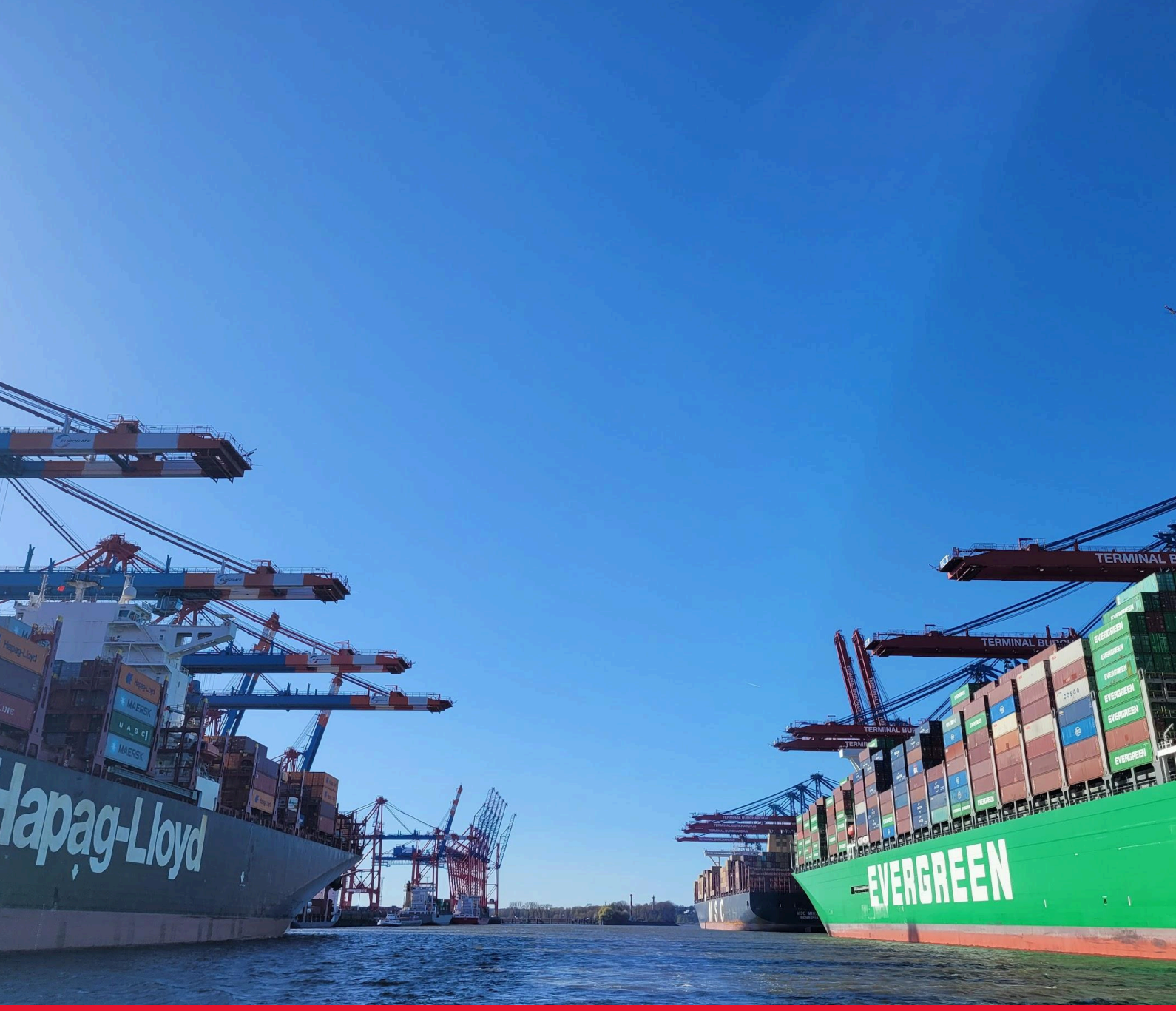

DRUG MARKETS, VIOLENCE AND THE CITY

European Ports in the Transnational Cocaine Value Chain

MASTER GOVERNING THE LARGE METROPOLIS

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PREFACE

This research project was carried out by four Master's students from the “Governing the Large Metropolis” program at the Urban School of Sciences Po, as part of their Capstone Project. Over the course of one semester, Daria, Jiangnan, Nils, and Ane explored the semi-wholesale cocaine trade in Germany and Spain — a crucial but often overlooked segment situated between the well-studied wholesale and retail markets. Their investigation focused on the actors, infrastructures, and transactions that link large-scale importation to street-level distribution, shedding light on a key but under-researched layer of the cocaine economy.

Over the past decade, the cocaine trade into Europe has grown significantly, driven by the platformisation of international markets and the resulting surge in European supply. These transformations have reshaped the governance dynamics of global value chains, with deep implications for urban violence, public health, and the logic of state responses. Understanding these shifts is essential to crafting more effective and context-sensitive policy strategies — and the semi-wholesale level plays a pivotal role in connecting global flows to local impacts.

The project was developed under the academic supervision of Gabriel Feltran and Paolo Campana at Sciences Po, and in close collaboration with David Weiberger from MILDECA (Interministerial Mission for Combating Drugs and Addictive Behaviors). The partnership between Sciences Po and MILDECA has produced a number of important outcomes in recent years, and this research stands out as one of the most significant. It demonstrates how Capstone projects can generate valuable insights at the intersection of academic research and public policy.

The students approached the work with exceptional dedication and methodological care, combining documentary analysis with fieldwork in multiple languages and across diverse cultural contexts. Their capacity to engage critically with complex materials, conduct interviews, and synthesize findings reflects not only their individual strengths but also the collaborative spirit of the project. The result is a nuanced and original contribution to our understanding of urban drug markets and their governance.

Gabriel Feltran,
Capstone Tutor

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THE PARTNER

MILDECA (Mission Interministérielle de Lutte contre les Drogues et les Conduites Addictives), under the French Prime Minister's authority, coordinates national efforts to combat drugs and addiction. Its research mission, led by sociologist David Weinberger - co-founder of the Observatory of International Criminalities (ObsCI) - focuses on illicit drug markets and transnational crime.

In collaboration with Sciences Po's Urban School, MILDECA's PIRALAD program has launched a conference series addressing the urban challenges linked to narcotics trafficking, fostering dialogue between researchers and public officials. Together, these initiatives aim to foster a critically grounded, policy-based understanding of the complex urban dynamics shaped by cocaine trafficking.

METHODOLOGY

This research follows a multi-method qualitative approach, combining desk research, semi-structured interviews, and field observations. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, our methodology prioritizes perspectives from official institutions, civil society organizations, academic researchers, and investigative journalists. All participants were anonymized to ensure ethical standards and protect their identities.

Phase 1: Desk Research and Field Site Selection

The first phase involved identifying the research gap and selecting the type of drug of focus and relevant field sites through desk research. We compiled and reviewed academic publications, press reports, policy reports, open-source quantitative data, and documentaries. Additionally, we spoke with academics and policymakers to understand the key trends of drug trafficking and the major gap in the research.

Phase 2: Data Collection

We conducted 19 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of actors related to drug trafficking enforcement, logistics, and policy in Hamburg, Valencia, and Algeciras. Interviewees included customs representatives, port officials, police delegates, prosecution members, prison executives, policy consultants, academic researchers, investigative journalists, and social workers. The interviews allowed us to explore perspectives from diverse institutions and working knowledge from the field.

Complementing these interviews, we conducted field observations in key logistical and urban environments, including port facilities, adjacent neighborhoods, community spaces, and night-time economies. These observations helped us understand the spatial and temporal dynamics of the spaces where licit and illicit economies intersect.

In addition, we also reviewed archival documents and audiovisual materials, such as court records, legal proceedings as well as documentaries, allowing us to have a detailed knowledge of the workings of drug trafficking through port infrastructure.

Phase 3: Qualitative Data Processing

All qualitative data were coded thematically using Open Coding and Axial Coding. We first developed open codes based on recurring themes, then we grouped these into broader categories to identify key patterns and contradictions. This process enabled us to do comparison in institutional narratives across different actors and locations.

Limitations

Given the covert nature of organized drug trafficking networks, direct access to individuals operating on the “illegal” side of the system was not feasible. This limits our ability to represent perspectives from within the networks themselves. Our research is therefore inherently partial, and we remain critically aware of our positionality as student-researchers and the potential biases shaped by access, language, and institutional framing. Rather than aiming for comprehensive coverage, this project offers a situated, layered understanding of the issue as seen from the vantage points available to us.

FIELDS STUDIED

Our research focused on three major European port cities: Hamburg (Germany), Valencia and Algeciras (Spain). Each of these port cities constitutes a crucial node in the transatlantic cocaine trade, as the third, fourth and fifth largest European ports in terms of annual container circulation, just after Rotterdam and Antwerp.

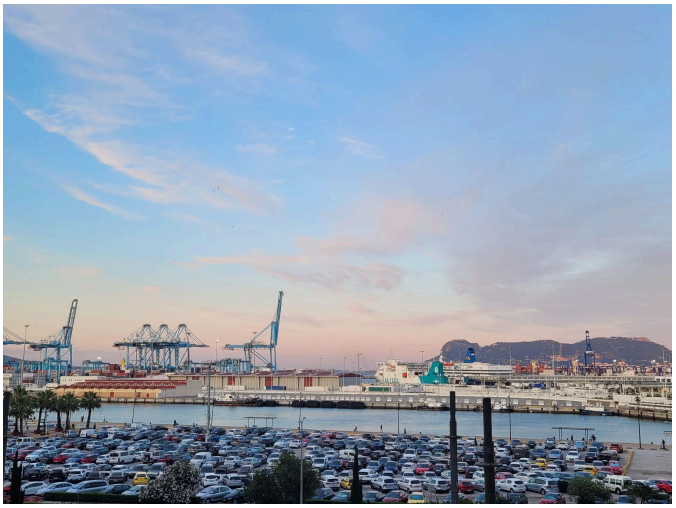
Hamburg, Germany

Hamburg handled around 7.8 million TEUs (Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit) in 2024. As Europe's third-largest container port, it has become in the last five years a critical entry point for cocaine trade - seizures surged by 750% between 2018 and 2013, including a 16-tonne record confiscation in 2021. Despite automation and policing, organized crime has infiltrated port operations via *Hafeninnentäter* (corrupted insiders) with visible impacts in the red light district economy, and rising violence in the port and nearby areas. Our visit during the "Port Cities Fighting Transatlantic Drug Trafficking" workshop confirmed persistent challenges in port security, intelligence coordination, and risk profiling framing.

Hamburg's Reeperbahn (red light district).
source: Authors, 2025

Algeciras, Spain

Located in the strategic Algeciras Bay, the port of Algeciras sits just near the Strait of Gibraltar, a key maritime choke point through which passes more than 10% of annual global maritime trade, linking major routes between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Across the Bay, Gibraltar, an opaque UK fiscal haven, adds complexity in terms of international cooperation against money laundering. Smuggling of both licit and



View of Algeciras Port and the Rock of Gibraltar from the city center
source: Authors, 2025

illicit goods over the Strait has shaped the local economy and social identity for decades. Today, the smuggling tradition of the area, combined with high unemployment and lack of state investment is fueling the shift to cocaine trafficking, which in turn exploits existing local knowledge and infrastructures.

Valencia, Spain

Valencia, Spain's largest container port and third-largest city, handled over 5 million TEUs in 2024, positioning itself as a leading Mediterranean logistics hub. It is currently undertaking a major expansion, its new container terminal will duplicate its capacity, backed by public investment of around €660 million and an additional €1,050 million from MSC, one of the largest shipping companies globally. Its modern infrastructure, integration in major, multi-modal transport corridors and growing trade attract transnational traffickers, despite limited local criminal networks or major drug-related violence.

View of the port of Valencia from El Cabanyal Beach
source: Authors, 2025

Yet, cocaine is somehow part of the region's collective imaginary, largely due to the legacy of *La Ruta del Bacalao*, a famous electronic music party route across its coast in the 80s and 90s. Valencia demonstrates how expanding trade hubs can become vulnerable to drug trafficking, highlighting the need for proactive strategies to prevent deeper social embedding.

ISSUES

Going beyond mainstream discourses that restrict cocaine trafficking to a public security or health threat, our project starts from the premise of framing it as a globalised commodity. Cocaine is defined as a psychoactive drug derived from coca leaves, traditionally cultivated in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, where the plant holds deep cultural significance. Hence, making blanket coca eradication efforts is both ineffective and controversial. The logistical complexity of its trade, on the one side because of being illicit, on the other side because of both offer and demand being transnational, reveals the deep entanglement between organized crime strategies, urban inequalities and infrastructures, and global capitalism at all scales of governance. From the three coca-growing countries to European port cities, the cocaine supply chain stands within the infrastructures of everyday trade. While public attention often focuses on producers or consumers, the in-between of wholesale and retail markets, what we call the middle layer of the supply chain, remains understudied. The trafficking of cocaine is not static but highly dynamic, for which a critical understanding, through long-term, multi-site, comparative research, of this middle section and its logistics is crucial.

The comparative approach of our project emerged naturally from our team's diverse national backgrounds. During the preliminary research phase, we explored cocaine trafficking dynamics in countries we were each familiar with, Germany, China, Russia, and Spain. As the project progressed, we chose to focus on Spain and Germany due to relative accessibility of information and official documents, languages spoken within the group, availability of fieldwork opportunities, and the growing importance of their port cities in the European cocaine trade.

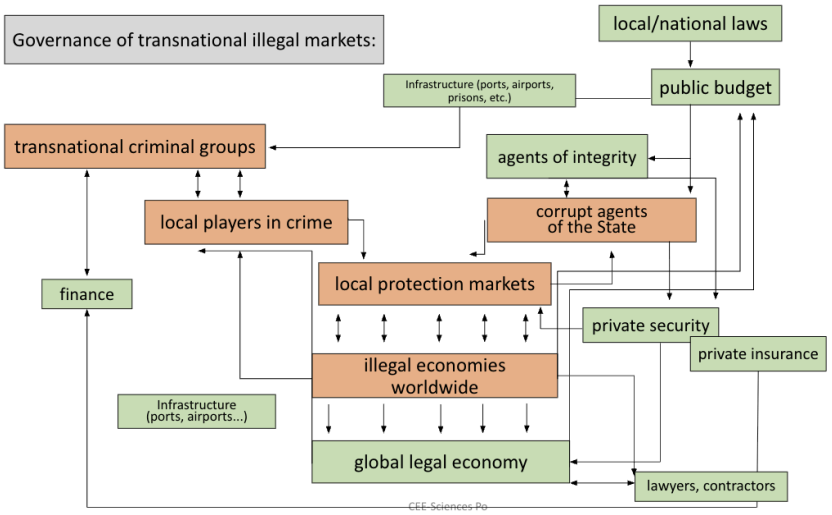
Spain, a geographical door to the European continent with historical ties to Latin America, offers regional contexts like Andalucía and Galicia where hashish and cocaine trafficking has a long-standing tradition, with rising cocaine seizures and millions-worth corruption scandals related to it. Germany, by contrast, presents a more centralized, bureaucratic, and security-driven response, with growing vulnerabilities in key infrastructures like the port of Hamburg. Comparing these two countries allowed us to better understand how national histories, policing cultures, and port governance models shape the cocaine market and its regulation at the urban level.

If one kilogram is worth around $1,500 to $2000 in producer countries, once in Europe the price can become 15 to 20 times higher, costing around $30 000 to $40 000, although street-level price is relatively stable since the last 10 years. These high profitability margins combined with increasing production and consumption create very interesting market opportunities for criminal organizations. Each of these groups used to control an extensive range of the supply chain, from the production stage to the high-end retail sale, structured in a well defined hierarchy with clear *capos* (bosses) figures. Mirroring legal economy trends towards platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2016), they operate now as big transnational enterprises (Naim, 2005) that serve as platforms absorbing smaller service suppliers in a highly specialised, fragmented value chain, re-centralising logistical infrastructures and network effects (Feltran, 2025). Despite growing policing means and efforts, organized crime adaptation is more and more efficient and cocaine markets have indeed expanded, not

shrunk. This raises key questions about the limits of enforcement and the structural conditions that allow illicit markets to flourish.

We began with a focus on urban and port drug logistics, but site visits and field encounters pushed us to critically rethink the very boundaries of formal and informal economies. Trafficking is not the other side of the globalised trade coin, but integral matter of the coin itself. Major ports like Hamburg, Valencia and Algeciras function as logistical checkpoints where risk is managed not through security control, but through selective screening and anticipatory techniques based on profiling and risk assessments. As Stepputat and Hagmann (2019) suggest, projects of circulation are often shaped by plural rationalities: ports must simultaneously enable the rapid movement of goods while containing the threats that such movement may conceal.

As an outcome, ports become speculative spaces where statecraft, criminal economies, and logistical capitalism intersect (Chua et al., 2018).



source: Feltran, 2025

Moreover, the technologies of risk management and inherent logics of governance not only detect illicit flows but also influence traffickers' routes and strategies, making risk not merely a matter of control, but a generative force within the legal-illegal continuum of circulation. Criminal organizations don't simply escape, evade or replace the state, they interact with, corrupt, and co-produce it. This led us to reframe trafficking and all actors involved in it in a legal/illegal continuum rather than a binary dichotomy opposing legal and illegal.

This project directly supports the Urban School's mission to interrogate how urban environments and governance intersect with global challenges. Looking at the cocaine value chain from a critical standpoint allows us to understand how the temporalities and spatialities of licit and illicit goods intersect under globalised economies, as well as its social, economical, and environmental stakes. This research contributes to rethinking informal activities and transnational crime, not as an exception to the legal order, but as something produced by the same systems we rely on for trade, governance, and development.

MAIN RESULTS

6.1 Historical Context

As a matter of public health and public security, each nation's distinct narratives and strategies around cocaine, and, at large, drug trafficking, have been shaped by national histories and institutional cultures.

In Spain, the 80's and 90's heroin epidemic and its "lost generation" is the backdrop of all drug-related policies. Many of the institutions we talked to, both civic and institutional, were founded during, or in response, to that crisis. This origin context is inscribed in its mission and identity until today. For instance, one of the key and most successful policy actions at the time was the state-managed distribution of methadone and other opioid substitutes as a harm-reduction measure. While the latter targeted consumption, many of our interviewees from both state and civic actors emphasized the need for a stronger public health and social security, combined with effective law enforcement and state policing means, especially regarding corruption. The legacy of this national trauma is visible in the cautious rejection of overly punitive or militarized narratives like the "war on drugs", through a general understanding between our interviewees that the eradication of drug trafficking might be overly unrealistic. This martial framing is also mismatched with Spain's relatively low levels of violent crime, even by European standards (Statista, 2025).

By contrast, the discourse around drug trafficking in Germany, and particularly cocaine, is shaped less by a health crisis and more by a rational-legal institutional tradition. Drawing on Max Weber's theories of domination, Germany can be understood as a highly rationalized state, where public authority operates through impersonal, formal-legal mechanisms and hierarchies, and a deeply institutionalized bureaucracy. Our interlocutors often addressed the issue through security-based frameworks, highlighting seizures and criminal prosecution; rather than acknowledging other factors such as corruption - usually considered one of the symptoms of state weakness - as an integral part of the criminal schemes.

This divergence in national narratives reflects not only different policy traditions but also the unique historical and institutional contexts that shape each country's approach. Introducing a historical perspective into international cooperation could be beneficial, as it allows for a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics driving drug trafficking and policy responses in distinct national settings.

6.2 Modalities of Cocaine Trafficking

In Hamburg, a multitude of professionalised criminal groups operate in a service-provider model. These groups include actors of Turkish, West Balkan, and Dutch-Moroccan origin. Despite their ethnic diversity, what now matters most is who has a professionalised access to the port rather than ethnicity. Albanians stand out due to their strong port presence and organisational capacity at any level. In fact, their key advantage lies in being embedded on

both sides of the Atlantic, notably in Ecuador, Colombia, and Brazil, thus controlling the supply side.

In Algeciras, local smuggling networks have historical roots going back to Franco's era, having evolved through sugar, tobacco, and hashish smuggling. These groups now serve external transnational criminal organisations, who own the cocaine and use the local infrastructure and expertise for its extraction. This represents a shift in ownership and control away from the local actors to international networks.

Inside the Hamburg port. source: Authors, 2025

In Valencia, the dominant actors are primarily from the Western Balkans, especially Albanians, who play a key role in maintaining international trafficking connections. The Brazilian *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC) also play a role in the cocaine trade in Valencia.

The smuggling techniques detailed below reflect what law enforcement currently knows, based mainly on seizures and investigations. Organised crime continually evolves, meaning that many methods remain undiscovered.

One of the most prevalent smuggling techniques is the rip-on/rip-off method, where cocaine is hidden inside legitimate cargo without the sender's knowledge and later retrieved by criminal operatives at the port of arrival. Perishable goods like bananas are often targeted due to their quick processing. Yet cocaine has also been concealed in paint cans, clothes, wooden pallets soaked in liquid cocaine, or fake plastic fruits.

Upon arrival, local networks must extract the cocaine. This requires corrupting two or more port workers: one to locate the container and another to access and move it. Vulnerable workers in strategic roles like port guards, IT staff, and vehicle operators are often targeted. These service networks are highly structured and operate as criminal subcontractors.

Various techniques are used to move cocaine out of the port. The PIN code fraud is common, where criminals steal container release codes to unlawfully access containers. The blind hook method involves retrieving drugs within the port with insider help, while the directed hook method retrieves them after the container leaves the port, often requiring more coordination and risk. Another strategy involves using front companies that gain trust by legally trading for a period, and then smuggle cocaine once considered low risk, as for a thirteen-ton seizure case in Algeciras.

Sometimes, containers go unrecovered due to errors or law enforcement action, such cases are known as lost hooks. Emergency recoveries may follow, like the 2023 Hamburg case involving an intrusion into an automated terminal.

The drop-off method, usually for smaller quantities, involves transferring cocaine at sea to a secondary boat like *narcolanchas*, yachts, fisher boats. *Narcolanchas* are increasingly used in Algeciras. These fast boats collect shipments offshore and land them illegally. Their operation involves a local logistic chain: the *aguador* (spotter), *petaquero* (fuel provider), *gepero* (GPS guide), *motero* (gas handler), and *lanchero* (driver). A person from the external international criminal groups, often called the notary oversees and reports the success or failure of delivery to the supplying group, ensuring accountability and traceability.

Other, less common smuggling techniques include divers retrieving packages from ship hulls, used in Hamburg and Valencia, and semi-submersible submarines, which represent a high-investment strategy to move tons of cocaine across the Atlantic.

Once out of the port, tracing cocaine becomes extremely difficult. Distribution typically involves small, agile teams and infrastructure like warehouses for processing. Cocaine is often repackaged and hidden in false compartments of vehicles for wider distribution. Historical and political biases affect customs, with southern and eastern European borders viewed as higher-risk, though cocaine arriving in northern ports often ends up in these regions. A GI-TOC expert explained that so-called "useful idiots" are often used to drive cocaine across Europe. Hamburg, in particular, functions as a major transshipment hub, redirecting cocaine to destinations such as England, Scandinavia (often via smaller feeder vessels), and even Australia, where the market value of cocaine is up to ten times higher than in Europe.

6.3 Logistical Governance Structure

Formal state institutions make significant efforts in regulating a plural governscape framework which is also shaped by non-state actors. Together they contribute and negotiate risk, circulation, and drug market governance strategies, particularly in port cities like our case studies.

On the broader scale, Germany and Spain both use decentralized port governance. The port is administered with high operational autonomy by the Hamburg Port Authority (HPA), accountable to the city-state government, although almost half of it is owned by the Mediterranean Shipping Company. The Spanish ports also benefit from a similar level of discretion, nevertheless more centralised. Ports are coordinated at the national level by the

Puertos del Estado (State Ports) agency of the Ministry of Transport, which provides oversight, strategic planning, and budgeting approval, as well as leadership appointment. They have also implemented a regulatory framework to standardise risk analysis, where, however, drug trafficking is not identified as one. It is at the local level that port authorities have dedicated means to it and include it in their strategies. However; both countries have a national drugs plan (National Drugs Plan for Spain under Ministry of Health, and National Action Plan on Drug and Addiction Policy under the Federal Government for Germany).

National agencies deploy and oversee customs and police in both countries, and all three ports have risk assessment units formed by a blend of port authorities' officials and law enforcement officers. Communitarian norms also play a significant role in normative compliance of port institutions, as well as in anti-money laundering schemes (Directives 91/308/EEC, 2001/97/EC, 2005/60/EC, 2015/849/EU, 2018/843/EU, 2020/283/EU). This is also more and more demanded in the case of public-private partnerships, as many areas of the ports operate under public concession or private share ownership regimes.

6.4 Risk Management

This section examines the risk management strategies in European ports and the rationalities behind them. Risk management is operationalised through security spatial zoning, profiling-based container inspections, as well as compliance practices. Through examining the discourse and practices of these strategies, we argue that:

First, risk management strategies, while shaped by diverging institutional and informal norms, do not aim to prevent cocaine trafficking but prioritise the continuation of circulation and logistical efficiency. The governance of risk is embedded in and subordinated to the imperative of uninterrupted logistical flow.

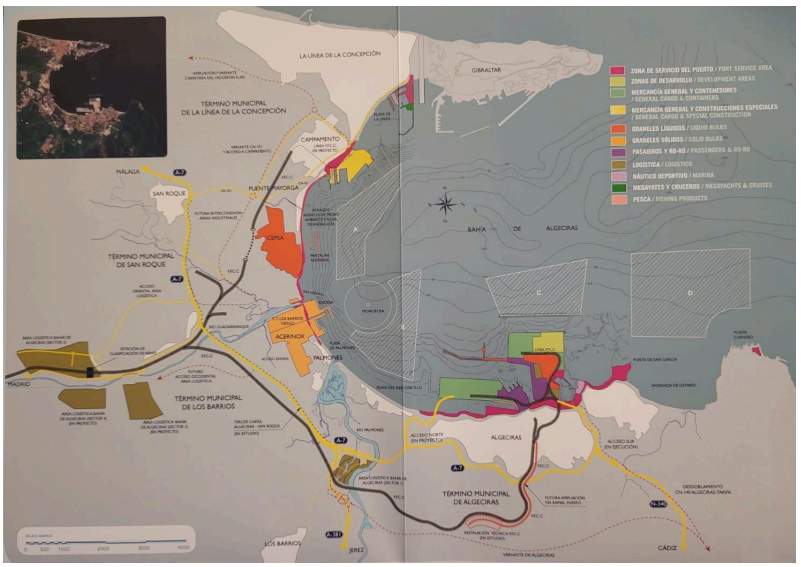
In all three ports, container screening rates remain strikingly low, and inspections rely on profiling-based selection rather than systematic scanning. In Hamburg, customs screen only around 1% of containers, far below the official figure of 5%. Risk profiling usually rely on cross-referencing variables such as importer identity, commodity type, and price anomalies to detect irregular shipments. RIsk is also spatialized into port infrastructure using zoning strategies and divided into hierarchical risk zones.

Both Spain and Germany emphasize automation for risk mitigation, but this introduces new vulnerabilities. Spanish officials note that fully automated terminals, while less exposed to human corruption, are more vulnerable to system hacking. German stakeholders describe the paradox of "clean terminals", which is secure on the surface but reliant on IT administrators who become corruption targets. Risk is redistributed rather than removed within the logistical architecture.

This relates to what Cowen (2014) termed "deadly life of logistics", describing a regime in which security does not interrupt trade, but is embedded within it to preserve circulation.

Ports do not secure borders by stopping movement, but govern by sorting, deferring, and selectively illuminating the paths through which goods travel. It is also reflected in the compliance practices, which is often framed as conditions for smooth port functioning.

Second, compliance regimes in Spain and Germany serve as governance techniques that treat labor as potential vulnerability, embedding security logics within the organizational and institutional fabric of port operations.



Infrastructure map of the Algeciras Bay
source: Algeciras Bay Port Police, 2025

Compliance operates at both national and port levels. Spain's frameworks are driven by EU directives and European funding requirements, with criminal background checks conducted at the national level varying by position. Germany introduces the practice of “Verdachtskündigung”, referring to the dismissal of employers based on reasonable suspicion. At the port level, Autoridad Portuaria de la Bahía de Algeciras (APBA) employees must sign a compliance document identifying the risks associated with their role and formally commit to protocol adherence. Hamburger Hafen und Logistik AG (HHLA) has developed an integrated compliance regime that includes internal audits, training sessions, a dedicated integrity team, and mechanisms for anonymous reporting. Over 40 awareness sessions were conducted in one year by police collaborating with HHLA, alongside podcast campaigns and operator briefings, demonstrating public-private compliance partnerships.

This approach reflects an institutionalized rationality that treats labor itself as a risk vector, embedding risk management within human resources practices and transforming the organizational fabric of port operations into a system of pervasive monitoring and control. Notably, in Algeciras, there is also presence of an informal mode of compliance rooted in social embeddedness rather than bureaucratic formalism. Local knowledge and reputational cues also play a central role in determining trustworthiness for employment or access.

Third, we analyse how discourses around drug trafficking contribute to the construction of “risk” and the ongoing negotiation of the legal-illegal continuum. These narratives not only justify state interventions but also co-shape the adaptive strategies of organised crime.

In both Spain and Germany, risk is framed through a binary of “good” state actors versus “bad” criminals. In Spain, this is tempered by professional recognition: Traffickers are described as smart, skilled, and persistent adversaries - “They do their job as much as we do

ours." This discourse legitimizes continued state investment in risk-preventive infrastructure, and sustains a dynamic where authorities must constantly adapt because traffickers inevitably will. However, while this narrative acknowledges criminal professionalism, it preserves normative distinction. This creates a paradoxical discourse where criminality is normalized as part of the logistics environment but still framed as the object of righteous state response.

Seizures are central to the public discourse of enforcement in all context. For instance, a German police officer presents Hamburg's record seizure of 34 - 35 tonnes in 2023 as a major achievement. Yet, he also acknowledges that in 2024, seizures dropped to just 5 tonnes while market prices for cocaine remained stable. This disconnect shows the performative dimension of seizures: they function less as evidence of systemic disruption and more as visible markers of state capacity.

Corruption is framed differently between Spain and Germany. Spanish officials openly acknowledge corruption as a structural feature of the port economy. As one anti-drug prosecutor put it: "Ports don't work without corruption." Such statements do not celebrate corruption but normalize it and frame it as a predictable outcome. Corruption is not described as a failure of institutions, but as an operational risk that can be managed within the system. In Germany, corruption is downplayed and euphemised. Port insiders involved in illicit practices are euphemistically referred to as "*Hafeninnentäter*", which refers to internal actors whose role is obscured through neutralized language. Nevertheless, in both contexts, we can observe that even when corruption is admitted, it is often described as exceptional and institutionally compartmentalized.

Therefore, the concept of "risk" is far from neutral. It is a discursive construct shaped by institutional norms and legal cultures. These narratives not only legitimise compliance and surveillance but also inform how criminal actors adapt, exploiting categorical blind spots. The boundary between legal and illegal is not fixed but co-produced through shared logics of risk and logistics.

6.5 Violence & platformisation

Drawing from interviews, fieldwork, and secondary sources, our study reveals three main dimensions that regulate the local cocaine economy and organized crime networks.

First, examining the relationship between drug trafficking and violence: Paolo Campana has emphasized that drug trafficking uniquely shapes the urban environment by organizing space, defining control zones, and influencing levels of violence (MILDECA-Urban School Conference, 2025). Although violence and organized crime often overlap, they do not always coincide (Tilly, 2003). Following Tilly's framework on collective violence, we consider how relational mechanisms, such as failed negotiations and shifting connections, can trigger violent outbreaks. In Hamburg, a rise in shootings and torture incidents in recent years indicates destabilizing competition, as the cocaine trade becomes more lucrative. A Hamburg police officer noted that growing profits attract new actors as violent means have become increasingly accessible, while a social worker in Algeciras described the increasing brutality of the trade: "there is no longer a gun, now we have a Kalashnikov." This is connected to the

shift within trafficking from hash, which has dominated in the past, to cocaine, and the money and ownership transfers that come with it. Nevertheless, port authorities have underlined the fact that organized crime actors continue to keep violence to an overall low level, compared to the rest of Spain, in order to avoid attention from law enforcement.

The second axis focuses on the embeddedness of organised crime in urban society. The degree to which criminal networks are integrated into the social, political, and economic life of a city profoundly shapes both their behavior and the spatial patterns of violence.

A narcolancha*-themed children's birthday cake*
source: An Algeciras interviewee, 2025

In Algeciras, organised crime actors are highly embedded, often replacing the state as informal welfare providers in marginalized neighborhoods and even becoming socially desirable. As one NGO interviewee put it: "The welfare is produced by drug trafficking." This level of integration contrasts sharply with the situation in Hamburg, where organized crime maintains a more clandestine and fragmented presence, while Valencia sits in between. An interviewee in Valencia associated cocaine trafficking primarily with Roma communities and specific neighborhoods in the city, reflecting a perception that may itself be shaped by institutional or societal bias.

Tilly's notion of low-capacity regimes as fertile ground for the emergence of alternative authorities is particularly relevant here. Where state capacity is uneven or lacking, organized crime actors are more likely to assert dominance, stepping into governance roles through what Stepputat (2013) terms the creation of a governscape - a field of rule that blends formal and informal authority. In such contexts, inequality generated by state exploitation and opportunity hoarding (Tilly, 2003) renders access to illicit livelihoods both necessary and normalized. However, organized crime does not not only thrive in conventionally "weak states". As we have seen through our research, even in countries like Germany, the Netherlands, or France - where state institutions are generally considered robust - organised crime can anchor itself, often violently and through corruption, particularly in specific neighborhoods.

The third axis concerns the platformisation of organized crime. Drawing on the fact that scholars have increasingly adopted a network perspective to analyse organised crime phenomena (Campana, 2016), we use Feltran's (2025) framework to observe how large criminal organizations function not merely as static hierarchies but as platforms. What Le Monde (2025) calls the "Uberization" of crime, is in fact a model in which local networks

increasingly operate within, and become dependent on, broader transnational structures that provide capital, logistics, and protection.

In Algeciras, local actors are not the drug owners but paid transporters, compensated per kilo moved. This dynamic also appears in Hamburg, where port-based groups retrieve cocaine for international clients and are rewarded with a share of the product. They then resell this share, creating a secondary market based on local redistribution and profit, structured around access to infrastructure rather than ownership of international supply chains.

These three axes (violence, embeddedness, and platformisation) offer a framework for understanding how local cocaine trafficking markets operate across different urban contexts. From the strategic use of violence to the replacement of state functions in marginalized areas, and the growing role of local actors as service providers within transnational networks, organized crime has emerged not as a fixed structure, but as an adaptive system.

LEARNINGS

This research has generated several key insights that could help shape future efforts to combat organised crime and drug trafficking. First, our partner, the MILDECA, plays a significant role in supporting knowledge production and funding research on these issues. It is essential to fill knowledge gaps for both state and civil society actors.

When addressing drug trafficking, we must acknowledge that illegal markets will not disappear. This does not mean accepting the current state, but rather being realistic about the deep links between organised crime and the global legal economy. As long as deregulated global trade continues to be prioritised over public health and security, trafficking will persist and grow, hence challenging even the most robust state systems. The key challenge lies in addressing the paradox at the heart of our study: how can we expect to reduce trafficking while simultaneously accelerating the conditions that facilitate it? The goal should not be eradication, but rather to bring illegal markets under more acceptable and manageable conditions. Achieving this requires a holistic approach that goes beyond traditional law enforcement strategies to disrupt the systemic roots of organised crime. Policing efforts themselves must also evolve, as reactive, low-level operations, large one-off seizures, and tough rhetoric have consistently failed to curb the flow of drugs.

Marginalised neighbourhoods are often targeted in the fight against trafficking, yet the root causes are frequently tied to long-standing state neglect and discriminatory practices. As one social worker stated, "the postal code marks us more than our genetic code." Fighting organised crime must therefore include addressing structural inequality, rather than focusing solely on repression. Policing alone cannot solve the problem. Drug trafficking should be seen as a public health and societal issue. Prisons are often used as places of silence and protection for those involved, not as deterrents. Many interviewees stressed the need to strengthen not only policing and anti-corruption measures but also investment in education, prevention, and reintegration. In Valencia, Algeciras, and Hamburg, improving access to education, job training, and employment opportunities in marginalised neighbourhoods is essential. Education can shift mentalities, reduce dropout rates, and provide alternatives to the criminal economy. Fighting corruption and money laundering must also be a priority. In Germany, there is growing awareness of the need for stronger anti-corruption measures and accountability at all levels.

Lastly, cooperation at all levels, local, national, and international, is crucial. Spain offers valuable examples of successful collaboration with Latin American countries and a public health approach to drug use. Financial regulation and control of tax havens, as shown by the case of Gibraltar, remain vital areas for improvement in the broader fight against cocaine trafficking.

This research project was an invaluable professionalising experience for all of us. It taught us how to engage with the language and procedures of public administrations in two different national contexts. It highlighted the importance of collaborative research, and helped us develop key skills in project management and internal mediation. It also allowed us to critically explore a complex issue through precise case studies, with the unique advantage of full freedom in choosing our approach and the financial support to carry out meaningful fieldwork.

FIND OUT MORE

Academic articles and books

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En Portada. (2024, April 3). *Cocaína vía Guayaquil* [Video]. RTVE. https://www.rtve.es/play/videos/en-portada/cocaina-via-guayaquil/16042402/

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The Capstone project: an original educational tool

Thanks to this original tool, students are placed in a work situation on a real problem posed by a public, private, or associative organisation. For all the Masters of the Urban School, the structure and management are identical: the project is jointly monitored by the the Urban School and the partners, at all phases of the project, and regular methodological supervision is provided by a professional or academic tutor specialised in the issue. The Capstone projects allow the partners to take advantage of the research and training acquired within the Urban School, to benefit from the production of studies and quality work, and to have a capacity for innovation.

Capstone projects are a great tool to study, diagnose, forecast, lead a comparative analysis, even to prepare for evaluation, and more generally to deal with any problem that can enlighten the organisation concerned in a logic of "R&D ". Each project mobilises a group of first-year students from one of the Urban School's Master’s. Students work between 1.5 days and 2 days per week on dedicated time slots, for a period of 6 to 9 months (depending on the Master’s concerned). In Executive education, collective projects concern the Executive Master “Territorial governance and urban development” and mobilize professionals for a period of 4 months.

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