

Europol Report Highlights Shift in Maritime Cocaine Trafficking

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Cornelia Riehle

News

On 27 January 2026, Europol [published](#) a report entitled "Diversification in Maritime Cocaine Trafficking Modi Operandi". The report analyses the evolving tactics used by criminal networks to traffic cocaine into Europe via maritime routes.

Setting the scene: The expansion of coca cultivation and increased efficiency in Latin America have led to high levels of cocaine production. Combined with rising cocaine use in several EU Member States, both supply and demand remain high, sustaining a lucrative market that encourages criminal networks to develop more sophisticated trafficking methods. While ports such as Antwerp, Hamburg, and Rotterdam have traditionally been key entry points for large-scale maritime cocaine trafficking into Europe, targeted law enforcement actions and the launch of the European Ports Alliance Public Private Partnership (→[eucri](#)m 1/2024, 30) have led to a decrease in cocaine seizures in these ports, having prompted criminal networks to adapt their transportation methods, concealment techniques, and routes.

According to Europol's [report](#), new modi operandi include:

- Diversifying routes and methods by bypassing major ports through at-sea drop-offs, transfers, semi-submersibles, and non-commercial vessels, making detection more difficult;
- More sophisticated concealment techniques, hiding cocaine in industrial equipment, machinery, and materials such as food, plastics, and textiles, which complicates detection using scanners, sniffer dogs, and forensic tests;
- Technological advancements, including encrypted communication, autonomous vessels, and drones, to enhance operations and evade detection.

Against this backdrop, the report concludes that addressing these challenges requires a coordinated, intelligence-led approach integrating maritime, financial, and technological capabilities. Monitoring should extend beyond commercial ports to smaller harbours, coastal areas, and open-sea routes. Financial investigations must adapt to fragmented transactions and informal maritime economies. Forensic and technical expertise should be applied earlier to detect hidden compartments, chemically concealed drugs, and extraction laboratories. Lastly, cooperation among law enforcement, customs, port authorities, and the private sector remains essential to securing supply chains and sharing data in real time, supported by cross-border investigations, integrated analysis platforms, and common risk indicators.

Europol will support the fight against the threat of cocaine trafficking through its dedicated Drugs Unit. The Agency will also provide analyses and coordinate EU-wide operations as well as deploy experts on the ground.

AUTHOR

Cornelia Riehle

Deputy Head of Section
Academy of European Law

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