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COCAINE AT EUROPE'S GATES  
CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES,  
SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITIES

Europe has increasingly become a primary destination for cocaine trafficking, a disturbing phenomenon often referred to by media and policymakers as the 'white tsunami'. The sheer scale of cocaine entering the continent presents significant security, health, and socioeconomic challenges.

In recent years, the port of Antwerp has seen major cocaine seizures, highlighting both the volume of trafficking and the ingenuity of criminal networks. For instance, in June 2019, Belgian authorities seized 3.36 tonnes of cocaine hidden in a rice shipment. Just over a year later, a staggering 11.5 tonnes were intercepted, concealed inside a scrap metal container. This operation led to multiple arrests and exposed corruption among port and law enforcement officials. To put this into perspective, ten tonnes of cocaine can yield approximately 100 million individual doses, with an estimated street value of 7.5 billion euros.

The port of Rotterdam, in the Dutch province of Zuid-Holland, has faced similar challenges. In 2019, Dutch customs seized over 23 tonnes of cocaine, much of it hidden in banana shipments from Latin America. Despite pandemic-related disruptions, seizures continued in 2020, including a significant 7-tonne shipment en route to Rotterdam. The most notable recent seizure occurred in August 2023, when authorities discovered over 8,000 kilograms of cocaine hidden in a banana container from Ecuador, valued at 600 million euros.

In response, the Belgian and Dutch governments implemented enhanced security and customs measures. These interventions have delivered tangible results: Antwerp's record seizures of 116 tonnes in 2022 dropped sharply to just over 44 tonnes in 2023, while Rotterdam's peak of 70 tonnes in 2021 fell to 25.9 tonnes in 2024.

However, cocaine networks are quick to adapt. When enforcement pressure increases in one country, traffickers reroute shipments to alternative entry points. This explains the growing volume of cocaine seized in other European ports, including those in Germany, France, Spain, and the Balkans. This trend, commonly referred to in research as the ‘balloon effect’, occurs when enforcement pressure in one area causes trafficking routes to shift elsewhere.

Europe’s open-border Schengen zone further facilitates this adaptability. Once cocaine enters any European port, it can be distributed across the continent with minimal friction. This agility ensures that the overall flow into Europe remains steady, even when specific routes are disrupted.

Criminal groups constantly experiment with new smuggling techniques, abandoning methods that become too risky. The appearance of narco-submarines off the Galician coast in Spain in 2023 is one such example – a response to heightened scrutiny of conventional shipping. Traffickers may switch from large single shipments to multiple smaller consignments to reduce risk or revert to bulk shipping if it appears less likely to be intercepted. They also rotate concealment techniques, moving from produce shipments to scrap metal or liquids as detection increases. Corruption remains a critical tool, as bribing port officials, police, or shipping insiders dramatically lowers the risk of interception. Traffickers actively seek out vulnerable entry points and will shift operations to exploit them.

Despite significant seizures, the continued stability of cocaine prices in European capitals indicates that supply lines remain intact. Criminal networks have managed to maintain an uninterrupted flow through strategic operational adjustments.

International cooperation has strengthened over recent years. Joint efforts among intelligence, police, and judicial authorities – along with technological advancements – have disrupted organised crime operations. The Encrochat and Sky ECC cases, for example, exposed the inner workings of criminal organisations. Decoded communications from these encrypted platforms provided law enforcement with unprecedented insights into criminal operations.

Modern cocaine trafficking networks differ significantly from traditional hierarchical cartels. Today’s networks are decentralised and highly adaptable, operating as fluid alliances and subcontractors. Various nodes – suppliers, transport cells, brokers, and destination-country mafias – cooperate for specific shipments and then disband or realign as needed. This means that even if one cell is dismantled by law enforcement, others can continue operations

or new configurations can quickly emerge. European mafias, such as the Italian 'Ndrangheta, Albanian groups, and Balkan gangs, have also established footholds in Latin America to secure cocaine at its source. This upstream integration provides more control and enables traffickers to develop alternative supply lines when disruptions occur, creating a resilient, multinational illicit enterprise.

Given the escalating violence between organised crime groups and the increasing flow of cocaine, the European Union has elevated this issue to a strategic priority. While the EU Drugs Strategy 2021–2025 offers a balanced framework – combining supply and demand reduction with international cooperation – the explosion in trafficking prompted additional measures. In her September 2023 State of the Union Letter of Intent, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced intensified efforts against narcotics, including a forthcoming 'Action Plan on Anti-Drug Trafficking', focused specifically on Europe's ports.

This political commitment was quickly followed by action. On 18 October 2023, the European Commission adopted a new EU Roadmap to Fight Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime. By November, the Council of the EU endorsed the Roadmap, placing drug trafficking high on the security agenda.

The Roadmap outlines 17 concrete actions for 2024–2025, targeting the cocaine trade as a significant threat. Its priorities include:

- ♦ Strengthening logistics hubs through the European Ports Alliance, with upgraded customs, security audits, and enhanced resilience against criminal infiltration
- ♦ Dismantling high-risk networks through improved financial investigations, digital forensics, and coordinated law enforcement and judicial cooperation
- ♦ Promoting prevention and resilience, including best practices to deter mafia recruitment, safeguard legitimate businesses, and restrict precursor access
- ♦ Advancing international cooperation with countries along trafficking routes – particularly Latin America, West Africa, and the Western Balkans – via information exchange and joint operations

A major milestone was the launch of the European Ports Alliance on 24 January 2024. This initiative enhances security at EU seaports – the primary cocaine

entry points – by investing 200 million euros in advanced scanning equipment. These funds support better container x-ray scanning and risk profiling, increasing the detection of concealed shipments. The Alliance also promotes coordination among customs and border agencies across Member States.

In March 2025, a significant Europol-coordinated operation dismantled a trafficking ring operating between Ecuador and the EU. Led by Ecuador with support from Germany and Spain, the operation seized a staggering 73 tonnes of cocaine before it reached European streets.

Because trafficking networks operate transnationally, judicial cooperation is essential. Eurojust, the EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, reported an unprecedented number of drug trafficking cases in 2023 – handling nearly 2,500 cocaine-related files, more than double the number from three years earlier.

Many of these cases required coordination between prosecutors and judges across multiple Member States and beyond. Eurojust supports the creation and funding of Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) and facilitates cross-border coordination meetings. In 2023 alone, Eurojust coordinated at least 67 JITs specifically targeting drug traffickers. This cooperation has led to synchronised arrests, timely evidence exchange, and coherent prosecution strategies against criminal kingpins and their enablers.

To further enhance judicial responses, new initiatives aim to harmonise prosecution approaches. A newly created network of specialised prosecutors facilitates the sharing of best practices and swift resolution of legal barriers.

In June 2023, the Council of the EU agreed to establish the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA), upgrading the existing European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. Starting in July 2024, the EUDA will produce threat assessments and early warnings to inform law enforcement and prosecutors about evolving trafficking trends and new methods, helping to build stronger legal cases.

Under the Spanish EU Presidency, European interior ministers met with 14 Latin American counterparts through the CLASI network in September 2023. A Joint Declaration was issued, committing both regions to enhanced collaboration against cocaine trafficking through capacity-building and improved law enforcement links.

Recognising that governments cannot tackle this challenge alone, the EU increasingly promotes public-private partnerships (PPPs) to involve industry

stakeholders. A flagship initiative is the PPP under the European Ports Alliance, launched in January 2024. This brings together port authorities, shipping and logistics firms, customs, and law enforcement to jointly develop port security solutions.

The goal is to fortify the entire supply chain – from origin to destination – against exploitation by traffickers. Private sector partners share data on suspicious shipments or internal corruption risks, while authorities provide feedback on threats. Enhanced screening, improved IT security, and personnel safeguards are key priorities. With EU-level coordination, common security standards and best practices can be developed for all major European ports, moving beyond fragmented national efforts. The PPP convenes annually at the ministerial level to assess progress and set priorities.

Despite considerable EU achievements, trafficking routes from Latin America to Europe continue to evolve. Around 2020, South America reached record cocaine production levels, paralleled by record seizures in Europe. Yet the flow persists, indicating traffickers' capacity for innovation and persistence.

The EU Roadmap's multidisciplinary approach rightly acknowledges the complexity of drug trafficking. While customs and law enforcement have received substantial human and financial resources, judicial cooperation remains underdeveloped and lacks a cohesive strategic vision.

Judicial authorities play a pivotal role in collecting admissible evidence, executing extraditions and surrenders, and managing transfers of proceedings. Seizing drugs alone, without dismantling the criminal structures behind them, represents only a temporary win. Criminal organisations often accept a 10–20% loss rate as a cost of doing business. Therefore, tackling all parts of the supply chain – production, transport, and distribution – is essential.

Because the cocaine pipeline spans continents, international cooperation is critical. While police intelligence sharing has become more straightforward, intelligence from foreign sources usually has only informational value. To be admissible, it must be converted into legally valid evidence, respecting human rights and national procedures. Otherwise, cases risk dismissal or acquittal.

The Roadmap emphasises the creation of a network of specialised prosecutors and judges to support complex, cross-border investigations. This European Judicial Organised Crime Network, initially focusing on drug trafficking, is designed to enhance judicial information exchange, promote best practices, and

facilitate the use of Eurojust. However, while convening experts is beneficial, a ‘broad mandate, narrow focus’ approach may fall short in tackling the dynamic nature of cocaine trafficking.

On international cooperation, the Roadmap stresses the need for comprehensive external engagement, prioritising countries along supply routes. Latin America is key, yet progress on formal EU agreements with these countries remains limited. Several factors contribute to this, including a fragmented EU negotiating approach – split between Home and Justice directorates – and differing agency priorities.

A significant hurdle in treaty negotiations is the requirement for European-level data protection standards. Many key trafficking countries lack strong data protection laws, institutional capacity, or political will to implement reforms. Moreover, ratifying international treaties is a lengthy, complex process, hindering timely collaboration.

## CONCLUSION

The fight against cocaine trafficking in Europe is far from over, but the European Union has undoubtedly taken the first steps on a long and necessary journey. Recognising that drug trafficking is not merely a national or regional issue, but a truly global challenge, the EU has shifted from reactive responses to proactive strategies that embrace collaboration, innovation, and resilience.

Like any meaningful journey, the path ahead will require persistence, adaptability, and unity. Through its comprehensive Roadmap, strengthened partnerships, and commitment to judicial and operational cooperation, the EU has laid a foundation for collective action. The establishment of the European Ports Alliance, increased support for Eurojust, the creation of specialised judicial networks, transformation of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and outreach to Latin American partners signal a clear understanding that only through multi-level, multi-actor collaboration can this threat be contained.

This sentiment is echoed by Belgian Minister of Justice Paul Van Tigchelt, who emphasised the urgency and scale of the challenge: ‘We should continue to invest in security. The events of the last few days show that this is not an

unnecessary luxury.' His remark underscores the reality that combating organised drug crime requires sustained political commitment and financial investment, particularly at key trafficking entry points such as European ports.

While the challenges are significant, the opportunities for impactful, long-term progress are equally clear. By integrating law enforcement, judiciary, public and private sectors, and international partners, Europe is charting a more secure and coordinated course. The journey is ongoing – but with determination and shared purpose, the EU is moving in the right direction to safeguard its citizens and uphold the rule of law across borders.

