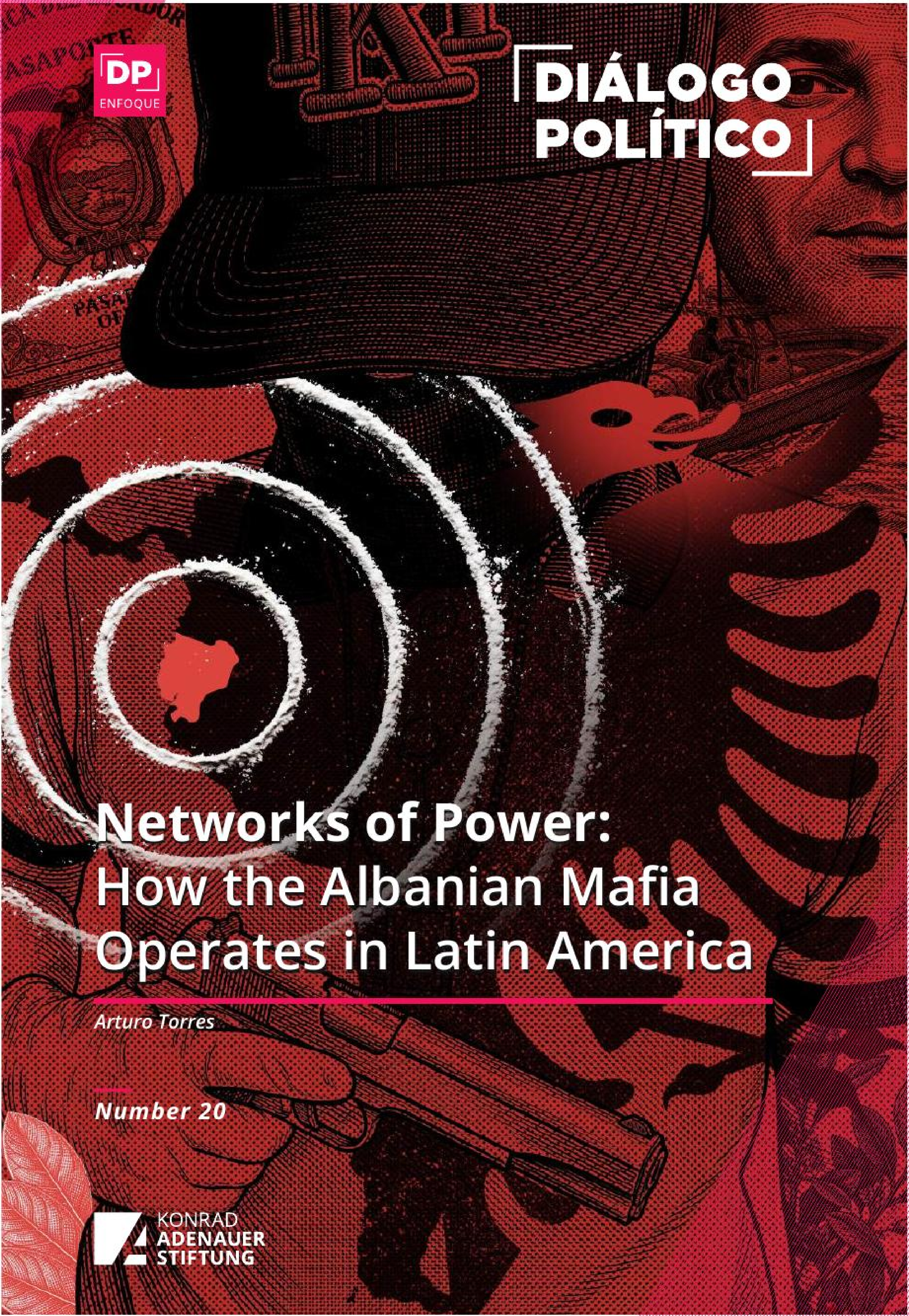

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Networks of Power: How the Albanian Mafia Operates in Latin America

Arturo Torres

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Summary

In less than a decade, Balkan criminal networks—led by Albanian organizations—expanded the cocaine trade from South American ports to Europe and Asia. Their rapid rise was fueled by growing global demand and by their ability to exploit Ecuador's institutional weaknesses, transforming the country into their main hub for criminal operations. Since then, Ecuador has become the principal launching platform for cocaine shipments bound for the Old Continent.

1. Introduction

From Ecuador, drug trafficking entrepreneurs from Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro became, in less than a decade, the leading players in the expansion of the cocaine trade across Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Their rise in transnational organized crime can be attributed to several factors. The main one was the surge in demand for cocaine in Europe, which, beginning in 2020 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, surpassed the United States as the world's largest destination market.

As a result, the cocaine market in the Old Continent quadrupled between 2010 and 2025, according to European Union reports. Over the same period, nearly every country in Latin America became a key link in the cocaine trafficking chain—whether as a producer, processor, transit country, or a haven for money laundering.

In response to this growing demand, South America now produces more than twice as much cocaine as it did a decade ago. According to figures from the DEA, coca cultivation in Colombia—the source of most of the world's cocaine—has tripled. The area of land used to cultivate coca leaf is now more than **five times larger** than it was when drug kingpin **Pablo Escobar** was killed in 1993. Today, **70 percent of the cocaine produced in Colombia leaves through Ecuadorian ports.**

Following the success of the Balkan criminal groups, organizations from Italy, Turkey, and Russia have also entered the region to secure a share of the trade, which continues to expand into increasingly distant markets, where costs and profits are higher.

A kilogram of cocaine, which costs around US$2,500 in Ecuador, can fetch as much as US$35,000 in Europe and US$150,000 in Australia. Few criminal networks—other than the Colombian and Mexican cartels at the height of their power—have managed to establish themselves in the cocaine trade as quickly and effectively as the Albanian, Serbian, and Montenegrin organizations.

2. Albanian Criminal Networks, Pioneers of Trafficking to Europe

Albanian criminal networks were the first to expand cocaine trafficking routes from Latin America to Europe. They began testing their model in Ecuador, which became their laboratory from 2009 onward, when the first arrivals of nationals from that country were recorded, particularly in Guayaquil, home to the main port terminals. That same year, Albanian national **Arber Çekaj** founded a banana export company in Ecuador, which he used to conceal narcotics in cargo shipments while acting as a representative of **Italy's 'Ndrangheta**, according to a joint investigation by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). Around the same period, Dritan Gjika—who over the years would become one of the prominent figures in the Albanian mafia—arrived in Ecuador on a temporary visitor visa. Three years later, in 2012, **Dritan Rexhepi** arrived, considered the pioneering leader of the Compañía Bello in Ecuador.

In less than a decade, Rexhepi, 45, had built a smuggling business stretching **from Colombia's coca fields to Ecuador's ports and the streets of Europe**, according to Ecuadorian investigators, rivaling the influence of Mexico's powerful cartels. His trademark, stamped on cocaine packages, was "Bello." Rexhepi, an Albanian national, built much of his empire from inside a cell in an Ecuadorian prison, forging connections with Latin American gangs and turning his cell block into an executive suite.

His emergence as a feared power broker inside a maximum-security prison in Cotopaxi was a symptom of the collapse of governmental control in Ecuador at all levels. In a short time, he turned the prison into his command and coordination center, with full technological means of communication to facilitate the shipment of dozens of tons of cocaine from the port of Guayaquil to Europe.

The Albanian's rise—from having been a hitman in his native country in the 1990s to becoming a transatlantic drug kingpin—is part of a global surge in the cocaine industry, a business far larger and more geographically diverse than at any other recent point in criminal history.

3. They Arrive as Tourists and Stay as Entrepreneurs

Interviewed by Diálogo Político, a narcotics officer who coordinates joint operations with police forces in several countries explained that Rexhepi was among the first Albanian criminal networks to arrive in Ecuador on exploratory trips as tourists, as they initially landed directly in Colombia, where they intended to establish a base to negotiate the purchase and shipment of cocaine.

They obtained false identity documents from the Civil Registry or paid to obtain permanent residence or investor visas. They also married Ecuadorian women, paying them to take part in the arrangement.

«Once they saw opportunities here in Ecuador, they would stay, according to migration records, for between one and two months. Later that pattern changed. They arrived as tourists but began to stay permanently», the officer said.

They obtained false identity documents from the Civil Registry or paid to obtain permanent residence or investor visas. They also married Ecuadorian women, paying them to take part in the arrangement.

When they detected opportunities within the corporate system, **they began acquiring or establishing export companies in the fruit and seafood sectors.** This phase began between 2012 and 2014. From then on, they used the façade of businesspeople, blending into Guayaquil's upper society and building contacts at the political and business levels.

Silently, these Balkan structures—part of the fourth wave of organized crime in Latin America—penetrated Ecuador's ports, judiciary, business sector, prison system, and security forces, in order to take control of key parts of the cocaine supply chain and trigger a flood of drugs into Europe: **an annual cocaine market worth more than US$12 billion.** These profits, in turn, allowed these organizations to infiltrate public and private institutions alike, corrupting any structure through networks of operators that remain largely active today

4. Italian and Albanian Criminal Networks, Opportunistic Allies

In the first stage, Albanian criminal networks and other individuals from **Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo** arrived as advance elements, according to reports from European agencies. Their arrival was part of a strategy devised by the Italian mafia, the **'Ndrangheta**, for which they worked as subordinates in Europe for two decades, mainly in operational and logistical roles.

This alliance is not new; it dates back to the 1990s. From that period onward, thousands of Albanian criminals left their country and migrated to Italy. In 1991, they fled the collapse of the communist regime, a severe economic crisis, and, years later, the turmoil caused by pyramid schemes.

Some of these migrants became integrated into criminal networks involved in cigarette smuggling, fraud, and the trafficking and retail distribution of marijuana and cocaine, serving as manpower for the Italian mafia.

This trend gradually changed as Albanian criminal networks gained power through their growth in the global criminal market as autonomous criminal organizations, marked by strong family tie.

Today, in Ecuador and the region, Albanian and Italian criminal networks are opportunistic allies in the shipment of cocaine from the ports of Guayaquil and El Oro, supported by robust structures that include route control, logistics, the creation of companies for money laundering and exports, as well as **operational support from local gangs with thousands of members**, as documented by drug intelligence agencies in Ecuador and Europe.

5. What is the 'Ndrangheta?

Originally from Calabria in southern Italy, the 'Ndrangheta is today the powerful criminal organization in Italy. According to the Italian judiciary, it has **approximately 20,000 members worldwide** and generates an annual turnover of more than €50 billion. Its strength lies in family ties: it is impenetrable. There are virtually no high-level collaborators with justice within the organization. It should not be understood as a drug trafficking or money laundering organization in the traditional sense. Instead, it is a global network of trust and brokerage that provides services as experienced regional facilitators, connecting supply and demand in different parts of the world.

The arrival of the 'Ndrangheta in Ecuador accelerated significantly from 2008 onward, when President Rafael Correa (2007–2017) promoted the policy of universal citizenship through constitutional means. This allowed leaders and operatives of Italian criminal groups—among others—to enter without significant controls, obtain Ecuadorian travel documents, and move freely across the hemisphere.

6. What determined the deployment of the cartels?

In addition to the external factor of growing demand in Europe, several key elements linked to the internal circumstances and events that Ecuador experienced in the first decade of this century also played a role. Undoubtedly, these factors were decisive in facilitating the penetration of Balkan cartels in the region

Among the main ones, the following can be highlighted:

- A **dollarized economy**, with a large share of transactions conducted in cash, which offered ample opportunities for money laundering accessible to almost anyone.

- A **network of ten ports** (seven private and three under concession) used for exporting goods across the Pacific, from where narcotics are shipped aboard vessels carrying bananas and other fruit bound for Europe.

- The **expulsion of the Military Cooperation Assistance Group** and the closure of the U.S. military air station at the Ecuadorian base in Manta, from where surveillance aircraft operated to monitor the movement of ships and speedboats in the Pacific, with the aim of coordinating counter-narcotics operations with the navies of Ecuador and Colombia, in the context of Plan Colombia.

- The **dismantling of intelligence systems** and the elimination of integrated control checkpoints on the country's main highways.

- The scrapping of functional **air radar systems** used to monitor drug-trafficking aircraft, which could have been upgraded in 2008. However, they were replaced with Chinese-made radars acquired during the administration of President Rafael Correa, which never became operational until 2016, when new Spanish-made equipment was procured.

- The **breakdown of relations and cooperation** for intelligence sharing between **Colombia, Ecuador, and the United States from 2008 to 2013**. This rupture was the response of then President Correa's government to the Colombian armed forces' bombing of a camp belonging to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) located in Angostura, Ecuador. Raúl Reyes, one of the group's leading commanders, was killed in the attack; by that time, the FARC was already a partner of the Sinaloa Cartel in shipping cocaine to the United States.

- The principle of **universal citizenship** was incorporated into the new Constitution. This provision made it easier for any foreign national entering Ecuador to obtain a visa or permanent residence, without any review of their criminal record.

7. The Migration That Changed Everything

Just a few months after visa-free entry was introduced, without background checks, organized crime networks from Russia, the Middle East, and China opened new migrant-smuggling routes through Ecuador bound for the United States.

During the two years in which Ecuador kept its borders open, thousands of nationals from the Balkans, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia entered the country. These included citizens of Albania, Afghanistan, China, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Cuba, Pakistan, and Somalia. According to migration data, there were 92 entries by Pakistani nationals in 2006 (before the policy change). By 2008, that figure had risen to 178, and by 2010, to 518—an increase of 550 percent in four years. Moreover, official estimates indicate that around 60,000 Cubans entered Ecuador between 2008 and 2010. Most were headed to the United States.

As a result, the indiscriminate entry of foreign nationals into Ecuador became a major challenge for efforts to combat regional organized crime and transnational drug trafficking organizations, particularly the Balkan mafias, which took advantage of this policy for 14 years to strengthen their structures in a variety of ways.

In response to warnings from several countries—especially the United States—regarding the entry of transnational criminal networks, and following the arrests of several of their leaders in Ecuador, Correa himself was compelled in 2010 to reinstate visa requirements for nationals of 12 countries, including Afghanistan, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Korea, and Cuba. His successors—Lenín Moreno, Guillermo Lasso, and Daniel Noboa—also decided to extend this restriction to nationals of additional countries, bringing the current total to 38, including Venezuela, Albania, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China.

Nevertheless, the Correa administration continued to downplay the warnings conveyed by other countries , which, in the absence of a response, began to make their concerns about the situation public. In May 2011, Jay Bergman, then the DEA's Director for Andean Region Operations, stated that Ecuador was becoming a melting pot for foreign drug mafias: «We have cases of Albanian, Ukrainian, Italian, and Chinese organized crime in Ecuador, all of whom obtain their product for distribution in their respective countries.»

Just a few months after visa-free entry was introduced, without background checks, organized crime networks from Russia, the Middle East, and China opened new migrant-smuggling routes through Ecuador bound for the United States.

«Ecuador is becoming the 'United Nations' of organized crime, » Bergman added, warning that the country was already being used as a base by drug traffickers from Albania to China to strike deals with local cocaine kingpins operating independently.

8. The Albanian Criminal Networks Advance Unnoticed

The Mexican cartels arrived first. By the time the Balkan drug trafficking groups established themselves in Ecuador, the Sinaloa Cartel had already opened trafficking routes through the country in the early 2000s, establishing its own transportation networks and money laundering infrastructure. From then on, **Los Sombrerudos became steadfast partners of the FARC**, which since the 1990s had maintained networks for procuring weapons, explosives, fuel, and military supplies through militia groups and criminal operatives that, over time, evolved into criminal gangs. The principal ones were Los Choneros, Los Lagartos, Cubanos, and the Latin Kings.

The arrival of George W. Bush to the presidency and the September 11, 2001, attacks in Washington and New York further worsened the situation for the FARC, which was placed on the list of terrorist organizations alongside Al-Qaeda.

The military escalation in Colombia triggered an exodus of 400,000 Colombian peasants to Ecuador. The border became a strategic area for the drug cartels, which, in alliance with the FARC, established additional laboratories to process cocaine, increasingly close to the border zone or on the Ecuadorian side. Ecuador became the outlet and departure corridor for an ever-growing flow of cocaine as a result of pressure from Colombian and U.S. forces. The country was unprepared for the storm that lay ahead. Over time, it became a drug trafficking hub through which 70 percent of the cocaine produced in that country leaves.

Guayaquil Port, Ecuador.

9. How the Business Went Global

The person who best understood that Ecuador had become a sanctuary for global business within the new boom in global cocaine distribution was the Albanian Dritan Rexhepi, who was arrested in 2014 under the identity Marataj Lulezim in Guayaquil, along with ten other members of his group, which was dedicated to the storage and shipment of cocaine purchased on the border with Colombia. His cover was that of a businessman exporting timber to Albania.

Rexhepi was arrested together with Azemi Remzi, from Kosovo, while they were traveling in a vehicle. Both were in possession of documents and passports under different identities. They were not carrying drugs, but were the masterminds of the operation, according to the prosecution.

> ***these new transnational networks are often criminal coalitions of disparate and independent groups, rather than hierarchical and violently competitive cartels, highly skilled and adept at forming suitable alliances.***

10. Multiple Identities

Italy was seeking his extradition so he could serve a sentence for drug trafficking. In that country he used three false identities, as he did in his country of origin, and in Belgium he held four falsified identities. In Albania, he was wanted for murder and for the manufacture and illegal possession of weapons and ammunition. In Italy, for drug trafficking, and in Belgium, for robbery. In 1999, he killed a man with a firearm in Albania. He was 19 years old. He carried out other killings in 2006 in the same country.

According to Interpol, before arriving in Ecuador under the identity Marataj Lulezim, he had been detained and escaped from prisons in Albania in 2006; in Italy in 2011; and in Belgium in 2011. He was also arrested in Madrid, Spain. Interpol reports indicate that he formed his drug trafficking organization between 2006 and 2007. He imported cocaine into Italy and heroin from the Netherlands. In 2010, he was sentenced in Italy to 16 years in prison. When he was captured in Ecuador in 2014, he was posing as a businessman with commercial ties to Greece. He was ultimately sentenced to 13 years in prison.


Colombia
Production zone
Ecuador: Main departure hub
70%
for shipments to Europe
ALBANIAN MAFIA
A new paradigm in transnational crime in Ecuador
Commercial fronts
Banana and seafood companies used to conceal drugs inside containers
IMPACT AND GROWTH OF THE BUSINESS
2019
2025
17
50.9
Homicide rate
(per 100k inh.)
80
226
Seized cocaine
(METRIC TONS)

He was initially held in La Roca prison, then transferred to the Guayaquil Regional Prison, and finally moved to the Cotopaxi prison, where he befriended leaders of Los Choneros, Jorge Luis Zambrano, alias Rasquiña (killed in 2021), and Adolfo Macías, "Fito," now extradited to the United States, according to a founding member of the gang interviewed under condition of anonymity for security reasons.

While in prison, Rexhepi built strategic alliances, competing with—and working alongside—the world's most powerful cartels, transforming the way the business is conducted.

According to anti-drug researchers interviewed by Diálogo Político, these new transnational networks are often criminal coalitions of disparate and independent groups, rather than hierarchical and violently competitive cartels, highly skilled and adept at forming suitable alliances.

11. Strategic Alliances

Rexhepi thus built strategic partnerships both with South American traffickers and with leaders of criminal groups across Europe. His objective was simple, according to investigators and analysts: **to sell as much cocaine as possible, with substantial profits** for all parties involved in the agreements.

His comfortable and profitable stay in Cotopaxi prison came to an end when he learned through his network of informants that the Italian authorities were seeking his extradition on drug trafficking charges. Rexhepi then decided it was time to move again.

An Ecuadorian judge, who is now in prison, citing medical necessity, ordered his house arrest in an exclusive neighbourhood of the port city of Guayaquil in August 2021. As was to be expected, in the following days Rexhepi fled to Colombia and from there flew to Turkey under another identity. Two years later, he was captured and extradited in 2025 to Albania, where he is currently imprisoned.

Following the same pattern, nine other drug traffickers of different nationalities were released by judges who unlawfully reduced their sentences and sent them to serve them at home, including the Serbian national Jezdimir Srdan.

The judiciary is a fertile ground for impunity for drug lords, either because judges yield to the demands of criminals or because they are threatened and lack state protection. This is another of the institutional weaknesses exploited by transnational crime in Ecuador.

At the beginning of 2026, anti-corruption judge Juan Serrano sentenced the Serbian national Jezdimir Srdan to ten years in prison for money laundering, but he was forced to leave the country after the government withdrew the protection provided by two police officers, despite the increased risk to his life. Senior officials of the Judicial Council, which oversees judges, pressured him to rule in favor of the Serbian defendant. Srdan's actions remain unpunished, and the Prosecutor's Office investigation against him has not advanced.

After escaping, **Rexhepi was replaced by fellow Albanian Dritan Gjika**, who followed in his footsteps but went further: he built a business empire for both fruit exports and money laundering.

The criminal organization was structured under a dual corporate scheme with two heads. **On one side, the logistical and operational wing was led by Gjika**, known in his communication networks by the alias "Tony." He was responsible for purchasing cocaine in laboratories along the Colombian border, its transport and secure storage, as well as the overall management of the foreign trade logistics chain. This gave him access to privileged information on exports and destinations, allowing him to select the most suitable cargo for shipping cocaine consignments, as well as to infiltrate and recruit police officers and agents responsible for risk profiling at Ecuadorian port terminals.

On the other side, there was a large-scale financial and money-laundering structure led by Mario Fabián Sánchez, an Argentine citizen naturalized in Ecuador. Together they built a robust network of shell companies that simulated legitimate fruit export operations—especially bananas—using legally registered firms.

These companies served as the perfect vehicle for shipping cocaine hydrochloride concealed in banana shipments to international ports in the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Turkey, Albania, and Russia.

A major turning point in the investigation came through the international legal assistance request to Spain and France. Investigators obtained records extracted from the encrypted communications platform Sky ECC. This was how the leader and his operators communicated covertly to avoid identification. The boss used an alphanumeric PIN, while his accomplices, logistics coordinators, and financial operators used identifiers such as the aliases Viejo or Pájaro.

The organization had a deeply concerning level of penetration among port workers and police officers in Guayaquil, according to a report by the National Anti-Drug Investigation Unit with European Coordination (UIACE).

12. The Purity of a Premium Product

The monitoring of logos printed on drug blocks revealed that the network operated by producing narcotics on exclusive, order-based demand. Through encrypted chats, buyers requested specific brands to certify the purity of their product. As a result, a systematic analysis of logos detected on packages seized in Ecuador was implemented, in order to trace the possible owners of the confiscated shipments.

Investigators also uncovered large contracts commissioned by European clients for shipments of up to six tons of cocaine, whose purity—reaching up to 96 percent—was certified by intermediaries, after which they stamped the MIMOS logo.

In addition, the network operated highly sophisticated clandestine laboratories. When clients in Europe demanded information on quality, intermediaries assured them that the product had a purity of 96 percent, demonstrating that they possessed these capabilities.

In this case, known as Pampa, the investigation was not limited to the seizure of shipments at ports, but rather involved a comprehensive inquiry covering organized crime and money laundering, with the aim of tracing and targeting the financial apparatus of the structure. The international investigation, which led to the conviction of 14 individuals, revealed that Mario Fabián, Dritan's associate, led a vast money-laundering scheme of global proportions. In Spain, operating together with an individual named Juan Ortigosa, the criminal network created various shell companies. Through continuous "capital increases" justified by illicit funds, they acquired multiple real estate assets. The crown jewel of this laundering empire was the acquisition of the operating unit of the well-known Mae West nightclub in Granada, Spain, for €3.8 million, in a deal whose real valuation was close to €6.5 million. The network also managed at least seven luxury properties rented in Spain and two exclusive properties in Dubai (United Arab Emirates) valued at more than €1.2 million. Dubai is the hub of Balkan mafia activity—a haven for money laundering.

In the field of international judicial cooperation, this investigation involved the implementation of several special investigative techniques, such as the coordination of joint teams between Ecuador and Spain, as well as the effective submission of multiple international legal assistance requests to Spain, Belgium, and the Netherlands in relation to the locations where shipments sent by this organization were seized, and to France for access to communications from the encrypted application Sky ECC. As a result, these requests were admitted as evidence in the corresponding procedural stages, as were the Sky ECC data.

Arconian ship detained in Gran Canaria in 2026. Source: Spanish Civil Guard

13. Innovation in Investigative Methodology

The success of the operation was based on two pillars that go beyond the logic of reactive policing:

- **High-level Cooperation:** A transnational model was established through real-time information sharing between the police forces of Spain and Ecuador.

- **Financial Traceability:** Priority was given to reconstructing the flow of funds and corporate links, rather than simply seizing narcotics, making it possible to identify the organization's entire structure.

14. Escalating Insecurity

The same year the Pampa investigation began, Ecuador's security crisis spiraled out of control. Starting in 2021, around forty criminal gangs emerged, providing cocaine transportation and storage services in Ecuador to the Sinaloa Cartel, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), and the Balkan (Albanian) cartels alike. Disputes over control of additional territories for criminal activity fueled the violence. From that point onward, the State entered a period in which it lost the capacity to exercise its authority over organized crime—a condition it has yet to overcome. It had already lost its preventive and reactive capacity several years earlier, and subsequently proved unable to sustain its role of maintaining control and enforcing the law.

Between 2019 and 2025, the homicide rate rose from 17 to 50.9 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. In just four years, Ecuador became the most violent country in Latin America.

The rise in violence is closely linked to increased cocaine production. While 80 tons were seized in 2019, seizures reached 226 tons in 2025, for a total of 835 tons over that period. According to conservative estimates by anti-drug intelligence analysts, more than 4,000 tons of cocaine hydrochloride were shipped from Ecuador to the United States and European markets during those years.

The vast resources generated by this business cascade down to criminal networks, many of them intertwined with political parties. Their hundreds of operatives within the judiciary, the police, the armed forces, oversight bodies, law firms, digital-native media outlets, banks and credit unions, real estate companies, and other businesses also benefit directly. There is enough for everyone.

15. The Ideal Laboratory

Ecuador thus became an ideal laboratory for mafia networks and for the narco-political elite. Building on everything they had learned there, some of these groups have even ventured into other regions and other countries, where they forge discreet, unexpected alliances to strengthen the lucrative business of organized crime and diversify their sources of income. It is a vessel powered by several engines. They are the protagonists of the **fourth wave of transnational crime**, according to the thesis advanced by experts Douglas Farah and Pablo Cevallos.

The Balkan criminal networks are not in conflict with the Mexican cartels. They are distinct transnational actors operating within the same criminal ecosystem in Ecuador, but with fundamentally different roles, objectives, and business models. They do not compete directly with one another. In practice, their activities are complementary.

The Mexican cartels bear primary responsibility for the violence that has ravaged Ecuador. The violence is driven by the fierce competition between the country's two largest local gangs: Los Lobos, allied with the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), and Los Choneros, allied with the Sinaloa Cartel.

The cartels also compete aggressively for territory, trafficking routes, and control of the Panama Canal. The CJNG, in particular, is recognized as being more aggressive and less willing to negotiate than the Sinaloa Cartel when expanding into new territories. It operates through emissaries who establish alliances with local Ecuadorian groups, a modus operandi that maintains a certain institutional distance.

Although the Albanian criminal networks are not nonviolent, they generate a more targeted form of violence. They have been documented carrying out their own targeted killings rather than hiring local hitmen, and their payment of Ecuadorian groups with weapons has indirectly contributed to the escalation of violence. Nevertheless, their impact on everyday violence is less significant than that of the Mexican cartels.

These three actors coexist more than they compete directly. Their destination markets differ—Europe for the Balkan and Albanian mafias, and the United States and Mexico for the Mexican cartels. The real competition takes place between the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG for control of routes and local allies.

The Albanian criminal networks operate in a different sphere: the **export logistics chain to Europe**. They do not compete with the Mexican cartels for territorial control.

In fact, the CJNG has forged alliances with the Italian 'Ndrangheta—a traditional partner of the Albanian criminal networks—to gain access to European markets and diversify its money-laundering operations, suggesting that these networks complement one another more than they exclude one another.

16. More Destinations in Europe

The leaders of Balkan criminal groups continue to adapt, diversify, and prosper economically. As European law enforcement authorities have intensified interdiction operations, particularly at the major ports of northern Europe, drug traffickers have shifted to other points of entry.

Rotterdam and Antwerp, Europe's largest ports, seized approximately half the amount of cocaine in the first half of 2024 as they did during the same period in 2025. Spain, which has continued to seize record quantities of cocaine, has now overtaken Belgium and the Netherlands as Europe's principal gateway for cocaine. Sweden and Norway have also reported record cocaine seizures at their ports since 2023, according to the European Union's anti-drug agency. Germany more than doubled its cocaine seizures between 2022 and 2023, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

In Ecuador, there is evidence that the Balkan criminal networks continue to expand into new routes. In an interview for this Diálogo Político report, Anti-Narcotics Director Colonel Manuel Gómez confirmed that European countries remain the primary destinations for cocaine shipments from Ecuador, in the following order: Spain, Belgium, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Italy, and France. In addition, new routes have been established to Cuba.

Traffickers are increasingly using laboratories in Europe to process cocaine or to separate it from the materials used to conceal it. The European Union reported the dismantling of 39 cocaine laboratories in its Member States in 2022, compared with 15 in 2019. One laboratory alone, uncovered by Spanish authorities in 2024, was producing 200 kilograms of cocaine per day.

17. Asia and Africa: New Routes

One of the most striking developments identified by anti-drug authorities in Ecuador, Colombia, and Europe is the **consolidation of new drug trafficking routes to Asia (China and Thailand) and Africa**, Colonel Gómez notes. The cases identified indicate that the cocaine purchased by the Balkan cartels is produced in plantations and laboratories controlled by dissident factions of the FARC, particularly the Border Commands, along the Colombia–Ecuador border in the department of Putumayo, opposite the Ecuadorian province of Sucumbíos.

The drugs enter Ecuador through Sucumbíos and is transported by river in speedboats through the Ecuadorian Amazon provinces of Napo, Pastaza, and Morona to Iquitos, Peru. It then continues along the Marañón River to Manaus and from there to Brazil's Atlantic coast, where it is loaded onto semi-submersible vessels—many of them crewed by Ecuadorian navigators—for transport to northwestern Africa. From there, the cocaine is moved by ships and high-speed boats across the Mediterranean to the coasts of various European countries. It does not reach Europe exclusively aboard fruit-export vessels calling at European ports.

There are also indications that cocaine is being shipped aboard vessels departing from the ports of Guayaquil, sailing across the Pacific and transiting the Panama Canal. That is the assessment shared with Diálogo Político by an anti-narcotics officer who coordinates transnational investigations with his European counterparts, following the largest cocaine seizure ever recorded in Atlantic waters, carried out by the Spanish authorities on May 7, 2026, south of the Canary Islands.

More than 30 tons of cocaine were aboard the vessel Arconian when it was intercepted after departing from Sierra Leona in West Africa. Authorities also found military-grade weapons and 42,000 liters of gasoline intended to supply high-speed boats that were allegedly to unload the shipment on the Iberian Peninsula. The vessel's 27 crew members were arrested, including five Dutch nationals believed to be the leaders of the organization.

18. Larger Shipments

The increase in large-scale cocaine seizures in European countries, involving a wide range of criminal groups and federations from different countries—among which the Albanian mafia stands out—is explained by **the steady rise in cocaine production in Colombia**, where agents established that this shipment originated.

This case also illustrates some of the most notable changes in the highly fragmented cocaine supply chain in recent years.

Albanian criminal networks have made a qualitative leap and represent a new paradigm. They have ceased to be a drug trafficking cartel and have become a transnational criminal enterprise linked to a dense and diversified network of illicit activities such as illegal mining, arms and wildlife trafficking, cybercrime, and human trafficking.

According to Spanish authorities, this shipment is linked to the **Mocro Mafia**, a term used to identify a complex web of criminal networks and structures based in the Netherlands. Some of these, like other European organizations, have expanded their presence across several Latin American countries to negotiate drug shipments directly. According to Colonel Gómez, the degree of connection and involvement of organizations operating in Ecuador in this case is currently under investigation.

In Colombia, cocaine supply is negotiated with one of the armed groups that currently control coca leaf cultivation, cocaine production laboratories, and trafficking routes to export points.

For this reason, the presence in Latin America of emissaries from European organizations, as well as intermediaries acting as bridges with these groups, is becoming increasingly common. In the Ecuadorian case, leaders of the Balkan criminal networks—specifically the Albanian criminal network known as Compañía Bello —rely on intermediaries with varying degrees of influence and political, economic, and government connections.

The success of figures such as Rexhepi and Gjika cannot be understood without the broader context of Albanian expansion. The alliance with the 'Ndrangheta was their springboard. Balkan groups used their close ties with the Italian 'Ndrangheta to establish their own wholesale cocaine supply chain from Latin America to Europe, engaging directly with producers in Colombia and establishing a permanent presence in source regions. Initially, they managed lower levels of the supply chain—leaving strategic decisions to the Italian criminal networks—but this position gave them a unique opportunity to consolidate control over the supply chain as they expanded.

19. Judicial and Political Links

Judicial investigations have uncovered specific links between Albanian traffickers and the highest levels of Ecuadorian politics, including the judiciary system.

Danilo Carrera Drouet, brother-in-law of former president Guillermo Lasso, and the Albanian Gjika were linked to corruption networks and investigated for their ties to organized crime in Ecuador. Both were prosecuted by Ecuadorian authorities in parallel cases. Carrera was sentenced in November 2024 to ten years in prison for organized crime in the Encuentro case, after being identified as the leader of a corruption network that facilitated contracts in public companies in the electricity sector. Gjika was indicted in August 2024 alongside more than twenty defendants in the Pampa case. He is currently detained in Dubai.

Journalistic and judicial investigations revealed that the corruption network operated by Carrera had connections to the late Rubén Cherres, who in turn maintained close ties to Gjika's illicit activities and was murdered in 2023. Cherres was a friend and associate of Gjika and introduced him to the then-president Lasso's brother-in-law. Several specialized police units were monitoring this network, including one that coordinates actions with Europol. An officer from that unit confirmed to Diálogo Político that when they were about to carry out the arrest of all members of the organization—who were preparing a cocaine shipment—officers from another investigative agency leaked classified information about the surveillance operation to the digital media outlet La Posta, which then reported that an operation was underway. «That publication alerted the leaders of the organization, who left the country, frustrating the entire operation we had in progress, » the officer stated.

He also revealed judicial schemes designed to secure the release of imprisoned gang members linked to the same structures that facilitate the operations of foreign groups such as the Albanian criminal networks.

The profitable permissiveness that enables Albanian money laundering in Ecuador has its judicial counterpart in a system where impunity prevails and justice has failed to act.

20. Routes and Identified Markets

In Germany (2017–2018), authorities investigated an Albanian group that imported large quantities of cocaine concealed in banana shipments from Ecuador to the port of Hamburg. The case had connections with Paraguay, the Netherlands, and Albania.

In Greece (2018), 35% of individual members of criminal groups involved in cocaine trafficking were of Albanian nationality. The proportion was even higher in leadership positions.

In Belgium, Albanian criminal networks were involved not only in extracting cocaine from ports, but also in exporting it onward to Italy and Albania.

Expansion into Colombia: in October 2025, Albanian national Artur Tushi was killed in Medellín, where he had been living using Ecuadorian documents. One month earlier, Interpol arrested Colombian national Samir Rosales Rodríguez, alias El Químico, **who coordinated cocaine shipments from the Colombian Pacific coast**—primarily concealed in organic fertilizers—destined for Albania.

Albanian criminal networks **have also been documented in Peru**, where they worked to produce and dispatch a liquid cocaine shipment valued at USD 160 million for transit to Europe. **In Bolivia, a series of murders and the seizure of three tons** of drugs were linked to Albanian criminal groups, although Bolivian authorities do not include them in their official reports.

However, the Ecuadorian case is particularly alarming, as it is the matrix where mafias and cartels from several continents converge. In the last decade, this country accounted for up to 70% of international cocaine trade, according to United Nations data from 2025. Robert Fay, head of Europol's Drugs Unit, stated that Ecuador is «not probably, but definitively, the number one gateway for cocaine coming from Latin America into Europe.

All these criminal dynamics of rapid expansion bear the imprint of the Albanian mafia, which **has turned Ecuador into a key player in the global criminal landscape**, with a significant caveat: Albanian criminal networks have made a qualitative leap and represent a new paradigm. They have ceased to be a drug trafficking cartel and have become a transnational criminal enterprise linked to a dense and diversified network of illicit activities such as illegal mining, arms and wildlife trafficking, cybercrime, and human trafficking.

By diversifying their criminal portfolio, Balkan criminal networks have been able to respond effectively to insufficient and inconsistent state countermeasures and to shifting socio-economic and political conditions, relying on powerful—mostly invisible—partners who form part of the political and economic establishment in both public and private spheres.

21. The International Dimension

When Balkan mafias and Albanian criminal networks turned Europe into the center of gravity of global drug trafficking six years ago, one of the main consequences was the infiltration of criminal structures in several countries on the continent, particularly port officials and police officers responsible for cargo control and sensitive money-laundering investigations. A notable case, according to an Ecuadorian anti-narcotics officer, was the arrest of the head of the money-laundering investigation unit of the Spanish National Police. He was accused of accepting multimillion-euro bribes from Western Balkan mafias to facilitate the entry of drugs from Latin America. Although this is considered an isolated case that does not undermine the work of Spanish security forces, it has raised concerns and led to a review of internal controls at both political and institutional levels, according to a Spanish official who cooperates in intelligence work with Ecuador.

However, such corruption facilitating drug trafficking has also reached other strategic European port facilities, particularly in the North Sea, including ports in the United Kingdom. The British government has been one of Ecuador's main allies in funding projects such as a data fusion center operating at the port of Guayaquil.

Cocaine originating in Ecuador and Latin America has acted as a criminal steroid, strengthening European mafia structures. In the specific case of Albanian criminal networks, it has consolidated criminal operations with tentacles in Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia.

The report on the fourth transnational criminal wave warns that Balkan groups have driven a significant increase in targeted killings in Europe, particularly in Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia, directly linked to disputes over control of cocaine routes originating in Ecuador.

The influence of Balkan mafias has also been notable in Latin America, where they have accelerated the penetration of organized crime into state institutions. According to multiple sources, transnational criminal organizations resort to violence against communities, widespread extortion, and the corruption of public officials and private actors, operating under a model of territorial control or dominance over strategic infrastructure.

The Albanian strategy is particularly subtle: their penetration was never confrontational. They infiltrated quietly by offering cocaine export services to Latin American organizations without disputing territory through violence.

22. Key Takeaways

1. Balkan mafias expanded during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, taking advantage of the fact that authorities worldwide were focused on understanding and combating the virus. Anti-drug enforcement was almost non-existent, which facilitated the significant entry of cocaine into Ecuador from Colombia. By mid-2020, a sharp increase in cocaine shipments from the ports of Guayaquil to Europe was recorded. Lockdowns also drove a rise in consumption, particularly in Europe.

2. This new consumption dynamic not only empowered Albanian criminal networks and other Balkan criminal networks, but also gave rise to new, more versatile criminal structures with a transnational outlook. As a result, strong alliances were consolidated between dissident FARC groups in Colombia and local Ecuadorian gangs that also operated for the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.

3. Alongside the expansion of the cocaine trade, political corruption intensified and proved more resilient in the face of states with weakened or absent defenses. Institutions were permeated by organized crime operatives, particularly within the police and the judiciary in the Ecuadorian case.

4. The dramatic increase in drug-related revenues led to the fragmentation of dominant criminal groups. Dozens of new criminal cells emerged, driving up violence over territorial control and increasing homicide rates.

5. Amid this "macabre boom," criminal groups also diversified their portfolios to include illegal mining, which has devastated sensitive areas of the Amazon, as well as extortion, wildlife trafficking, arms trafficking, and explosives trafficking, among other crimes.

6. Faced with this unprecedented wave of criminal activity, Europe has struggled to address the scale and depth of the crisis and to find solutions by strengthening cooperation and support for the countries that serve as safe havens for Balkan mafias, particularly Ecuador and Colombia. Its approach is more comprehensive, aiming to tackle the structural causes of crime through training, social policy support, and intelligence sharing, while the United States has become the Ecuadorian government's main ally in its hardline policy, marked by the militarization of the conflict since January 2025.

7. As of June 2026, the Ecuadorian government has made no substantial progress in curbing crime in its various forms. All experts and officials consulted by Diálogo Político, including European and American officials, agree that the government lacks an effective and multidimensional strategy to overcome the security crisis that threatens the survival of democracy in the country.

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