

The new El Dorado for cocaine traffickers

Cocaine does not seem affected by inflation. Here's why.

by Celine Pina,* France



Céline Pina.
(Photo celinepina.com)

As with our European neighbours, cocaine is now available at bargain prices in our cities and countryside. Imported in bulk, it ceased to be a luxury product. But its disturbing power of corruption and destruction has not diminished.

Is life expensive? Is everything increasing? Not necessarily. From 150 euros at retail a few years ago, a gram of cocaine is now traded between 60 and 80 euros in Paris. Faced with the rising prices of energy and raw materials, cocaine, once a luxury product, is becoming more democratic.

The increase in seizures point to this fact: in the port of Antwerp, in 2022, the police seized 110 tons of cocaine. In 2015, it was less than 16 tonnes. These figures point less to the improvement in police performance against trafficking than to the explosion of the market: Europe is the new El Dorado for cocaine traffickers.

Yann Bastière, representative of SGP Unit Police explains the mechanism at work:

"The cocaine market in the United States is saturated. At the same time, production exploded. In Colombia, the leading producing country, the areas sown increased by 43% in 2021 compared to 2020. Finding new outlets is a vital necessity.

For these markets to be profitable, it is necessary to be able to sell large quantities of drugs. That is why Europe and its large middle class have been the preferred target of traffickers for some years. This is why prices are falling while quality is increasing: it is necessary to conquer and retain new consumers."

Massive and poorly controlled arrivals

The gateway to drugs are the major container ports, such as Antwerp, Rotterdam or Le Havre.

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More than a tonne of cocaine seized on board a commercial vessel by Channel and North Sea coastguard customs officers, Dunkirk, October 2021. (Picture ma)

Another actor is decisive in the case of France: Guyana. Its border with Suriname, a narco-state and a hub for Colombian cocaine trafficking to France, makes it a true "narco-department".

According to a police source,

"The border with Suriname, very little controlled, resembles the Champs-Élysées in terms of attendance, especially with the upcoming twice daily commute from Cayenne airport to France. At each control, we catch three or four mules, but we know very well that this is only the submerged tip of the iceberg. The more mules there are, while the customs staff is limited, the more a large number fall between the cracks. They don't care to lose three or four mules if on each trip they pass dozens of others."

And this official long in charge of the fight against drug trafficking recounts:

"One day, we decided to carry out an exhaustive and unannounced check on an aircraft. Even by taking the decision as late as possible, the power of corruption of the traffickers is such that the info leaked despite everything. Well, on a plane of 250 people, around 40 people did not show up for boarding even though the tickets were no longer refundable."

Nevertheless, the bulk of traffic to Europe remains transported by container. In the emblematic case of Antwerp, only 1.5% of the 12 million containers landed are analysed. According to police sources, it is estimated that only 10% of the drugs passing through this channel is being inter-

cepted. For traffickers, this loss is acceptable in view of the enormous profits: the cocaine market in Antwerp is estimated at more than 50 billion per year, or 10% of Belgium's GDP.

Terror and corruption

"Traffickers are well aware of how ports work. In particular, they hide the drugs in containers of perishable products, because these must be unloaded very quickly and cannot be stored. But above all, they have so much money that they have no trouble bribing dockers, customs officers, policemen ... And if corruption does not work, there is still terror",

tells Fabrice Rizzoli, president of Crim'Halt.

In Antwerp, the violence generated by drug trafficking has thus spilled over from the port to the city, to end up poisoning the country. The situation has become all the more out of control as the authorities have long refused to invest in high-performance camera systems or scanner gates.

Easy to access, the port has become the playground of the "Mocro Maffia", this Moroccan mafia which is rampant in northern Europe, particularly in Belgium, the Netherlands or northern France, regions where many immigrants from the Rif have settled since the 1960s. Indeed, the arrival of cocaine relies on the already existing networks, and in particular those of cannabis.

According to Yann Bastière,

"there is a joint venture between Italian, Moroccan and Corsican mafias, and South American producers. One of the proofs of these structural links is found in Morocco. Indeed, more and more cocaine is seized there, while Morocco is not a producer. The product gets there, because it takes the routes of cannabis trafficking and is being distributed by the same actors."

In France, the port of Le Havre has quickly established itself as an important gateway for cocaine. In 2021, 10 tons of cocaine were seized, an increase of 164% in one year. As in Antwerp, corruption and violence have organized the mafia's grip on the port and the dockworkers are at the forefront.

The particular organization of the ports and the reign of all-powerful unions which impose their standards prevent the installation of cameras, impose free access to containers by dockworkers, make them essential agents for recovering the goods.

A police source told us that,

"without the complicity of dockers, getting the drugs out is impossible. Moreover, a number of

them find themselves in court following corruption cases. This allows you to get an idea of the sums offered by the traffickers. 10,000 euros for the loan of a badge, 50,000 euros for the crane operator to move a container... It's hard to resist such temptations."

The lure of profit does not explain everything, however. According to Yann Bastière,

"traffickers' extreme violence and determination put enormous pressure upon dock employees, customs and police officers. In Le Havre, dockworkers have been kidnapped and sequestered, their families targeted. And there is a disproportion between the resources allocated to control and the police, and those of traffickers."

When Belgian, French and Dutch police managed to break into the *Sky ECC messaging* used by mafia networks, they came across videos of torture chambers, of people being dismembered and chopped up.

Enough to discourage honesty. The port of Le Havre has already experienced kidnappings and its first death. In 2020, the body of *Allan Affagard*, docker and CGT trade unionist, was found behind a school. He had been suspected of facilitating the exit of cocaine from the port and indicted for this. Accusations that he had always denied.

The power of traffickers

In the Netherlands, the Crown Princess and the Prime Minister are directly threatened with death by traffickers. In Belgium, it is the Minister of Justice who is targeted. But if there are real threats to the political class, the concern also lies in its potential corruption. With colossal stakes and resources, mafia networks need to develop links with elected officials at all levels.

Admittedly, few cases have broken out, but specialists believe that the resounding story that has splashed the city of Saint-Denis, where a half a ton of cannabis was stored in the municipal technical centre, is perhaps not so exceptional. The relative impunity enjoyed by the employee during the time that this traffic lasted questions the blindness of the elected officials and the great meekness of the hierarchy.

We can also cite the case of *Florence Lamblin*, green elected official (EELV) and deputy mayor of the 13th district of Paris, accused of having helped launder money linked to drug trafficking, or *Nicolas Jeannete*, director of the *New Center party* and adviser to Paris, accused of drug

trafficking, *Melanie Boulanger*, socialist mayor of Canteleu and her deputy in charge of trade, accused of having been under the influence of drug traffickers and of having “facilitated” their lives.

As in the case of port personnel, the targeting of elected officials could prove to be all the more “profitable” when the death threats of drug kingpins are credible, lasting and followed by effects, where police protection may appear limited and flawed.

Pending a reaction commensurate with the dangers involved, drug market specialists warn:

“When production increases and prices are almost halved, there is a rejuvenation and massification of consumers. [...] To get it, just type ‘cocaine delivery’ on Twitter or Snapchat for example, this allows you to obtain a number working on WhatsApp, which delivers you to your home within the hour”,

says Yann Bastière. The uberization of the deal works wonderfully. To our collective misfortune.

Source: <https://www.causeur.fr/vers-une-republique-de-marquis-poudres-261910>, 4 July 2023

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

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