, this underscores the widespread use of encrypted communications by criminal actors from the region.

Western Balkan groups have also positioned themselves within the supply chain for some encrypted technologies. For example, a number of 'Ndrangheta clans reportedly largely purchased EncroChat devices from Albanian groups, indicating the latter's strategic positioning in the trade.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, members of Slavic-speaking groups were not only prominent users of Sky ECC but also key resellers of the platform, facilitating access to the encrypted communication system for a wide net of organized crime groups.¹⁷⁸ ■

Albanian-speaking networks

Albanian-speaking groups consist of individuals from Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro, together with collaborators of various nationalities. Largely involved in cocaine and cannabis trafficking, their operations have been well documented across EU member states, Norway, Switzerland, the UK and parts of Latin America, including Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador. Europol considers Albanians to be among the top five nationalities involved in cocaine trafficking destined for the EU.¹⁷⁹ Since 2017, UK law enforcement agencies have regarded Albanian organized crime groups as having established a high-profile influence within the country's organized crime landscape and exerting considerable control over the UK drug market, with significant impact on the cocaine trade.¹⁸⁰

In Ecuador, Albanian-speaking groups have built a significant transportation hub over the last decade, forging close collaborations with local gangs and gaining access to the country's ports. They have also entrenched themselves in Brazil, particularly since 2019, increasingly connecting Albanian groups to the West Africa route.¹⁸¹

West Africa – as a region, and as an area of operations by Albanian-speaking criminal groups – remains poorly understood in Albania, with minimal collaboration in the fields of culture, education and diplomacy. Although historically limited, trade relations have been growing. Since 2023, there has been an increase in exports from West Africa to Albania, most prominently from Nigeria, followed by Côte d'Ivoire (see Figure 6).¹⁸²

EXPORTING COUNTRIES	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	TOTAL
Côte d'Ivoire	3	1	2	4	3	4	17
Ghana	11			2	3		16
Guinea		2					2
Liberia	1						1
Mali	1						1
Mauritania		1					1
Nigeria	1		5		14	17	37
Senegal	1			1	1		3
TOTAL	18	4	7	7	21	21	78

FIGURE 6 Container imports, in TEUs, from West African countries to Albania, 2019–2024.

SOURCE: Albanian Customs Office

As elsewhere in Europe, Albanian customs authorities confirmed that West African exports are not considered high risk and undergo significantly less scrutiny than those from Latin America, particularly Ecuador, and there is limited law enforcement attention to Albanian-speaking crime operations in West Africa.¹⁸³

One exception to this is Albanian national Armando Pacani, who was, as the press reported, long based in Germany, and then lived in Brazil for almost two years before moving to Dubai in 2020.¹⁸⁴ One of the largest cocaine buyers in Europe, according to Brazilian authorities, he worked with an organized crime group operating in Paraguay and Brazil to ship large quantities of cocaine

from the Brazilian ports of Porto Alegre and Rio Grande to Europe.¹⁸⁵ His operations were among those tracked by the international intelligence-led Operation Hinterland and, in March 2023, over 17 tonnes of cocaine linked to this group were seized.¹⁸⁶

Originally, the Pacani group's shipments were sent in containers directly to European ports, including Algeciras, Hamburg, Antwerp and Vlissingen. After suffering the loss of shipments,¹⁸⁷ as well as international arrest warrants for Brazilian traffickers in the network, they had to adapt their operations. From mid-2022 onward, they allegedly began to coordinate and organize the transport of multi-tonne consignments from north-eastern Brazil to the West African coast using fishing boats – a shift of modalities that echoed those of a number of networks.¹⁸⁸ Using prearranged meeting points in international waters near Liberia and Guinea-Bissau, they allegedly trans-shipped consignments onto smaller vessels coming from the West African coastline.¹⁸⁹ The Pacani network allegedly relied on a West African-based intermediary nicknamed 'Espadarte' ('swordfish'), whose nationality is unclear.¹⁹⁰

Alliances

The Western Balkan groups' approach to building alliances across the cocaine supply chain – non-exclusive, pragmatic, based purely on commercial considerations and using violence only as a last resort – has proved critical to their success.¹⁹¹ These alliances are based on mutual interests rather than loyalty, which is generally reserved for group members, allowing them to remain flexible and adapt to different contexts and markets.

Primeiro Comando da Capital

One of the most significant alliances in both the West Africa route and the broader global cocaine trade is the partnership between Slavic- and Albanian-speaking criminal networks and Brazil's PCC.

Since 2016, the PCC has become an increasingly influential actor in the global cocaine market. From the mid-2010s onward, Western Balkan groups' operations in Brazil have increasingly been managed in collaboration with the PCC, particularly in its strongholds of São Paulo and Santos. This cooperation has also extended to southern states, such as Parana and Santa Catarina, and the country's north-eastern regions, where both the PCC and Western Balkan groups play key roles in managing non-containerized cocaine shipments via West Africa.¹⁹²

Alliances are built for specific business opportunities, rather than as a permanent partnership with any expectation of exclusivity. Balkan networks purchase cocaine consignments – or elements of consignments – from the PCC. The PCC supports in the logistics of export from Brazil, and to West Africa when that route is chosen. Western Balkan networks take over logistics in West Africa, often involved in receiving consignments. They remain responsible for logistics on the Europe-facing leg of the journey, and are typically responsible for extraction of the drug from European ports and distribution of the consignment they own.

However, sometimes Western Balkan groups are not the owners of the entirety of a consignment. Often, consignments are 'pooled', with 'the drugs never belong[ing] to just one group', according to one Brazilian law enforcement officer who has long been analyzing PCC operations. Consequently, part of a consignment may be delivered to other networks in Europe, rather than entirely distributed by Balkan networks. Crucially, in pooled consignments, risks are shared in PCC/Balkan operations, with losses (in the case of seizures) shared between players, and payment made only when the drugs arrive in Europe.¹⁹³

This stands in contrast to documented cases involving the PCC and the 'Ndrangheta, where the latter repeatedly refused to share risks or accept liability for seized cocaine shipments. This refusal reportedly caused significant difficulties for their intermediary, who then sought alternative partnerships – including with Western Balkan groups.¹⁹⁴

Western Balkan networks are widely established across European consumption markets. In some cases, Western Balkan networks have been known to sell cocaine in Europe on behalf of Latin American groups, notably Ecuadorian gangs, taking a cut of proceeds. It is not clear whether this arrangement is also in place with the PCC, whose physical establishment is growing, particularly in Portugal, but currently lags far behind that of the Western Balkan networks. Overall, the 'Ndrangheta–PCC relationship, which underpinned significant trafficking of cocaine into Europe, including via West Africa, may have been superseded by these alliances with Western Balkan groups.

'Ndrangheta

The long-standing relationship of Western Balkan groups with the Calabria-based 'Ndrangheta may have facilitated their establishment in West Africa, and their alliance with the PCC.

The 'Ndrangheta has operated in Brazil since the 1970s and had relationships with Western Balkan groups rooted in Italy since the 1990s, which created entry points in Brazil.¹⁹⁵ For example, testimony from one senior 'Ndrangheta figure, who operated as an intermediary between 'Ndrangheta clans and the PCC, reported in the court of Calabria, Italy, how he established ties with Albanian organized crime groups in the Italian city of Turin. He later began to work with these groups in Brazil, in coordination with the PCC.¹⁹⁶

Western Balkan groups appear to have leveraged their relationship with the 'Ndrangheta to engage with other groups and eventually forge direct partnerships.¹⁹⁷ However, there are still instances of collaboration, including between the three parties.

The 'Ndrangheta has been in West Africa since at least the mid-2000s.¹⁹⁸ Here again, its presence helped open the way for Western Balkan operations, which the groups then 'leapfrogged' to establish direct links in the region.¹⁹⁹ Illustratively, Sierra Leone, which is a hub for operations by Western Balkan groups, as outlined above, is also favoured by 'Ndrangheta elements who benefit from the country's lack of extradition agreements with Italy.²⁰⁰

While Western Balkan groups initially relied on 'Ndrangheta influence in international logistics chains, this has reversed over the last five years, with the 'Ndrangheta now 'need[ing] these groups', according to an expert on the 'Ndrangheta.²⁰¹ Significant law enforcement operations over this period against the 'Ndrangheta, particularly in the wake of the Sky ECC hacks, have materially weakened the group, creating a gap in the market for Western Balkan groups to capture additional market share.²⁰²

Criminal actors from the Netherlands

Since the 1990s, Western Balkan groups have maintained extensive operations in the Netherlands, working closely with Dutch criminals and relying on the country's seaports and airports for drug trafficking.²⁰³ Today, they are prominent actors in the Dutch criminal landscape.²⁰⁴ Several contacts link Western Balkan groups, Dutch criminal groups and trafficking routes through West Africa.

One reported link is the Dutch national Jos Leijdekkers, also known as Bolle Jos. In June 2024, he was sentenced in absentia to 24 years in prison for large-scale drug trafficking and, in February 2025, to an additional 13 years for attempting to steal 10 tonnes of cocaine.²⁰⁵ Leijdekkers' presence in

Sierra Leone was widely reported by the media in January 2025, along with his alleged connections to members of the presidential family and other state actors. Prosecutors in the Netherlands have confirmed that they suspect he is currently hiding in Sierra Leone.²⁰⁶

Dutch authorities are currently investigating Leijdekkers for suspected money laundering and collaboration with the Kavač clan.²⁰⁷ An investigative journalist claims that the Kavač clan is suspected of assisting Leijdekkers in coordinating operations in the Western Balkans.²⁰⁸ Additionally, Serbian media reports that Leijdekkers may have played a role in the assassination of Jovica Vukotić, leader of the Kavač rival Škaljari clan from Montenegro, again suggesting possible Kavač alignment.²⁰⁹

Leijdekkers, who was convicted of coordinating cocaine shipments through the Port of Antwerp,²¹⁰ is believed to have operated through Sierra Leone since at least 2022, and possibly earlier, and is considered a major criminal actor in the country. His presence in Sierra Leone coincides with a surge in seizures in Antwerp originating from the country.²¹¹ This trafficking route has also been used by a Serbian criminal group led by Miroslav Starčević, an ally of the Kavač clan. The group allegedly includes Mario Krezić, a key broker for Starčević, who holds Dutch nationality and is well-embedded in Sierra Leone.²¹²

Dubai: A safe harbour for elite Balkan traffickers

For almost a decade, Dubai has been a safe haven for some Western Balkan group leaders, including those involved in trafficking cocaine through West Africa. When they realize that law enforcement in Europe or elsewhere is pursuing them, they often turn to Dubai – not only to evade justice but also to invest and launder the proceeds of their crimes.²¹³ Extraditing drug traffickers from Dubai has proven to be challenging because criminal offences in the UAE are treated differently compared to in Europe. For example, in the UAE, cases may often pertain to commercial matters rather than criminal ones, as is common in Europe.

As described above, wanted Albanian national Armando Pacani was arrested in July 2024 in Dubai, where he was living as a fugitive. However, this did not prevent him from engaging in business activities and opening a company in the UAE.²¹⁴ The next step was expected to be his extradition to Brazil. However, as of April 2025, the extradition had not yet taken place.

Dutch-Bosnian Edin Gačanin, who has been sanctioned by the US and is considered by Europol to be part of a cartel that controls around one-third of the cocaine trade in Europe,²¹⁵ has lived in Dubai for an extended period. Despite his arrest in Dubai and a Rotterdam court sentencing him to seven years in prison and a €1 million fine for drug trafficking, his extradition to the Netherlands has yet not been made possible.²¹⁶

Dutch-Croatian Mario Krezić relocated to the UAE following a seizure of cocaine in Belgium in May 2020. In 2024, Dubai police arrested Krezić at Belgium's request. However, as of June 2024, he reportedly remained at large in Dubai, with extradition proceedings expected.²¹⁷

Some fugitives continue to finance and coordinate global drug trafficking from Dubai.²¹⁸ One is Gačanin, who has established companies in Dubai, under his own name and the names of his associates. Media reports claim that he has continued to ship cocaine globally.²¹⁹ ■

Future scenarios and strategic implications

Criminal entrenchment

Tracing the growth of Western Balkan groups' overseas operations in other locations suggests that they will seek further entrenchment in West Africa. It is likely that the groups will rely less on other criminal networks, such as the 'Ndrangheta – typically used as a last resort – and increasingly 'insource' their operations. This will see more long-term establishment of brokers from the Western Balkans in West Africa.

There is a high degree of collaboration among Western Balkan groups in West Africa, including unconventional partnerships and unusual cross-ethnic collaboration. Some brokers support both Slavic- and Albanian-speaking groups. If patterns observed in Latin America – where Western Balkan groups formed strategic alliances with local networks and business actors – are replicated in West Africa, the current level of collaboration between different Balkan groups is likely to decline over time. In the medium term, each group is expected to establish its own independent presence and direct connections, reducing reliance on shared networks or intermediaries.

Consequently, the deeper criminal entrenchment of Western Balkan groups in West Africa could well result in long-term fragmentation and diversification. Over time, this may lead to the emergence of more independent and distinct operational groups.

Growing protection infrastructure: collusion and corruption

Western Balkan groups have shown a clear pattern of embedding themselves into local environments by investing in the private sector, building logistical infrastructure and securing protection from state officials. It is likely that these trends, already observed in Latin America and Europe, will take an upward trend in West Africa, where the groups are expected to increasingly invest in vessels, warehouses and other logistics to support their operations. As their presence grows, so too will their spending to secure political and law enforcement protection in the region.

Experience from the Western Balkans shows how deeply these groups can penetrate state structures. For example, in Albania, a former member of parliament was arrested for supporting a criminal organization.²²⁰ In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a former security advisor and judicial officials were prosecuted for their alleged involvement in cocaine trafficking.²²¹ In Croatia, border police and customs officers were charged with leaking confidential data to Montenegrin groups.²²² In Montenegro, high-ranking officials, including former police and judicial superiors, were indicted for their links to organized crime.²²³ In Serbia, a police investigator was convicted for sharing sensitive information with an organized crime group.²²⁴ Similarly, in Ecuador, the entrenchment of Western Balkan groups brought with it an explosion of violence in the country.

These examples demonstrate the risks of state collusion and a pattern that is likely to repeat in West Africa as Western Balkan groups expand their influence.

Anticipating violence?

If the cocaine market in West Africa enters a period of decline, competition between Western Balkan groups is likely to increase, and countries where different networks have significant presence could see a surge in violence. While the market remains in a phase of expansion, however, collaboration – rather than competition – appears to be primary.

The groups are known for coercion, targeted assassinations and the elimination of rivals. One of the most notorious examples comes from Montenegro, where the Kavač and Škaljari clans have been engaged in violent conflict since 2014, resulting in dozens of deaths.²²⁵

Violence is also strategically used by Western Balkan groups beyond the region. While no violent incidents involving the groups have been recorded in West Africa, one documented case relates to a network operating in Senegal,²²⁶ and several cases have been documented in South Africa.²²⁷ According to police reports, individuals with criminal backgrounds from Serbia arrived in South Africa in two waves during the 1990s and early 2000s, often to evade arrest or seek refuge.

Geographic expansion within West Africa

Western Balkan groups appear to be currently most active in the western hub of West Africa, but a deeper analysis of other countries in the region is required to confirm this. An analysis of areas where the groups are already established can suggest several indicators to help forecast future patterns of expansion. These include the following:

- Existing presence of allies, including the 'Ndrangheta, Colombian organized crime groups or the PCC. Of these, the 'Ndrangheta seem to be most helpful in West Africa, particularly as they have been weakened in recent years, face growing financial stresses and may be ceding space to Western Balkan groups.
- Governance weaknesses in maritime port infrastructure, creating entry points for entrenchment.
- Port infrastructure with significant export potential to Europe, Türkiye or Australia. Ports that are heavily serviced by MSC shipping lines are particularly vulnerable: although MSC has significantly enhanced screening procedures, a few Western Balkan groups appeared to favour the infiltration of this company.²²⁸

This matrix suggests that the following countries stand out as particularly vulnerable to further penetration and entrenchment by Western Balkan organized crime groups.

Nigeria

Supported by at least 12 direct shipping routes, Nigeria's maritime trade links with Europe offer multiple opportunities for the concealment of illicit goods. There are indications that some Western Balkan groups, including the Kavač clan, may already be operating in the country.²²⁹

Powerful Nigerian trafficking networks, including cultist groups, are present across the cocaine supply chain to Europe, creating touchpoints for alliance-building with Western Balkan groups. Partnerships between Nigerian trafficking networks and Western Balkan groups involved in the drug trade already exist in Italy, an important European centre for both groups, particularly in the northern regions of Piemonte and Lombardia.²³⁰ Nigerian criminal networks also have long-standing alliances with the PCC, which is known to have extensive cooperation with Western Balkan groups.²³¹ All three actors maintain a strong presence in São Paulo, where Nigerian actors are particularly active on air trafficking routes to Europe.

Nigeria is second only to India in the adoption of cryptocurrency worldwide, with around a third of the population estimated to invest in it.²³² As Western Balkan groups increasingly use cryptocurrencies to launder drug proceeds,²³³ this creates additional opportunities for collaboration and financial integration between criminal actors.

Côte d'Ivoire

The Port of Abidjan is, according to available data, among West Africa's best-connected ports to Europe, with at least 18 direct shipping routes.²³⁴ Abidjan's vibrant economy, with its plethora of formal and informal economic establishments, creates a wide range of opportunities for money laundering that have long been exploited by Spanish organized crime groups and the Italian 'Ndrangheta.²³⁵ Multiple operations against the 'Ndrangheta, including Bartolo Bruzzaniti, found by Italian law enforcement investigations to be a crucial Abidjan-based broker, may have weakened the network's operating power in the country. Bruzzaniti, whom investigations found had coordinated shipments through West Africa, allegedly also had established collaborations with Serbian nationals.²³⁶ Western Balkan groups appear well placed to step into the space left by 'Ndrangheta arrests, leveraging existing in-country relationships with the 'Ndrangheta.



Belgium's prestigious chocolate industry, with its significant imports of cocoa products from West Africa, creates a channel for concealing illicit trade. © Sia Kambou/Afp via Getty Images

Guinea

Within West Africa's western hub, operations in Guinea may merit further scrutiny. It boasts the second best-connected maritime port in the sub-region, has a significant cocaine market and a reported concentration of Albanian-language encrypted messaging tabs.²³⁷

Expanding role of West Africa as a logistics hub for a growing range of consumption markets

Western Balkan groups increasingly use West Africa as a warehousing node for shipments en route to Europe and may give it a similar role for other destinations. As Europe looks set to remain a major consumption market, ongoing growth in maritime trading connections between West Africa, Europe and coastal countries in the Western Balkans and the broader region of South Eastern Europe – including the establishment of new trading routes – could create additional opportunities for criminal infiltration.

Furthermore, consumption markets elsewhere now offer higher prices, and could also be targeted by Western Balkan groups operating through West Africa.

Australia

Western Balkan groups have increasingly targeted Australia, which offers far higher prices and the highest per capita cocaine consumption in the world.²³⁸ Some Albanian-speaking elements in Australia have been linked to the Montenegrin Kavač clan, which has made use of countries across West and southern Africa in its operations.²³⁹ The Kavač clan's consideration of an aerial route from Sierra Leone to South Africa supports hypotheses that West Africa could operate as a warehousing hub for intra-continental movements and southern export points towards Australia.²⁴⁰ Some groups using West Africa as a warehousing node, including the Bosnian-led network, already supply Australian markets, increasing the probability that West African stocks could be trafficked towards Australia.²⁴¹

Türkiye as a corridor to emerging consumption markets

Since 2021, Türkiye has gained prominence as a node in the cocaine market. Official data tracked a 45% increase in cocaine seizures between 2020 and 2021, with similar seizure figures in 2023. That there has been no evidence of a commensurate increase in consumption indicates growing outflows.²⁴² Targets are likely to include Europe and also potentially Western Asia, which has high cocaine prices. In Oman, for example, 2022 prices ranged from US\$130 to US\$260 per gram, while in Israel they reached US\$203.²⁴³ By contrast, the average price per gram in Western and Central Europe was around US\$73 in December 2024.²⁴⁴ For now, cocaine consumption in Western Asia remains limited, with consumption concentrated in the amphetamines market, but growth could prove highly lucrative. The trend of increasing cocaine traffic through Türkiye has continued.²⁴⁵

Since 2021, Turkish actors have become more visible in West Africa's cocaine trade.²⁴⁶ Turkish nationals have been linked to numerous seizures either in West Africa or involving loading in the region, including a 2 tonne seizure off the coast of Senegal in November 2021, 528 kilograms seized in Guinean waters in February 2022,²⁴⁷ and in October 2024, 4 tonnes of cocaine seized on a ship called *El Ras*, which was picked up in West Africa and coordinated by Turkish nationals and seized near the Canary Islands.²⁴⁸

Over the past five years, Türkiye's economic influence in West Africa has increased – particularly in maritime ports and in the security sector, where it is becoming an important weapons supplier – as has its political and diplomatic engagement.²⁴⁹ Western Balkan groups have also increasingly based themselves in Türkiye, where they have long-standing alliances built through the heroin trade.²⁵⁰ Dutch nationals have repeatedly been involved in the West Africa to Türkiye route, which, as highlighted above, could also create entry points for Western Balkan groups, given the extensive alliances between Dutch and Western Balkans criminals. Looking forward, Western Balkan groups are well positioned to leverage cocaine routes via West Africa to Türkiye, and on to Europe and lucrative new markets.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening strategic engagement

Strengthening coordination between public institutions – as well as between the public and private sectors – across West Africa, Latin America and Europe offers a strategic opportunity to maximize the impact of limited resources. As the common interest in disrupting cocaine trafficking grows, improved cooperation can enhance information sharing, streamline resource use and support more effective joint interventions.

European states

Having recognized the swelling inflows of cocaine trafficking, several European states are stepping up their engagement in West Africa. Stronger cooperation in this response would bolster interventions and the overarching intelligence picture. Mapping resources and interventions would be a critical first step, to avoid duplication and enable consolidation.

Another concrete measure would be frameworks for regular information exchange and coordination between European field liaisons across West African states. The Western Balkan countries should consider deploying liaison officers to West Africa, to better understand the Western Balkan groups' strategies and to augment engagement with regional authorities in West Africa.

The Europol-coordinated Operational Taskforce 'Balkan Cartel' should expand the scope of its analysis of Western Balkan groups to include a greater consideration of West Africa and engagement with European assets deployed in the region.

Latin American and European states

European, Western Balkan and Latin American authorities have taken numerous steps towards increased coordination in response to the growing threat posed by Western Balkan groups. These frameworks for collaboration should be expanded to include West African states identified as prominent nodes for these groups. Although a formal expansion of existing programmes and regional frameworks may not be possible in the short term, there could be opportunities for engagement between existing multi-stakeholder programmes across the cocaine supply chain and the West Africa region, which should be considered.

As cocaine trafficking dynamics continue to develop in West Africa and Latin America, effective engagement with West African counterparts will be essential in reducing the region's appeal as a transit hub for cocaine. In order to effectively target engagement and avoid reinforcing harmful power dynamics, the identification of strategic partners in West Africa should be informed by a nuanced political economy analysis. This should consider local governance structures, informal power brokers and existing criminal protection networks, as well as regional political sensitivities and donor dynamics.

Cross-continental partnerships

Countries from Europe – including the Western Balkans – Latin America and West Africa should identify areas where interests intersect and then align and leverage these as diplomatic windows of opportunity to collaborate on shared priorities in order to shape responses to the cocaine trade.

After a decade of building enhanced engagements with Latin American states regarding cocaine trafficking, European states should apply the lessons learned to engage similarly in West Africa, both diplomatically and operationally. One key lesson is to engage with speed and efficiency so as to avoid situations where collaborative frameworks lag behind the evolution of the threat and European states are left responding to unforeseen incidents on the back foot.

Shipping sector

Maritime shipping, which plays a central role in global trade, is likewise a key part of the global supply chain for cocaine trafficking and an important factor in the international response to it. Improved coordination, clearer responsibilities and targeted investment between public and private actors in the shipping industry are needed to strengthen its capacity to do so.²⁵¹ This would entail the adoption of a clear security framework that distinguishes between safety and criminal threats and integrated security protocols across all stages of the supply chain. Stronger cooperation between port authorities, customs and law enforcement is essential, supported by staff training, improved data sharing and investment in detection technology.

Public-private cooperation with the shipping industry should be formalized through joint task forces and clear channels of communication. Shipping companies need to consistently enforce due diligence procedures, especially when working with high-risk intermediaries. Best practices, such as those of the European Ports Alliance, can be taken up to improve risk management and build trust among stakeholders.²⁵² Strengthened processes for screening and monitoring supply-chain partners will further reduce vulnerabilities.

Finally, the industry must invest in advanced technologies, such as AI, blockchain and chemical scanners that can counter the growing threat of liquid cocaine. Collaboration between industry, government and international organizations will be key to scaling these tools and ensuring that smaller ports have access to them.

Enhanced intelligence systems

Dynamic, granular and multi-sourced

One factor in West Africa's vulnerability to infiltration by foreign criminal actors, including groups from the Western Balkans, has been patchy information about the cocaine market's structure, routes and

enabling actors. In their threat assessments, European authorities have relied too restrictively on official reporting from EU and UN bodies, even though their data is usually seizure-based, outdated and does not include unreported criminal phenomena – the ‘unknown unknowns’.

West Africa's cocaine market is extremely dynamic, as are its links to Europe. Annual or multi-annual data snapshots are not sufficient for operational interventions and updated risk profiles. What is needed are more agile approaches to data-gathering that can tap into a wider range of sources and develop a moving picture over time, rather than static images.

Tailored risk profiles

An enhanced data picture that includes Western Balkan group activity can flesh out updated risk profiles for West African states across maritime ports in Europe. Rather than draw solely on historical seizure data within Europe, which creates a closed information loop, such profiles should be informed by a wider array of data sources including seizures of West Africa-bound shipments in Latin America, informal data sources and mapping of existing trading routes. Enhanced risk profiles should concentrate on direct maritime trading routes and prominent secondary routes. Any developments in routes between West Africa, Europe and the Western Balkans should be scrutinized for new trafficking vulnerabilities and, where these are found, they should be monitored and the information fed into the risk analysis.

Maximizing Sky ECC and EncroChat data

Data from the encrypted channel hacks – Sky ECC and EncroChat – has yielded unprecedented insights into the operations of organized crime groups globally. The encrypted messages reportedly revealed a particularly high concentration of Albanian-speaking tags in West Africa. Although the data is now dated, deeper analysis of such messages should be considered for the possible strategic value of understanding regional operations and forward-looking trends for authorities in the Western Balkans and Europe more broadly.

General aviation

The dynamics of cocaine trafficking through West Africa using general aviation remain poorly understood. The limited evidence of Western Balkan groups' exploitation of this modality certainly indicates their consideration of its opportunities, including for trafficking from Latin America to Europe and for moving consignments within Africa. A tailored data-collection programme that combines official data sets (including those gathered by Colibri), open-source intelligence, and field reporting from clandestine landing strips and international airfields would significantly enhance its visibility and opportunities for intervention.

Smart targeting

Enhanced support for the MAOC-N

The operations of the EU's Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre–Narcotics have enjoyed a high degree of success. Furthermore, with an approach that focuses on collaboration with regional partners – most prominently in Senegal and Cabo Verde – it creates opportunities for courtroom results, rather than mere seizure of the consignment. The MAOC-N currently has more intelligence regarding cocaine consignments trafficked by sea to the Gulf of Guinea than it can put to work.²⁵³ Supporting the MAOC-N with greater resources should be a priority for targeting flows entering West Africa.

Blocking the brokers

Law enforcement interventions should target the best-connected nodes in a criminal ecosystem. For the expansion of Western Balkan and other foreign organized crime groups into West Africa, this means brokers. The Western Balkan groups task them with building the necessary relationships, corporate structures and logistical infrastructure. As was allegedly the case with Mario Krezić, brokers in West Africa often provide services to more than one network within their nodes of operation. Similarly, the 'Ndrangheta reportedly support the trafficking operations of a number of networks. In other cases, regional intermediaries play this role and are pivotal nodes in international trafficking operations.

Brokers are among the hardest elements to replace. This is particularly true where they are not supported by a significant expatriate community that can provide a basis for their establishment. Their profiling and arrest can therefore cause medium-term disruption.

Disrupting illicit finances

Although a significant challenge, strengthening national anti-money laundering (AML) systems is essential. As mentioned above, West Africa's high vulnerability to illicit financial flows linked to cocaine trafficking is reflected in the presence of Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria on the FATF grey list due to weaknesses in their AML and counter-terrorist financing frameworks. Measures to address this should focus on enforcing existing regulatory frameworks and driving towards beneficial-ownership transparency, improved resourcing of financial intelligence units and stronger coordination between them. Sectors that have a high risk for laundering drug proceeds, such as real estate and construction, should also be prioritized. Importantly, financial investigations must run in parallel with criminal investigations to effectively trace, freeze and recover illicit assets.

The growing use of cryptocurrency by organized crime groups adds another layer of complexity. In line with FATF standards, countries should adopt and enforce regulations for virtual asset service providers and build the capacity of national authorities to monitor blockchain activity and detect suspicious transactions. Public-private cooperation is also critical – banks, fintech companies and law enforcement agencies should collaborate to share intelligence, develop typologies and identify red flags. Greater investment in technology, training and cross-border coordination will further support efforts to investigate, disrupt and prevent money laundering related to the cocaine trade in West Africa.



ANNEX

NAMED INDIVIDUAL	SOURCE	JURISDICTION	STATUS OF THE CASE	PLEAS AND/OR PUBLIC DENIAL
Armando Pacani	Judiciary FEDERAL JUSTICE, Rio Grande do Sul Judiciary Section, 22nd Federal Court of Porto Alegre, PETITION NO. 5014337-91.2023.4.04.7100/RS, dated 15 March 2023; Jusbrasil, Jurisprudência sobre Hinterland, https://www.jusbrasil.com.br/jurisprudencia/busca?q=hinterland&p=5 .	Brazil/Dubai	Pacani was released by a court in Dubai in November 2024 due to perceived errors in the filing for extradition by Brazil.	Pacani and his lawyers have alleged his innocence. Any denials that have been publicly reported are quoted in the report.
Mario Krezić	Indictment against Miroslav Starčević and others, KTO 89/23, 1 November 2023; Indictment against Nenad Petrak and others, KO-US-57/2024, 1 October 2024. Begoña P Ramírez, <i>Dos de los detenidos en la operación que desmanteló el cartel de los Balcanes se escondían en Dubái</i> , Infolibre, 14 June 2024, https://www.infolibre.es/economia/detenidos-operacion-desmantelo-cartel-balcenes-escondian-dubai_1_1817898.html .	Belgium/Dubai	Mario Krezić is not facing indictment in Serbia or Croatia. However, prosecutors from both countries mention his name in cases involving Miroslav Starčević and Nenad Petrak related to international drug trafficking. Additionally, media reports state that authorities in Belgium have issued an arrest warrant for Krezić, while the Spanish Guardia Civil expects that Krezić will be extradited.	No records exist of statements made by Mario Krezić or his legal representative.

Milan Rataj	Decision of the Federal Regional Court of the 2nd Region, Rio de Janeiro, 29 October 2019, https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/rmgsf4rgw4wqdg477njzo/Decision-of-the-Federal-Regional-Court-of-the-2nd-Region-Rio-de-Janeiro-29-October-2019.pdf?rlkey=2kyw0lf33dbx58kmidny4d3b-z&st=w9i7oe9j&dl=0	Brazil	Final verdict and conviction. Federal Judge Messod Azulay Neto dismissed the special appeal of Milan Rataj for international drug trafficking in October 2019.	
Aleksandar Nešić	Brazilian police investigation reports: Relatório Final, Operation Dontraz, 2023, Ministério da Justiça Polícia Federal Superintendência Regional de Polícia Federal de São Paulo FICCO/DRPJ/SR/PF/SP; https://www.jusbrasil.com.br/busca?q=aleksandar+nesic . Nesic's lawyer, Marrero, stated to Reuters that his client is innocent: Gabriel Targardter, How Balkan gangsters became Europe's top cocaine suppliers, Reuters, 2 May 2024, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/brazil-drugs-balkans/	Brazil	Nesic has been indicted in Brazilian courts, but not yet convicted.	Nesic's lawyer, Marrero, has made statements to the press reporting that Aleksandar Nesic is innocent.
Nenad Petrak	Indictment against Nenad Petrak and others, KO-US-57/2024, 1 October 2024.	Croatia	The prosecution submitted an indictment against Nenad Petrak in October 2024. However, according to media reports from July 2025, the court has not yet formally approved it. The trial has not yet commenced.	Lawyer Anto Nobilo, representing the defence for Petrak, confirmed in January 2025 that they were close to reaching a plea agreement with the prosecutors. Petrak was expected to admit to the crimes, but this plan was leaked to prison, where many group members are detained. Some members opposed the deal, leading Petrak to withdraw his consent.
Edin Gačanić	Gačanić has a designation by the US Government for illicit drug trafficking under EO14059: https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20230315 . Gačanić also has been convicted by a court in Rotterdam on charges of drug trafficking: https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2023/12/06/justitie-sluit-deal-met-zeer-invloedrijke-drugssmokkelaar-a4183448 ; in other media: https://www.crimesite.nl/justitie-maakt-procesafpraak-met-edin-g-in-cocaineproces ; https://sarajevotimes.com/edin-gacanin-gets-seven-years-in-prison-for-smuggling-2-4-tons-of-cocaine .	Netherlands	Convicted in a court in the Netherlands in 2023.	

Miroslav Starčević	Indictment against Miroslav Starčević and others, KTO 89/23, 1 November 2023.	Serbia	The trial is presently ongoing.	Miroslav Starčević has maintained his innocence. He stated that he will present the defense at a later stage, once the original documents from Sky ECC are received from the French authorities.
Radoje Zvicer	Indictment against Radoje Zvicer and others, Kt-S. 172/22, 30 December 2022.	Montenegro, Serbia, Austria	Several arrest warrants issued. Zvicer remains free. Trial has not been concluded.	No records exist of statements made by Radoje Zvicer or his legal representative.



NOTES

- 1 These are, in Serbia, indictments against Miroslav Starčević and others, KTO 89/23, 1 November 2023; Nikola Vušović and others, KTO 81/23, 11 October 2023; Veljko Belivuk and others, KTO 65/21, 30 July 2021 and KTO 80/23, 25 September 2023; Ljubo Milović and others, KTO 10/23, 9 February 2023. In Montenegro, indictments against Zoran Lazović and Milivoje Katnić, Kt-S. 117/23, 11 October 2024; Jugoslav Raičević, Kt-S. 238/23, 25 December 2023; Ljubo Milović, Kt-S. 93/23, 15 September 2023; Radoje Zvicer and others, Kt-S. 172/22, 30 December 2022. In Croatia, indictments against Nenad Petrak and others, KO-US-10/2023, 21 September 2023 and KO-US-57/2024, 1 September 2024; Petar Ćosić and others, KO-US-19/2023, 12 April 2023; Marko Grzunov, KO-US-18/2023, 12 April 2023.
- 2 European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA), Wastewater analysis and drugs – a European multi-city study, 19 March 2025, https://www.euda.europa.eu/publications/html/pods/wastewater-analysis_en#data-explorer.
- 3 EUDA, Cocaine – the current situation in Europe, European Drug Report 2024, 11 June 2024, https://www.euda.europa.eu/publications/european-drug-report/2024/cocaine_en.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Daniel Brombacher and Sarah Fares, Violence without borders: Why is drug-related violence spilling over into Germany?, GI-TOC, 2 September 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/why-is-drug-related-violence-spilling-over-into-germany>.
- 6 EUDA, Cocaine – the current situation in Europe, European Drug Report 2024, 11 June 2024, https://www.euda.europa.eu/publications/european-drug-report/2024/cocaine_en.
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- 8 Closed-door discussion with international analysts of organized crime in West Africa, April 2025.
- 9 GI-TOC, Can cocaine seizures act as indicators of political instability in West Africa?, Risk Bulletin of Illicit Economies in West Africa, Issue 8, August 2023, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-008/04-can-cocaine-seizures-act-as-indicators-of-political-instability.html>.
- 10 GI-TOC, Global Organized Crime Index, <https://globalinitiative.net/initiatives/ocindex>.
- 11 Fatjona Mejdini, Cocaine connections: Links between the Western Balkans and South America, GI-TOC, April 2025, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cocaine-connections-links-between-the-western-balkans-and-south-america>.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Fund for Peace, Fragile States Index, <https://fragilestatesindex.org>.
- 14 Interview with international investigative journalist (IJ3), Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, November 2024. Sky ECC communications of the Bosnian leader of a criminal network ('Bosnian 1') were made available to the GI-TOC during the interview.
- 15 Indictment against Radoje Zvicer and others, Kt-S. 172/22, 30 December 2022.
- 16 FATF, Jurisdictions under increased monitoring, 21 February 2025, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/High-risk-and-other-monitored-jurisdictions/increased-monitoring-february-2025.html>.
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- 18 The work of the EU's Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre–Narcotics (MAOC-N) has significantly improved the maritime intelligence picture. However, it has largely focused on non-containerized vessels.
- 19 Fernando Méndez and Asier Ruiz, Africa's role in global trade: A review of container traffic expansion, ALG, 11 November 2024, <https://alg-global.com/blog/logistics/container-ports-and-traffic-expansion-africa>.
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 - 24 Interview with senior port official from Albania (PA6), Tirana, Albania, August 2024.
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 - 30 In November 1999, Croatian authorities seized 660 kilograms of cocaine at the port of Rijeka. According to the indictment, the cocaine had been smuggled from Ecuador, hidden in a container with 1 564 cans of tuna, and shipped to Belgium. It was then moved by train to Croatia. Upon discovery, police seized the shipment but left 4.5 kilograms in place to track its destination and identify suspects. The cocaine continued its journey by train to Slovenia and then by ship through Greece and Senegal before reaching the Port of Banjul. A similar trafficking route has not been identified since then. Two suspects, a Croatian and a British national, were acquitted in November 2012 after a lengthy trial. Indictment, DOK 135/2000-I, 8 November 2000.
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 - 43 In 2017, for example, the Brazilian Federal Police's Operation Brabo identified individuals associated with the PCC to be working with Serbian nationals allegedly linked to the Šarić

- group. The alliance was coordinating the movement of containers at the Port of Santos. Stakeholders in Brazil have also reported this growing alliance. Interview with maritime security manager and former police officer from Brazil (PA7), São Paulo, Brazil, August 2024.
- 44 Gabriel Stargardt, How Balkan gangsters became Europe's top cocaine suppliers, Reuters, 2 May 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/brazil-drugs-balkans>.
 - 45 UNODC, *Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2021*, October 2022, https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia/INFORME_MONITOREO_COL_2021.pdf; UNODC, World Drug Report 2024, June 2024, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2024.html>.
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 - 47 This growth also occurred in the Western Balkans, particularly in coastal countries, where law enforcement recorded major seizures. In 2021, authorities seized 1.4 tonnes of cocaine at the Port of Bar, Montenegro; 575 kilograms at the Port of Ploče, Croatia; and 725 kilograms at the Port of Durres, Albania, highlighting the region's increasing role in transnational drug trafficking routes. Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes, GI-TOC, July 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime>.
 - 48 Interview with individual involved in the cocaine market (CM1), Tirana, Albania, August 2024.
 - 49 EUDA, Cocaine market in Europe, 2013–2023, June 2025, https://www.euda.europa.eu/media-library/cocaine-market-europe-2013-2023_en.
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 - 51 GI-TOC, European Drug Trends Monitor, Issue 1, December 2024, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/european-drug-trends-monitor-1>.
 - 52 Lucia Bird, West Africa's cocaine corridor: Building a subregional response, GI-TOC, 28 April 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/west-africas-cocaine-corridor>.
 - 53 Brazilian law enforcement investigation titled 'Operation Hinterland' extensively documented the involvement of Pacani in cocaine trafficking in connection with Brazil. The degree of evidence set out in the investigative documents was found sufficiently strong to support an application for the preventive detention of Pacani by the Federal Public Ministry in 2023. Judiciary Federal Justice, Rio Grande do Sul Judiciary Section, 22nd Federal Court of Porto Alegre, Petition No. 5014337-91.2023.4.04.7100/RS, dated 15 March 2023.
 - 54 Aline Ribeiro, *Interpol prende cidadão albanês que enviava cocaína do Brasil para Europa*, Globo, 8 August 2024, <https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2024/08/08/interpol-prende-cidadao-albanes-que-enviava-cocaina-do-brasil-para-europa.ghtml>.
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 - 57 Brazil Customs Office, Ordinance ALF/STS no. 241, 29 November 2019, <http://normas.receita.fazenda.gov.br/sijut2consulta/link.action?idAto=105231>; Brazil Customs Office, Ordinance ALF/STS no. 119, 6 October 2022, <http://normas.receita.fazenda.gov.br/sijut2consulta/link.action?idAto=126504>.
 - 58 Gabriel de Santis Feltran, Isabela Vianna Pinho and Lucia Bird, Atlantic connections: The PCC and the Brazil-West Africa cocaine trade, GI-TOC, August 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/brazil-west-africa-cocaine-trade>. The pandemic may also have contributed to their growing use of West African routes. In one case, COVID-19 restrictions led a Slavic-speaking group to reroute a sailboat from the Caribbean to the Gulf of Guinea, where it picked up 980 kilograms of cocaine stored in Sierra Leone. Guardia Civil, *La Guardia Civil interviene 1000 kilogramos de cocaína en la novedosa 'ruta marítima africana' del narcotráfico internacional*, 12 September 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220925225127/https://www.guardiacivil.es/es/prensa/noticias/7590.html>.
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 - 60 Senegalese customs authorities noted more non-containerized consignments and the use of go-fasts to bring cocaine into the region. Stakeholders also report a perceived decrease in containerized imports. However, this is premised on decreased seizures, which do not necessarily reflect diminished inbound flows. Interview with Amadou Makhtar Cisse, customs inspector from Senegal (L21), Dakar, Senegal, December 2024.
 - 61 Indictment against Radoje Zvicer and others, KI-S. 172/22, 30 December 2022.

- 62 Ibid.
- 63 In 2021, for example, Gambian authorities seized nearly 3 tonnes of cocaine concealed in a shipment of industrial salt from Ecuador that had made its way through the ports of Guayaquil in Ecuador and Algeciras in Spain. The drugs were found during a container search. Maritime Executive, Gambia's largest cocaine seizure: Nearly 3 tons destined for Europe, 8 January 2021, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/gambia-s-largest-cocaine-seizure-nearly-3-tons-destine-to-europe>.
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- 70 Interview with representative of prosecution from Spain (LE17), Netherlands, March 2025.
- 71 Indictment against Nenad Petrak and others, KO-US-57/2024, 1 October 2024.
- 72 Interview with international investigative journalist (IJ3), Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, November 2024. Sky ECC communications of the Bosnian leader of a criminal network were made available to the GI-TOC during the interview.
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