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THREAT SPOTLIGHT: EMERGING DRUG SMUGGLING ROUTES TO EUROPE

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In recent years, Europe has grown into a key hotspot for drug trafficking. What's even more alarming is that in 91% of the incidents at ports, employees play a key facilitating role. Because of their legitimate access to information, systems and processes, insiders (employees, contractors, suppliers) have become an attractive means for criminals to exploit organisational vulnerabilities. Whether intentional or unintentional, insider involvement not only compromises employee safety but also severely damages organisations' reputations and public trust.

“Insiders play a role in 91% of drug smuggling operations at ports.”

To help organisations mitigate this risk, Signpost Six collaborates closely with ports and logistics companies worldwide to enhance their internal resilience through comprehensive scans. By continuously analysing trends and new Modus Operandi, we help organisations stay informed and offer advice on the most effective solutions for their situation.

EMERGING DRUG SMUGGLING TO EUROPE

Despite increased efforts to intercept shipments, only 2-10% of cargo entering Europe is inspected by authorities. This means that the majority of illicit goods enter undetected. More traditional entry points like the ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp have invested significantly into improving human processes, technological solutions, and collaborations that limit infiltration and insider collusion. Such investments have contributed to a reported 40% decrease in incidents handled by Dutch customs officials in the first half of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023. This points to the emergence of new smuggling routes, where smaller and less resilient ports are increasingly targeted to traffic drugs into Europe. These secondary ports offer criminals more influence and the limited security measures enable infiltration and greater control over processes. This threat spotlight provides an overview of how cocaine smuggling routes to Europe have changed in recent years, highlighting emerging transit zones and European entry points.



EMERGING TRANSIT ZONES

The origin of cocaine shipments to Europe is consistent as cocaine production is dominated by just three countries: Colombia, Bolivia and Peru. However, shipments from cocaine-producing countries are much more likely to be flagged as high-risk and inspected by European authorities at traditional entry points. This drives drug smugglers to diversify smuggling routes, exploiting transit zones with lower risk profiles and easier access to insiders.

Almost all Central and South American countries have been involved in transporting cocaine to Europe at some point, as well as several countries in Africa serving as intermediate transit zones. However, the following transit zones are especially relevant today as drug smugglers increasingly exploit their strategic advantages.

Brazil



Brazil is increasingly used as a transit point for cocaine destined for Europe, driven by the growing role that Brazilian gang First Capital Command (PCC) plays in the global drug trade. Specifically, smugglers target the **Port of Santos** in the São Paulo state due to its high volume of container traffic, making it harder to detect cocaine shipments.

Ecuador



Ecuador has become a hotspot in the global cocaine trade in the last few years, reflected by the increasing crime and gang violence in the country. Cocaine is transported from neighbouring production countries to be shipped to Europe, specifically from the **Port of Guayaquil**. Ecuador's weak institutions are exploited by criminal networks, allowing key ports to be corrupted.

European territories in the Caribbean

The European overseas territories in the Caribbean are of particular strategic interest to smugglers. Criminals can exploit close business and cultural ties with continental Europe, as well as weak governance and limited economic opportunities for the local population. Cocaine is typically transported to the Caribbean territories by boat before departing for Europe from a larger transit hub.

Chile



Chile is emerging as a key transit point in smuggling cocaine from neighbouring Bolivia to Europe. Drug smugglers take advantage of the fact that shipments from Chile are generally not considered high-risk by European customs officials.

EMERGING ENTRY POINTS

Western Europe

Although major ports such as Rotterdam, Antwerp and Hamburg are still primary targets, drug smugglers increasingly use so-called secondary ports on the European continent as an entry point into Europe. The chances of their shipments being intercepted at these ports are significantly lower:

Sweden

Sweden is emerging as a northern entry point for cocaine to enter Europe in largely undetected container shipments. Specifically, the weak security at the targeted **Port of Helsingborg** makes it an attractive target for drug smugglers, where seizures have tripled in the last few years.

Norway

Drug smugglers exploit the situation at ports in Norway such as the **Port of Oslo**, where officials lack the capacity and necessary resources to intercept cocaine shipments entering the country. Despite record seizures in 2023, the majority of cocaine likely still enters undetected.

France

France is increasingly being targeted by drug smugglers in favour of more traditional entry points. **The Port of Le Havre**, the largest port for container ships in France, has seen record seizures in recent years. More than 45% of cocaine entering France comes through this port and seizures have tripled in the last few years.

United Kingdom

The UK's ports are generally less scrutinised than those in continental Europe. Drug smugglers embrace the reduced risks of using British ports such as the **Port of Southampton**, **Port of Plymouth** and **Port of Portsmouth**. The UK's emergence as an entry point for cocaine is also driven by record levels of consumption among the population, with the second-highest rate of cocaine use in the world.



Eastern Europe and The Balkans

Russia



Russia, specifically the **Port of Saint Petersburg**, is increasingly targeted as a transit point for cocaine travelling to Western Europe. This is demonstrated by the recent seizure of over one ton of cocaine at the Port of Saint Petersburg in January this year.

Türkiye



Türkiye is a growing cocaine hub, strategically positioned between Europe, Asia and the Middle East for further distribution. Drug smugglers can also leverage existing structures in the country that have historically supported the heroin trade. The **Port of Mersin** is specifically targeted.

Highlight: The Balkan Route

The Balkans provide the perfect pathway into Europe for drug smugglers trying to avoid the increasing scrutiny on traditional cocaine smuggling routes. Ports in the Balkan region are particularly exposed to corruption due to weak governance and established criminal networks, increasing the facilitating role of insiders significantly. Balkan criminal networks are key players in the global cocaine trade, with links to organised crime around the world. More importantly, the majority of cocaine arriving in Balkan ports is destined for Western Europe.

Although the Balkan route is not necessarily a new phenomenon, this route has been seeing intensified traffic of illicit goods recently. This is partially due to the need to diversify traditional smuggling routes to Europe, as well as disruptions due to the ongoing War in Ukraine diverting more drug traffic through the Balkans. Some of the key ports along the Balkan route that are increasingly targeted by smugglers include:

- Port of Rijeka, Croatia
- Port of Ploče, Croatia
- Port of Bar, Montenegro
- Port of Durrës, Albania
- Port of Piraeus, Greece
- Port of Varna, Bulgaria
- Port of Constanta, Romania

WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO TO PROTECT THEMSELVES?

Organisations in the logistics sector are likely to be targeted by drug smugglers in the cocaine trade. There is one integral element at the core of almost every operation to smuggle drugs through ports: insiders. Although the means and routes used to smuggle cocaine into Europe are changing, criminal organisations remain reliant on insider collusion. Employees, contractors or suppliers may be financially compensated or coerced into helping bypass security measures, allowing hundreds of tonnes of cocaine to enter Europe's borders illegally every year.

But what are key steps organisations can take to protect themselves? The following recommendations provide a high-level starting point for any organisation wishing to enhance their resilience against the evolving tactics of criminal organisations:

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Understand Threats and Vulnerabilities:** Identify how your organisation may be affected by the emerging drug smuggling routes and accurately map potential weaknesses in your logistical process.
- **Invest in Resilience:** Establish concrete steps to address identified weaknesses, implementing measures aimed to better protect your organisation, its employees, and its reputation.
- **Build Awareness:** Develop targeted communication material to increase vigilance and establish direct reporting mechanisms to help improve your employee's safety.
- **Stay Informed:** Follow the latest news in the media concerning organised crime activity in the logistics sector and upcoming threat updates by Signpost Six.

NEED ASSISTANCE?

At Signpost Six, we assess the readiness of organisations to combat drug crime arising from within. Through internal resilience scans, we identify vulnerabilities in internal operational processes, workforce behaviours, and security protocols. Strengthening internal processes sits at the heart of protecting organisations and their people from the risks posed by the international drug trade.



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