

## EUROPEAN UNION: DESTINATION AND TRANZIT AREA FOR COCAINE TRAFFICKING

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**Abstract:** Drug trafficking remains the main activity of the transnational organized crime networks, providing the bulk of revenue and fueling corruption and conflict at the European Union Member States. In this article we analyzed some aspects concerning the import and distribution of cocaine in the European Union, focusing on the transnational organized crime hubs, the origin of trafficking networks acting on this illegal markets, the European cocaine entry points, as well as the routes considering for the transport of cocaine.

**Key words:** cocaine trafficking, trafficking routes, organized crime networks

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### COCAINE TRAFFICKING NETWORKS ORIGIN - FROM THE PRODUCTION TO THE STREET SALES

Existing studies highlight an obvious specialization of the trafficking networks on different types of drugs, making them simultaneously engaged in other illegal activities through the control over the entire circuit, from production to the retail sales on the underground markets<sup>1</sup>. In Colombia, which is one of the leading cocaine suppliers, the FARC and the paramilitary groups have the control over some significant areas, monopolizing the purchase and sale of coca paste and cocaine base, setting the prices these products can be purchased from the manufacturers and sold for processing<sup>2</sup>. Members of these groups promote

<sup>1</sup> Europol, *EU Organised Crime Threat Assessment (OCTA)*, European Police Office, The Netherlands, 2008, p. 30, <http://www.europol.europa.eu>.

<sup>2</sup> Jansson, O., *L'impact des politiques paramilitaires sur la production de cocaïne*, Les Cahiers de la Sécurité, dossier «Drogues et antidrogue en Colombie», n° 59, quatrième trimestre, 2005, pp. 87–106.

simultaneously, the illicit cultivation of coca plants and collect protection fees for the cocaine laboratories and for the clandestine landing corridors of the aircrafts carrying drugs<sup>3</sup>.

The EU markets are dominated, in terms of cocaine imports, by the members of Colombian organized crime networks, taking advantage of historical and linguistic affinities with Spain and Portugal, as well as the existence of a significant Diaspora, set along the coast regions of the Iberian Peninsula<sup>4</sup>. They act as importers and dealers, while the involvement on the retail markets is restricted only to Spain. The complexity degree of the European markets has allowed, on the EU territory, the existence of several groups, obtaining considerable profits from cocaine distribution in other European countries, which is especially imported in the Iberian Peninsula, directly from Latin America. In this regard, we can mention the Dominican networks acting especially in Spain, the Jamaican networks in Great Britain, as well as those originating from Antilles, controlling Netherlands cocaine markets. West African traffickers are active in the retail activities, being less involved in cocaine imports from France, Switzerland, Austria, Italy and Germany, while the North African groups are visible in the coastal areas of Mediterranean countries, or in those countries with a significant Diaspora from North Africa, such as Spain, Italy, France and the Netherlands. Lately, the Balkan networks (mainly originating from Romania, the countries of former Yugoslavia, Albania and Turkey) have an important role on the cocaine markets in Western Europe<sup>5</sup>.

#### **IMPORT AND DISTRIBUTION OF COCAINE IN EUROPEAN UNION**

As regards the import and distribution of cocaine, Europol<sup>6</sup> has identified two major organized crime hubs in Europe, namely *the Southwest organized crime hub*, with networks that act in the Iberian Peninsula, using France as a transit country and *the Northwest organized crime hub*, with groups located in and around Netherlands and Belgium, which have a major transport infrastructure, generating a significant volume of commercial traffic through connections with the illegal markets around the world. According to Europol, the Northwest nucleus acts as a center of drug redistribution to other European countries, especially to Western Europe (Denmark, Germany, Austria, Finland, Sweden, United Kingdom) for both the cocaine entering the Iberian Peninsula and for that which is discharged into the major seaports in the region<sup>7</sup>.

In this context, the most important entry points of cocaine into Europe are, according to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction<sup>8</sup>, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands and in the background, Germany Belgium, France and Great Britain, benefiting both the advantage of good infrastructure and excellent connections with the production areas and drugs transit through ports and airports, as well as their access to trans-European corridors.

<sup>3</sup> Calvani, S., *Debería Colombia solamente reducir aún más sus cultivos ilícitos, o también debería reducir el número de productores de cocaína, esclavos de los grupos de la cocaína, esclavos de los grupos armados?*, speech, Bogota, Universidad de los Andes, October, 2005., <http://www.sandrocalvani.com/speech/discursoUniandesfinal.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> UNODC, *The globalization of crime. A transnational organized crime threat assessment*, Viena, 2010, p.p. 98, 99.

<sup>6</sup> Europol, *OCTA — EU Organised crime threat assessment 2007*, Europol, The Hague, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Europol, *Project COLA — European Union cocaine situation report 2007*, Europol, The Hague, 5 September 2007.

<sup>8</sup> European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), *Drug situation in Europe. Cocaine and crack cocaine*, 2007, p. 18, <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/situation/cocaine/2>.

Cocaine import and distribution are concentrated mainly in Western European countries, one of the most important being Spain, where the authorities seized in 2007, almost 38 tones of cocaine, largely brought on by sea, representing approximately 50% of the total estimated amount intercepted in Europe<sup>9</sup>. A trend of increasing quantities of cocaine seized (34 tons) was registered, by the year 2006, followed by their decline, as in 2008, only five tones were seized by the authorities, as shown in Table 1. The amount of cocaine seized has sharply declined in recent years, in the Netherlands, in part because of the authorities efforts to stop the shipments before they leave their origin countries<sup>10</sup>, but despite this, large quantities of cocaine have been confiscated by the coastal guards, in Antilles and Aruba. Iberian Peninsula remains the main transit area for cocaine in Europe, followed by the Netherlands, but lately, increased the number of direct shipments from the Caribbean to France, which reported in 2008, the second highest annual total amount of cocaine seized in Europe<sup>11</sup> (Table 1).

**Table 1.** The amount of cocaine seized in the interval 2000-2008, in the EU Member States (in kilograms)

(Data source: Table adapted from \*\*\*EMCDDA, *Statistics and country data*, <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/stats10/szrtab9>)

Year \ Country	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Belgium	1652	-	3946	644	3522	9228	3946	2470	3852
Bulgaria	2	9	45	3107	1	142	144	5	10
Czech Republic	-	-	6	3	3	10	5	38	8
Denmark	36	26	14	104	32	57	76	88	56
France	913	1288	2136	1009	969	1079	1717	1878	1069
Germany	156	297	239	201	1152	43	57	255	67
Greece	6165	33681	17617	49279	33135	48429	49650	37784	27981
Italy	1311	2096	3651	4172	4484	5186	10166	6579	8215
Spain	2368	1813	4042	3539	3589	4380	4638	3928	4110
Hungary	11	6	55	23	94	8	7	15	23
Austria	20	108	37	58	76	245	62	78	78
Poland	81	51	399	801	28	17	22	161	29
Portugal	3075	5574	3140	3017	7423	18083	34477	7363	4878
Romania	13	3	3	13	25	110	11	47	3
Croatia	39	7	0.4	1	1	1	7	4	3
Finland	50	39	41	42	29	34	1358	39	49
Sweden	3948	2841	3566	7773	4644	3862	3321	3457	-
United Kingdom	-	1	3	351	18	9	6	105	29

## ROUTES OF COCAINE TRAFFICKING TO WESTERN EUROPEAN UNION

Cocaine is trafficked to Europe via different routes, being used a great diversity of methods and means of hiding it, from cargo ships, fishing boats and private yachts to small commercial aircraft or small planes. Routes preferred by the trafficking networks for transporting cocaine in Europe have changed in recent years, being mentioned the following routes in the literature:

<sup>9</sup> \*\*\*EMCDDA-EUROPOL, *Cocaine. A European Union perspective in the global context*. Spain, 2010, p.25, [http://www.europol.europa.eu/publications/Joint\\_publications\\_on\\_illicit\\_drugs/Cocaine.pdf](http://www.europol.europa.eu/publications/Joint_publications_on_illicit_drugs/Cocaine.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> \*\*\* UNODC, *The globalization of crime. A transnational organized crime threat assessment*,..., p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> \*\*\* UNODC, *The globalization of crime. A transnational organized crime threat assessment*,..., p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> Idem.

- *Northern route from the Caribbean via the Azores to Portugal and Spain* - International Narcotics Control Board<sup>12</sup> estimated that 40% of the cocaine entering Europe passes through the Caribbean. In a first step, the cocaine is transported by sea or air directly into the Caribbean where it is organized transshipment to Europe, frequently using the pleasure boats, the cargo ships and the cargo containers. The aircrafts are another mean of transporting packages of cocaine, which once thrown into the international waters, it is expected and uploaded by the traffickers. The couriers are also frequently used in transporting cocaine through the European airports<sup>13</sup>. The large volume of cocaine trafficked through the Caribbean can be explained by the geographical position of this region, its historical roots with Europe and the fact that shares the same languages with the countries of destination. For example, the Netherlands Antilles are involved in the supply of cocaine to the Netherlands, Jamaica is used as a platform for the UK, while Martinique and Guadeloupe play an important role in the transshipment of cocaine in France. Azores Islands are equally exploited in transshipment of cocaine to the Iberian Peninsula<sup>14</sup>.

- *Central route from South America through Cape Verde or Madeira and the Canary Islands, to Europe*. The traffic is often carried out at sea, with large cargo ships, often fueled by fast boats. Drugs are then transferred at Cape Verde and Canary Islands, where they will be uploaded into smaller boats, such as the fishing vessels, to the Iberian Peninsula<sup>15</sup>. Couriers also have an important role in transporting cocaine on the central route, especially when passing through the Madrid Barajas airport.

- *African route from South America to West Africa and from there, mainly to Spain and Portugal*. In the interval 2004 - 2007, at least two distinct transshipment centers in West Africa have emerged: one comprising Guinea-Bissau and Guinea, the other located in the Gulf of Benin, from Ghana to Nigeria. Colombian traffickers transport the cocaine to the West African coast, where it was uploaded into small vessels, with the destination Spain or Portugal. This transit route has become lately less used, as, during 2006-2008, Portugal which is a major port of entry for cocaine into Europe, has experienced a strong decline in terms of quantities of cocaine seized<sup>16</sup>. This descending trend is also demonstrated by the UNODC estimates based on analysis of known origin cocaine seized on the European territory, claiming that 6.8% of cocaine seized in Europe was brought on smuggling through West Africa, in decreasing from 28% in 2007, but still more than 2.7% estimated in 2005<sup>17</sup>. Cocaine is also transported by air, from the West African countries to the European airports, using small aircrafts or the cargo planes<sup>18</sup>. As there is a limited capacity of law enforcement for verification of a large number of passengers, on each

<sup>12</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, INCB, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2007*, United Nations, New York, 5 March 2008.

<sup>13</sup> UNODC, *2008 World Drug Report*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, 2008, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR\\_2008/WDR\\_2008\\_eng\\_web.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2008/WDR_2008_eng_web.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> EMCDDA-EUROPOL, *Cocaine. A European Union perspective in the global context*,..., p.21.

<sup>15</sup> Zaitch, D., *Trafficking cocaine: Colombian drug entrepreneurs in the Netherlands*, Kluwer Law International, The Hague, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Serious Organized Crime Agency (SOCA), *The United Kingdom Threat Assessment of Organised Crime*, 2009/10, London, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> UNODC, *2009 World Drug Report*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna 2009, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR\\_2009/WDR2009\\_eng\\_web.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2009/WDR2009_eng_web.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> JIATFS, *Cocaine found after emergency landing*, The International Cocaine Weekly Round-Up, 27.07.2007—03.08.2007, Joint Inter Agency Task Force South, Key West.

commercial flight to Europe, are placed couriers carrying various amounts of cocaine, using their own body or hiding it in the travel luggage. Cocaine trafficking from West Africa and Europe is facilitated by both maritime trade, the regular flight connections and the historical existing links (such as the links from Ghana, Nigeria and Great Britain, Côte d'Ivoire and France, Cape Verde and Portugal), issues that justify the presence of the West African networks in distribution of drugs in Europe<sup>19</sup>.

In conclusion, according to data from the World Customs Organization, 69% of the total volume of cocaine seized en route to Western Europe, was detected on board of boats, either hidden in their structure or in the cargo containers. Although the largest shipments of cocaine come on sea, still significant loads were detected at the airports<sup>20</sup>.

### **ROUTES OF COCAINE TRAFFICKING THROUGH THE BALKANS REGION**

Trade liberalization and the presence of transnational criminal networks in the Balkan region, provide a fertile ground for the development of cocaine trafficking, the area becoming a transit point, as the new routes of trafficking emerged. Although less convenient, the Balkan routes are designed to avoid Western European routes, being lately, under careful monitoring of the authorities.

Although most shipments of cocaine from South America continue to be directed to Western Europe, in recent years, have been made substantial seizures of cocaine, in the Balkans major ports, usually hidden in containers<sup>21</sup>. For example, in January 2009, Romanian authorities have seized, in the port of Constanta, 1.2 tons of cocaine hidden in a consignment of wood. Also, in July 2009, authorities in Varna, Bulgaria, seized 1020 bottles containing a mixture of cocaine with wine, shipped from Santa Cruz, Bolivia, the total weight of the cocaine being estimated at approx. 100 kilograms. In Greece, at Piraeus, were also seized in August 2009, nearly 450 kilograms of cocaine hidden in a shipment of metal<sup>22</sup>.

All this aspects accompanied by the tendency of increasing involvement of the Balkan organized crime groups indicate that the infrastructure, already developed in the region, particularly for cigarette and heroin smuggling, is currently used for the transport of considerable quantities of cocaine.

Analyzing the existing trends, we believe that, lately, may have seen a diversification of trafficking routes regarding the Eastward expansion of the cocaine trafficking in Europe (see Figure 1), leading finally, to the cocaine consumption emergence in countries which are currently unaffected<sup>23</sup>.

Based on existing data regarding the amounts of cocaine seized, the most visible route, used until now as an entry point, is *the Balkans Southern route*. Evidence that Greece had become a transit and entry point into the European Union, for the cocaine trafficking, have appeared since the early 90s, a trend that continued to strengthen in the next decade. For instance, the Greek

<sup>19</sup> EMCDDA-EUROPOL, *Cocaine. A European Union perspective in the global context*,..., p.24.

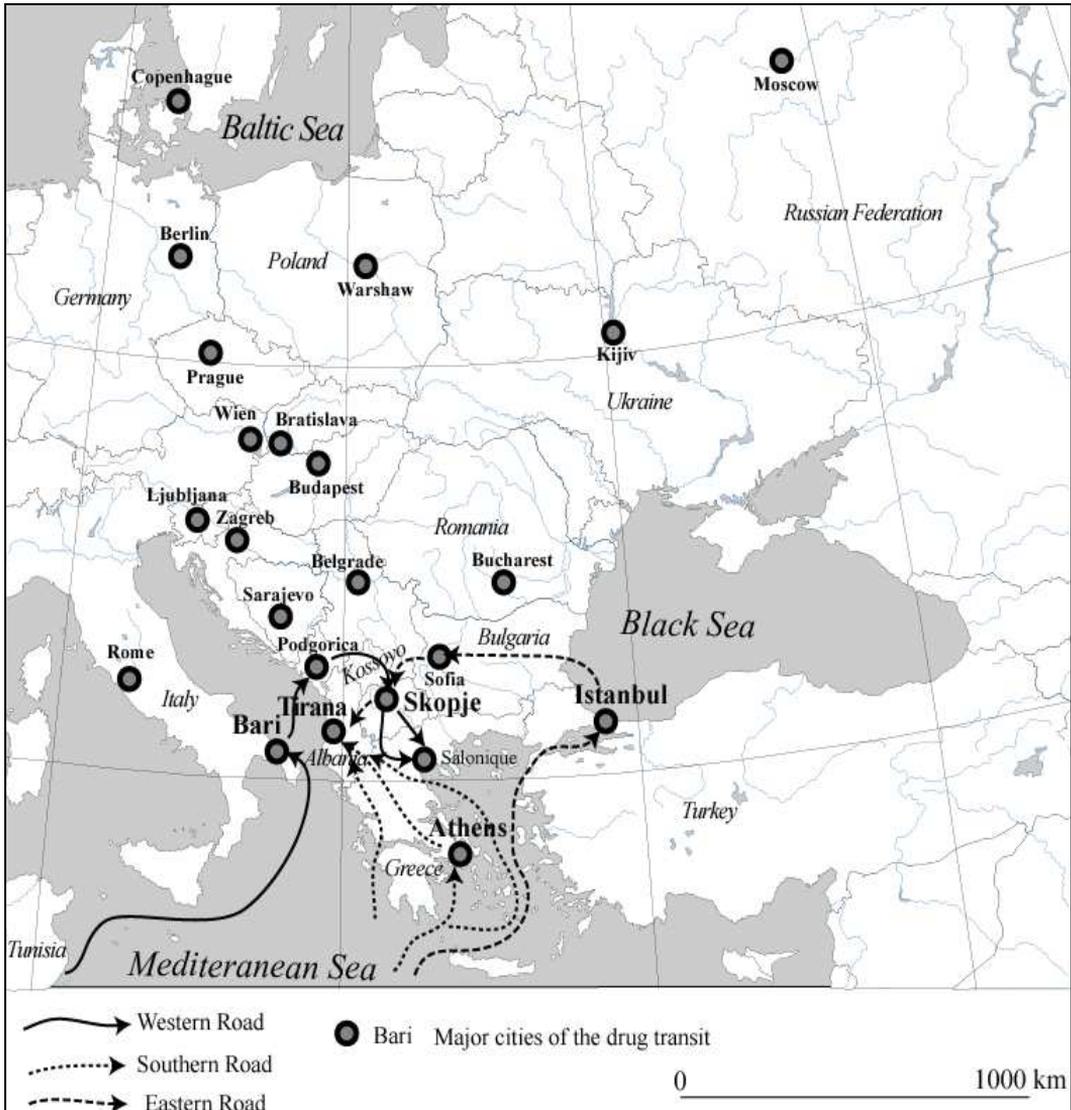
<sup>20</sup> World Customs Organization, *Customs and Drugs Report 2008*, Brussels, June 2009, see also EMCDDA-EUROPOL, *Cocaine. A European Union perspective in the global context*. Spain, 2010, p.20, [http://www.europol.europa.eu/publications/Joint\\_publications\\_on\\_illicit\\_drugs/Cocaine.pdf](http://www.europol.europa.eu/publications/Joint_publications_on_illicit_drugs/Cocaine.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> International Narcotics Control Board, INCB, *Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2010*, United Nations, New York, January 2011, p. 101, [http://www.incb.org/pdf/annual-report/2010/en/AR\\_2010\\_English.pdf](http://www.incb.org/pdf/annual-report/2010/en/AR_2010_English.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> EMCDDA-EUROPOL, *Cocaine. A European Union perspective in the global context*,..., p.29.

<sup>23</sup> Idem.

authorities, in cooperation with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), seized in 2001, over 200 kilograms of cocaine, which were stored in the Prebeza (Greece), ready for transport to the Western European markets. The existing route, based primarily on cocaine entering Europe through Greek ports, no longer guarantees the safety of illegal cargos transit, as the introduction of new technologies for monitoring possible terrorist activities, in most European ports, diminished the organized crime networks interest in terms of using this trafficking route<sup>24</sup>.



**Figure 1.** Routes on cocaine transport in the Balkans

(Source: Figure adapted from Jana Arsovska Panos A. Kostakos, *Cocaine traffickers turn to the Balkans – Changing routes*,

Organised Crime, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Volume 19, Number 3, March 2007)

<sup>24</sup> Panos A. Kostakos, Jana Arsovska, *Emerging Cocaine Routes in the Balkans*, *SGOC Newsletter* Volume 6, Issue 2 – 14 May 2007, p. 4.

The first case of using *the Balkans Eastern Route*, as an alternative entry point, was reported in 2005, when the Greek police dismantled a network that imported cocaine from South America. Drugs entering Bulgaria, were trafficked through Skopje and the northern Greece, reaching then, the EU illegal markets (see Figure 1)<sup>25</sup>. The emergence of this route is closely related to increasing number of criminal networks in Bulgaria, associated with the transnational criminal groups, interested in European cocaine markets.

The literature was revealed the existence of a third route for cocaine trafficking in the EU, namely *the Balkans Western route*, as shown in Figure 1. This new trend has been facilitated by the existence of counter-trafficking measures taken by the European authorities and shows the role of Serbian and Greek smuggling networks operating in the region, that have used the same route during the Yugoslav crisis, for trafficking in cigarettes and oil. Greece and Serbia have always had strong historical, geopolitical, economic and religious ties, which lately, have contributed to the long-term establishing partnerships of criminal networks, particularly concerning the cigarette smuggling, oil and drugs trafficking, but also the other illegal activities<sup>26</sup>.

Cocaine production and trafficking were moved from one area to another, and often in places where instability, difficult conditions or other obstacles have caused a poor response from the authorities. The international community should strengthen the link between drugs supply and demand reduction measures and to achieve better integration of national efforts in developing an effective international strategy countering these illegal markets. We estimated for achieving these plans, became necessary to conduct additional studies on the European cocaine markets profile, analyzing their structure, dynamics or the changes occurring on the trafficking routes.

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<sup>25</sup> Idem.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

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