

EUROPOL SPOTLIGHT

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## **DIVERSIFICATION IN MARITIME COCAINE TRAFFICKING MODI OPERANDI**

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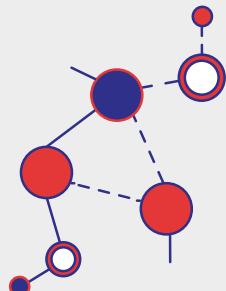
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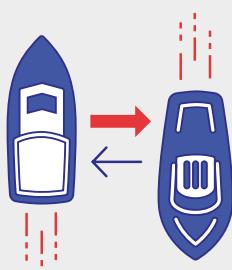
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# KEY FINDINGS



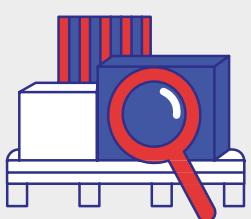
Cocaine trafficking into Europe continues to grow at unprecedented levels, underscoring the persistent reach and adaptability of organised crime. Criminal networks have demonstrated a worrying capacity to exploit vulnerabilities, rapidly adjusting their operations to stay ahead of authorities. These networks have responded by fragmenting their routes and adopting ever more complex and covert trafficking methods — highlighting their determination to evade detection and sustain illicit profits.



Displacement of trafficking activity is evident. Law enforcement pressure in major ports in and outside the EU has led to a relocation of trafficking activities to other, smaller, ports. Additionally, criminal networks may also bypass commercial ports by transferring their drug cargo at sea from one vessel to another, or dropping it off for collection by smaller boats, avoiding exposure to port controls.



Semi-submersibles and non-commercial vessels are now used for trans-Atlantic transport. Recent seizures near the regions of the Azores (Portugal) and Galicia (Spain) confirm the expanded range and technical capability of these crafts.



Criminal networks use sophisticated concealment methods to prevent the drugs from being detected by scanners, sniffer dogs, or drug tests. Cocaine is chemically bonded with or incorporated in liquid or solid materials, hidden in industrial machinery, or attached beneath ship hulls.

# Introduction

The illicit drug market is among the EU's most dynamic and dangerous criminal markets, with continuously adapting trafficking routes and modi operandi. Cocaine trafficking, in particular, has become increasingly diversified in terms of transportation methods, concealment techniques and trafficking routes<sup>1</sup>.

The ports of Antwerp, Hamburg and Rotterdam have traditionally been the primary gateways for large scale maritime cocaine trafficking into Europe. Following targeted law enforcement actions in the ports, and the launch of the European Ports Alliance Public Private Partnership<sup>2</sup>, cocaine seizures dropped significantly in these three ports. It is likely that some criminal networks have relocated their activities to other ports, due to the so-called waterbed effect, as indicated by increased seizures in various other ports in the EU<sup>3</sup>. It is also likely that criminal networks are increasingly making use of air trafficking, including both air cargo and post and parcels, in an effort to avoid maritime ports.

In addition to such a displacement, other factors are at play. Criminal networks trafficking large volumes of cocaine, show a high level of versatility by using different modi operandi interchangeably. This allows them to adjust to both opportunities and challenges as they emerge. They employ everchanging and sophisticated ways to disguise and deeply conceal cocaine entering the EU, so that it becomes less detectable with traditional law enforcement techniques.

This report illustrates how criminal networks are employing maritime cocaine trafficking methods that either circumvent commercial ports as entry points into Europe, or rely on concealment techniques designed to undermine the effectiveness of visual inspections, scanners and detection tests.

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- 1 Europol, 2025, European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (EU-SOCTA), Accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publication-events/main-reports/changing-dna-of-serious-and-organised-crime>
- 2 Launched in January 2024, the Alliance aims to bolster the security and resilience of EU ports against organised crime and drug trafficking. [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/european-ports-alliance-fight-drug-trafficking-and-organised-crime-2024-01-24\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/european-ports-alliance-fight-drug-trafficking-and-organised-crime-2024-01-24_en)
- 3 Europol, 2025, European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (EU-SOCTA), accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publication-events/main-reports/changing-dna-of-serious-and-organised-crime>

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# Bypassing commercial ports

Criminal networks make use of different maritime cocaine trafficking methods, using smaller, and often non-commercial, vessels. In this way, they avoid commercial ports and the risks associated with law enforcement presence and controls.

## At-sea drop-offs and transfers

By transferring the cocaine at sea, criminal networks seek to avoid commercial ports and exposing the shipment to controls. Large so-called mother vessels carry the drugs from Latin America to smaller daughter vessels, which either take the cocaine onboard directly (at-sea transfers) or collect it at prearranged drop-offs and bring them ashore (at sea drop-offs). These techniques are used in diverse geographical areas, and involve varied types of mother and daughter vessels, from container vessels, tankers, bulk vessels, tug boats, fishing vessels and leisure vessels to speed boats.

### CASE EXAMPLE

#### Criminal network trafficking cocaine using at-sea drop-offs brought down

A joint international law enforcement operation led by Spain, involving Colombia, Portugal, UK, US as well as the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre (MAOC) and Europol successfully took down a criminal network trafficking cocaine via different maritime methods, including at-sea drop offs. Operating 11 speedboats, the criminal network picked up cocaine from mother vessels in different locations in the Atlantic before bringing the drugs onshore in the Canary Islands. Despite the criminal network making use of complex encrypted communication systems such as satellite terminals and coded language, law enforcement successfully brought down the network, arresting 50 suspects and seizing close to 4 tonnes of cocaine. The operation clearly illustrates the important role of internationally coordinated investigations, including joint action days, as well as the key role Europol plays in providing both analytical and financial support to these operations<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Europol, 6 June 2025, 50 arrested and 4 tonnes of cocaine seized in major hit against drug trafficking in Spain, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/50-arrested-and-4-tonnes-of-cocaine-seized-in-major-hit-against-drug-trafficking-in-spain>

At-sea transfers often involve a mother vessel departing from Latin America that subsequently transfers the cocaine to a daughter vessel off the coast of West Africa. The cocaine is then either brought ashore in West Africa for further shipment to mainland EU, or shipped to the Canary Islands<sup>5</sup>. The South Atlantic at-sea transfers are also brought to mainland Spain with criminal networks making use of rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs), equipped and supported to stay far out at sea – as far as 100 nautical miles – for extended periods of time. Entering the coastline of Andalusia, criminal networks make use of the Guadalquivir River, shipping the cocaine inland for further distribution. The use of this route attracts new criminal actors to the area and with them, the capacity and readiness to use violence in protecting the often very large shipments of cocaine<sup>6</sup>. Armed criminals boarding vessels in order to pick-up cocaine have been observed, for example.

At-sea drop-offs and transfers are also common around Northern Europe, including the North Atlantic as well as in the English Channel and the Kattegat. In one case, a criminal network purchased a cargo ship for the sole purpose of being used as the mother vessel, planning to drop over 2 tonnes of cocaine off the Irish coast. An increase in drop-offs has also been reported in the United Kingdom with fishing boats, and increasingly speed boats, being used. Similarly, two cargo vessels dropped approximately 1.5 tonnes of cocaine along the Danish coast. Drop-offs have also been used in the Mediterranean.

## Semi-submersibles

Semi-submersibles built specifically for cocaine trafficking are becoming increasingly sophisticated, and capable of travelling larger distances. Historically, different types of semi-submersibles have typically been used for shorter trips in Latin and Central America. However, improvements in the vessels have facilitated the crossing of the Atlantic. In March 2025, a semi-submersible carrying approximately 6.5 tonnes of cocaine was intercepted close to the Azores, the largest seizure in the EU involving a semi-submersible. In mid-September 2025, a semi-submersible was used in trafficking over 3 tonnes to the Galician coastline in Spain.

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5 Europol, 6 June 2025, 50 arrested and 4 tonnes of cocaine seized in major hit against drug trafficking in Spain, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/50-arrested-and-4-tonnes-of-cocaine-seized-in-major-hit-against-drug-trafficking-in-spain>

6 Europol, 18 September 2025, New routes and concealment methods identified in cocaine crackdowns in Spain, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/new-routes-and-concealment-methods-identified-in-cocaine-crackdowns-in-spain>

## Camouflage and deep concealment

While cocaine is most commonly trafficked in one kilo bricks, hidden among legal goods in containers, various alternative concealment methods are used which may make detection, including by scanners or sniffer dogs, challenging.

### The incorporation and mixing of cocaine with carrier materials

Criminal networks can conceal cocaine in different carrier materials to mitigate the risk of detection, as incorporated cocaine is hard to detect, even by forensic tests and drug-detecting dogs. Using this method, cocaine is incorporated, or chemically bonded, with solid or liquid legitimate carrier materials such as food, plastics, textiles, charcoal and cardboard. In a recent operation, a criminal network trafficking cocaine by incorporating it into cowhides was dismantled<sup>7</sup>. Another example involved a criminal network trafficking cocaine incorporated into cardboard boxes containing fruit, using the fruit companies as a front<sup>8</sup>. Trafficking cocaine in frozen form may also make detection challenging. A criminal network trafficked large volumes of cocaine by concealing it in thin sheets hidden within frozen yucca powder, making it undetectable by scanner systems<sup>9</sup>.

Particular to this modus operandi is the need for an extraction laboratory to be set up in the EU in order to get the cocaine out of the carrier material. It is not uncommon that specific experts are brought over from Latin America for this.

#### CASE EXAMPLE

### Law enforcement identifies and fights sophisticated concealment methods

Seeking to avoid detection, criminal networks sometimes use sophisticated concealment methods, including incorporating

- 7 Europol, 18 September 2025, New routes and concealment methods identified in cocaine crackdowns in Spain, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/new-routes-and-concealment-methods-identified-in-cocaine-crackdowns-in-spain>
- 8 Europol, 26 August 2024, 28 arrested and cocaine lab dismantled in hit against drug traffickers, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/28-arrested-and-cocaine-lab-dismantled-in-hit-against-drug-traffickers>
- 9 Europol, 12 June 2025, Frozen yucca, hidden cocaine: drug route from Costa Rica to Europe dismantled, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/frozen-yucca-hidden-cocaine-drug-route-costa-rica-to-europe-dismantled>

the cocaine in different carrier materials. In partnership, Costa Rica, Portugal and Spain, targeted a criminal network using such concealments, including hiding the drugs in frozen yucca powder, for shipments to the EU. The operation commenced with Portugal carrying out controlled deliveries of the suspected shipments leading to several arrests and an expansion of the investigation to Spain and subsequently to Costa Rica. Europol provided key international coordination to the operation by setting up an Operational Task Force (OTF), allowing a platform for multi-agency collaboration and coordination. In this case, the coordination was further strengthened through the GDIN Project — a framework designed to enhance cooperation and information sharing between EU law enforcement agencies and third countries like Costa Rica<sup>10</sup>.

## Under water: Out of sight

Cocaine can be stored in the hull of the ship, in the sea chest located below the waterline. Stored in watertight bags, the cocaine needs to be extracted from the sea chest by professional divers upon arrival at ports. A variety of vessels have been used for this method, as reported by various EU Member States. Cocaine can also be trafficked in objects attached to the hull of a vessel underneath the water surface. These objects can vary in size and sophistication, and range from small magnetic boxes to larger torpedo-like attachments.

## Deep concealment: The use of industrial equipment and machinery

Hiding cocaine in industrial equipment and machinery is another technique which may make detection challenging. The drugs are hidden in existing, or specifically made, openings in the machinery which may not be visible by scanners. For example, a Member State reported that 900 kilos of cocaine were hidden in a stone crusher, requiring the complete dismantling of the machine to access the drugs.

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<sup>10</sup> Europol, 12 June 2025, Frozen yucca, hidden cocaine: drug route from Costa Rica to Europe dismantled, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/frozen-yucca-hidden-cocaine-drug-route-costa-rica-to-europe-dismantled>

## Shifting methods, criminal processes and responses

The constant shift in trafficking methods brings changes in the criminal process and requires adjustments to law enforcement responses. By avoiding entering into commercial ports, the criminal networks may extend their control of the criminal process as well as remove some trafficking costs such as fees paid to facilitate the insertion and extraction of the drugs at these locations. While corrupting functions in ports and logistics chains offers criminal networks access to key enablers, it also comes with costs and potential risks<sup>11</sup>. In using for example, the drop-off modus operandi, the criminal network is able to keep more control of the criminal process, removing the use of enablers at ports. Specialised services related to drop-offs may be associated with fewer risks than approaching port staff operating in a regulated, and increasingly secure, environment.

The shifting modi operandi present challenges for law enforcement. By avoiding trafficking in maritime containers, criminal networks may seek to circumvent well-established systems for risk profiling. These systems make use of a range of indicators, including for example cargo manifests and customs declarations, not applicable in risk profiling of at-sea drop-offs. It also hampers financial investigations, as at sea drop-offs and transhipments sever the logistical trail, reducing the number of traceable invoices and shipping documents that can be exploited. The use of non-commercial vessels and small coastal handlers increases the reliance on cash and informal value transfer, producing shorter, more opaque financial chains. Proceeds are split across many low-value transactions, complicating detection.

The varied location options for at-sea transfers, as well as the multiple possible land entries, make monitoring challenging and resource demanding, even when intelligence highlights a potential suspicious vessel. The use of fast-moving speedboats can make law enforcement interception both challenging and dangerous.

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11 Europol, 5 April 2023, Criminal Networks in EU Ports: Risks and challenges for Law Enforcement, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/criminal-networks-in-eu-ports-risks-and-challenges-for-law-enforcement>

## Outlook

The expansion and increased efficiency in coca cultivation in Latin America, has led to high levels of cocaine production. Combined with the increase in cocaine users in several EU Member States<sup>12</sup>, this implies that both supply and demand are expected to remain high. The cocaine market will remain lucrative, motivating criminal networks to continue developing more sophisticated ways to traffic cocaine. They may shift their area of activity to emerging markets where wholesale prices are higher – particularly because wholesale prices in key entry points for cocaine, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, have declined.

In order to secure the trafficking of the drug, criminal networks will further intensify their efforts to circumvent security measures in major entry ports, and to implement new countermeasures.

Recognising that certain departure and transit points are flagged as high risk by law enforcement, routes are likely to become even more diverse. Criminal networks will take advantage of different countries and regions, as is already the case with West Africa. More diverse maritime entry points will subsequently lead to shifting trafficking routes of cocaine within Europe. Inland ports, bulk ports, and smaller, less rigorously controlled ports are likely to become key targets for drug trafficking, combined with a wide range of vessels, such as dry and liquid bulk carriers, multi-purpose vessels, and reefer vessels.

Technologies and innovative approaches will continue to be used to develop trafficking techniques and mitigate the risks criminal networks face. Autonomous semi-submersibles, equipped with antennas and a modem, are likely already capable of crossing the Atlantic without a crew on board. Drones and helium balloons are already used by criminal networks to traffic illicit goods, as well as underwater drones which have also been seized by law enforcement in the EU. These autonomous trafficking methods are likely to undergo further refinement.

The systematic misuse of legal business structures in facilitating and concealing cocaine trafficking is at risk of becoming even more commonplace and elaborate, as criminal networks set up their own companies and infiltrate existing ones<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> EUDA, 2025, European Drug Report 2025: Trends and Development, accessible at [https://www.euda.europa.eu/publications/european-drug-report/2025\\_en](https://www.euda.europa.eu/publications/european-drug-report/2025_en)

<sup>13</sup> Europol, 18 December 2024, Leveraging legitimacy: How the EU's most threatening criminal networks abuse legal business structures, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/publications/leveraging-legitimacy-how-eu%20%99s-most-threatening-criminal-networks-abuse-legal-business-structures#downloads>

Additionally, encrypted communication technologies have become critical tools for criminal networks. Various commercial communication applications provide end-to-end-encryption (E2EE), designed to protect the content of the data transmitted. This poses significant challenges for law enforcement. Lack of lawful access to communication data hinders investigations and makes it more difficult to dismantle criminal networks.

Criminal networks' incentives and capacity to cooperate, share resources, facilitate contacts and outsource or share parts of the criminal process will also shape trafficking methods and routes. By joining forces, bigger financial investments can be made regarding both trafficking modalities and countermeasures. There is a risk that criminal networks will seek to break up their structures associated with the different steps of the criminal process into more isolated networks to protect themselves from both competitors and law enforcement.

Finally, the enormous profits provide strong incentives for many – often competing – criminal networks to engage in this business, further increasing the risks of drug-related violence spreading across the EU.

## Conclusion: Turning the blind spots into clarity

Cocaine trafficking into Europe continues to evolve faster than traditional detection and control systems. The shift towards at-sea transfers, semi-submersibles, and deep concealment has created new blind spots in maritime surveillance, financial tracing, and inspection regimes. Each innovation by criminal networks exploits weaknesses in the interfaces between law enforcement technologies, and institutions.

Transforming these blind spots into clarity requires a coordinated, intelligence-led approach that integrates maritime, financial, and technological capabilities. Maritime monitoring must extend beyond commercial ports to smaller harbours, coastal zones, and open-sea corridors. Financial investigations need to adapt to fragmented, low-value transactions and informal maritime criminal economies. Forensic and technical expertise must be deployed earlier in investigations to expose hidden compartments, chemically incorporated drugs, and extraction laboratories.

Partnership is essential. Law enforcement, customs, port authorities, and the private sector share responsibility for securing supply chains and sharing actionable data in real time. Cross-border investigation teams, integrated

analysis platforms, and common risk indicators can ensure that what once operated out of sight becomes visible and traceable.

By strengthening detection at the physical, financial, and digital levels, the EU and its Member States can reclaim the initiative—transforming criminal innovation into investigative opportunity, and turning today’s maritime blind spots into tomorrow’s intelligence advantage.

#### CASE EXAMPLE

##### 73 tonnes of cocaine seized in an international drug-trafficking investigation

The most threatening criminal networks involved in cocaine trafficking have the capacity to traffic and distribute very large volumes of drugs. Europol supported an operation targeting such a network together with partners in Ecuador, Germany and Spain. With its core structure in Ecuador, the criminal network trafficked several multi-tonne container shipments to ports in Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain. By targeting all the criminal actors involved in the different parts of the criminal process, law enforcement successfully seized a total of 73 tonnes of drugs, in addition to making numerous arrests in both Latin America and the EU. Europol’s working arrangements with key partners such as Ecuador facilitates and strengthens EU’s ability and capacity to successfully run such large-scale international investigations<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Europol, 14 March 2025, Large cocaine bust in Ecuador: 36 arrested after 73 tonnes of drugs seized, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/large-cocaine-bust-in-ecuador-36-arrested-after-73-tonnes-of-drugs-seized>

*It is evident that effective law enforcement efforts, in cooperation with private partners, challenge the criminal networks. Targeted international law enforcement cooperation is at the core of Europol's fight against drug crime. Recognising the threat drug crime poses to the EU's internal security, Europol works in close partnership with all EU Member States as well as Third Parties in pursuing a multifaceted response to this threat.*

*Europol plays a key role in supporting Member States and Third Parties in the fight against drug trafficking, providing operational support through its dedicated Drugs Unit within the European Serious and Organised Crime Centre. The agency offers analytical and coordination support, targeted expertise, and deploys experts on the ground to support operations within the EU and partner countries. Additionally, Europol targets specific crime hubs and participates in the European Ports Alliance. Furthermore, Europol continues to provide support to Member States in identifying High Value Targets (HVT) and in complex investigations against them through Operational Task Forces (OTF).*

*At a strategic level, Europol is in a unique position to provide an EU perspective of the varied threats posed by drug trafficking criminal networks; identifying shifts in criminal behaviour, trafficking routes, modi operandi as well as links to other crime areas such as money laundering and corruption. In the most recent iteration of the EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment 2025 (EU-SOCTA), Europol highlighted the dynamic nature of cocaine trafficking, its high profits and troubling link to violence.*

*The European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) is another key tool in countering organised crime, allowing an integrated intelligence led approach, including a specific focus on drug trafficking. Entering the next four-year cycle in 2026, cocaine trafficking will remain a priority engaging all EU Member States and EMPACT partners. By ensuring that the strategic and operational sides work hand in hand, Europol supports its partners with a current comprehensive intelligence picture as well as the exchange of actionable intelligence in operational actions.*



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