

# NEW TRENDS IN COCANINE SMUGGLING IN EUROPE WITH A FOCUS ON THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

Review Article

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**Abstract:** Over the past decade, cocaine trafficking in Europe has expanded significantly. This is evidenced by law enforcement agencies' data on drug seizures across Europe and the steadily increasing number of users. Particularly noteworthy from our perspective is the involvement of nationals from the Western Balkan countries in these activities. International organizations estimate that individuals and criminal groups from this region have become the primary cocaine traffickers in Europe. The so-called "Balkan Cartel" has established strong connections in both the source countries and transit nations (South America), enabling them to smuggle large quantities of cocaine into destination countries throughout Europe. Data obtained by decrypting encrypted communication methods (Sky ECC, Anom) have led to current legal proceedings that are just beginning to uncover the extent of these activities. The aim of this paper is to highlight the prevalence of cocaine smuggling in Europe, with a focus on its impact on the Western Balkan countries, considering the involvement of their nationals in this criminal activity and the development of the cocaine market in the region.

**Keywords:** cocaine, narcotics, smuggling, Europe, Western Balkans, trends.

## INTRODUCTION

Cocaine smuggling is one of the leading activities of global organized crime, with a pronounced growth index.<sup>2</sup> What is specific about this narcotic is

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2 Analysis of the results shows that within the global score of organized crime, the cocaine market continues to expand, with a growth index of +0.30, making it the third fastest-growing criminal market (human trafficking has seen the highest increase at +0.39, followed by synthetic drug trafficking with a growth index of +0.33) (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime [Global Initiative] 2023a).

the limited geographical area where the coca plant can be cultivated, including regions of Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia.<sup>3</sup> This means that this is the only region in the world where the coca plant is cultivated and transformed into coca paste, the base for cocaine. Thus, the availability of this drug depends on the extent of its cultivation on one hand and its smuggling worldwide on the other.

The harmful consequences of cocaine consumption are well-documented. These consequences are not only directed at individuals who use the drug, such as increased mortality rates among users (Peacock et al., 2021; Rendon et al., 2023), but they also have an impact on society as a whole, affecting the security of states and regions. The illegal drug trade, especially cocaine, is closely linked to high levels of violent crime (Goldstein, 1985), thereby threatening the safety of individuals and property in those countries. These trends, which have been present in the Americas since the 1970s (Bagley, 2012; Puyana et al., 2017; International Crisis Group, 2023; Garavito et al., 2024), are now evidently spilling over into the European continent. The Western Balkan countries<sup>4</sup> are not excluded from these trends. On the contrary, they are heavily involved in these criminal activities and are now identified as the main cocaine smugglers in Europe (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023b). Specifically, data suggest that criminal groups colloquially known as the “Balkan Cartel” have established strong connections in cocaine’s source and transit countries in South America. This has enabled them to smuggle large quantities of cocaine into destination countries across Europe.

Given the above, the subject of this paper is to gain a better understanding of the new trends in cocaine smuggling in Europe. The aim is to highlight the prevalence and methods of cocaine smuggling in Europe, with a particular focus on the impact on the Western Balkan countries, considering the involvement of their citizens in this criminal activity, as well as the development of this market in the region. The structure of this paper is divided into two main sections, focusing on the following:

- Analysis of drug trafficking using containers as the main method of cocaine smuggling into Europe;
- Role of criminal groups from the Western Balkans in these criminal activities;
- Establishing the link between cocaine smuggling and violent crime.

The purpose of this study is to provide concrete recommendations and proposals for law enforcement agencies to effectively respond to the challenges and emerging threats posed by the development of the cocaine market and its association with violent crime.

<sup>3</sup> Although the coca plant is found across much of South America, varieties containing cocaine alkaloid (the basis for cocaine hydrochloride) are primarily cultivated and processed in the three countries mentioned (United States Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> The term “Western Balkans” denotes the countries located within the Balkan Peninsula, specifically the former Yugoslavia excluding Slovenia, plus Albania.

## COCAIN MARKET IN EUROPE

The long-term trend of increasing cocaine use, which saw a temporary halt during 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, resumed its upward trajectory in 2021, with production increasing by over a third from previous levels<sup>5</sup> (UNODC, 2023b). This growth is attributed to both the expansion of coca plant cultivation and improvements in the process of converting coca leaves into cocaine hydrochloride (UNODC, 2023a). The increased supply of cocaine has led to even greater demand, particularly evident in the criminal markets in North America and Europe, which remain the two primary markets for this type of drug<sup>6</sup> (UNODC, 2023b). It is estimated that the retail drug market in the European Union is worth at least 30 billion euros annually, making it a major source of revenue for organized crime (Europol, 2024a). Furthermore, according to the European Union Drug Agency, cocaine is the second most commonly used illicit stimulant in Europe after cannabis, with approximately 2.5 million adults (aged 15 to 34) having used it in the past year (European Union Drug Agency [EUDA], 2024). The increased availability of this drug has resulted in a growing number of users,<sup>7</sup> showing a trend of continuous growth. This trend is also supported by the declining retail price of cocaine,<sup>8</sup> which is directly linked to the decrease in the “intermediary margin” (the difference between retail and producer prices), a significant component of the retail cost (Storti & De Grauwe, 2009; Storti & De Grauwe, 2008).

The cocaine market in Europe is not evenly distributed. In 2020, Belgium with 70 tons of seized cocaine, the Netherlands with 49 tons, and Spain with 37 tons accounted for approximately 73% of the estimated total in Europe. Significant quantities were also seized in Italy (13.4 tons), France (13.1 tons), Germany (11 tons), and Portugal (10 tons) (EUDA, 2022a). Furthermore, out of 13 European countries that conducted surveys in 2021, five reported higher estimates than their previous comparative survey, while eight reported stable trends (EUDA, 2024). Several factors influence this distribution, such as the routes of cocaine trafficking to Europe, the methods of smuggling, and the criminal groups involved in this type of criminal activity. The primary points of

5 The level of cocaine production reached a new record in 2021, with 2,304 tons of pure cocaine cultivated. (UNODC, 2023b).

6 Estimates indicate that 6,180,000 people in North America consume cocaine, while in Europe, that number is 5,240,000, with 640,000 in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. (UNDOC, 2023b).

7 The quote from Roberto Saviano's book *ZeroZeroZero: How Cocaine Rules the World* (2014) is very illustrative: “The guy sitting next to you on the train uses cocaine, he took it to get himself going this morning, or the driver of the bus you are taking home, he wants to put in some overtime without feeling the cramps in his neck. The people closest to you use cocaine. If it's not your father or your mother, if it's not your brother, then it's your son. And if your son doesn't use it, your boss does...” (Савијано, 2014: 13).

8 However, it should be emphasized that despite the “decline” in cocaine prices in Europe, this illicit drug remains more expensive than in the United States. For example, a kilogram of cocaine is worth up to \$28,000 in the US, while the same kilogram is worth around \$40,000 and as much as nearly 80,000 US dollars in different parts of Europe (McDermott et al., 2021).

entry for cocaine smuggling using maritime shipping containers are Belgium and the Netherlands. Additionally, Europe serves as a transit area towards the Middle East, the Russian Federation, and Asia (McDermott, Bargent, Held, & Ramírez, 2021). These changes in production, supply, and demand are not only factual but also a consequence of globalization and the liberalization of trade, which have affected the illegal drug market. Globalization has opened new routes and methods for drug smuggling, resulting in the “creation” of new markets for cocaine users worldwide, which has also influenced the prices of illicit drugs (Bagley, 2012; Bartilow & Eom, 2009; Storti & De Grauwe, 2009; Storti & De Grauwe, 2008).

In addition to the above, we can identify another emerging trend concerning efforts to relocate cocaine production to the European continent. Historically, the focus has primarily been on smuggling the finished product. However, there is currently an expansion in the illegal transport of coca paste and cocaine base to Europe, facilitating production of the final cocaine product within European laboratories (Voss, 2023; den Held, 2024). Moreover, the increasing seizures of chemicals<sup>9</sup> associated with cocaine production in Europe underscore this potential (European Union Drug Agency [EUDA], 2022b). Closely related is the growing trend in the use of “crack” cocaine in Europe, with Belgium, France, and Spain notably recording a sharp increase in crack users since 2017 (UNODC, 2023a).

### *Routes and methods of cocaine smuggling into Europe*

Given the nature of transoceanic transport, routes for smuggling cocaine from South America to Europe involve both maritime and air traffic, with inland routes also incorporating road transport. The methods of smuggling are influenced by the type of trafficking (ports or airports), the quantity of illicit drugs being trafficked, and the capabilities of criminal organizations involved in trafficking cocaine into Europe.

Over time, trends have shifted, and today we can observe that cocaine is primarily smuggled via maritime shipping containers.<sup>10</sup> Several reasons account for this shift, primarily the large volume of overall trade conducted through ports, the infrastructure enabling the dispatch and reception of larger shipments, and the customs and police oversight conducted in ports which, due to the sheer volume of trade, is not at the same level as that of other types

9 There are 53 different types of chemicals potentially associated with cocaine production, which are subject to monitoring and supervision (EUDA, 2022b).

10 For example, in a single seizure at the port of Hamburg in 2024, 35 tons of cocaine were confiscated, with a market value of several billion euros. In comparison, ten years ago, around one and a half tons of cocaine was seized in this port in one year (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2024).

of transportation.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the scale of this type of transport offers limitless opportunities for criminal groups, which are increasingly focusing on ports to build a structure embedded in the port environment to leverage legal trade, infrastructure, and facilities (Van de Bunt, Siegel, & Zaitch, 2014). This means that ports are “gateways for both the entry and exit of cocaine” (Sergi, 2020), which is characterized by a lower risk of shipment detection, which is the most critical variable assessed by criminal groups<sup>12</sup> (Sampó & Troncoso, 2023: 240). Closely related to this is the “costs” of container transport, which include commercial lines, meaning that smugglers do not need to invest in a ship but only in the “contamination” of containers, which entails minimal costs (Sampó & Troncoso, 2023). Essentially, ports are today “spaces of convergence for legal and illegal activities and actors” (Sciarrone, 2019, cited in Antonelli, 2021: 169). They are geographical spaces where “complex social relations are created, with complicated governance structures, coordination difficulties between public and private entities, longstanding tensions between trade and security in ports, technological challenges, including security challenges and risks such as cyber security and corruption” (Sergi, Reid, Storti, & Easton, 2021: 1). These “vulnerabilities” represent key advantages for smuggling cocaine through ports.

In this context, ports in South American countries from which cocaine is transported via container ships to European ports are crucial.<sup>13</sup> Considering the quantities of cocaine seized in European ports and ports elsewhere, the primary departure points have been identified as ports in Brazil (approximately 71 tons), Ecuador (67.5 tons), Colombia (about 32 tons), and Costa Rica (20.4 tons) (EUDA, 2022a), as well as ports in Panama, Paraguay, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic (UNODC, 2023a). Moreover, some studies suggest that current trends indicate that criminal organizations are prioritizing non-traditional ports for cocaine smuggling from transit countries,<sup>14</sup> such as the ports of Buenos Aires (Argentina), San Antonio (Chile), and Montevideo (Uruguay), including the access routes leading to them (Sampó & Troncoso, 2023). The advantage of using these non-traditional ports for cocaine smuggling lies in the fact that they are under less scrutiny and surveillance both

11 For example, the largest European port, Rotterdam (the Netherlands), spans an area of 12,500 hectares and is 40 km long. The port handles approximately 438 million tons of cargo annually, including over 130,000 containers. Each year, around 28,000 seagoing vessels and 90,000 inland vessels operate within the port (Port of Rotterdam, n.d.).

12 According to research findings, these are “neither geographically closest routes nor the shortest or the cheapest routes. Such counterintuitive pathways include land, air, river, or even sea routes that lack obvious geographical or economic logic. Consequently, these routes enable criminal organizations to continue exporting drugs while maintaining a low risk of detection” (Sampó & Troncoso, 2023: 240).

13 However, “the latest trends indicate that the widespread use of maritime containers for smuggling cocaine from origin countries in South America makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between ‘departure’ and ‘transit’ areas” (EUDA, 2022a).

14 For example, the main departure points used to be the ports in Venezuela, “but due to political and security instability, it seems that criminal organizations do not use them often” (UNODC, 2020: 32).

by domestic and international authorities, compared to ports already identified as major departure points for cocaine smuggling. Simultaneously, increased controls in Colombia, Peru, and Brazil over the past three to five years have led to the shifting of drug trafficking routes further south.

Between ports in South America and Europe, transit typically occurs via several traditional routes: the Caribbean and West Africa (e.g., Morocco), as well as the Madeira (Portugal), Canary (Spain), and Cape Verde islands in Africa (EUDA, 2022a).

In Europe, as a destination for cocaine, primarily large European ports are used, such as Rotterdam (the Netherlands), Antwerp (Belgium), Hamburg and Bremen (Germany), Liverpool (the United Kingdom), Barcelona, Algeciras, Valencia, and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (Spain), Marseille (France), Gioia Tauro and Genoa (Italy), and ports in other maritime countries<sup>15</sup> (McDermott et al., 2021; UNODC, 2023a). The choice of a specific port for smuggling is made by criminal groups based on their connections within the port structure, including their ability to control parts of the logistics and transport networks, as well as opportunities to evade customs and police checks through corruption and/or lack of intelligence information. In this context, the environment in ports is a crucial factor influencing smugglers to move from one port to another, in line with local circumstances and following the trends of the criminal market (Antonelli, 2021). Another reason for the expansion of this method of smuggling could be the use of port workers for smuggling cocaine. This refers to those workers in the ports who, due to their background (migrants) or status (poverty) or qualifications (low-skilled workers), are more easily engaged in the transport and distribution of drugs (Storti & De Grauwe, 2009; Storti & De Grauwe, 2008).

New trends indicate that the strengthening of control and surveillance measures at ports identified as “entry” points for drugs has led cocaine smugglers to increasingly direct their activities towards smaller ports in other EU countries and countries bordering the EU that have the potential to become involved in the cocaine criminal market (EUDA, 2024). As a result, certain Northern European countries, including Sweden and Norway, reported substantial cocaine seizures in maritime ports in 2023 (EUDA, 2024). Similar trends have been observed in ports in Greece, Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania, demonstrating the adaptability of criminal groups to the current situation and their continuous search for new viable smuggling routes. In connection with this, estimates suggest that the Western Balkans, although currently of limited scope, “could significantly increase its role as a transit area for cocaine smuggling into Europe” (EUDA, 2022a).

<sup>15</sup> For more details on cocaine smuggling routes, see the research report entitled the Cocaine Pipeline to Europe (McDermott et al., 2021: 3- 4).

*The link between cocaine smuggling in Europe and violent crime*

It has been established that increased availability of cocaine is directly correlated with higher rates of violent crime.<sup>16</sup> Trends observed on the American continent (South, Central, and North America)<sup>17</sup> are now manifesting in Europe.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, intense competition in the cocaine criminal market, “both at the wholesale and retail levels,” is directly linked to an increase in various types of violence (EUDA, 2024). This includes violent acts such as brutal and ruthless murders between rival criminal groups, internal violence within criminal organizations during the distribution of profits, and efforts to maintain or gain control over cocaine smuggling routes and distribution markets. These trends are particularly evident in countries with major container ports identified as “entry” points for cocaine, where there has been an observed increase in violent crime, threats, intimidation, kidnappings, and torture,<sup>19</sup> as well as corruption among personnel in the supply chain (EUDA, 2024).

Although Ireland, due to its high rate of cocaine use in Europe, has often been described as having an increased rate of violence associated with drug trafficking (UNODC, 2023a), Sweden is a more typical example today. In Sweden, the number of reported cases of illegal drug consumption is rising, resulting in the highest number of drug-related deaths in Europe (Hofmarcher, Leppänen, Månsdotter, Strandberg, & Håkansson, 2024). Simultaneously, statistical data indicate that fatal violence involving firearms in socially disadvantaged areas is steadily increasing<sup>20</sup> (Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention [Brå], 2021, 7). Even more alarming are the statistics on the number

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16 In 1985, American criminologist Paul Goldstein developed a conceptual framework to describe and explain the relationship between drug-related crime and violent crime. This framework consists of three mechanisms: psychopharmacological violence, economic-compulsive violence, and systemic violence (Goldstein, 1985).

17 Based on several decades of available statistical data in the United States, there is an unequivocal connection between drug-related crime and increased rates of violence, which significantly contributes to the country’s high homicide rate (National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, n.d.; Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). Furthermore, estimates indicate that since 2006, over 360,000 murders in Mexico have been linked to drug trafficking and illegal drug trade involving Mexican drug cartels (Statista, 2021; Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). In South America, drug-related violence has been evident since the 1970s in Colombia (Rubiano et al., 2018; Garavito et al., 2024), and it is currently escalating in countries such as Ecuador and Costa Rica, which were previously considered safe (International Crisis Group, 2023).

18 In Europe, there is no existing system for tracking drug-related homicides. Consequently, it has been proposed to define and operationalize this concept, establish a monitoring system, and create a coordinating body (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2018).

19 For instance, owing to photographs from the encrypted application EncroChat, Dutch police discovered a “torture chamber” consisting of seven soundproofed containers. Inside these containers, they found tools for torture, including a dental chair, hedge shears, scalpels, and pliers (BBC, 2020).

20 According to the same data, eight out of ten firearm homicides in Sweden occur within a criminal environment (Brå, 2021, 7). In absolute numbers, this was evident in 2022 with 391 instances of firearm use, 62 of which resulted in fatalities. This represents an increase of over 20% compared to the 45 firearm-related homicides recorded the previous year (The Guardian, 2023).

of individuals involved in or associated with criminal networks. According to a police report, there are 62,000 people considered active or connected members of criminal networks (Polisen, 2024). Some neighborhoods in Swedish cities have been identified by the police as “vulnerable”—deprived areas where criminal networks have a significant influence on local communities. These neighborhoods tend to have open drug markets and high levels of violence, including firearm use (Gerell et al., 2021), which, in turn, affects Swedish society as a whole (Magnusson, 2023). It is important to note that the flow of illegal weapons into Sweden primarily originates from the Western Balkans, highlighting the longstanding connection between criminal groups in these regions (Global Initiative, 2023b).

Considering the broader picture, it can be assumed that similar trends will emerge in other countries that serve as destinations for cocaine, especially in port cities and their surrounding areas across Europe.

## THE IMPACT OF COCAIN SMUGGLING ON THE WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES

Cocaine smuggling in the Western Balkan countries, as previously discussed, follows trends in global cocaine smuggling.

The Western Balkan region has long been recognized as a transit area (the so-called Balkan Route) for drug smuggling, and in recent years, increasing quantities of cocaine for direct consumption have been reported<sup>21</sup> (see, Ministarstvo bezbjednosti Bosne i Hercegovine, 2021; Ministarstvo bezbjednosti Bosne i Hercegovine<sup>22</sup>). It is evident that cocaine is mainly imported into the Western Balkans through Adriatic ports such as Rijeka and Ploče (Croatia), Bar (Montenegro), and Durrës (Albania) via maritime shipping containers,<sup>23</sup> mirroring the general trend of cocaine trafficking into Europe (McDermott et al., 2021). Other Western Balkan countries are used as transit areas for further

21 Thus, in 2023 alone, Croatian police seized around 900 kilograms of cocaine in the shipping containers in the port of Rijeka (Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova, Ravnateljstvo policije, 2023). In the same year, the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) in Bosnia and Herzegovina discovered and temporarily confiscated 269 kilograms of cocaine in four separate cases (Државна агенција за истраге и заштиту СИПА, 2023)

22 For example, the quantities of seized cocaine in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2016 to 2022 show a continuous increase, as follows: 2016 - 0.7 kg; 2017 - 1.9 kg; 2018 - 4.3 kg; 2019 - 2.8 kg; 2020 - 4.2 kg; 2021 - 9.14 kg; and 2022 - 75.18 kg (Министарство безбједности БиХ, 2023: 35).

23 For illustrative purposes, in late March 2021, more than half a ton of cocaine was discovered hidden in a container with bananas at the port of Ploče (Croatia). Similarly, on April 10, 2021, 143 kilograms of cocaine were seized in a banana-filled container at the port of Durrës (Albania) (Global Initiative, 2021). In late August 2021, 1.4 tons of cocaine were seized in Zeta (Montenegro), hidden in banana-filled containers (Euronews Serbia, 2021). Due to the use of banana containers for smuggling, such seizures have colloquially been referred to as “cocaine bananas” (Janković, 2022).



distribution of cocaine primarily to destination countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, and Italy.

Furthermore, the widespread cocaine smuggling in Europe has led to the increased involvement of citizens from Western Balkan countries in international cocaine trafficking networks. Recognizing the severe threat to European Union security, Europol established the Operational Task Force “Balkan Cartel” in 2022, comprising European states, including all Balkan countries, to effectively address this threat originating from the region (Europol, 2023a).

*The involvement of Western Balkan citizens in cocaine smuggling in Europe*

Cocaine smuggling in Europe has been marked by the active engagement of organized criminal groups known as the “Balkan Cartel” over the past decade. These groups have not only participated in the distribution of cocaine within the Western Balkans and the European Union but have also organized large shipments of cocaine directly from South America (Walter, 2020). It is important to emphasize that the “Balkan Cartel” is not a singular criminal group with a clear structure and leadership. Rather, it operates as a criminal network comprising interconnected individuals or groups originating from the Western Balkan countries, who are involved in international criminal structures engaged in the smuggling and distribution of cocaine.<sup>24</sup> The profitability of illegal drug trade, particularly cocaine, represents a key incentive for criminal groups to engage in such activities (Lajić & Ivanović, 2009).

The *modus operandi* of criminal groups from the Western Balkans focused on establishing direct communication with smuggling groups from South America while successfully avoiding the territorial structure of cartels from Mexico and Colombia. Instead, they operated in small, flexible groups that proved capable of smuggling large quantities of cocaine and distributing it across Europe (Stargardter, 2024). By exploiting modern telecommunication technologies, they connected an unlimited number of individuals (Durieux, 2021, cited in Simović & Šikman, 2023: 231), including establishing links with other drug trafficking criminal groups (United States Attorney Office Southern District of California, 2021). Data obtained by law enforcement agencies through the decryption of

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24 In the 1990s, a criminal organization known as the “Group America, composed of Serbian nationals, was identified operating in South America and involved in drug trafficking. One of the first individuals from the Western Balkans to start smuggling cocaine directly from South America to Europe in 2005 was Darko Šarić (Montenegro), dubbed the “Balkan King of Cocaine,” who replicated the Italian mafia model. Following his arrest, the “Kotor” clan, a criminal group from Montenegro, continued operations but soon split into two factions known as the “Škaljari” and “Kavač” clans. The criminal activities of these groups have been marked by multiple mutual murders, with over 60 killings reported. Additionally, in the last decade, organized crime groups from Albanian-speaking areas have become major players in the European cocaine market, relying on a vast network of associates within the Albanian diaspora. Currently, the “Dino and Tito” cartel led by a Bosnian national who is facing criminal proceedings in several European countries, is in the spotlight. (McDermott et al, 2021; Global Initiative, 2023a; Global Initiative, 2023c; UNODC, 2023a; Global Initiative, 2024).

encrypted communication methods (EncroChat, Sky ECC, Anom) have led to ongoing legal proceedings that are just beginning to reveal the extent of cocaine smuggling into Europe and the roles of the so-called “Balkan Cartel.” These activities resulted in the 2023 and 2024<sup>25</sup> arrests of leading figures believed to be responsible for cocaine smuggling into Europe. In 2023, 2.7 tons of cocaine were seized in Spain, while in 2024, approximately eight tons of cocaine were seized in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain (Europol, 2023a, 2003b, 2024b). These data illustrate the strength of the so-called “Balkan Cartel,” which, along with other criminal organizations, is responsible for the expanding cocaine market in Europe and the Western Balkans. This is further corroborated by the facts that only a few organized criminal groups (such as the ‘Ndrangheta) can survive in the drug smuggling business (Antonelli, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

Taking into account the analyzed comparative indicators, we can draw specific conclusions as follows:

- The cocaine market in Europe, including Western Balkan countries, is expanding with a positive growth index. This trend is driven by increased availability of cocaine and heightened competitiveness among trafficking groups, which typically results in price decreases, mirroring trends observed in regions like the United States. Consequently, this scenario is expected to lead to a rise in cocaine use prevalence, an increase in the number of users, and thereby escalate societal costs. These costs encompass public health expenditures and overall burdens on the criminal justice system;
- The aforementioned increase is significantly influenced by new trends in cocaine smuggling. This primarily pertains to cocaine smuggling in maritime shipment containers, which facilitates the smuggling of large quantities of cocaine, now measured in tons, with profits estimated in billions of euros. It is evident that criminal groups have exploited the full potential of this mode of transportation, on one hand, and the vulnerabilities of port infrastructure, on the other.
- A new trend can be observed in the increasing formation of criminal networks as the dominant form of organized crime in the field of cocaine smuggling. These organizational structures are increasingly replacing traditional mafia-style criminal groups and taking the lead in cocaine smuggling. Their flexibility, adaptability, and exploitation of modern technologies, such as encrypted communication methods, provide these networks with a crucial advantage in criminal activities.

<sup>25</sup> Additionally, efforts to uncover the so-called “Balkan Cartel” continued in 2019, resulting in the seizure of over one ton of cocaine (Europol, 2019).

- Citizens from Western Balkan countries have leveraged these advantages by collaborating with each other and emerging as key players in the cocaine trafficking network across Europe. Available data indicate that they have established direct relationships with criminal groups in source countries (Colombia, Peru, Bolivia) and transit countries (Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, etc.). This has enabled them to execute numerous cocaine shipments across Europe and globally.
- There is a pronounced link between cocaine smuggling and violent crime, which is particularly evident in the prevalence of brutal and indiscriminate homicides. This is closely associated with competition among criminal groups involved in cocaine smuggling and internal rivalries within these groups. These dynamics significantly impact public safety, law enforcement agencies, and governmental bodies. As a result, the security in areas involved in the transportation and distribution of cocaine is compromised.

If the emerging trends in cocaine smuggling and abuse in Europe and the Western Balkan countries are alarming, as they clearly are, the question arises as to how to address and control this issue. The response can be viewed through two simultaneous approaches. The first involves prevention primarily through the entities of informal social control. Prevention programs should aim to “reduce risk factors and strengthen protective factors” (Министарство безбједности БиХ, 2018: 9). In other words, consumers and the general public need to be informed that cocaine is not a magical substance that enhances abilities but a highly harmful drug, which has serious consequences (ranging from acute conditions like heart attacks or strokes to various psychological and physical disorders).

Another approach involves repressive action through formal social control agencies, which is implemented by law enforcement and judicial bodies. This approach includes measures aimed at reducing the supply of cocaine in the domestic criminal market, primarily through international police cooperation and information exchange. Ultimately, strengthening criminal policies related to illegal production and trafficking of drugs by imposing harsher penalties on offenders becomes imperative, considering the already low punitive measures in place.

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