Ecuador's Central Role in Cocaine Trafficking to Europe

Jorge Vicente Paladines

Introduction

In less than five years, Ecuador has become the main country through which the largest amount of cocaine entering the European Union (EU) is trafficked. Despite its proximity to the largest cultivation and production areas in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, historically, Ecuador has played a peripheral role in international drug trafficking. It was unilaterally classified by the U.S. government as a "drug transit country", mostly as a result of its territory being used for drug smuggling, but without a significant role between the major production centers and consumer markets, i.e., between supply and demand.

However, recent cocaine seizures and police investigations in the EU tell a different story, mainly in relation to the historic drug route between Ecuador and the U.S. Despite having been classified for decades as a "drug transit country", Ecuador has begun to move away from its peripheral role between the major centers of production and consumption to play a central role, becoming a strategic enclave for the export of this substance. Most of the cocaine production leaves through its ports, displacing the most important ports in Latin America, like Santos (Brazil) or Manzanillo (Mexico).

Ecuador's leading role in international cocaine trafficking has also caused a shift in drug trafficking routes. This time, the flow is not from South to North America, but from the Southwest of the South American Pacific to the Northeast of the Atlantic. Although the U.S. has always been an attractive market for criminal economies, cocaine trafficking has changed course in terms of quantity. The EU is now a preferred and most profitable destination for criminal organizations.

Parallel to the increase in cocaine exports and seizures in both hemispheres, intentional homicides also began to grow at an alarming rate. Along with the dismantling of the welfare state around the adoption of neoliberal economic policies, Ecuador is projected to be the most insecure country in the Americas, with a marked tendency to become a global benchmark in this area. Faced with this reality and these scenarios, fear has pushed its population to leave their country.

However, the events that have taken place in the EU and Ecuador surrounding cocaine seizures only show a small picture of the criminal economy surrounding this substance. Within the upturn in this market, there is also a reconfiguration of the criminal order, both internationally and locally. In the subjective image of this phenomenon, there are other actors and criminal groups that interact in a kind of new "criminal division of labor" with respect to classic drug trafficking to the U.S. This term, coined by jurist Claus Roxin, highlights an interesting distinction between the perpetrators and executors of the crime (1984, p. 300), revealing that the map where both the "business owners" and their "simple operators" are drawn may have changed.

Ecuador's new role in international cocaine trafficking, therefore, deserves particular analysis. This chapter will therefore describe the most relevant features, factors, and causes, as well as the actors and new forms of criminality that have led Ecuador to play a central role in the illicit market for this substance in Europe. To this end, the primary sources used will be the recent information compiled by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in the World Drug Report, along with information from local and international organizations and newspaper articles. Although the data in these reports does not constitute a single, definitive source of information, figures from countries like Ecuador often appear due to the close cooperation between their police forces and international agencies.

Consequently, in addition to being descriptive, this chapter proposes an attempt to interpret and generate a reflective view of crime in the Global South. To this end, we will first analyse the facts on which Ecuador's classification as a "drug transit country" is based, mainly to determine whether these have changed geographically. Secondly, the implications of cocaine trafficking through banana exports will be highlighted. This leads us, thirdly, to take a look at Ecuador's social structure and the impact of violence surrounding the trafficking of these substances. And finally, as a fourth point, we will outline the new forms of crime operating in Ecuador around cocaine trafficking.

More Than Just a "Drug Transit Country"

Ecuadorian territory traditionally served as a means for exporting cocaine to the U.S. via Central America. For this reason, Ecuador was classified as a "drug transit country" due to its geographical proximity to the coca plant cultivation centers established in southwestern Colombia. The Biden administration, at the time, reaffirmed this characteristic in its Presidential Determination for Fiscal Year 2022, stating the following:

> I hereby identify the following countries as major drug transit or major illicit drug-producing countries: Afghanistan, The Bahamas, Belize, Bolivia, Burma, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Jamaica, Laos, Mexico, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. (U.S. The White House, 2021)

Through this declaration, the U.S. government attributed both the "drug-producing countries" and the "drug transit countries" with increased consumption in the U.S., in the context of the health crisis resulting from the upsurge in opioid overdose cases (Humphreys et al., 2018, p. 123; New York Times, 2022).

Currently, the Trump administration has once again resorted to this classification for Fiscal Year 2026, this time adding China to the same list of countries that would perform poorly in the "war on drugs" (U.S. Department of State, 2025a). Thus, the paragraph mentioned above, written four years earlier, was replicated verbatim, stating that: "the reason countries are placed on the list is the combination of geographic, commercial, and economic factors that allow drugs or precursor chemicals to be transited or produced, even if a government has engaged in robust and diligent narcotics control and law enforcement measures" (Ibid.).

The White House or Department of State used the definition established in Article 1 (u) of the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances from 1988, as well as in Resolutions 845 (XXXII) and 1147 (XLI) of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations. Both texts determine the form of country representation at the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) insofar as they are "drug consumption countries" and "drug-producing countries" (ECOSOC, 1961; 1966). Curiously, "drug transit countries" defined in the 1988 drug convention do not enjoy representation within this important United Nations body. Therefore, Ecuador does not originally have a seat on the CND despite having been defined as a "drug transit country."

The classification or labeling as a "drug transit country" does, however, have some factual basis. After the fall – or rather, the transformation into other forms of criminal structures – of the Medellín and Cali drug trade organizations (Durán-Martínez, 2018, pp. 111–174), Ecuador became the preferred corridor between criminal groups in Colombia and Mexico for trafficking cocaine to North America. The U.S. Department of State itself acknowledged this when it highlighted the following:

> Ecuadorian maritime trafficking networks consistently use routes south of the Galapagos Islands to destinations in Central America to circumvent law enforcement interdiction efforts. Transnational criminal organizations, many based in Mexico and Colombia, continue to operate in Ecuador. (U.S. Department of State, 2019, pp. 158–159)

All police and military cooperation with the U.S. has been based precisely on interdicting drug trafficking across the Pacific. As a result, in 1999, Ecuador signed the "Cooperation Agreement concerning the access and use by the United States of America of facilities at the Ecuadorian Air Force base in Manta for anti-narcotics air activities" (Presidencia de la República Ecuador, 1999), which allows the U.S. to deploy a Forward Operating Location (FOL). The U.S. military presence through the FOL in Ecuador came to an end after the new Ecuadorian Constitution took effect in 2008, as Article 5 of the constitution prohibits the establishment of foreign military bases on national territory. However, Daniel Noboa's government has proposed holding a referendum this year to repeal this very article of the Constitution (El Comercio, 2025a).

Meanwhile, cooperation with the U.S. has continued in various forms. In addition to economic aid under special certifications for Latin American governments, as well as tariff benefits on certain products that Andean countries have received in the context of the "war on drugs", such as the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA) of 2002 (Umaña Mendoza, 2010, pp. 334–335), the U.S. government promoted military cooperation to combat the various methods used by criminal groups off the coast of Ecuador.

Thus, in 2006, the governments signed "Operational procedures for boarding and inspecting vessels suspected of illicit traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances and of smuggling migrants by sea" (U.S. Coast Guard, 2006). Through this agreement, hundreds of Ecuadorian citizens were detained at sea. Consequently, they were transferred for trial in U.S. courts on the Atlantic coast, after a long journey that involved prolonged imprisonment on board the U.S. Coast Guard vessels themselves, as revealed in the shocking investigation by journalist Seth Freed Wessler, subtitled 'Floating Guantánamos' (New York Times, 2017; Parametría, 2019).

Beyond the use of controversial measures by the U.S. to wage the "war on drugs" within and outside its territory, which has had a negative impact on human rights (Youngers & Rosin, 2005, p. 10), drug trafficking remains unscathed. In this sense, Ecuador is more than just a "drug transit country". Through Ecuadorian territory, criminal groups are said to have tested and perfected a range of methods for trafficking cocaine. For this reason, the U.S. Department of State stated the following:

> Drug traffickers use various methods to move shipments, including containerized cargo ships, small fishing boats, self-propelled semi-submersible and fully-submersible submarines, 'go-fast' boats, aircraft, human couriers, and mail. (U.S. Department of State, 2018, p. 159)

In addition to its geographical position, linking the major cocaine-producing countries (Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia) with the South American Pacific, Ecuador offers several advantages for the establishment of drug trafficking in its territory. One of these is the monetary policy adopted since 2000. Since then, Ecuador has used the U.S. dollar as its official currency, which has simplified economic transactions between criminal groups by eliminating the need to convert their payments into the national currencies of Colombia or Mexico. Added to this is Ecuador's institutional ineffectiveness in detecting and combating money laundering. After implementing the U.S. dollar as its local currency, Ecuador maintained a weak institutional capacity to detect and punish the flow of illicit money within its national financial system (Reuter & Truman, 2004, p. 164).

Ecuador became an attractive country within the criminal drug economy mainly due to the accessibility of its ports on the South American Pacific coast. Unlike Colombia, all of Ecuador's coastal provinces have deep-water ports and an extensive road network connecting them, as is the case with the ports in the provinces of Esmeraldas, Manabí (Manta), Santa Elena, Guayas (Posorja and Guayaquil), and El Oro (Puerto Bolívar). The installed capacity in these ports is notable not only for its infrastructure supporting the anchoring and departure of deep-draft ships, but mainly for its logistics for the internal movement and storage of goods.

Due to these characteristics, transnational criminal groups found Ecuador to be a hub for exporting cocaine from Colombia. Local criminal groups historically involved in common crimes took on an important role in cocaine trafficking (Carrión, 2024, pp. 139–140; Ordóñez, 2024, pp. 47–64), especially because they co-opted all of these logistics, consequently serving as brokers between criminal groups that began to have a transnational presence. However, as noted by UNODC, "Domestic 'service providers' in transit countries may grow powerful enough to conduct trafficking operations independently" (2023a, p. 148). Similar to Mexican criminal groups that gained an advantage over their Colombian counterparts in the 1990s (Durán-Martínez, 2015, pp. 132–133; Paul et al., 2014, pp. 81–82), Ecuadorian criminal groups thus acquired a certain degree of autonomy; in other words, greater power. In this regard, UNODC went on to note the following:

> These 'service providers' may work for multiple clients; a transportation network may organize deliveries of cocaine to different buyers who operate in different locations. Lieutenants of foreign OCGs (organized criminal groups) often travel to a transit country to establish their operations with local 'service providers'. Some of them stay, while others return to their base, leaving the domestic operators in charge of overseeing logistics and day-to-day operations. (UNODC, 2023a, p. 148)

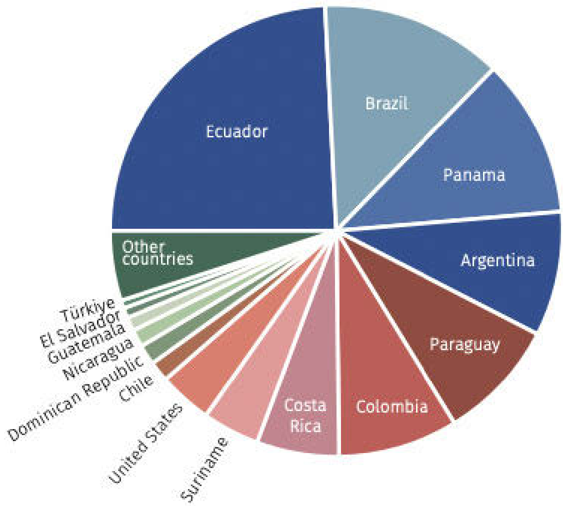
In this way, Ecuador went from being a "drug transit country" to a "service provider country". With local criminal groups becoming increasingly active and powerful, drug trafficking through Ecuador became more attractive. All of this also indicates that, for the interests of transnational criminal groups, the difference between "drug-producing countries" and "drug-transit countries" is irrelevant (Taylor et al., 2013, p. 424).

Bananas and Cocaine: Their Coexistence in the European Market

Although the areas where coca leaves are grown and processed to cocaine have been predominantly located in countries such as Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia since at least the mid-1980s (Gylys, 1988, p. 79; Isacson, 2005, p. 45; Bagley, 2015, p. 4), it is nevertheless in the last five years that there has been a notable increase in the trafficking of this substance from

Ecuadorian ports to the European continent. In a 2023 special report prepared by UNODC, which addresses the issue of supply and demand in the context of the global cocaine market rebound, Ecuador is identified as the main exporter of this substance (see Image 1), following a trend that had been evident prior to the coronavirus pandemic. Almost a quarter of the cocaine seized in the EU in 2021 came through Ecuador, making it the largest supplier of this substance compared to other Latin American ports from which cocaine is also exported (UNODC, 2023a, p. 82).

Image 1: Breakdown of cocaine seizures by customs authorities in the EU, by country of departure of the consignment, 2021



Source: UNODC / Global Report on Cocaine 2023

Unlike Bolivia and Peru, which are considered "drug-producing countries" and whose trafficking routes point to the Amazon region and other South American ports such as San Antonio in Chile (Ibid., pp. 58–59), Ecuadorian ports have now become a means of transporting mainly Colombian cocaine. Ecuador is thus part of an illicit trafficking chain that begins in Colombia, specifically in the southwestern part of the country, through expanded cultivation areas in the departments of Cauca and Nariño.

As reported by the Colombian government itself through crop monitoring carried out jointly with UNODC, the area under coca bush cultivation in Colombia increased by 61% in less than five years (UNODC & Ministerio de Justicia de Colombia, 2023, p. 11; UNODC, 2023a, p. 42). It is therefore estimated that the area under coca cultivation is approximately 253,000 hectares, an area twice the size of New York City. As a result, global cocaine production in 2023 reached 3,708 tons, which implies a relative increase by 25% compared to 2022 (UNODC, 2025a, p. 12).

Although these figures have recently been called into question by the Colombian government of Gustavo Petro (BBC, 2025), Ecuador does not even feature among the countries raising concerns due to coca cultivation. In fact, the latest report, produced by UNODC and the Government of Ecuador (2011, p. 9), does not provide an estimate based on hectares, but only on the number of plants eradicated through military operations near the border with Colombia.

On the other hand, the Pacific metropolis of Guayaquil in Ecuador has one of the largest ports in Latin America. After Santos (Brazil), Manzanillos (Mexico), Panama, Callao (Peru), and Cartagena (Colombia), Guayaquil stands out for handling nearly 5.5 million tons of cargo annually according to the Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit (TEU) standard. However, the infrastructure for mooring ships at docks, as well as for logistics, storage, and trade in goods, is not concentrated in one place. Around Guayaquil, there are several private ports known as "port companies" authorized by the Ecuadorian state itself. One of these is the private port of 'Naportec', through which a large part of the bananas marketed by The Bonita Banana Company, part of the Noboa Group – a family business linked to the current President of Ecuador, Daniel Noboa – is exported.

In fact, most cocaine seizures originating in Ecuador have been discovered in banana boxes. This was pointed out, for example, by the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) in its report published in 2024, highlighting the following in reference to the number of seizures:

> In 2022, for the sixth year in a row, EU Member States reported a record amount of cocaine seized, amounting to 323 tons. Belgium, Spain, and the Netherlands remain the countries reporting the highest volumes of seizures, reflecting their importance as entry points for cocaine trafficked to Europe. In 2023, the quantity of cocaine seized in Antwerp, Europe's second-largest seaport, rose to 116 tons from 110 tons in 2022. The volume of cocaine seized in Antwerp has increased annually since 2016. In 2023, Spain reported its largest ever seizure of cocaine (9.5 tons) in a single shipment, concealed in bananas originating from Ecuador. (EMCDDA, 2024, p. 57)

The commercialization of bananas from Latin America has effectively served as a Trojan horse for organized crime groups to channel cocaine into European markets, evidenced by a sharp rise in seizures at the ports of Hamburg, Rotterdam, and Antwerp in 2021. While 33.9 tons were seized in Hamburg, 70.6 tons were detected in Rotterdam and 89.5 tons in Antwerp, respectively (UNODC, 2023a, p. 83). Of these three ports, Belgium has seen a sharp increase in cases, becoming one of the most worrying in the EU.

The increase in seizures between 2021 and 2023 prompted the mayors of these three important European cities and ports to make an on-site visit to Ecuador in February 2024 (Primicias, 2024). The visit by mayors Peter Tschentscher (Hamburg), Ahmed Aboutaleb (Rotterdam), and Bart De Wever (Antwerp) symbolized not only the EU's concern about a "drug transit country", but also about a country that is seen as a causal phenomenon as a "drug-producing country".

Within the EU, concerns began to grow about the side effects of the increasing amount of cocaine seized in its ports, particularly because of its link to violence in its cities. Although the figures for all these seizures are only a simple indicator of what is actually circulating on European streets – a sign that, according to the European Union Drugs Agency

(EUDA), suggests greater availability of this substance on the black market (2025, p. 3–4) –, Europol adds that the growth of the market is due not only to changes in drug trafficking routes, but also to the impact of cocaine trafficking on the recruitment of young people by criminal networks that traffic drugs in Europe. These would therefore be the causes that have also led to an increase in violence on this continent (Europol, 2025, p. 56; EMCDDA & Europol, 2022, p. 55).

According to Europol, the resurgence of drug trafficking routes to Europe is due to the resilience of drug trafficking, especially since the coronavirus pandemic (UNODC, 2021, pp. 13 and 30). Their predominant form of adaptation is expressed through the infiltration of containers loaded with legal goods, as well as the arrival of small boats such as sailboats used for this purpose (Europol, 2025, p. 56). As a primary trafficking strategy, Europol highlights the so-called "rip-on/rip-off method," which involves the infiltration or contamination of containers (EMCDDA & Europol, 2022, pp. 39–40). This involves the concealed shipment of cocaine through legally traded products or goods, i.e., without the contracting parties at both the port of origin and destination having supposedly any knowledge of the illicit trafficking. Guayaquil stands out in this criminal strategy as the port of origin from which the most significant amount of cocaine is shipped to Belgium (see Image 2).

In this regard, trade agreements with the EU play an important role in enhancing the fluidity of customs procedures, while also promoting tariff benefits that encourage exports. Although there are no free trade agreements between the EU and Ecuador, a similar form of agreement remains in place. This is because Ecuador joined the "Multiparty Trade Agreement" (*Acuerdo Comercial Multipartes*), signed initially by Colombia and Peru, which entered into force for Ecuador on January 1, 2017. Thus, in addition to industrial products, agricultural products from these three South American countries also benefit from total or partial tariff liberalization within the European market.

Given its relatively underdeveloped industrial sector, Ecuador's exports are primarily concentrated in agricultural products, with bananas standing out as the country's leading export fruit. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), "bananas represented about 17% of agricultural GDP and 39% of agricultural export revenue in Ecuador in 2022" (OECD & FAO, 2025, p. 145). Although bananas are included in a very long list of products classified under the agreement above (EU, 2016, p. 88), they are nevertheless the product for which Ecuador stands out most in the European market. For its part, the World Customs Organization (WCO) highlighted in its recent report that Ecuador's banana exports are highly contaminated with cocaine, noting the following:

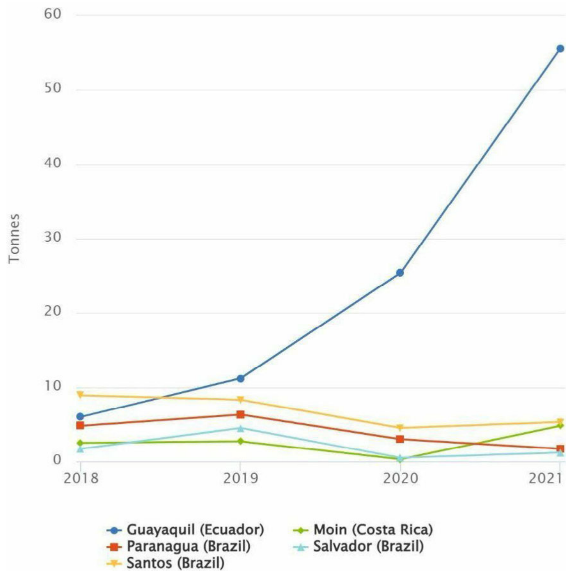
> Rip contamination of banana containers is particularly pervasive in Ecuador, which is the world's largest exporter, accounting for 27% of global banana production volumes in 2022 and generating $3.68 billion in revenue [...] Banana exports make up 66% of containers leaving Ecuador, with 30% going to the European Union. (WCO, 2025, p. 35)

Interestingly, the trade agreement between Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru with the EU establishes 'tariff contingencies' on certain products, particularly bananas. This means that the EU has the power to apply tariffs on banana imports from South America – therefore also restricting their entry – to promote a certain trade balance between the supplying countries and prevent oversupply in the European market. However, the increasing number of cocaine findings in containers transporting bananas correlates with the increase in demand for this product in Europe. In this regard, it is estimated that the supply and demand for bananas will increase even further; subsequently, the OECD and FAO consider the following:

> Production in the top exporting region, Latin America and the Caribbean, is projected to grow at 0.8% p.a. and reach 37 Mt by 2034, supported by rising demand from key markets, most importantly the European Union and the United States. (OECD & FAO, 2025, p. 146)

Given this scenario, the increase in cocaine trafficking through banana exports lends itself to a logical deduction. The greater the demand for South American bananas, the greater the supply of cocaine on the European black market, since it is precisely through bananas that cocaine is transported. Therefore, satisfying the demand for a legal product also incubates the demand for an illegal one, indicating a coexistence between the legal and illegal markets.

Image 2: Top 5 source ports for cocaine seized while smuggled using the rip-on/rip-off method intended for Belgian ports between 2018 and 2021



Source: EMCDDA / EU Drug Market: Cocaine 2022

Further, the contaminated banana shipment does not only contain hydrochloride cocaine or cocaine powder for sale on the black market, but also crack cocaine, which is processed in laboratories established within the EU (Europol, 2025, p. 56; UNODC, 2025b, p. 74–75). Trafficking cocaine in this form, therefore, has a multiplier effect due to degradation, mixing, or blending with other substances, thus obtaining a significant yield. By 'cutting' or 'blending' cocaine, the profit margin for criminal groups is even greater (Solomon & Hayes, 2017, p. 475). The profits obtained from one kilo can be multiplied by up to three times on the European market. This multiplier effect is nothing new in the history of trafficking in this substance. Its consequence is not only the loss of purity or quality of cocaine to minimal levels, which has a significant impact on the health of users – and whose consequences are in some cases mitigated by countries that have adopted harm reduction programs – but mainly in the ability of this market to become more profitable.

Between the production and distribution chains of cocaine, the profit margin becomes greater in the latter phases. It is in the "drug consumption countries" where the income from drug trafficking remains (Zaffaroni, 2016, p. 5). The profits can even be reflected in their gross domestic product (GDP). In this regard, the recent World Drug Report states the following:

> Although the largest illegal incomes from drug trafficking are generated in destination markets, they only represent a small proportion of the national economies of relatively high-income countries. The retail drug markets in the European Union, for example, generated approximately €31 billion in sales in 2021, equivalent to 0.3% of the region's GDP. (UNODC, 2025a, p. 82)

However, this deduction underestimates the adaptability of the illicit drug market within high-income countries, as well as the significant profit margins that develop within their own economies. Although profits in destination markets are notoriously higher than in so-called "drug transit countries" and "drug-producing countries", reports such as the one mentioned above continue to point to countries in the Global South as places where criminal income occupies a more significant place in terms of GDP. Thus, in the case of Colombia, it is estimated that the average annual inward illicit financial flows fluctuate between $1.2 billion and $2.6 billion, while the average annual outward illicit financial flows are $227 million (Ibid., p. 83).

In this way, the contradictions of the prohibitionist paradigm – established both in the drug conventions and in the administrative regime that monitors their enforcement – become apparent, mainly because states' efforts focus on combating supply, leaving the increase in demand in the background. Thus, it is estimated that between 2013 and 2023, the global population of cocaine users increased from 17 to 23 million (Ibid., p. 12). At this rate, by 2030, the planet is expected to reach the staggering figure of 55 million users of this substance (UNODC, 2023a, pp. 47–48).

Global market observation for this substance does not focus solely on the U.S., unlike in the 1980s. Evidence from seizure figures indicates that cocaine trafficking has intensified in Europe. For the fifth consecutive year, the EU has once again surpassed the U.S. in cocaine seizures (UNODC, 2025a, p. 12). The difference is therefore palpable. According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), only 31.8 tons (2022), 36.7 tons (2023), and 30.9 tons (2024) of this substance have been seized within U.S. borders over the last three years (U.S. CBP, 2025). In any case, the amount of drugs seized in both the EU and the U.S. does not reflect containment, nor does it provide an accurate picture of the size of this market, as all these figures are merely 'mythical numbers' (Andreas, 2011, p. 26). Therefore, the increase in the production and trafficking of this substance from Latin America is supported by the rise in consumption in Europe, suggesting a stable and profitable market for the criminal economies of this continent.

Social destructuring and escalating violence in Ecuador

Initially, the increase in cocaine seizures in the EU was related to the increase in seizures of this same substance in Ecuador. Although police forces on both continents have demonstrated their achievements in drug interdiction, none of these results has affected the incessant flow between supply and demand in this illicit market. An example of this is the increasing number of cocaine seizures on both continents. In Ecuador, since the beginning of the pandemic, 30.8 (2019), 88.83 (2020), 173.53 (2021), 242.85 (2022), 197.92 (2023), and 294.61 (2024) tons of this substance have been seized, according to statistics provided by the National Police to the media (Primicias, 2025a; 2025b). This trend suggests that cocaine seizures exceeded 200 tons per year on average over the last five years, a figure that approaches 300 tons when taking last year as a reference.

The increase in cocaine trafficking through Ecuadorian territory is taking place within a complex local context. Within its borders, the population of Ecuador is struggling to survive in a context of dismantling the welfare state, which has led to the erosion of social structure and a concomitant lack of opportunities (Dressler & Wolff, 2024, p. 284). In addition, the inhabitants of Ecuador are suffering from an alarming escalation of violence accompanied by drastic policies of securitisation and militarisation of the country.

Since the criminal groups took over the country's prisons, they have unleashed a wave of extreme violence against inmates (Paladines, 2023, pp. 27–28). In four years, 30 (2019), 51 (2020), 348 (2021), and 147 (2022) murders were recorded against inmates in various prisons in Ecuador (Ibid., p. 34). Like the riots in U.S. prisons in the late 1920s, as described in critical criminology (Rusche, 1930, pp. 1–2), the massacres in Ecuadorian prisons have the collapse of social policies as their common denominator. Thus, some ministries were dismantled in Ecuador before the prison massacres began (Andrade, 2023, pp. 58–59), including the Ministry of Justice, which was specifically responsible for administering Ecuadorian prisons.

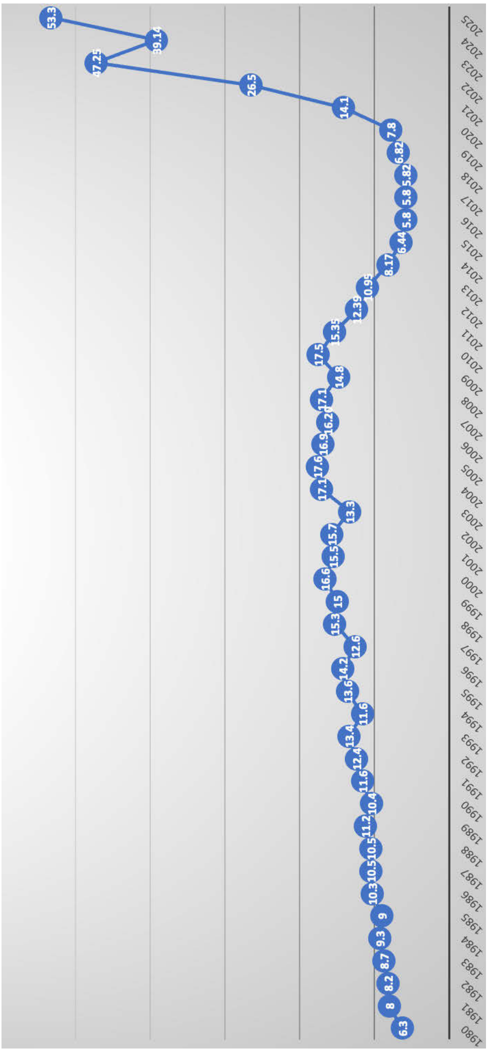
But the bloodshed inside Ecuadorian prisons immediately spilled over into the streets. During the presidency of Lenín Moreno Garcés (2017–2021), the Ecuadorian population began to experience a rise in the homicide rate to shocking levels. The violence worsened under the presidency of banker Guillermo Lasso Mendoza (2021–2023), who not only decreed a series of states of emergency to militarise prisons and streets, but also continued the neoliberal economic model reintroduced by his predecessor. Under austerity measures and state cuts, Lasso's government had allocated only 24% of the budget for health and education by the end of 2022 (Primicias, 2022a). At the end of his first year in office, Ecuador's homicide rate rose from 14.1 (2021) to 26.5 (2022), a historical record after quintupling the figures recorded in 2016 and 2017.

The situation continued to worsen, especially after Lasso resigned less than halfway through his term in 2023. The inauguration of young businessman Daniel Noboa as president and his immediate reelection (2023–2029) did nothing to reduce the intentional homicide rate, at least not to the levels recorded prior to Moreno's administration. On the contrary, the continuation of the same economic adjustment program by the state coincided with a spike in criminal violence, reaching levels never before seen in Ecuador's republican history since it returned to the rule of law in 1980.

In 2023, not only did the homicide rate triple compared to the beginning of Lasso's administration, but an even more discouraging scenario is emerging. This has led to the Guayaquil morgue being even more overcrowded with corpses (El País, 2024). If this trend continues, it is estimated that by the end of 2025, Ecuador could have a rate between 50 and 53.3 homicides per 100,000 people, as inferred from the statistical analysis prepared by the Ecuadorian Observatory on Organised Crime (OECO, 2024, p. 14), which would make it the most violent country in Latin America (see Image 3).

The increase in exports of cocaine-contaminated bananas through Ecuador is related to the increase in homicides committed in its territory (UNODC, 2025a, p. 14), which has even been highlighted by the French satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo, describing the port of Guayaquil as the "prime export port of cocaine" (Fischetti, 2024). At the same time, journalistic narratives are emerging to describe Ecuador as a "narco-state" (Clapp, 2024). However, although the increase in violence is a more serious situation, the global view of Ecuador is focused on its role in international cocaine trafficking. The indicator on seizures in both the EU and Ecuador overshadows the suffering of its own society.

*Image 3: Trends in the homicide rate in Ecuador, 1980–2025**



Source: INEC 2025; Ministerio del Interior 2025, OECO 2025, UNODC 2023b, and press releases. Own elaboration.

Although at first glance the increase in homicides reflects the dispute between criminal groups over their interest in taking over the trafficking of this substance, as well as their drift towards other types of criminal activities such as extortion (El Comercio, 2025b), international cooperation is aimed at improving the indicator on seizures, at least since the on-site visit by the mayors of Hamburg, Rotterdam, and Antwerp in early 2024. The EU's concerns and its concomitant cooperation on this issue revolve around the security of the European continent, as evident in the agreement signed between the EUDA and the Republic of Ecuador (EUDA, 2024).

However, for every ton of cocaine that arrives at European ports, hundreds of lives are lost due to criminal violence in Ecuador. Since then, its inhabitants have felt that Ecuador is the most unsafe place in the Americas, according to a Gallup survey (2023). Ecuadorians have begun to emigrate in significant numbers. In this regard, Ecuador has a migration deficit within its own population, with more departures than arrivals, according to the United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM). Thus, in 2021 alone, 81,479 Ecuadorians emigrated, compared to 30,774 in 2019, representing a 265% increase (IOM, 2024, p. 2). The following years confirmed this trend, with 99,361 (2022) and 121,335 (2023) Ecuadorians not returning (Ibid.). Rather than economic reasons, the migration of Ecuadorians to other countries is motivated this time by insecurity (Ecuavisa, 2025), with Ecuador acquiring the historical characteristic that other countries have had through the painful forced displacement of their population.

In addition to all these forms of violence, there is also that perpetrated by the Ecuadorian state itself. The 'live kidnapping' of television presenters in early 2024 radicalized the state's response, defining the state of insecurity in Ecuador as an "internal armed conflict" by decree (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador, 2024). This is an unconventional declaration in terms of international humanitarian law and, especially, the jurisprudence handed down by the international criminal courts set up to try crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and the Congo, mainly because it grants special legal status to insecurity by classifying it as an 'internal armed conflict' (Meron, 1995, pp. 556–559).

However, this measure led to the normalization of the military presence on the streets, which does not exactly fall within the framework of the recurring declarations of states of emergency to which former presidents Moreno and Lasso had become accustomed – and which had to follow the legal control procedure of the Ecuadorian Constitutional Court. In the context of the "internal armed conflict", Ecuador is under a permanent state of emergency, i.e., as a form in which violence and law are articulated (Agamben, 2003, p. 112).

As a result, human rights violations have been reported that require criminal investigation. Therefore, in its report published this year, Human Rights Watch (HRW) points out: "Ecuador's militarization of its streets and prisons since January has led to serious human rights violations by security forces, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and illicit treatment" (HRW, 2025, p. 130). In short, HRW summarises its observations on Ecuador in the following terms:

> In a context of fragile democratic institutions, Ecuador has seen a sharp increase in violence by organized crime, which has taken homicide rates to unprecedented levels, following President Daniel Noboa's announcement that the country is in an "internal armed conflict," security forces engaged in serious human rights violations. Longstanding structural problems, related, among other things, to access to health, education, and employment, remain unaddressed, limiting the enjoyment of economic and social rights. (Ibid.)

Just a phenomenon of the Global South?

The development of criminal violence in Ecuador at this time does not only come from the Ecuadorian state and locally established criminal groups. The deterioration of security for Ecuadorians and the upturn in the cocaine market have produced a new configuration of crime that deserves particular analysis. To this end, it is worth asking which criminal groups are involved in both local criminal violence and international cocaine trafficking, two issues that may be closely linked. There are, therefore, three dimensions in which this phenomenon can be analyzed.

First, the criminal organizations in Ecuador revolve around a complex and diffuse network of small but violent criminal groups. However, for more than two decades (1998–2018), the Choneros gang maintained a certain hegemony over other gangs involved in criminal activities (Ordóñez, 2024, pp. 137–149). Traditionally, the criminal activities of these groups have consisted of property crimes, such as robbery and kidnapping (Dressler & Wolff, 2024, p. 281). The criminal economy based on drug trafficking did not originate with them, unlike the historic Reyes Magos gang led by the notorious Ecuadorian drug trafficker Jorge Hugo Reyes Torres when the Medellín and Cali cartels existed (New York Times, 1992).

The Choneros turned to drug trafficking when Mexican drug trade organizations began to expand into South America, particularly the Sinaloa cartel. Along with the dollarization of the economy and the modernization of ports and highways in Ecuador, the dispersion of criminal organizations in Colombia became a factor that facilitated the Choneros' leap into drug trafficking. In this way, they became "service providers" between the criminal groups of Colombia and Mexico (UNODC, 2023a, p. 148). In doing so, they secured drug trafficking from the Ecuadorian Pacific for the Sinaloa cartel (Ibid., p. 100).

After the assassination of their leader, Jorge Luis Zambrano ('Rasquiña') in December 2020, there was also a dispersal among the local criminal groups that had long coexisted with the Choneros in a kind of "mafia peace" (Paladines, 2023, p. 44). This coexistence was reflected in the relative calm of Ecuadorian prisons, which were characterized by a "criminal ecosystem" (Pontón, 2022, p. 194). It is not, therefore, a question of fragmentation – given that there was never a single root or source of criminality – but rather a return to the state from which they had come, only this time with new knowledge, skills, and, above all, contacts at both the local and international levels for cocaine trafficking. Thus, each of them became "service providers" for foreign criminal groups.

In the same decree that defined the situation of insecurity as an "internal armed conflict", President Daniel Noboa classified local criminal groups as "terrorist groups". This denomination identifies, in a way, all the gangs involved in drug trafficking from Ecuador. Thus, in addition to the Choneros, there are the Lobos, Tiguerones, Águilas, AK 47, Caballeros Oscuros, Chone Killers, Corvicheros, Cuartel de las Feas, Cubanos, Fatales, Gánster, Kater Piler, Lagartos, Los P 27, Mafia 18, Mafia Trébol, Patrones, and R7 (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador, 2024). Likewise, following the visit to Ecuador by the U.S. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, in early September 2025, the U.S. State Department also classified the Choneros and the Lobos as "terrorist groups" (U.S. Department of State, 2025b).

Therefore, the classic definition of "Makrokriminalität" developed by Herbert Jäger (1989, p. 11) is not sufficient. Beyond the political debate that lies behind the definition of "cartel" and those who are labelled "drug traffickers" (Zavala, 2018, p. 110; Astorga, 1995, pp. 23–28), the idea of absolute control over the entire drug production and trafficking chain persists in the functioning of "cartels", i.e. from the control of crops, production or refinement in laboratories, distribution by land and storage prior to export, infiltration or contamination of banana containers, arrival at destination ports and, finally, distribution in consumer markets –clearly, under sophisticated monitoring and a network of bribes to state officials. In some cases, distribution in consumer markets is preceded by refinement or composition in laboratories located in the EU itself, as noted above.

The diffuse nature of these criminal groups in Ecuador is closer to the definition of "micro-criminality" (Paladines 2023, p. 51–52), where organized crime coexists with forms of disorder or lack of leadership, giving the impression that, rather than being organized, this type of crime preserves its own dis/organization. Beyond the fragmentation of a criminal order, based on the condition that there would have been an "internal criminal governance before" (Lessing, 2021, p. 865), what emerges in Ecuador is an immeasurable number of criminal cells that replace one another under different names, internal codes, and actors. Ecuador has no history of "cartels" based on the concepts above. However, the diffuse network of criminal groups manages to evade the state itself. Poverty and the dismantling of the welfare state in the territories taken over by these criminal groups create opportunities for greater co-optation of young people, most of whom are between 13 and 17 years old (Manrique & Connectas, 2025).

Secondly, Ecuador has served as a bridge to other criminal groups in Latin America. This regional characterization of crime involves not only the Mexican groups of Sinaloa and Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), but also the complex diversity of criminal groups that exist in Colombia today, a convergence for which Ecuador has been described as a "unified criminal territory" (Carrión, 2024, pp. 320–321). In addition to the Frente Oliver Sinisterra to the Comandos de la Frontera, both coca cultivation and cocaine production in southern Colombia are in the hands of the so-called FARC dissidents, within which criminal groups such as the Estado Mayor Central and the Segunda Marquetalia have also emerged (Ibid.; UNODC, 2023a, p. 141). The contemporary emergence of new criminal groups in this country is largely attributed to the lack of economic and social sustainability in rural areas following the signing of the peace agreement between the Colombian State and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016 (Cairo & Ríos, 2023, pp. 29–30; Jiménez, 2021, pp. 181–182).

Within Colombia, there is tension between the FARC dissidents, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), and the fragmentation of the former Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), from whose paramilitary structure the so-called Clan del Golfo emerged (Niño, 2024, p. 82; UNODC, 2023a, pp. 142–143). The violence generated by all these criminal groups has led to the murder of dozens of social leaders in rural areas. Their deaths not only have in common the fact that they came from areas where coca is grown, but also their political and ideological identification with left-wing organisations (Albarracín et al., 2020, pp. 13 and 21).

Added to this is the expansion in South America of Brazilian criminal groups such as the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and the Comando Vermelho (CV), which have spread throughout the Amazon rainforest that Ecuador also shares. Like the Mexican groups, the PCC and

CV are notable for their involvement in cocaine trafficking in Latin America (UNODC, 2023a, pp. 145–146).

Finally, criminal violence in Ecuador and its significant role in cocaine trafficking are also due to the presence of criminal groups from the EU. For several years, actors linked to the Italian mafia ('Ndrangheta) and the Balkan criminal groups (Ibid., 148; UNODC, 2024, p. 20; Carrión, 2024, p. 339), known locally as the "Albanian mafia" (Zhilla & Lamallari, 2016, pp. 28–31), have been operating in Ecuador. However, unlike the Mexican and Colombian criminal groups that interact with Ecuadorian criminal gangs, the "Albanian mafia" has now consolidated its power in cocaine distribution by forming companies or firms qualified to export bananas. According to the nationality of their founders, the Albanian companies involved in cocaine trafficking to Europe so far are Albafresh, Zico Sha/Bana King, Jordil Sha, Masabi Fruit, Mc Food, and Elkos, Fat & Bet (Infobae, 2025).

According to press and police reports, the influence of the "Albanian mafia" has reached the highest echelons of political power in Ecuador, mainly during the government of banker Guillermo Lasso, under which the homicide rate also skyrocketed. In this regard, there are at least four circumstantial facts that stand out. The first comes from a documented journalistic investigation based on police information in the case known internally as "León de Troya". This investigation establishes links between people close to President Lasso and the "Albanian mafia". Their objective was to place trusted individuals in strategic positions within the Ecuadorian state for trafficking drugs to Europe (La Posta, 2023). The second stems from the previous investigation and led to a criminal prosecution that is still ongoing in the case known as "Pampa". The Ecuadorian Public Prosecutor's Office is investigating the then Minister of Agriculture, Bernardo Manzano, who allegedly acted during Lasso's government as an "operator for the Albanian mafia" in granting export quotas and bureaucratic facilities to the companies above (Primicias, 2022b).

The remaining two events are related to homicides that have not yet been fully clarified, but which nevertheless affected the highest echelons of economic and political power in Ecuador. One of them is the murder of Rubén Cherres, a close friend of President Lasso's brotherin-law, who was also under investigation for drug trafficking at the time (Primicias, 2023). The other relates to the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio on August 9, 2023. In April of the same year, Villavicencio had denounced the controversial circumstances surrounding the release of Dritan Rexhepi, an Albanian drug lord from the Kompania Bello syndicate, who was arrested and prosecuted in Ecuador in 2014 and later captured in Turkey (Extra, 2023). Rexhepi's presence in Ecuador had raised alarms for cooperation between some justice systems, such as those of the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and Albania (Balkan Insight, 2021).

These events raise at least two fundamental questions. The first implies a logical deduction within the cocaine trafficking chain from Ecuador. The reception, unloading, and distribution – the latter sometimes preceded by refining, mixing, or cutting with other substances at the destination – are carried out by European criminal groups. There is no doubt that those who satisfy the demand for cocaine first-hand are criminal structures operating within the EU itself.

However, the Ecuadorian case shows a historical shift in the tasks that appear on the pendulum of supply and demand within criminal economies. In the "criminal division of labor" of drug trafficking, understood as the separation of roles and tasks between those who act as perpetrators and executors of drug trafficking, a positive-sum exercise has persisted. Those responsible for distribution and first-hand sales on the black market have not always been the ones who transport the drugs using methods such as container contamination, let alone those responsible for cultivation or production in laboratories in the areas where coca is grown (Jenner, 2011, p. 907; Natarajan, 2000, pp. 289–294).

Hence, the second deduction has to do with the emergence of European criminal groups operating in Latin America, that is, controlling the cocaine trafficking chain in loco. In other words, they govern the supply itself from the moments before the export of this substance under a zero-sum exercise. Thus, similar to the role played by banana export companies in determining payments to farmers and small producers, the price of this product is set by them, not by those who maintain the crops. Proof of this can be found in the huge differences in the price per gram of cocaine between America, Asia, and Australia. Thus, according to estimates by the UNODC, while a gram costs an average of $101 in the U.S. (2018), in Australia (2020), China (2019), and Saudi Arabia (2020), it reached $241, $413, and $533, respectively (UNODC, 2023a, p. 95). In this way, for criminal groups such as the "Albanian mafia", the boundaries between supply and demand have been erased.

Within the EU, detecting criminal groups remains a challenge. Although borders have been abolished for EU citizens, facilitating free movement, each EU member state has its own rules for investigating and prosecuting crimes; there is therefore no unified European criminal code. However, while Europol attempts to uncover criminal networks by deciphering communication algorithms related to drug trafficking (Europol, 2024, pp. 28–29), the German police focus on the link between crime and family through the controversial definition of "Clankriminalität" rooted in ethnicity (BDK, 2019, p. 5). In both cases, there remains a kind of criminogenic attribution towards immigration, or at least towards criminal groups whose members have a migration background. In any case, the EU has been unable to contain its forms of crime. Now, its criminal groups are defiant and expansionist, having long since circumvented internal police controls to cross the Atlantic and operate from other continents. The issue of organized crime surrounding cocaine trafficking is not only a phenomenon of the South, but also of the Global North.

Conclusions

Ecuador's unilateral classification as a "drug transit country" was not based on its importance in international cocaine trafficking, but rather on its peripheral role in intermediation between production and consumption centers, as well as on its poor performance in the "war on drugs", which led to the signing of a range of controversial bilateral agreements in the name of international cooperation. Ecuadorian territory was conceived as a simple transit country between the supply and demand of this substance to the U.S.

However, with the expansion of drug trafficking routes to the EU, Ecuador ceased to play a peripheral role. Ecuador's geographical position, as well as its proximity to the most significant areas of cultivation and production of this substance on the planet, changed the course of the history of drug trafficking. Currently, most of the cocaine destined for the European illicit market passes through Ecuadorian ports. Ecuador's main fruit exports became the preferred means of trafficking this substance through the contamination of its containers, thereby consolidating a sustainable route for criminal economies, given that increased legal banana trade facilitates the process of cocaine trafficking.

In addition to the accessibility of its ports, Ecuador has other features that enhance drug trafficking activities. The U.S. dollar, as its national currency, made it even more attractive, to the point of being classified – also due to the prominence of its own criminal groups and institutional weaknesses in detecting and combating money laundering – as a "service provider". However, the deterioration of its welfare state produced a tragic causal relationship. Just as Ecuador is the main centre for cocaine exports to the EU, it is also one of the most violent countries on the planet.

The increase in cocaine trafficking through its territory is taking place in an environment of rivalry between criminal groups, but also of military interventions with negative consequences for human rights. All this has led to an increase in intentional deaths, causing Ecuador to break its historical record for homicide rates. As a result, its inhabitants have begun to emigrate.

All these features and factors describe Ecuador's position and the consequences of its central role in the current international cocaine trade. However, behind what appears to be an internal dispute between local criminal groups over the "provision of services" – the consequence of which is reflected in the increase in criminal violence – a particular form of international crime is developing.

As part of the European criminal groups, the "Albanian mafia" has transcended the boundaries between supply and demand, managing to take over the monopoly of this pendulum in Ecuador. Behind the export of cocaine-contaminated bananas lie the activities of this criminal organization. Its modus operandi is to set up front companies or firms to obtain larger quotas or permits for the fruit export. In this way, they contaminate containers loaded with bananas to transport cocaine, thus taking advantage not only of Ecuador's larger agricultural supply but also of trade agreements with the EU.

While the increase in cocaine exports highlights the interaction between Latin American criminal groups – mainly from Colombia and Mexico – in Ecuador, it also reveals the power of other criminal structures. The supply of cocaine to the EU market from Ecuador highlights the adaptation of European criminal groups that are now established in Latin America. The new trafficking of this substance is therefore leading to a reconfiguration of the international criminal activities. Ecuador's importance in cocaine trafficking lies in the central role played by the European criminal groups that directly operate in this country.

In this sense, the increase in cocaine seizures in Europe does not precisely reflect the transnational nature of the criminal groups in Ecuador or Latin America, but rather the expansion of European criminal structures themselves. Europe must first interrupt the movement of criminal groups that, although they have developed on their own continent, now pose a threat to the security of other countries. This displacement in criminal activities demonstrates once again the "balloon effect" (Reuter, 2014, pp. 34–37), as it is reflected in the concern of European authorities over quantities of cocaine that they were not accustomed to seizing – yet another feature of the ineffectiveness of the prohibitionist paradigm. Perhaps, then, the next trips and visits on-site will not come from mayors of major European ports, but from those in Latin America whom European criminal groups have used to traffic cocaine to their own continent.

References

Agamben, G. (2003). *Stato di eccezione: Homo sacer, Vol.II*, 1. Turin: Bollati Borighieri.

Albarracín, J. et al. (2020). *La lógica política de los asesinatos de líderes sociales: autoritarismo competitivo local y violencia en el posacuerdo*. Bogotá: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Andrade, C. (2023). La seguridad como excepción. ¿Hacia dónde va el Ecuador? *Ecuador Debate*, 119 (August), pp. 45–73.

Andreas, P. (2011). The Politics of Measuring Illicit Flows and Policy Effectiveness. In: Andreas, P & Greenhill, K. M. (Eds.). *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 23–45.

Astorga, L. (1995). *Mitología del 'narcotraficante' en México*. Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés Editores.

Bagley, B. M. (2015). Introduction. In: Bagley, B. M. & Rosen, J. D. (Eds.). *Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime, and Violence in the Americas Today*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, pp. 1–24.

Balkan Insight (2021). "'Undisputed Capo': The Albanian Behind a Cocaine Pipeline to Europe". 19 February. Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2021/02/19/undisputed-capo-the-albanian-behind-a-cocaine-pipeline-to-europe/

BBC (2025). "'No somos súbditos, eso Trump no lo entiende': Gustavo Petro en entrevista con la BBC". Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5OmrzxRXbM

BDK Bund Deutscher Kriminalbeamter (2019). *Clankriminalität bekämpfen: Strategische Ausrichtung – nachhaltige Erfolge*. Berlin: BDK.

Cairo, H. & Ríos, J. (2023). De las dificultades de la paz territorial surge la paz total: un concepto ambicioso aunque controvertido. In: Cairo, H., Piazzini, E. & Ríos, J. (Eds.). *De la paz territorial a la paz total en Colombia: una aproximación socio-espacial*. Madrid: Trama, pp. 19–34.

Carrión, F. (2024). *La producción social de las violencias en Ecuador y América Latina. Histórica, estructural, plural y relacional*. Quito: Flacso-Ecuador & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

Fischetti, A. (2024). "En Équateur, Narcotour á Guayaquil. Premier port exportateur de cocaïne". *Charlie Hebdo* (1660), pp. 8–10.

Dressler, E. & Wolff, J. (2024). From political instability to "internal armed conflict": Ecuador's multiple crisis. *Revista de Ciencia Política*, 44(2), pp. 229–293.

Durán-Martínez, A. (2015). Drugs Around the Corner: Domestic Drug Markets and Violence in Colombia and Mexico. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 57(3), pp. 122–146.

Durán-Martínez, A. (2018). *The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico*. New York: Oxford University Press.

ECOSOC (1961). Resolution 845 (XXXII): Increase in the membership of the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council, 1180th Plenary Meeting, Geneva [E/RES/845(XXXII)].

ECOSOC (1966). Resolution 1147 (XLI): Commons of the Economic and Social Council, Functional members, increase in number. 1443rd Plenary Meeting, Geneva [E/RES/1147(XLI)].

Ecuavisa (2025). "Más familias dejan sus casas en Guayaquil y Durán ante la violencia". 16 September. Available at: https://www.ecuavisa.com/la-noticia-a-fondo/mas-familias-dejan-casas-guayaquil-duran-violencia-NA10105910

El Comercio (2025a). "Bases militares extranjeras en Ecuador, lo que está en juego en la consulta popular de Daniel Noboa". 4 September. Available at: https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/politica/bases-militares-extranjeras-ecuador-lo-que-esta-juego-consulta-popular-daniel-noboa/

El Comercio (2025b). "Las extorsiones crecen sin piedad Ecuador: 'Si no se paga hay bala o secuestros'". 4 June. Available at: https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/extorsiones-crecen-ecuador-paga-bala-secuestros/

El País (2024). "A Morgue in Ecuador Struggles with over 200 Rotting Corpses of Murder Victims". 13 June. Available at: https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-06-13/a-morgue-in-ecuador-struggles-with-over-200-rotting-corpses-of-murder-victims.html

EMCDDA (2024). *European Drug Report: Trends and Development*. Lisbon: EMCDDA.

EMCDDA & Europol (2022). *EU Drug Market: Cocaine*. Lisbon: EMCDDA.

EU (2016). Protocol of Accession to the Trade Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the one part, and Colombia and Peru, of the other part, to take account of the accession of Ecuador. Brussels: Official Journal of the European Union.

EUDA (2024). Acuerdo de Colaboración entre la Agencia de la Unión Europea sobre Drogas y el Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Movilidad Humana de Ecuador. Lisbon: EUDA.

EUDA (2025). European Drug Report: Cocaine – The Current Situation in Europe. Lisbon: EUDA.

Europol (2024). Decoding the EU's most threatening criminal networks. Luxembourg: Europol.

Europol (2025). European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment: The Changing DNA of Serious and Organised Crime. Luxembourg: Europol.

Extra (2023). "Dritan Rexhepi: El capo albanés denunciado por Fernando Villavicencio fue detenido en Turquía". 10 November. Available at: https://www.extra.ec/noticia/actualidad/dritan-rexhepi-capo-albanes-denunciado-fernando-villavicencio-detenido-turquia-93992.html

Gallup (2023). "Ecuador: The Most Dangerous Country in Latin America?". 20 January. Available at: https://news.gallup.com/poll/468227/ecuador-dangerous-country-latin-america.aspx

Gylys, J. A. (1988). Cocaine Industry and Demographic Patterns of Consumption. *International Social Science Review*, 63(2), pp. 78–83.

Humphreys, K., Caulkins, J. P. & Felbab-Brown, V. (2018). Opioids of the Masses: Stopping an American Epidemic from Going Global. *Foreign Affairs*, 97(3), May-June, pp.118–129.

HRW (2025). *World Report 2025: Events of 2024*. New York: Human Rights Watch.

Infobae (2025). "Cómo opera la mafia albanesa para traficar cocaína desde Ecuador hacia Europa". 21 June. Available at: https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2025/06/21/como-opera-la-mafia-albanesa-para-traficar-cocaina-desde-ecuador-hacia-europa/

INEC – Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (2025). Homicidios intencionales. Quito: INEC.

IOM (2024). Análisis del flujo migratorio de población ecuatoriana hacia el extranjero. Retrieved from: https://ecuador.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl776/files/documents/2024-08/flujo-migratorio-de-poblacion-ecuatoriana_0.pdf

Isacson, A. (2005). The U.S. military in the war on drugs. In: Youngers, C. & Rosin, E. (Eds.). *Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of U.S. Policy*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, pp. 15–60.

Jäger, H. (1989). *Makrokriminalität: Studien zur Kriminologie kollektiver Gewalt*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Jenner, M. S. (2011). International Drug Trafficking: A Global Problem with a Domestic Solution. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 18(2), Summer, pp. 901–927.

Jiménez, C. (2021). Injusticias territoriales y la búsqueda por la construcción de paz Colombia: entre las geografías del despojo y la esperanza. In: Jiménez, C. & Zuluaga, J. (Eds.). *Incertidumbres de la paz: Entre el incumplimiento del acuerdo y las luchas sociales en su defensa*. Buenos Aires: Clacso, pp. 175–201.

La Posta (2023). "El Gran Padrino". Available at: https://investigacioneslaposta.com/

Lessing, B. (2021). Conceptualizing criminal governance. *Perspectives on politics* 19(3), pp. 854–873.

Manrique, A. & Connectas (2025). Desaparecidos: Los niños perdidos en la guerra interna en Ecuador. Available at: https://tierradenadie.ec/desaparecidos/

Meron, T. (1995). International Criminalization of Internal Atrocities. *The American Journal of International Law* 89(3), July, pp. 554–577.

Ministerio del Interior (2025). Homicidios intencionales. Quito: Ministerio del Interior. Retrieved from: https://datosabiertos.gob.ec/dataset/homicidios-intencionales

Natarajan, M. (2000). Understanding the Structure of a Drug Trafficking Organization: A Conversational Analysis. In: Natarajan, M. & Hough, M. (Eds.). *Illegal Drug Markets: From Research to Prevention Policy*. Monsey: Criminal Justice Press, pp. 273–298.

New York Times (1992). "Ecuador Journal: With Graft Rife, Nation Reins In the Cocaine King". 22 July. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/22/world/ecuador-journal-with-graft-rife-nation-reins-in-the-cocaine-king.html

New York Times (2017). "The Coast Guard's 'Floating Guantánamos'". 20 November. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/20/magazine/the-coast-guards-floating-guantanamos.html?ref=nyt-es&mcid=nyt-es&subid=article

New York Times (2022). "U.S. Drug Agency Doubles Its Catch of Fentanyl-Laced Pills in 2022". 20 December. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/20/us/fentanyl-drug-dea-seizure.html?searchResultPosition=1

Niño, C. (2024). Why Has Peace Not Come to Colombia? Between Total Peace and Armed Peace. *Journal of Strategic Security* 17(2), pp. 77–88.

OECO – Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado (2025). Boletín semestral sobre homicidios intencionales en Ecuador: Análisis estadístico primer semestre 2025. Quito: OECO.

OECD-FAO (2025). *Agricultural Outlook 2025–2034*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Ordóñez, C. (2024). *Ecuador en guerra: La paulatina penetración del crimen organizado*. Quito: Parentética.

Paladines, J. V. (2023). *Matar y dejar matar: Las masacres carcelarias y la (des)estructuración social del Ecuador*. Quito: El Siglo.

Parametría (2019). *A la deriva: Repercusiones sociales del narcotráfico en el Pacífico ecuatoriano*. Quito: Open Society Foundation.

Paul, C., Clarke, C. P. & Serena, C. C. (2014). *Mexico is not Colombia: Alternative Historical Analogies for Responding to the Challenge of Violent Drug-Trafficking Organizations*. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation.

Pontón, D. (2022). Las nuevas cárceles en Ecuador: un ecosistema para la reconducción del crimen complejo. *Universitas*-XXI (37), pp. 173–199.

Presidencia de la República del Ecuador (1999). Acuerdo de cooperación concerniente al acceso y uso de los Estados Unidos de América de las instalaciones en la base de la Fuerza Aérea Ecuatoriana en Manta para actividades aéreas antinarcóticos, Decreto Ejecutivo 1505, Registro Oficial 326, 25 November, Quito.

Presidencia de la República del Ecuador (2024). Decreto Ejecutivo 111, Registro Oficial 474, 10 January. Quito.

Primicias (2022a). "La inversión en salud y educación cae 80 % en 2022". 29 August. Available at: https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/economia/inversion-estatal-salud-educacion-estancada-ecuador/

Primicias (2022b). "Investigan manipulación del sistema de permisos para exportar banano". 30 May. Available at: https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/economia/investiga-manipulacion-sistema-exportacion-banano/

Primicias (2023). "Rubén Cherres: lo que se sabe sobre el crimen y los detenidos". 14 July. Available at: https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/sucesos/captura-asesinos-ruben-cherres/

Primicias (2024). "Tres puertos de Europa anuncian cooperación para combatir narcotráfico desde Ecuador". 1 February. Available at: https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/politica/daniel-noboa-alcaldes-amberes-roterdam-hamburgo-control-puertos/

Primicias (2025a). "Más de 290 toneladas de droga se incautaron en Ecuador en todo 2024". 2 January. Available at: https://www.primicias.ec/seguridad/droga-incautada-toneladas-ecuador-policia-86642/

Primicias (2025b). "Ecuador fue el segundo país en el que más cocaína se incautó en el mundo entre 2019 y 2023". 7 July. Available at: https://www.primicias.ec/seguridad/ecuador-segundo-pais-decomiso-cocaina-mundo-99898/

Reuter, P. (2014). The Mobility of Drug Trafficking. In: Collins, J. (Ed.). *Ending the Drug Wars*. London: London School of Economics, pp. 33–40.

Reuter, P. & Truman, E. M. (2004). *Chasing Dirty Money: The Fight Against Money Laundering*. Washington: Institute for International Economics.

Roxin, C. (1984). *Tatherrschaft und Teilnahme*. Berlin: De Gruyter

Rusche, G. (1930). Zuchthausrevolten oder Sozialpolitik. Zu den Vorgängen in Amerika. *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 430(74), pp. 1–2.

Solomon, N. & Hayes, J. (2017). Levamisole: A High-Performance Cutting Agent. *Academic Forensic Pathology*, 7(3), pp. 469–476.

Taylor, J. S., Jasparro, C. & Mattson, K. (2013). Geographers and Drugs: A Survey of the Literature. *Geographical Review*, 103(3), July, pp. 415–430.

Clapp, Alexander (2024). "A journey through the world's newest narco-state. Drugs transformed Ecuador from a Latin American Success Story into a War Zone". *The Economist*, 22 November. Available at: https://www.economist.com/1843/2024/11/22/a-journey-through-the-worlds-newest-narco-state?utm_medium=social-media.content.np&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=editorial-social&utm_content=discovery.content

Umaña Mendoza, G. (2010). La trampa del bilateralismo. *Revista de Economía Institucional*, 12(23), pp. 323–346.

UNODC (2021). W*orld Drug Report Executive Summary: Policy Implications*. Vienna: United Nations.

UNODC (2023a). *Global Report on Cocaine: Local dynamics, global challenges*. Vienna: United Nations.

UNODC (2023b). *Global Study on Homicide*. Vienna: United Nations.

UNODC (2024). *World Drug Report: Key Findings and Conclusions*. Vienna: United Nations.

UNODC (2025a). *World Drug Report: Key Findings*. Vienna: United Nations.

UNODC (2025b). *World Drug Report: Contemporary Issues on Drugs*. Vienna: United Nations.

UNODC & Ministerio de Justicia de Colombia (2023). Monitoreo de territorios con presencia de cultivos de coca. Resumen ejecutivo. Bogotá: Ministerio de Justicia de Colombia.

UNODC & Government of Ecuador (2011). Informe Técnico de Indicadores de Cultivos Ilícitos en Ecuador 2010. Quito: UNODC.

U.S. Coast Guard (2006). Operational Procedures for Boarding and Inspecting Vessels Suspected of Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and of Smuggling Migrants by Sea. Dirección General de la Marina Mercante y del Litoral de la República del Ecuador.

U.S. CBP (2025). Drug Seizure Statistics. Retrieved from: https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/drug-seizure-statistics

U.S. Department of State (2018). International Narcotics Control Strategy Report: Drug and Chemical Control, Vol. I. Washington: Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

U.S. Department of State (2019). International Narcotics Control Strategy Report: Drug and Chemical Control, Vol. I. Washington: Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

U.S. Department of State (2025a). Presidential Determination on Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2026. Retrieved from: https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/09/presidential-determination-on-major-drug-transit-or-major-illicit-drug-producing-countries-for-fiscal-year-2026

U.S. Department of State (2025b). Terrorist Designations of Los Choneros and Los Lobos. 9 September. Available at: https://www.state.gov/releases/2025/09/terrorist-designations-of-los-choneros-and-los-lobos

U.S. The White House (2021). Presidential Determination on Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2022: A Memorandum for the Secretary of State. Presidential Determination No. 2022–23. Washington: Executive Office of the President.

WCO (2025). Infiltration of Maritime Cargo Supply Chains: Organized Crime, Cocaine and the Internal Conspirator. Brussels: WCO.

Youngers, C. & Rosin, E. (2005). The U.S. 'War on Drugs': Its Impact in Latin America and the Caribbean. In: Youngers, C. & Rosin, E. (Eds.). *Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of U.S. Policy*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, pp. 1–14.

Zaffaroni, E. R. (2016). Prólogo. In: Paladines, J. V. *En busca de la prevención perdida: Reforma y contrarreforma de la política de drogas en Ecuador*. Quito: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, pp. 5–7.

Zavala, O. (2018). *Los cárteles no existen: Narcotráfico y cultura en México*. Barcelona: Malpaso.

Zhilla, F. & Lamallari, B. (2016). *Evolution of the Albanian Organized Crime Groups*. Tirana: Open Society Foundation for Albania.