



RiskIntelligence

Narcotics smuggling: Impact on commercial shipping

April 2025

Risk Intelligence A/S
Strandvejen 100
2900 Hellerup
Denmark

Tel: +45 7026 6230
info@riskintelligence.eu
www.riskintelligence.eu

Table of contents

Summary Q1 2025 narcotics smuggling trends 3

Background 4

Vessels targeted Q1 2025 6

Smuggling routes 11

Regional focus: South America 11

Regional focus: Central America & the Caribbean 14

South America In-Depth Story: Organised Crime infiltration of Colombian Seaports 16

Regional focus: Europe 18

Cocaine smuggling to Russia 19

Summary – Q1 2025 narcotics smuggling trends

Risk Intelligence publishes this quarterly report to provide an up-to-date analysis of existing patterns and emerging trends related to the smuggling of drugs, notably of cocaine. It provides essential background for creating or updating guidelines and policies to prevent – or at least limit – exposure to cocaine smuggling. For the purposes of this report, incidents that occurred between 01 January and 31 March 2025 were collected and analysed.

- Law enforcement agencies have continued setting new records for annual drug seizures. This trend was visible through 2024 and is expected to remain unchanged for 2025. These seizures can have a direct impact on merchant ships. The discovery of cocaine can result in the detention of ships and crew during the investigation, leading to operational delays, lengthy legal proceedings, and significant additional costs. Drug trafficking groups regularly recruit and/or coerce regular shipping employees to support their operations.
- Cargo vessels were again reported to account for the most cocaine seizures that took place outside of the Americas. Usually, larger vessels are used to smuggle lower quantities of drugs to transshipment points in the Caribbean, Central America or West Africa from which drugs are then sent to North America or Europe via the oceangoing cargo vessels. In Europe, most seizures are made in shipping containers.
- Most container seizures take place before the cocaine leaves the Americas, highlighting law-enforcement efforts in Latin America to target the cocaine trade across the internal supply-chain on the continent. The three main container smuggling methods are in the container structure, concealed inside the products that the container is transporting, and the rip-on/rip-off method. The number of seizures for each method changes in each reporting period but is not indicative of a fundamental shift in the methods used by the smugglers.
- Seizure numbers continue to indicate a diversification of ports in Europe. While traditional drug-import ports like Antwerp and Rotterdam remain relevant, these saw a considerable drop in 2024 compared to the figures reported by law-enforcement for 2023. This trend is continuing so far for 2025. The French port of Le Havre has experienced increasing threats against port workers, leading to strikes by unions demanding more protection. Reports from Belgium and the Netherlands highlight growing concerns as customs officials and port workers face escalating recruitment attempts by criminal groups.
- While ports across South America may be affected by drug trafficking activity regardless of the geographic proximity to cultivation areas, the amount of cocaine seized, the employment of concealment techniques, and the frequency of shipments may also be altered by subnational criminal dynamics. However, it remains unclear how these local dynamics could facilitate the supply of drug shipments or contribute to the diversification of shipping routes to avoid detection.
- Colombia and Ecuador continue to lead the way on drug seizures in South America as these two countries are the main gateways for cocaine trafficking to North America and Europe. An emerging trend is the use of Colombian ports as transit points, instead of only

as a port of origin for drug shipments. The high volumes of smuggling through ports such as Buenaventura underscores not only the prevalence of organised crime operations but also the entrenched nature of corruption within the public service.

- Drug trafficking trends in Central America & the Caribbean remain unchanged. Panama continues to be the most important country according to drug seizures. The rip-on/rip-off technique is the most common method to tamper containers, with most of the cargo bound to Western Europe. The total number of drugs is expected to be higher as criminals have been targeting containers that arrive from countries with a lower risk profile.

Additional services

The Risk Intelligence System provides clients with real-time intelligence and situational awareness that will assist in avoidance of threats for operations around the globe, including the threat of drug smuggling in individual countries and ports. Moreover, Risk Intelligence offers bespoke services such as risk assessments for specific routes, countries or regions as well as recommendations to mitigate the implications of vessels being targeted for cocaine smuggling.

In addition, frequent webinars provide in-depth updates, mini masterclasses in situational awareness methodology, and analysis of current events. Schedules and registration forms can be found at riskintelligence.eu/webinars.

Background

This report focuses on cocaine trafficking across the Atlantic, which is currently one of the most significant security issues for the shipping industry. Cocaine trafficking poses a direct threat to crews and operations, with detentions of vessels and cargoes as well as crew members possible during an investigation. It also represents a reputational risk for the companies involved. Drug trafficking can also be linked to other types of illicit activities.

The production of cocaine has reportedly reached record levels in the past years, with over 2,700 tonnes in 2023, and is a trend that likely continued through 2024, and into 2025 for various reasons. Data suggests that the cultivation of coca leaf is expanding in multiple hotspots in Colombia, the world's leading. While variations in coca bushing cultivation remain volatile, the area under coca cultivation is expected to continue an upward trend in northern Peru and to a lesser extent in rural areas of Honduras and Guatemala. Finally, the emergence of new cocaine laboratories in Central America, Mexico, the United States and Europe poses an incentive for drug traffickers to increase the commercialisation of coca paste.

In addition to the main production areas, South American countries such as Ecuador and Brazil are playing a more central role as transshipment points for cocaine destined for North America, Europe and, to a lesser extent, West Africa.



Drug traffickers continue to demonstrate an impressive capacity for adaptation and innovation when it comes to transporting their shipments. They also try to intervene or control an increasing number of stages along the supply chain. The immediate environment of ports therefore must be considered, including access routes (roads and rivers), the coast, as well as offshore areas where ship-to-ship transfers are possible. Routes are also likely to vary in frequency, mode of operation and location.

In addition to the main production areas, South American countries such as Ecuador and Brazil are playing a more central role as transshipment points for cocaine destined for North America, Europe and, to a lesser extent, West Africa.

It should also be noted that the reliability of statistics and reported incidents is uneven. Drug seizures in certain countries or regions may be less well reported than elsewhere, leading to an incorrect impression of current trends. Similarly, some reports will have more detailed information than others. This report only includes figures where data is reliable or where reliable assumptions about missing data can be made, and in these cases the assumptions are clearly stated.

Vessels targeted - Q1 2025

During the period covered in this report (Q1: 01 January to 31 March 2025), 237 maritime-related drug seizures (all types of drugs) were identified. While this does represent an increase from the previous quarter (Q4 2024: 218), it is uncertain to what degree this is a significant increase due to changes in activity, changes in policing, or changes in reporting. Overall, it is assessed that the drop is not significant to the general threat of cocaine smuggling, given that the baseline conditions remain almost unchanged, as discussed below.

The identified seizures cover 213 (Q4 2024: 184) instances where cocaine specifically was seized by law enforcement agencies. For Q1, the main bulk of cocaine seizures at 167 (78%) took place in the Americas (compared to 149 seizures / 81% in Q4 2024 →), and the remaining 46 (21%) took place predominantly in Western and Southern Europe (compared to 35 seizures in Q4 2024). The main difference between Q4 2024 and Q1 2025 is that there were fewer seizures in Southern Europe, and slightly more seizures in Western Europe in Q1 2025. The overall pattern fits into the established numbers from previous quarters and follows a stable trend.

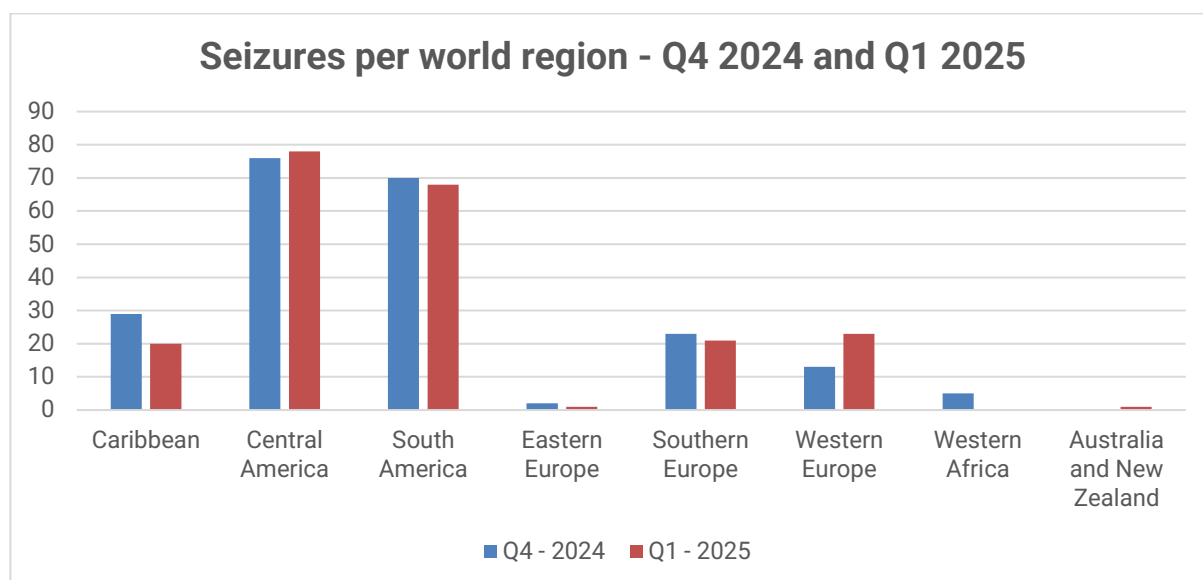


Figure 1 - The number of cocaine seizures in the various world regions (source: Risk Intelligence)

Cargo vessels

As in Q4 2024, a cargo vessel was involved in the incident with the largest seizure of Q1 2025, with the discovery of 10 tonnes of cocaine in a container in the French port of Dunkirk.

Cargo vessels were again reported to account for the most cocaine interdictions that took place outside of the Americas (Figure 4). Usually, larger vessels are used to smuggle lower quantities of drugs to transshipment points in the Caribbean, Central America or West Africa from which drugs are then sent to North America or Europe via the oceangoing cargo vessels.

In Europe, most seizures are made from shipping containers on cargo vessels. Diverting from previous quarterly data, Q1 2025 had no identified incidents of go-fasts or fishing vessel seizures in Europe. It is uncertain to what degree this is the smuggling networks moving away from using

larger fishing vessels for transatlantic crossings, or if it is related to circumvention of the authorities.

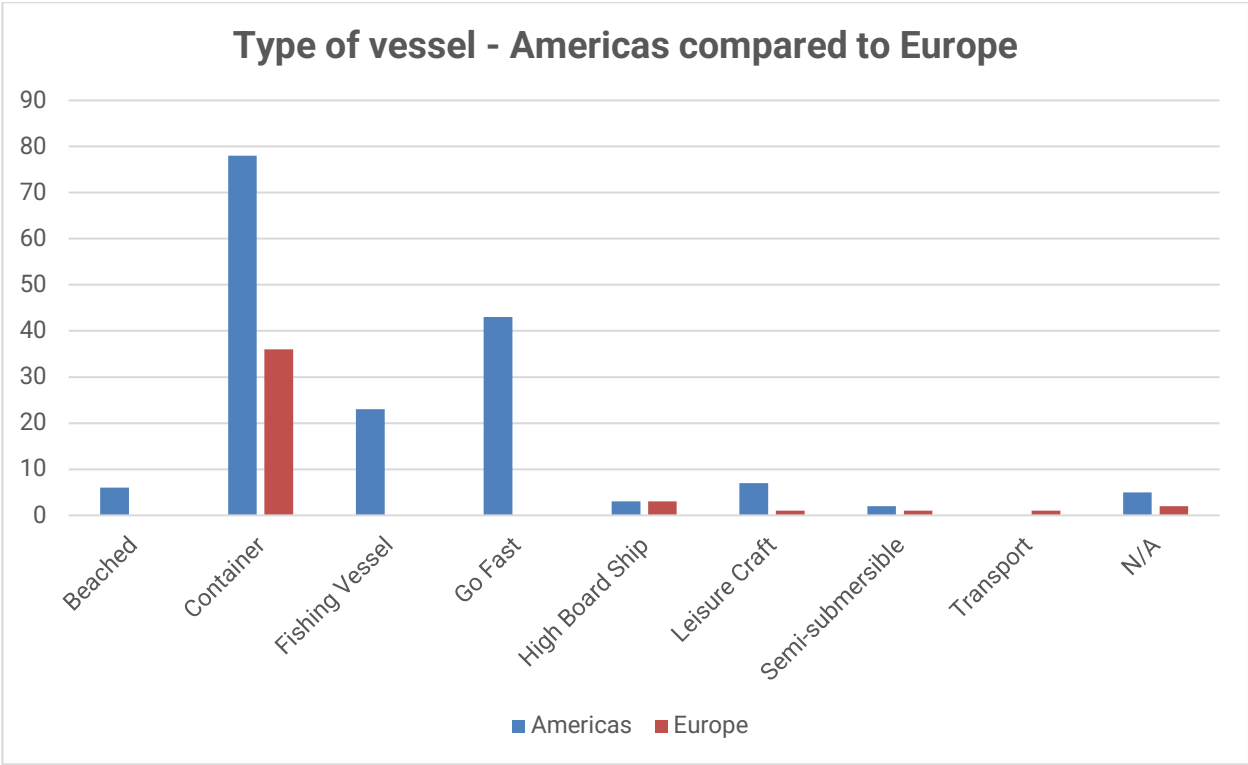


Figure 2 - The number of vessel types identified in seizure reports; Americas compared to Europe (source: Risk Intelligence)

It should also be noted that most container seizures take place before the cocaine leaves the Americas, highlighting law-enforcement efforts in Latin America to target the cocaine trade across the internal supply-chain on the continent. In the past years, dozens of nations have agreed to several partnerships where intelligence-sharing has proven crucial to intercept non-declared vessels. Likewise, North American and European countries have deployed naval assets to patrol and monitor the Caribbean and the Pacific Oceans, increasing the local capabilities to intercept smugglers before reaching the coastline where they can hide easily from naval and aerial patrols.

For Q1, out of all 213 registered incidents of cocaine trafficking, 123 were linked to cargo vessels – a total of 57% (Q4 2024 – 106 incidents /48%). Incidents involving containers and container vessels makes up a total of 115 or 53% out of the 213 (Figure 5). Other types of high-board ships like bulk or general cargo vessels account for the remaining 8 identified incidents.

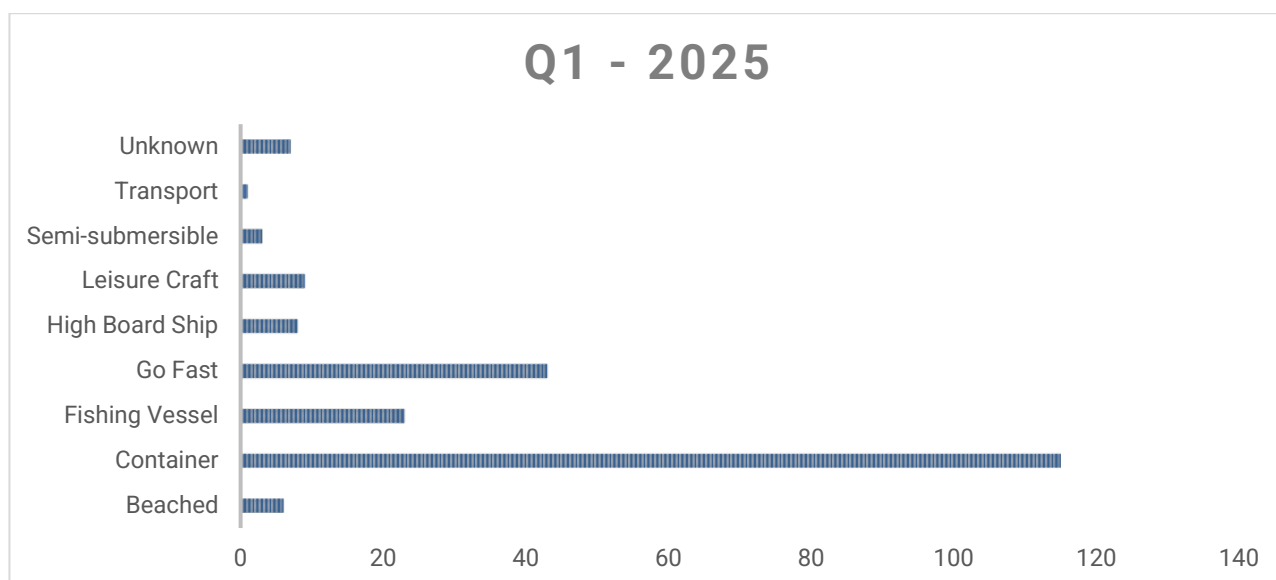


Figure 3 - Total number of seizures from different vessel types (source: Risk Intelligence)

Overall, the distribution of the use of various vessels in Q1 2025 is similar to the conditions of Q3 and Q4 2024 (Figure 6).

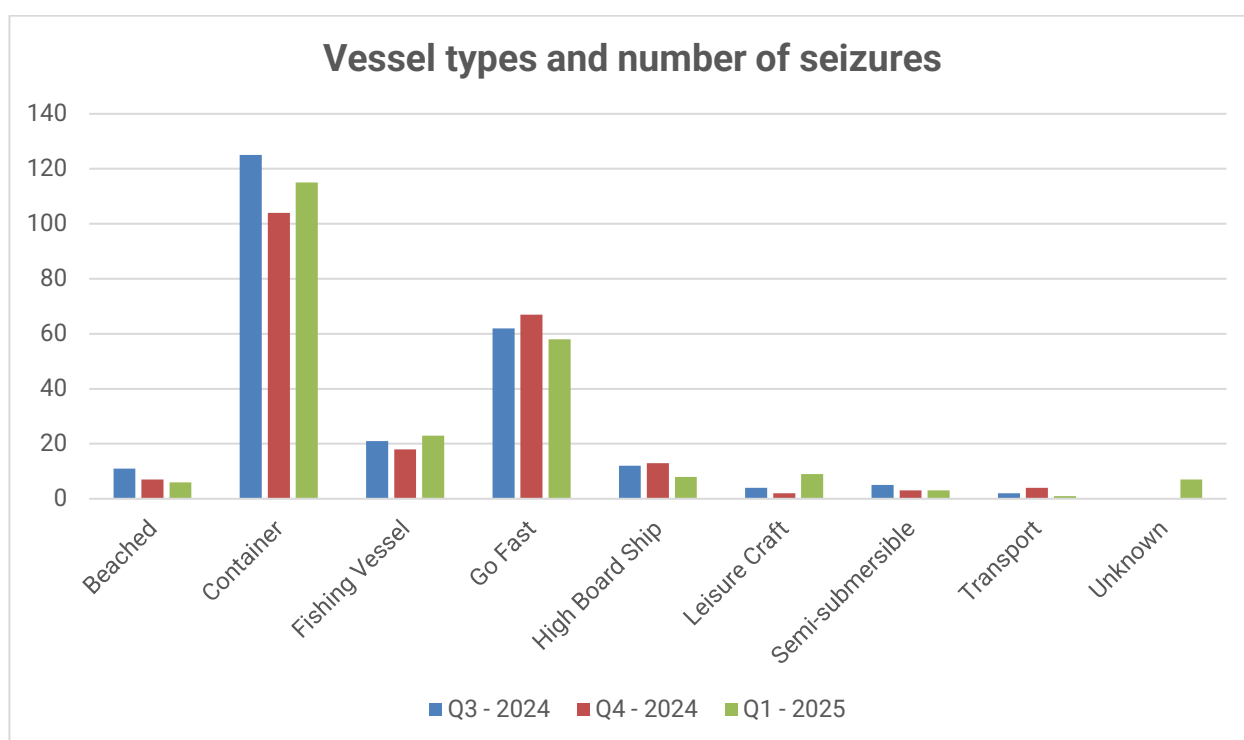


Figure 4 - Vessel types involved in seizures, Q3/Q4 2024 compared to 2025 (source: Risk Intelligence)

While the total number of container seizures (115) continue to account for more than the other vessel types combined (Figure 6), it also remains the vessel type on which most cocaine is shipped overall, as shown in Figure 7 –although the margins for both are smaller than in Q3/Q4 2024. Still, the seizures related to go-fast boats are usually larger than the ones found in containers, meaning that go-fasts, while only accounting for 20% (43 incidents) of the total seizures, they account for 33% (63 tonnes) of the total seized quantity.

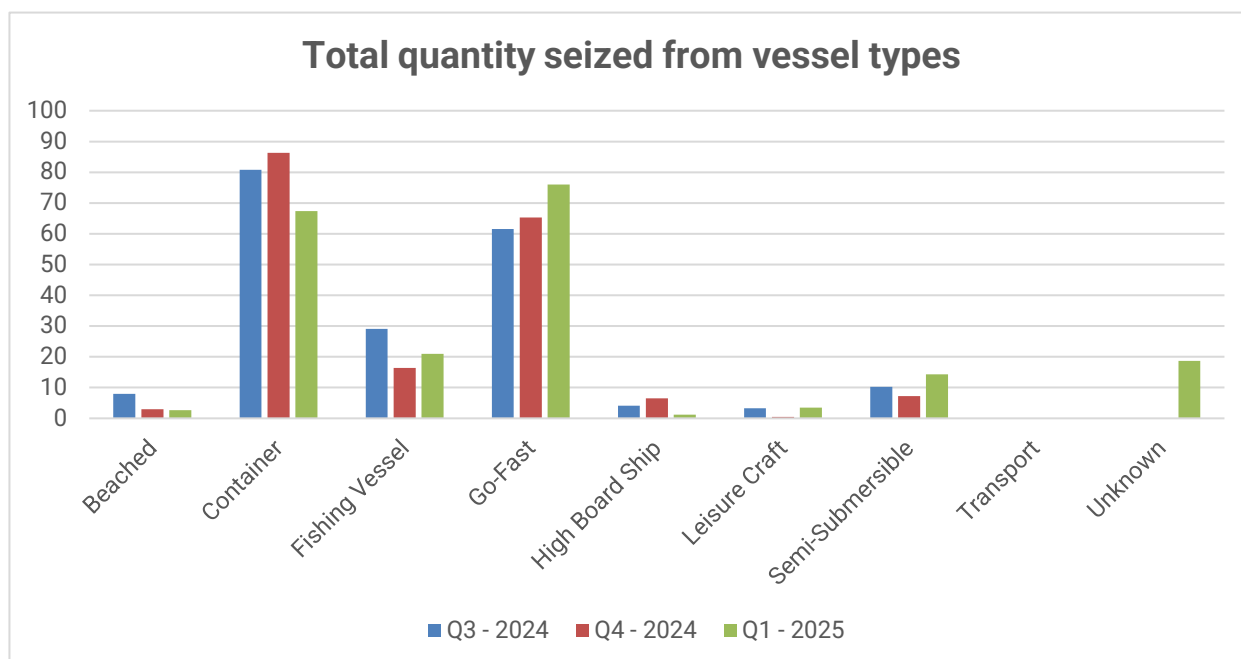


Figure 5- Quantity of cocaine in tonnes seized per vessel type - Q3/Q4 2024 compared to Q1 2025 (source: Risk Intelligence)

For smuggling MOs related to cargo vessels, the main outlier is a doubling of seizures of cocaine hidden inside the structure of containers – from 21 identified incidents in Q4 2024, to 42 in Q1 2025 – as seen in Figure 8. This indicates that the tampering with containers themselves is a significant MO for the smuggling groups.

The method of smuggling cocaine by hiding the product inside containerised cargo and wares was the second most identified method of smuggling 34 reported incidents out of the 115 involving containers. The rip-on/rip-off MO was the third most identified MO at 24 seizures. This follows a general trend, where smuggling groups are increasingly inserting themselves into the supply-chain by controlling packaging- or logistics companies. In two instances, cocaine was discovered elsewhere on container vessels, and in four cases, parasites had been planted on vessels. In 14 cases, the smuggling MO has not been verified.

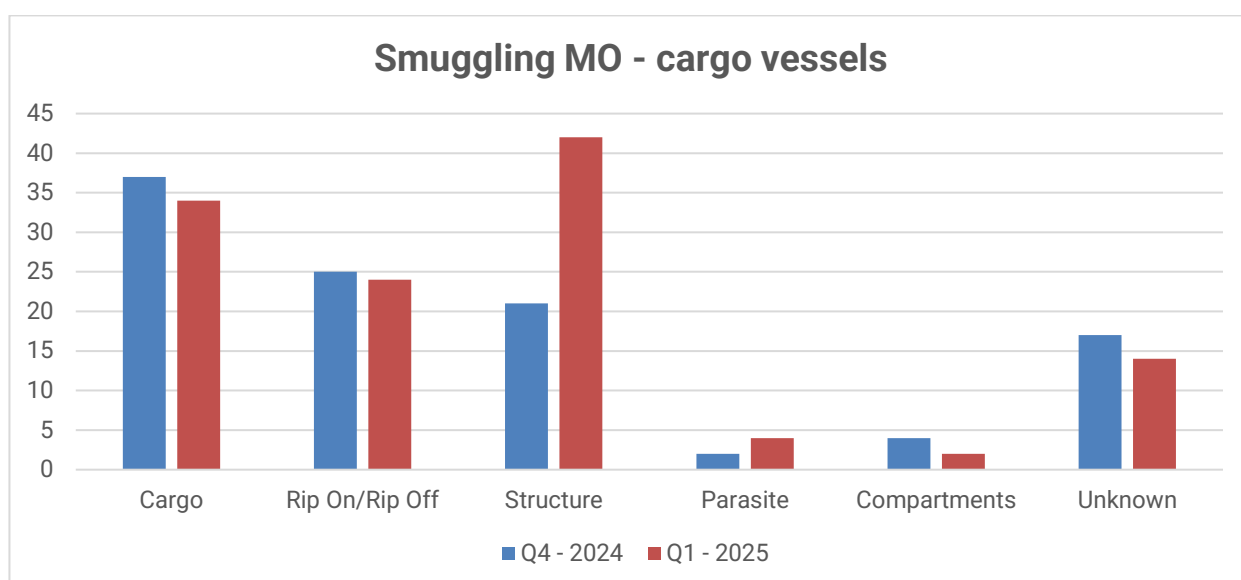


Figure 6 - Identified smuggling MOs and hiding places related to container vessels (source: Risk Intelligence)

Go-fast boats

Data collected by Risk Intelligence reveals how non-cargo vessels are predominately seized internally in the Americas region (Figure 2). This follows the established smuggling routes, as go-fasts are reliable means of transportation used in littoral environments but also for larger voyages across the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean. This means that a large portion of these go-fast boats are used to transport cocaine to larger trafficking hubs and major international ports, where the cocaine will be inserted into the proper supply-chain, and oceangoing cargo vessels.

The use of go-fast boats grew slightly in Q1 2025 in comparison to Q4 2024, while accounting for similar levels of drug seized. In Q1 2025, there were about 58 registered incidents with a total of 76 tonnes whereas Q4 2024 reported 53 events that led to the impoundment of 65.3 tonnes.

The illicit cargo in these boats has been documented to reach to up to 5 tonnes in Q1. In addition, there are other incidents of multi-tonne shipments. The use of go-fast boats remains prevalent as shown by data from Q1 which indicates that it was the modality which accounted for the second largest number of cocaine seizures in the Americas.

Semi-Submersibles

Drug trafficking organisations continue to use semi/fully submersible and low-profile vessels, colloquially known as *cowships*, to ship large quantities of cocaine. The use of these vessels is more frequently reported across the Pacific Ocean as the abundance of mangroves and estuaries allow criminal organisations to build and hide these vessels more easily; however, periodic seizures in Southern Europe and in Caribbean waters outline that these remain a useful modality for transatlantic smuggling attempts.

In the past quarter, four semi-submersibles were seized, although it was impossible to retrieve drugs from one of them as it sunk off the coast of Galicia, Spain. In total, the interdiction of semi-submersibles led to a total of 14,3 tonnes seized in Q1 2025. This is slightly up compared to 7,2 tonnes for Q4 2025, spread across three semi submersibles. As such, it is consistent with established trafficking patterns.

Other

Pleasure, sailing and fishing vessels are often owned by individuals or companies which are part of an organisation of cocaine traffickers. In other cases, they are merely used to transport cocaine in exchange for money. These types of vessels offer an important degree of flexibility for drug traffickers.

The use of fishing vessels was reported to account for the third most common modality of drug smuggling behind cargo vessels and go-fast boats. In Q1 2025, the use of fishing vessels accounted for the total seizure of 21 tonnes of cocaine – a relative increase from 16,3 tonnes in Q4 2024. It is assessed that this relative increase is not itself indicative of an increase in the use of fishing vessels for smuggling.

Smuggling routes

Out of the 213 incidents, a total of 167 took place in the Americas (78 in Central America, 68 in South America, and 20 in the Caribbean), i.e. before the drugs were shipped across the Atlantic. While this is in line with earlier trends, it highlights the work done by law enforcement agencies in the Americas. A total of 45 events were recorded for Europe. The remaining seizures were recorded elsewhere.

Numbers continue to indicate a diversification of ports in Europe. While traditional drug-import ports like Antwerp and Rotterdam remain relevant, these saw a considerable drop in 2024 compared to the figures reported by law-enforcement for 2023. This trend is continuing so far for 2025.

The use of transatlantic cargo vessels remains the most significant way to smuggle large quantities of drugs. This trend has been accompanied by the adoption of new technologies to better conceal drugs inside various products, such as fruit pulp. As noted above, this is due to more widespread coca crops in countries such as Colombia and Peru, and new cultivation practices in Mexico and Central America.

Moreover, criminal organisations have improved the production processes of hydrochloride cocaine, meaning some organisations have optimised yields per hectare by adopting new agricultural practices. Finally, the demand of drugs reached an all-time record with an increase of 20% more users when compared to ten years ago.

Regional focus: South America

Colombia and Ecuador continue to lead the way on drug seizures in South America as these two countries are the main gateways for cocaine trafficking to North America and Europe. In Colombia, containerised cargo (18 tonnes) is reported as the main smuggling modality, followed by go-fast boats (12 tonnes); other smuggling methods accounted for less than 3 tonnes in total. Unlike previous quarters, go-fast boats do not represent the preferred drug trafficking method. This is not related to a decline in the use of undeclared boats, but answers to an exponential growth in drug seizures at the Pacific port of Buenaventura reported –see Figure 7.

In Colombia, cargo contamination was the prevalent smuggling technique with the seizure of 13.5 tonnes of cocaine. Spain is reported as the drugs main destination with nearly 11 tonnes seized either abroad or before setting sail. Western Europe stands out as the second most common destinations, with over 3 tonnes of cocaine seized in Belgium and Germany. The number of drugs seized at other regions remain below 240 kilograms each.

Overall, drug traffickers attempted to hide drugs while mirroring legal cargo, hoping to evade non-intrusive inspections. This practice is not new, and authorities rely on K-9 units to discover drugs based on the container's risk profile. To avoid employment of an ingenious concealment technique in at least one occasion which entailed mixing 8.2 tonnes of cocaine inside agricultural inputs. The drugs, which were bound to the Spanish port of Algeciras, went through a chemical process designed to hinder detection.

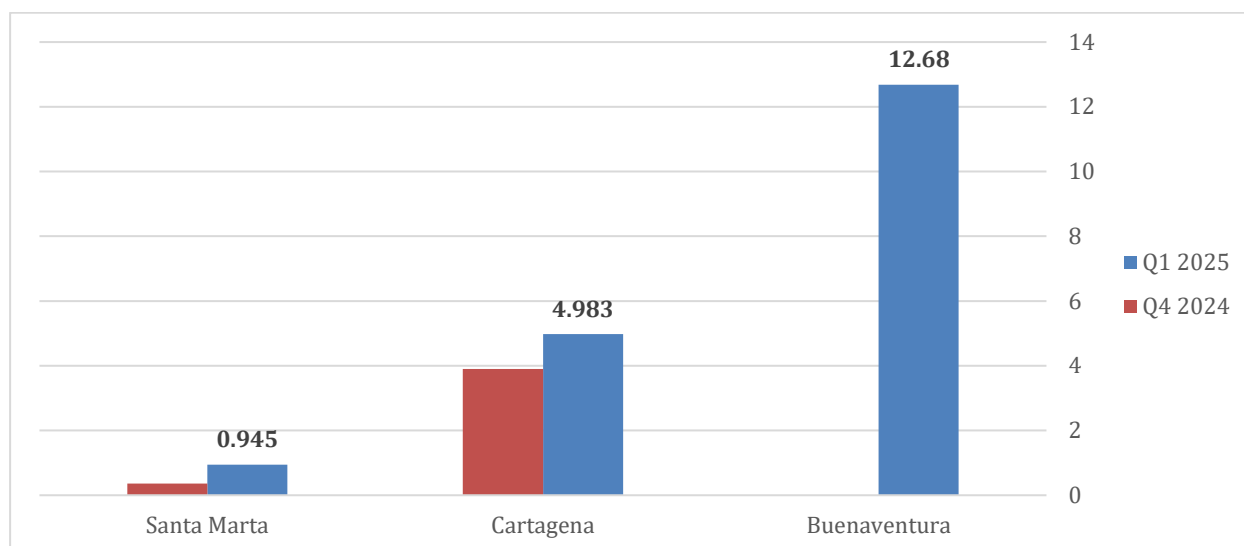


Figure 7- Drug seizures in containerised cargo reported at Colombian ports: Q4 2024 Q1 2025 (Source: Risk Intelligence)

A few emerging trends were noticeable. The first one indicates an inclination to use Colombian seaports as transit points, instead of only as a port of origin for drug shipments. The trend is more visible at the port of Buenaventura. While the threat of smuggling is prevalent in the area for several decades, four out of five seizures were drugs that arrived from neighbouring Ecuador. All seizures entailed containers that had Eastern Asia as their final destination, with stops in Panama and Mexico before crossing the Pacific Ocean.

The second emerging trend is related to the seizure of two metallic structures built to carry a tonne of cocaine and meant to be attached to the hull of merchant vessels through powerful magnets. The seizure surprised local authorities as there are no precedents of similar structures. In addition, both were found in the interior of the country and not in remote and coastal locations better suited as hideouts. It should be noted that the impoundment of the structures occurred days apart from the apprehension of a liaison from the Balkan Cartel which was tasked to ship 300 kilograms per month through the use of parasites.

As for Ecuador, containerised cargo persists as the main smuggling modality (19.6 tonnes), followed by go-fast boats (12.8 tonnes), and seizures at illegal deposits near the shore and port terminals (2.9 tonnes). The trend persists when adding drug seizures reported overseas.

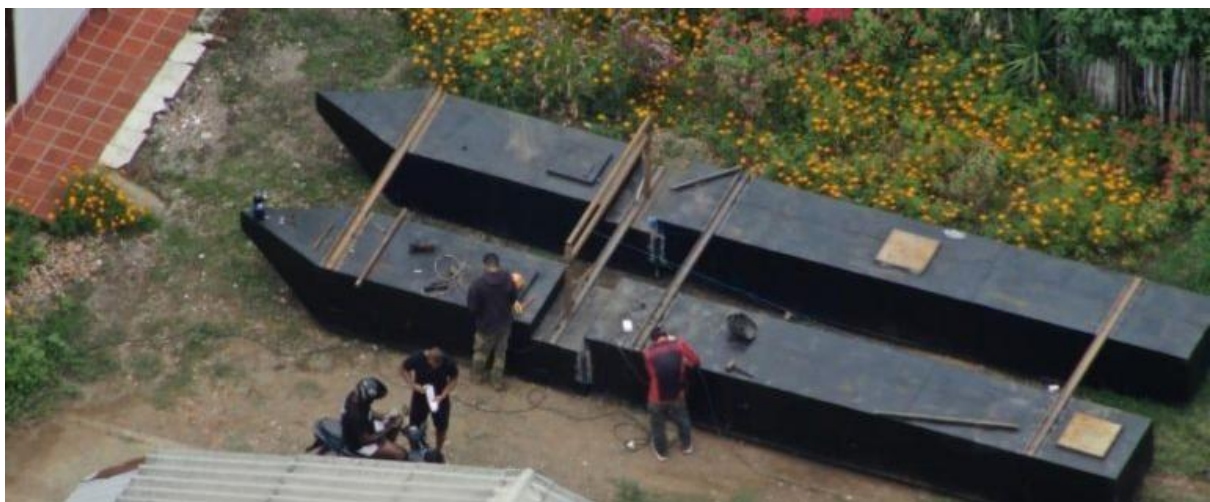
Western Europe was the main destination for containerised cargo, accounting for a total of 16.4 tonnes which is nearly half of the cocaine seized after leaving Ecuadoran ports. Most seizures were reported in Germany and Belgium, followed by The Netherlands. Ecuador also stands out because of the diversification its destinations, albeit with lower quantities. These include Eastern and Western Asia, and occasional seizures in Eastern and Northern Europe.

In Ecuador, cargo contamination is the most frequently used concealment technique, accounting for 18 tonnes, while the Rip-on/Rip-off technique reported 6.8 tonnes, hiding drugs in the structure of containers, 0.5 tonnes, and two more tonnes remain to be confirmed. Drug traffickers usually employ perishables such as bananas or pineapples to hide drugs in its crates. In some other occasions, cocaine is hidden in bulk bags. The most notable example is related to the

seizure in the Spanish port of Valencia of an undetermined amount of cocaine found mixed in 27 tonnes of zeolite along with GPS devices.

The rip-on/rip-off technique continues to pose a threat to commercial maritime operation despite reporting lower numbers of seizures. In January 2025, security forces arrested a former Police Colonel and a Navy Captain that retrieved inside information on shipping liners and the itinerary of containers which were tampered with drugs either within port facilities or by hoisting drugs while merchant vessels were drifting away from Ecuadoran seaports. The security operation revealed that organised criminal organisations have managed to permeate security controls and remain flexible enough to coordinate trained security officials, Los Lobos gang members – in charge of providing security, and local fishermen and port workers.

Colombian security forces discovered two metallic parasites in the township of Santander de Quilichao, Cauca in January 2025. (Photo: Narcodiaro website)



Other South American countries reported a less significant role. Brazil reported the seizure of 4.6 tonnes of cocaine which represents a decline in comparison to the 7 tonnes seized during the last quarter of 2024. Overall, the use of cargo vessels was the primary smuggling method with the port of Santos reporting the highest number of drugs leaving port premises. Lower numbers of cocaine were evenly divided between the Rip-on/Rip-off technique, the use of parasites, and the concealment of drugs in the structure of shipping containers.

The most notable exception was the seizure of 6.6 tonnes of cocaine in a semi-submersible vessel intercepted off the Azores Islands. The vessel reportedly left the state of Macapa and was crewed by Brazilian nationals along with Colombians and one Spanish citizen. Preliminary reports indicate the semi-submersible was bound to the mouth of the Guadalquivir River in Spain.

Other inconsistencies were reported in Venezuela and Chile. The first one involves a counter-narcotics operation by Venezuelan authorities that led to the seizure of 5.4 tonnes of cocaine, the impoundment of one semi-submersible vessel, and over a dozen go-fast boats. Specific details are missing and the arrest of opposition under drug trafficking charges suggest that the seizure was triggered by the oversight of unsanctioned cocaine shipments. At least 5 tonnes of cocaine were seized off the Venezuelan coastline, mainly through maritime patrols from the Dutch, French, Colombian navies and the US Coast Guard.

Data gathered by Risk Intelligence suggest a surge of cocaine shipments inside containers that arrived in Panama from Chilean ports. The Rip-on/Rip-off and structure concealment techniques were dominant, which cast doubts on whether the drugs were loaded in Chile and, instead, were smuggled into containers that had a lower risk profile. This hypothesis is backed by the impoundment of low cocaine quantities bound to distant places such as Australia and Western Asia.

Regional focus: Central America & the Caribbean

Drug trafficking trends in Central America & the Caribbean remain unchanged. Panama continues to be the most important country according to drug seizures, which were over 20 tonnes or nearly 30% of the drugs seized in the region for Q1 2025. Containerised cargo accounted for the majority of the drugs seized with 11.2 tonnes impounded, whereas fishing vessels and go-fast boats reported 5.5 and 4 tonnes each.

The Rip-on/Rip-off technique is the most common method to tamper containers, with most of the cargo bound to Western Europe. The total number of drugs is expected to be higher as criminals have been targeting containers that arrive from countries with a lower risk profile. In Q1 2025, most containers arrived in Panamanian seaports from Chile, Peru, Suriname and Costa Rica.

The second most common smuggling technique was hiding drugs in the cooling mechanism of reefer containers. Packages ranged between a couple dozen kilograms to nearly a hundred. Similar concealment methods in the ~~tonne of cocaine~~ r ' s s in the fake floor of a shipment that arrived from Ecuador and was bound to Valencia, Spain. This method is also frequently reported for shipments bound to distant ports such as Australia or Eastern Europe. Despite smaller packages, drug traffickers earn significantly from cocaine due to higher market prices.

The country reported at least 16 interceptions of go-fast boats or artisanal fishing vessels. In most cases, smugglers were carrying between a hundred kilograms to half a tonne, although the total number of drugs could grow up to two tonnes in the same ves s e l . Panama ' s p r o m i s e x p e c t e d t o c o n t i n u e d u e t o i t s g e o g r a p h i c c l producer. Most interdictions were reported along the coast of the Guna Yala province and off Punta Mala and Punta Cocos in the Pacific. Smaller quantities are smuggled closer to the shore and with increased frequency as regional authorities have devoted larger resources to monitor and intercept larger shipments farther from the coast and at the border of Colombia and Ecuador.

Mexico is reported as the second most important country according to drug seizures which were limited, almost exclusively, to the seizure of go-fast boats in the Pacific Ocean. The present trend is not a surprise as the country is a preferred destination because of its geographic proximity to the United States. The largest seizures in the reporting period were a 4.5 tonne and 2.2 tonne shipments reported between 56 and 200 nautical miles from Cabo San Lucas. The seizures are not enough to indicate an emerging trend but do signal a shift in maritime patrolling as usually seizures are made to the south-west of the state of Chiapas, Colima, Guerrero, and Michoacan.

Drug traffickers employ the same smuggling techniques, which entail carrying large quantities of drugs on deck. This allows smugglers to jettison the cargo overboard upon discovery. South American smugglers are then expected to meet with receiving vessels crewed by Mexican nationals. On some occasions drugs are transferred in-person, while in some others the drug bales are attached to sea buoys and GPS devices.

Current levels of drug seizures align with the general trend reported over past quarters where larger drug shipments are common in the Pacific Ocean, while the size of drug shipments vary across the Caribbean as there are alternative routes overland and through subsequent transshipment points across the Caribbean. This trend is illustrated by the reports from the United States Coast Guard of a 75% increase in the number of seizures in its Pacific Southwest district.

However, this trend also means there is a significant imbalance between drugs seized in the Pacific Ocean in comparison to those reported in the Atlantic coastline. For Q1, seizures of go-fast boats were 17.9 tonnes, while only 3 kilograms were found beached outside a resort in the Yucatan Peninsula. The Mexican Navy (Semar) keeps intercepting fishing vessels with unusually large amounts of diesel, which suggests that drug shipments continue to flow towards Mexican Atlantic facade.

The distortion in drug seizures appear to answer to the employment of larger resources to the south-west as with a two-fold purpose. In the first place, large seizures are instrumental in tackling the finances of transnational criminal organisations. In addition, high-profile seizures provide political leverage with the Trump administration as it shows willingness to fight drug trafficking.

The Salvadoran Navy seized 1.551 kilograms of cocaine about 920 nautical miles from the coast. Six smugglers and three go-fast boats were apprehended (Photo: Nayib Bukele / X social media platform)



The absence of seizures through shipping containers raises further questions. Although cocaine seizures are not frequently reported among containerised cargo, authorities report seizures of cannabis with relative frequency. Seaports and smugglers continue to use cargo vessels to ship methamphetamines toward South America. Furthermore, Mexican ports in the Pacific are transit points for cocaine cargoes leaving Ecuador and Colombia towards Eastern Asia. While the size of cocaine shipments towards destinations in the Pacific are smaller in comparison to those bound to Europe, current trends fall short on explaining why organised crime would avoid smuggling cocaine through the same means.

Further seizures in the region are almost limited to the use of industrial or artisanal fishing vessels or go-fast boats. Most countries account for occasional seizures of large numbers of drugs, with the exception of the Dominican Republic. The most notable seizures were reported off the island of Martinique where the French Navy intercepted a fishing vessel carrying nine tonnes of cocaine. The seizure of these vessels takes place once or twice every quarter, with boats sailing from Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, or Brazil towards Southern Europe or Western Africa.

Other drug seizures of note were reported by the Salvadoran Navy. In the reporting period, the country reported four maritime interdictions at open seas of boats carrying between 1.3 to 1.7 tonnes of cocaine. Most boats sailed from Ecuador and used the Humboldt current to lower the amount of fuel used in the journey. The Ecuadoran Galapagos Islands continue to be instrumental for refuelling purposes. As reported in previous quarters, the Salvadoran Navy continues to enhance their operational capabilities, reaching vessels up to 920 nautical miles from its coast. Most of these boats are bound towards Mexico, but seizures by the Guatemalan military suggest that the country is also used as a frequent transshipment point.

South America In-Depth Story: Organised Crime infiltration of Colombian Seaports

In early February 2025, Colombian President Gustavo Petro televised his weekly cabinet meeting to provide insight into the government's decision-making process. However, the six-hour broadcast was controversial due to the absence of specific policy discussions. Instead, it featured lengthy interventions and heated arguments between cabinet officials who opposed the appointment of ~~Hand Pentas~~ Minister of Interior. The cabinet meeting generated numerous press articles about the ~~ti~~es ~~leader~~ ~~style~~, while also prompting journalists to investigate allegations that a notorious smuggler financed the presidential campaign.

Initial press reports concentrated on the connections between Mr Diego Marin Buitrago, also known as 'Papa Pitufó'. However, subsequent reports revealed that ~~Mr~~ ~~ici~~ ~~an~~ Marin had successfully infiltrated high-ranking police and customs officials, enabling him to run an extensive trade-based money laundering operation. Mr Buitrago, locally known as 'El Contrabando', operated alongside multiple drug traffickers, shipping large quantities of contraband, which were then distributed through black markets in large-sized cities of the country, laundering money for him and his associates.

At first glance, the network appeared to resemble traditional smuggling methods. However, press reports revealed that Mr Buitrago's network Wiretaps disclosed that multimillion-dollar bribes were paid to security and customs officials nationwide. The organisation reportedly spent between 150,000 USD and 200,000 USD daily to control logistics at ports across the country. Low-lying police officers and customs officials received between 750 USD to 75,000 USD. Larger bribes were as high as 18 million USD offered to a newly appointed Navy Captain in Buenaventura, while a former head of the Fiscal and Customs Police unit (Polfa) – also known for increasing drug and contraband seizures - was offered 5 million USD for him to resign.

In return, corrupt officials provided access to perimeter, where no scanners or police units were conducting cargo inspections. In Buenaventura, the network's reach pushed local trucks to enter undetected. The bribes were also instrumental in avoiding cargo inspections through non-intrusive means as well as physical inspections. In other instances, corrupt officials allowed smugglers to tamper with containers that were already cleared by the authorities. Police officers were also paid to avoid any overland inspections or delays at roadside checkpoints. In addition, bribes provided smugglers access to confidential information such as the country of destination or the container's ID.

On the other hand, larger sums of money allowed smugglers to suggest trusted individuals for job vacancies –mainly middle-ranking officials –as well as to oversee the appointment of public servants in the most important customs offices across the country. Once security and customs offices were infiltrated through local operatives and bribed officials, smugglers were able to anticipate security operations, judicial investigations, and mislead authorities by setting up decoys where authorities were able to seize contraband or drugs while ignoring larger quantities stored in other containers.

Access to inside information was believed to take place to some extent. However, leaks of the current judicial investigation suggest that Mr Marin Buitrago had access to the content of an in-person meeting held between two prosecution officers, the head of counterintelligence at the National Police, and Colombia's Minister of Defence. Mr Marin Buitrago was able to identify the prosecutor behind him, but also the identity of the police officer who was interacting with him undercover. Mr Marin Buitrago left the country soon after.

This underscores not only the prevalence of organised crime operations but also the entrenched nature of corruption within the public service. Further developments raised questions and increased uncertainty. For instance, press replaced the prosecutor in charge of the case while he was in a judicial hearing seeking the detention of various individuals, including the individual k General said the prosecutor was relieved from the case due to the lack of significant progress and indications that the prosecutor was hiding information about the case and colluding with the suspected criminals as no arrests were made in years.

The judicial case was unified under the appointment of another prosecutor. The new investigation led to the arrest of several middlemen involved in the smuggling network in only six months.

Despite tangible results, the situation continued to be worrisome as several police officers behind the initial investigations were transferred to remote areas in the country or relieved from duty, including the former Director of Judicial Police and Interpol (DIJIN).

The political implications of these press revelations are likely to dominate the domestic agenda as the country gears up for the 2026 presidential elections. Opposition figures are expected to emphasise the alleged funding of Petro's-level officials and members of the smuggling network. On the other side, the government of Gustavo Petro is likely to continue engaging in heated arguments with external figures –such as President Trump - as well as with domestic political figures to further polarise the electoral bases and ensure the continuity of his programme of government for the next four years.

Nonetheless, press revelations are essential to understanding the coordination capabilities of criminal organisations. Unlike past monolithic and hierarchical structures, the main threat arises from flexible and highly adaptive networks that have developed diverse sources of illegal revenue and employ various smuggling modalities as well as money laundering methods.

Most importantly, recent events signal the existence of current political events narrow the threat to a few powerful individuals in control of strategic public offices or with large amounts of money at their disposal, it is important not to ignore that these individuals developed a public profile but do not operate alone. Furthermore, they have the ability to work with rival organisations at the same time without detection. This scenario facilitates larger flows of cocaine due to reduced operational risks.

Regional focus: Europe

Due to the clandestine nature of smuggling activities, the complete extent of cocaine trafficking into European ports remains uncertain but is likely at high levels. Seizures account for only a small portion of overall smuggling operations, with various indicators highlighting the complexity of these activities across Europe.

There has been a notable decline in seizures in Antwerp and Rotterdam, with significantly less cocaine intercepted at both ports in the first quarter of 2025. This continues the trend of reduced seizures in 2024 compared to 2023, suggesting that 2025 will likely see relatively low cocaine seizures at these ports. It remains uncertain whether this reflects a decrease in smuggled cocaine or if smugglers have successfully evaded authorities. However, police sources indicate no evidence of decreased cocaine use or sales on the streets, signifying a steady flow of the drug. Wastewater data from European countries showed a continent-wide increase in cocaine residue in 2023 compared to 2022 – no new data has been published although authorities in many European countries are noting either a stable or rising number of small quantity street seizures from dealers and users.

This trend, coupled with street seizures showing minimal dilution of cocaine sold to users, indicates a significant rise in the import volume of cocaine. This trend is anticipated to continue throughout 2025. European ports are expected to remain major import hubs for South American

cocaine, with the busiest container ports serving as key entry points. Increasing seizures from previously low-risk ports show a diversification of smuggling routes.

Methods used to export cocaine to Europe have not significantly changed, with regular shipments of common South American exports, such as bananas, often used as cover. Seizures reveal that smugglers frequently conceal cocaine within the cargo itself or inside container refrigeration units, indicating infiltration of packaging and shipping businesses.

The use of perishable products to hide cocaine is a prevalent method. Smugglers exploit the fact that refrigerated containers are rarely inspected by customs. This contrasts with the rip-on/rip-off approach, where cocaine is placed directly inside containers at South American ports and collected at destination ports by corrupt dockworkers or criminals with access to secure areas. Both methods are effective as they allow the transport of large quantities with minimal risk of product loss.

Nevertheless, increased efforts by authorities likely contribute to higher seizure rates, making it uncertain if the rise in seizures reflects increased shipments or more effective policing. Traditional ports remain primary import centres, with millions of containers passing through annually, providing smugglers opportunities to conceal their shipments.

Elsewhere in Europe, intensified police operations have led to the interception of cocaine shipments in ports not previously known for trafficking, suggesting smuggling networks are diversifying their routes. For instance, the French port of Le Havre has experienced increasing threats against port workers, leading to strikes by unions demanding more protection. Reports from Belgium and the Netherlands highlight growing concerns as customs officials and port workers face escalating recruitment attempts by criminal groups, who initially offer bribes and subsequently coerce those who refuse.

Cocaine smuggling and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has had far-reaching consequences beyond geopolitical tensions and military engagements. One significant impact has been on the illicit drug trade, particularly the trafficking of cocaine into Russia. Prior to the invasion, Ukraine's port city of Odessa was a major hub for various black-market commodities, including narcotics. The port's strategic location made it an ideal transit point for traffickers looking to move drugs into Eastern Europe, and Russia.

However, at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24 2022, the Russian military declared the Northwestern Black Sea, the location of the major Ukrainian ports, as a no-sail zone, effectively blockading the region and closing the ports. What followed was an increased naval presence in the region, bombings of the ports became frequent, and normal operations were completely disrupted.

As such, the closure of the major ports of the region of Odesa – Odesa, Chornomorsk, Pivdenny – had a profound impact on smuggling routes, and forced the smuggling groups to find alternatives to fuel the cocaine markets in Eastern Europe and Russia. Traffickers began

redirecting shipments through several Russian, which quickly became a key transit hub for cocaine destined for other markets. This shift was driven by market conditions in Eastern Europe, as well as the major disruption of regular cargo traffic overland to Russia as sanctions started to have an impact over 2022.

Since the start of the war, Russia has experienced a dramatic surge in cocaine smuggling. Data from Russian law enforcement agencies indicate that approximately 5.2 tons of cocaine valued at 350 billion rubles (\$3.4 billion) were seized between 2023 and 2024. This represents a tenfold increase compared to earlier levels. Most of this is seized in the container terminals of the Russian Baltic- and Sea of Azov ports, with St Petersburg taking a central place, with seizures up to one ton.

Popular smuggling methods include rip-on/rip-off, as well as concealing cocaine in fruit containers, such as bananas, which bypass inspections due to concerns about spoilage. This is similar to the conditions noted elsewhere on the European continent when cocaine has been shipped across the Atlantic.

Russian customs seize one tonne of cocaine in the port of St Petersburg, January 2024 (Photo: Telegram)



Due to major Ukrainian success since 2023 in battling the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the ports of the Odesa region are once again open to containerized shipping. Still, while allowing regular cargo to go into the ports, this has also indicated an uptick in cocaine seizures. This shows that smuggling groups are, yet again, using the port of Odesa to transport in cocaine. However, now that the smuggling groups have established routes into Russian ports, it is likely that they will continue to utilize these to get cocaine directly into the Russian market.

Disclaimer

Advice given and recommendations made do not constitute a warranty of future results by Risk Intelligence or an assurance against risk. Recommendations made are based on information available at the time of writing. No express or implied warranty is given in respect of any judgment made or to changes or any unforeseen escalation of any factors affecting any such judgement.

Documents are for the benefit of the client only and may not be disclosed to any third parties without the prior written consent of Risk Intelligence; such consent not to be withheld unreasonably. The client agrees to indemnify Risk Intelligence against any claims and any resulting damages that may be caused by any unauthorised disclosure of such documents.

Risk Intelligence A/S
Strandvejen 100
2900 Hellerup
Denmark

+45 7026 6230
riskintelligence.eu

RiskIntelligence