

EU cooperation with Latin America: Combating drug trafficking in the Andean region

SUMMARY

The global supply of cocaine is at record levels: in just six years (from 2014 to 2020), cocaine production doubled and led to a 416 % increase in the European cocaine market. Almost all cocaine produced comes from the Andean region: With 61 % of total production, Colombia remains the world's biggest cultivator of coca, followed by Peru (26 %) and Bolivia (13 %).

Political instability experienced in Andean countries in recent years goes hand in hand with a worsening public security situation and rising cocaine supplies. There has been a dramatic security deterioration, particularly in Ecuador, where the homicide rate rose from 13.7 per 100 000 people in 2021 to about 45 in 2023, placing Ecuador among the top three most violent countries in Latin America.

Illicit drug trafficking is also affecting the EU as never before. In 2021, EU Member State authorities seized 303 tonnes of cocaine – the highest ever amount of cocaine confiscated in Europe. Today, the drug trade orchestrated by organised crime poses one of the most serious security threats to the EU. Almost 40 % of the criminal networks active in the EU are involved in the illegal drugs trade. Some 50 % of all homicides in Europe are connected to drug trafficking.

Against this backdrop, the EU is stepping up its response and has established a series of instruments to fight organised crime, such as the EU security union strategy and the roadmap to fight drug trafficking and organised crime. Moreover, in 2023, the European Commission started negotiating international agreements on the exchange of personal data between Europol and a series of Latin American countries and launched the European Ports Alliance in January 2024.

Cooperation on illegal drug-related issues has become a priority for the strategic partnership between the EU and the Community of Latin America and Caribbean states (CELAC).



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Introduction

Taking into account all armed conflicts, domestic and other, Latin America is one of the most peaceful regions in the world. The most recent armed conflict between Latin American nations took place almost 30 years ago (the [Cenepa War](#) between Ecuador and Peru in 1995; it lasted one month). According to the [Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights](#), six non-international armed conflicts are currently ongoing in Latin America (all of them in Mexico and Colombia). By way of comparison, the Middle East and North Africa are numerically the least peaceful regions, with more than 45 armed conflicts ongoing today.

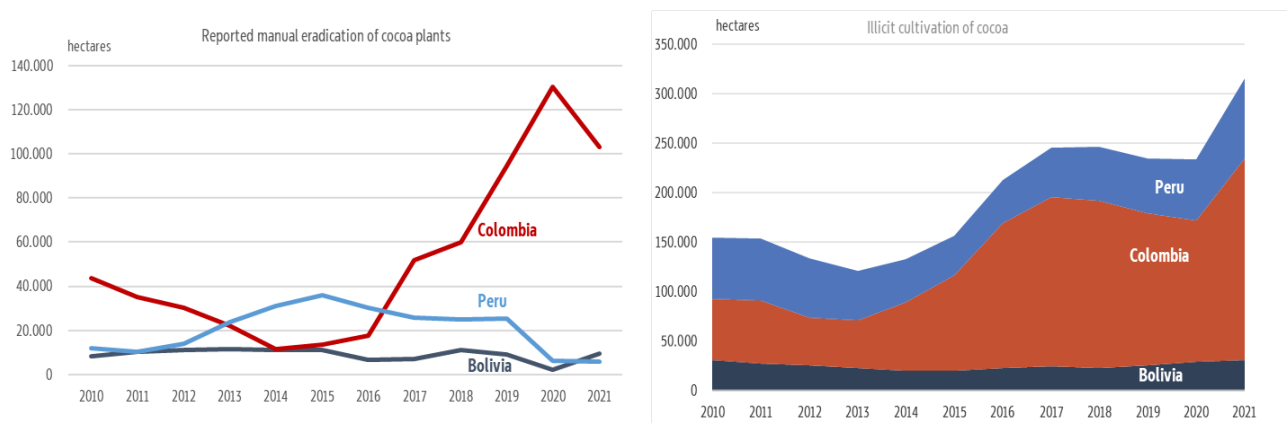
Nevertheless, this peaceful picture is only one side of the coin. Looking at public security in the region, the situation does not look so rosy. According to the [2023 Global Study on Homicide](#) prepared by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the homicide rate in the Americas (Northern America, Central America, South America and the Caribbean) in 2021 was 15 per 100 000 inhabitants. This is almost three times higher than the global homicide rate (5.8). [Organised crime-related homicides](#) represent 50 % of all homicides in the Americas. In comparison, the average homicide rate in the EU is about 0.66 % per 100 000 inhabitants. Moreover, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) remains among the [most unequal](#) regions in the world (along with sub-Saharan Africa), with an average poverty rate of about 30 %.

Two of the three South American countries with the highest murder rates – Ecuador and Colombia – are members of the Andean Community (CAN), the regional intergovernmental organisation and customs union. Homicides in Ecuador rose 407 % between 2016 and 2022. This sharp increase can be attributed to intensifying violent competition among rival drug trafficking gangs.

The UNODC 2023 [Global Report on Cocaine](#) points out that the global supply of cocaine is at record levels. Cocaine production recently doubled within six years (from 2014 to 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic only temporarily disrupted production. According to UNODC, coca bush cultivation doubled between 2013 and 2017, hit a peak in 2018, and rose again sharply in 2021. [Experts](#) assume that 2024 will be the year when the cocaine supply chain catches up with new record levels of coca cultivation and global organised crime will enjoy rising profits.

Colombia remains the world's biggest cultivator of coca (61 % share of global production), followed by Peru (26 %) and Bolivia (13 %). According to the 2023 [European Drug Report](#), cocaine is, after cannabis, the second most commonly used illicit drug in Europe. Within just 10 years (between 2011 and 2021), the European cocaine market [increased](#) by 416 %. The trend of rising cocaine production is reflected in the volume of cocaine confiscated at European ports. EU Member States seized a record 303 tonnes of cocaine in 2021. Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Germany continue to report the highest volumes of seizures, reflecting the importance of these countries as entry points for cocaine trafficking to Europe. Customs investigators in Belgium and the Netherlands seized a [record amount of cocaine](#) in 2023. Authorities in both countries reported a total of 180 tonnes of the drug were confiscated at the ports in Antwerp, Rotterdam and Vlissingen, as well as at the airports. In Belgium alone, authorities seized a record 121 tonnes of cocaine at the Antwerp-Bruges port in 2023. Most of the cocaine shipped to Antwerp [comes from](#) Colombia, via the port of Guayaquil in Ecuador. The development is even more concerning considering that, globally, more than US\$ 930 million in [aid](#) was spent on 'narcotics control' projects in countries around the world between 2012 and 2022. More than half of the funding came from the United States (US\$550 million) – followed by the EU (US\$282 million). However, this appears a drop in the ocean compared to the market value of cocaine. [Observers](#) point out that the 600 tonnes cocaine production increase in Colombia alone (1 120 tonnes in 2018; 1 738 tonnes in 2022) is worth at least US\$20 billion on the international wholesale markets.

Figure 1 – Cocaine cultivated and seized in Bolivia, Colombia and Peru



Source: [UNODC](#).

In addition to the devastating effects for society and security in LAC countries, Latin America's organised crime groups and their cooperation with European organised crime networks pose a serious threat to EU internal security, as their actions are increasingly linked to a [series of crimes](#) within the Union. According to the 2021 [European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment](#) (SOCTA), close to 40 % of the criminal networks active in the EU are involved in the trade in illegal drugs. The estimated [organised crime profit](#) from illicit activities, including drug trafficking, amounted to around €139 billion a year, corresponding to 1 % of EU GDP. Fully [50 %](#) of homicides in the EU are linked to drugs and drug trafficking.

International dimension of EU strategy on drug trafficking and organised crime

[According](#) to the Belgian Minister for Justice, Paul Van Tigchelt, combating drug trafficking and organised crime is an absolute priority for the Presidency of the Council of the EU. This fight is based on the European Commission's 2020 [communication on the EU Security Union Strategy](#), its 2020 [EU agenda on drugs for the years 2021-2025](#), and its [communication on the roadmap](#) to fight drug trafficking and organised crime of 18 October 2023. The package reaffirms that protecting EU citizens is no longer only about ensuring security within EU borders, but also about cooperation with third countries to address common challenges related to transnational organised crime and small arms control.

The roadmap sets out a series of concrete actions in four priority areas. These include a new [European Ports Alliance](#) to increase port authority resilience against criminal activity and cooperation with international partners, including by reinforcing information exchange, joint operations on the main drug-trafficking routes, and strengthening law enforcement and judicial cooperation. The European Ports Alliance was launched on 24 January 2024, and aims to strengthen security in all EU ports with €200 million to fund modern equipment, which will help EU customs officials scan containers and check imports more efficiently. Public-private partnerships will support port authorities and shipping companies, to protect logistics, information, staff, and processes in ports and through law-enforcement operations in ports.

To increase the fight against organised crime and improve law-enforcement cooperation with Latin American countries, the Commission has begun negotiating [international agreements](#) on the exchange of personal data between Europol and Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru. Moreover, the Commission aims to conclude negotiations on international judicial cooperation agreements between [Eurojust](#) and Argentina, Brazil and Colombia. In addition, joint investigation teams (JITs) involving Argentina, Brazil and Ecuador were established with Eurojust support.

EU-CELAC cooperation on drug-related issues

The fight against drugs and organised crime is a common interest within the framework of the bi-regional EU-CELAC partnership and dates back to the 1998 creation of the [EU-CELAC coordination and cooperation mechanism on drugs](#) and the first high-level meeting of the mechanism held that year. The mechanism was designed to enhance existing cooperation on drug-related issues, and to develop new areas of cooperation in the field. As yet, the mechanism is the only formal regional forum in which the EU and CELAC countries meet to address drug-related issues – taking a comprehensive approach and dealing with matters relating to both drug-supply and drug-demand reduction. The [24th high-level meeting](#) of the EU-CELAC coordination and cooperation mechanism on drugs was held on 22 February 2024 in La Paz, Bolivia.

Over time, [EU-CELAC cooperation](#) on drug-related issues has become a priority on the inter-regional agenda. The first EU-CELAC summit held in Santiago de Chile in 2013 included strengthening regional security cooperation structures and fostering regional cooperation in the fight against illicit drugs and related crimes – such as arms trafficking and money laundering – among the cooperation activities and initiatives in the [2013-2015 EU-CELAC action plan](#). At the 2015 EU-CELAC summit held in Brussels, the Heads of State and Government decided to step-up cooperation in the fight against drugs. Consequently, the world's drug problem became one of the key areas of concern in the [2015 EU-CELAC action plan](#). Prior to the third [EU-CELAC Summit](#) of Heads of State and Government in Brussels on 17 and 18 July 2023, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, and the Commission adopted a [joint communication](#) on 7 June 2023. This sets out a new agenda for relations between the EU and the LAC countries aiming at strengthening the strategic partnership through reinforced political engagement. 'Joining forces for justice, citizen security and the fight against transnational organised crime' is one of the six key areas. The communication proposes a set of key actions, such as to support further capacity development and cooperation with the [Latin America Internal Security Committee](#) (CLASI) and the Police Community of the Americas ([AMERIPOL](#)). The creation of CLASI is one of the achievements of the Europe Latin America Programme of Assistance against Transnational Organised Crime ([EL PAcCTO](#)), the EU's international cooperation programme seeking to contribute to security and justice in Latin America by supporting the fight against transnational organised crime.

The 2023 EU-CELAC summit recognised the EU-LAC Partnership on Justice and Security as a priority for bi-regional cooperation. In the 2023 [EU-CELAC Summit Declaration](#), leaders committed to 'enhance cooperation and coordination, in relevant multilateral fora (...), addressing and countering the world drug problem and organised crime', and agreed to consolidate and strengthen EU-CELAC cooperation initiatives in the field of citizen security and social justice by combating organised crime in all its forms.

On 28 September 2023, the ministerial meeting of CLASI and its EU counterparts took place in Brussels, and issued a [joint declaration](#). This reaffirmed the strategic and operational cooperation between CLASI law-enforcement bodies and the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT).

In the joint fight with Latin American countries against transnational organised crime and illicit drug trafficking, the EU can rely on a range of [programmes](#) and agencies, for example:

- EL PAcCTO;
- the Cooperation Programme on Drugs Policies (COPOLAD);
- [EUROFRONT](#);
- the Global Illicit Flows Programme ([GIFP](#));
- the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats ([EMPACT](#));
- the [European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction](#) (EMCDDA);
- Europol; and
- [Eurojust](#).

Under its Democratic Governance, Security and Migration priority area, the EU's 2021 to 2027 [regional multiannual indicative programme](#) for the Americas and the Caribbean sets the specific objective of enhancing the fight against transnational organised crime across the region. For EL PACCTO 2.0 – the flagship EU-CELAC sectoral bi-regional partnership programme in the fight against transnational organised crime – the EU doubled its funding to provide [€58.8 million](#). EL PACCTO 2.0 will be implemented by an EU Member State consortium (Spain, France, Italy, Portugal and the Netherlands). The agreement was signed in Brussels on 21 November 2023 and the programme was [officially launched](#) on 12 March 2024 in Panama. The programme will operate until the end of 2027.

The European Parliament is also a long-standing supporter of the fight against illicit drugs, and drug trafficking in particular, in the framework of the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (EuroLat). During its fifteenth meeting in Madrid from 24 to 27 July 2023, EuroLat adopted a [recommendation](#) entitled 'The fight against organised crime in the EU and Latin America'. Members of the European Parliament and Latin American parliamentarians called, amongst other things, for efficient and effective cooperation to develop inter-agency, interinstitutional and increased international capacity and resources to fight organised crime and drug trafficking.

Political and security issues in Andean Community countries: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru

The Andean region has experienced instability and social upheaval over the past decade. Following [political turmoil and mass demonstrations](#) in Colombia (2019-2020), Bolivia (2019), and Peru (2022-2023), Ecuador has come under the spotlight since 2023. This political instability goes hand in hand with a worsening security situation, increasing production and trafficking of illicit drugs and the expansion of transnational criminal organisations. Some [experts](#) observe that counternarcotic strategies are being consistently relegated in the list of government priorities in the region.

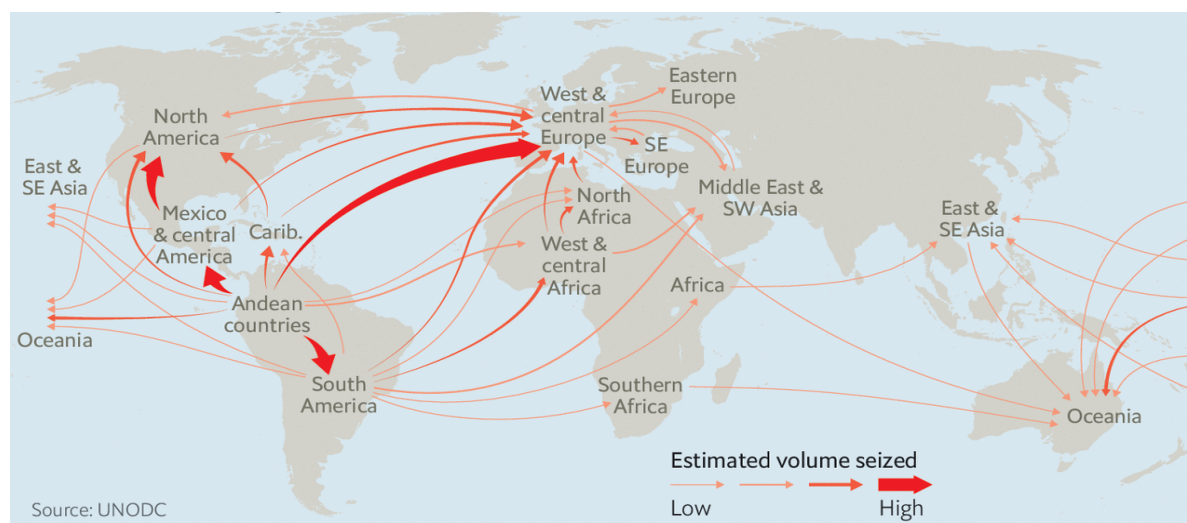
As almost all of the cocaine produced comes from Andean Community countries, the four member states are key international partners in reducing the global supply of cocaine. The EU has been cooperating with the region in the fight against drugs for almost 30 years. Since 1995, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and the EU have been involved in a specialised high-level dialogue on drugs to exchange best practices and enhance further cooperation. Since 2003, the [political dialogue and cooperation agreement](#), signed on 15 October 2003, provides the framework for overall EU relations with CAN. Amongst other things, the parties agreed to cooperate in combating illicit drugs and related organised crime, and that the coordination and cooperation mechanism on drugs between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean should be used for this purpose. Moreover, the EU has a [trade agreement](#) with Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, which has applied provisionally with Peru since 1 March 2013 and with Colombia since 1 August 2013. Ecuador joined the agreement on 1 January 2017. Bolivia benefits from the preferential access that the EU grants under the [EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences](#) (GSP), including through the special incentive arrangement for sustainable development and good governance, known as GSP+.

Bolivia

After the presidential elections of 20 October 2019 that led to Evo Morales' resignation, Bolivia experienced a [post-electoral crisis](#) with violent protests, roadblocks and strikes. Following the interim presidency of Jeanine Áñez, Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) candidate and Morales' former finance minister, [Luis Arce](#), took office in November 2020 after a first-round victory in the presidential elections of October 2020. As MAS chairman, Morales was therefore able to return to Bolivia. However, Morales has been engaged in a [power struggle](#) with Arce since 2022, over which of the two will be allowed to run as a MAS candidate in the 2025 presidential election. This struggle has divided the ruling party, led to a splintering of the parties in Congress and paralysed politics in the country. The Congress has also rejected important government legislative projects. In

December 2023, the Constitutional Court of Bolivia [ruled](#) that no president could serve more than two terms, consecutive or otherwise, which prevents Morales from running for another term in office. Whether this decision, which Morales [called a 'coup'](#), finally resolved the conflict remains uncertain. The crisis subsequently escalated further, with roadblocks in place across the country. Protesters demanded the resignation of judges sitting on the Constitutional Court, along with fresh elections. Continued instability plays into the hands of the illegal drug trade.

Figure 2 – Main cocaine trafficking routes, 2016-2020



Source: [The Economist](#), 2022.

In recent years, Bolivia has [turned](#) from a coca-cultivating country to a producer and exporter of cocaine. [Counter-narcotics operations](#) revealed sophisticated drug laboratories in the country, run with Brazilian, Mexican and Colombian expertise. The [destination](#) of Bolivian drug production is mainly Brazil, Paraguay, and Europe. Bolivia is the third largest coca-cultivating country globally, accounting for [13%](#) of global cultivation, much of it grown for traditional uses. The chewing of coca leaf is a traditional practice in the country and the government allows for legal coca cultivation of [22 000 hectares](#) in authorised areas. According to the 2022 Bolivia Coca Crop Monitoring [Report](#) published by UNODC, 29 900 hectares are under coca bush cultivation.

The Comprehensive Policy Council for the Elimination of Illicit Traffic in Controlled Substances, Excess Coca and Prevention of Drug Consumption is Bolivia's principal body that approves, monitors, and evaluates Bolivia's drug control policies. While Bolivia emphasises the protection of its cultural heritage and traditions regarding the coca leaf, the country is committed to fighting illicit drug trafficking. The [2021-2025 strategy](#) to combat illicit trafficking of controlled substances identifies four key points: a) control of expansion of focal crops, b) control of illicit trafficking, c) safety against drug trafficking, and d) the protection of coca leaf use for traditional purposes. According to government representatives, operations to counter advances in international drug trafficking have been stepped-up. In July 2023, Vice-Minister of Social Defence and Controlled Substances, Jaime Mamani Espíndola, [announced](#) that Bolivian authorities carried out more than 25 000 anti-drug operations in the last two and a half years. In December 2023, Bolivian authorities announced the country's biggest ever cocaine seizure of nearly 9 tonnes. [Data published](#) by Bolivia's anti-drug trafficking force shows a 62% increase in cocaine seizures compared to 2022, when authorities captured 20.3 tonnes of the drug.

The EU is Bolivia's [largest donor](#) in the fight against drugs. The EU has funded programmes in the country by over €108 million since 2008, to support the fight against organised crime, drug trafficking and to strengthen Bolivian police capacities in their fight against organised crime. The 2017-2020 Multiannual Indicative Programme ([MIP](#)) for Bolivia earmarked €50 million for the fight

against illicit drugs and control of surplus coca cultivation. The [2021-2027 MIP](#) also emphasises support for the fight against corruption and illicit drug trafficking.

On 22 February 2024, the [24th High Level Meeting](#) of the EU-CELAC coordination and cooperation mechanism on drugs took place in La Paz, Bolivia. The meeting was co-chaired by Belgian Minister of the Interior, Annelies Verlinden, under the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU and the Co-Presidency of the Mechanism, and for CELAC, by Carlos Eduardo Del Castillo Del Carpio, Minister of Government of Bolivia, under the Bolivian Co-Presidency of the Mechanism. President Luis Arce addressed EU and CELAC member state delegates, stressing that the exchange of information and the transfer of technology is vital for a joint fight against illicit drugs.

Colombia

Despite the historic 2016 [peace agreement](#) reached between the Government of Colombia (under former president Juan Manuel Santos) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), internal armed conflict, violence and forced displacement continue to pose a major security challenge in Colombia, the fourth largest economy in Latin America. Colombia's President Gustavo Petro, the country's first left-leaning President, who came to power in August 2022, is aiming to bring 'total peace' to the country by 2025. Following his inauguration, Petro prepared peace talks with the country's remaining armed groups. Petro's predecessor, Iván Duque Márquez terminated previous peace talks with the biggest remaining group, the National Liberation Army (ELN) in January 2019. [Peace talks](#) between the Colombian government and the ELN officially resumed on 21 November 2022. However, neither the peace agreement nor the peace talks have resulted in a more secure situation for the population. On the contrary, according to [Human Rights Watch](#) and the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) (ICRC), violence increased in many remote areas, reaching similar levels to those prevalent before the peace process. More than 1 200 human rights defenders and social leaders have been killed in Colombia since 2016. [According](#) to the Colombian Ombudsman's Office (DPC), 181 social leaders and human rights defenders were murdered in 2023 (this figure fell by 16% against the data reported for 2022). In 2022, Colombia was the country with the [highest number](#) of murders of rights defenders. Based on the degree of inequality in income distribution measured by the Gini coefficient, Colombia is the [most unequal](#) country in Latin America as of 2021.

The demobilisation of the FARC in 2016 resulted in a [power vacuum](#) and consequent fragmentation of the criminal landscape, as well as battles between numerous non-state armed groups and criminal gangs for control over Colombia's strategic criminal economies – in particular coca cultivation and drug trafficking. According to the [UNODC](#), these developments have also led to an increasing presence of foreign organised crime groups in Colombia, including from Mexico and the Balkans.

Although there is no official figure on government spending in the fight against drugs, the [Colombian Drug Observatory](#) (ODC) estimates that, on average, annual expenditure is almost €900 million, thus achieving an investment of approximately €18 billion in the last 20 years. The ODC points out that, although results have been obtained along the way, the two main objectives of reducing the supply and demand of illicit drugs have not been achieved. To the contrary, plantations in Colombia grew from 204 000 to 230 000 hectares at the end of 2022, and drug production reached 1 738 tonnes – the [highest figures](#) ever recorded.

Petro has [declared](#) the previous approach to the drug war was a failure, resulting in a million dead Latin-Americans. He has [criticised](#) the US for confusing the fight against drug trafficking with the counterinsurgency. The decades-long [US-Colombia](#) 'Plan Colombia' prioritised drug supply reduction by eradication and aerial spraying of coca, as well as counterinsurgency against the FARC and ELN. However, following the 2016 peace agreement, the Obama administration also switched from the '[Peace Colombia](#)' framework to a more holistic approach, including strengthening the rule of law, rural economies and promoting justice and other essential services for conflict victims. The updated 2023 US [Integrated Country Strategy for Colombia](#) reconfirmed this focus on a holistic

approach to reducing narcotics and bolstering rural prosperity, which recognises the importance of drug-supply reduction, rural security, justice, economic development, delivery of public goods and services, and environmental protection.

In September 2023, the Colombian government adopted a new [ten-year drug strategy](#) (*Sembrando Vida*) focusing on the human and environmental aspects. The strategy is structured around two pillars, 'oxygen' and 'asphyxiation'. The [objective](#) is to significantly reduce cocaine production in Colombia by 43 % by 2026, through agricultural projects promoting the voluntary substitution of coca cultivation with legal alternatives (oxygen pillar) and by targeting the sophisticated drug-trafficking networks, focusing on production infrastructure, the marketing of production factors, and combating traffickers' illegal finances (asphyxiation). Implementing Petro's 2022 campaign promise to better consult with the long-neglected rural communities that are most affected by the drug trade, the government (in partnership with UNODC) carried out 27 [community dialogues](#) from January to July 2023, in 16 Colombian provinces and Bogotá, prior to the adoption of the new strategy.

Colombia is [joining forces](#) with its regional partners to advocate for a new, more health and human rights-based approach to drug policy. Under Colombia's leadership (and in partnership with Mexico) the '[Latin American and Caribbean Conference on Drugs for Life, Peace, and Development](#)' took place in Cali, Colombia on 9 September 2023. The participating states (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, México, Nicaragua, Panamá, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela) endorsed a [roadmap](#) for a new global policy on drugs, exploring innovative ways to address the world drug problem.

The EU has been a [longstanding](#) (political and financial) supporter of peace and stability in Colombia. Since 2016, the EU has [invested](#) over €650 million, principally through the EU Trust Fund for Peace in Colombia. The EU's 2021-2027 [MIP](#) for Colombia stresses that cooperation on security and the fight against organised crime are highly relevant for Colombia. However, the MIP stresses that – considering the transnational nature of organised crime networks – security-related action should be carried out in the framework of regional programmes. Both partners are cooperating to fight transnational organised crime through the above-mentioned range of regional programmes (EL PAcCTO 2.0, COPOLAD III, EUROFRONT, the Global Illicit Flows Programme (GIFP), EMPACT). In addition, Colombia and the EU hold annual high-level political and sectoral dialogues on a series of political issues including, since 2022, on illicit drugs. The first [EU-Colombia Dialogue on Drugs](#) was held on 17 June 2022, in Bogotá. The [second dialogue](#) on drugs took place in Brussels on 29 September 2023. On 22 February 2024, Colombia [assumed](#) the presidency of the Cooperation Mechanism on Drugs between the EU and CELAC, within the framework of the 24th High Level Meeting of the EU-CELAC coordination and cooperation mechanism on drugs in La Paz, Bolivia.

Currently, Colombia is the only country in the region with a bilateral agreement with Europol for the exchange of information. To strengthen cooperation in the global fight against drug trafficking, EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson [visited Colombia](#) (and Ecuador) in February 2023, together with the Belgian Interior Minister, Annelies Verlinden. On 2 March 2023, the Commission proposed a [pilot project](#) under EL PAcCTO 2.0., to strengthen the exchange of information between Europol and Colombia to disrupt criminal drug-trafficking networks. Moreover, in January 2024, the [mayors](#) of Antwerp, Hamburg and Rotterdam, accompanied by a delegation of 40 representatives from German, Dutch, and Belgian customs, security, and port authorities, travelled to Colombia for discussions with the Colombian government, and to establish contact with local security authorities. A joint conference also took place with Colombian, Peruvian and Ecuadorian port authorities, to exchange views on security measures and improved international cooperation.

Ecuador

Following the impeachment trial against then-president Guillermo Lasso, the dissolving of parliament and early general elections, centre-right president, [Daniel Noboa](#) of Acción Democrática Nacional (ADN), became the country's new president, beating Luisa González, his rival and an ally of

former president Rafael Correa in the 15 October 2023 runoff. Since taking office on 23 November 2023, Noboa has limited time to tackle the country's major security crisis, as the next general election is scheduled for May 2025.

Ecuador (which seemed an [anchor of stability](#) in the Andean region under its former president Rafael Correa – 2007-2017), has experienced high levels narco-criminal gang violence in recent years. Ecuador's [homicide rate](#) rose from 13.7 per 100 000 people in 2021 to about 45 in 2023, placing Ecuador among the top three most violent countries in Latin America, alongside Venezuela and Honduras. As one result, a record [48 000 Ecuadorians](#) left the country between January and September 2023, crossing the Darién Gap jungle between Colombia and Panama, compared to a total of about 29 000 in 2022.

Fights between gangs, in particular the [Choneros and Lobos](#), for territorial control have spurred acts of violence. The assassination of presidential candidate [Fernando Villavicencio](#) on 9 August 2023 was a [blow](#) to Ecuador's democracy. Villavicencio, who had a long record of exposing corruption, human rights violations, and organised crime abuses, was murdered by a [Colombian hitman](#) ahead of the presidential elections of 20 August 2023.

Noboa [declared](#) a nationwide state of emergency by executive decree on 8 January 2024 (for a period of 60 days, subsequently extended for an additional 30 days to 8 April 2024), following [Adolfo Macías's](#) escape from prison on 7 January 2024. Alias 'Fito', Macías, the head of the Choneros cartel, is still on the run at the time of writing. In addition to the state of emergency, Noboa later [declared](#) the existence of an internal armed conflict against criminal groups – a first in the country's history. In reaction to the government's firm response, criminal gangs seized a public television station, detonated bombs in major cities, kidnapped police officers, took control of several prisons and invaded a university. Noboa mobilised the armed forces widely in the fight against organised crime and designated 22 criminal groups as 'terrorist organisations', instructing the armed forces and police to act. The National Assembly approved the decree by unanimity, in a display of unity and support for the government. Currently, Noboa can [count](#) on the support of both the population and opposition parties Revolución Ciudadana (RC) and the conservative Partido Social Cristiano (PSC). However, observers consider this pact remains at risk of collapse. [Analysts](#) warn that if Ecuador's democratically elected government loses this gang-declared war, the country risks disintegrating into a narco-state.

[Experts](#) point out that the explosion of violence had been brewing for a long time. Following the 2016 Colombia peace agreement, the demobilisation of FARC, which had long maintained a de facto monopoly on cocaine trafficking routes from southern Colombia to Ecuador's Pacific ports, created a [power vacuum](#). Ecuadorian groups began to fight to fill the void and linked up with foreign criminal organisations, such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco Nueva Generación cartels from Mexico and the Albanian mafia. They infiltrated the Ecuadorian security forces and state institutions, benefiting from the export of cocaine and other illicit goods. The US State Department [estimates](#) that a third of Colombia's cocaine passes through Ecuador before reaching North America and Europe. The port of Guayaquil has become a hub for international drug trafficking. In 2022, 44 tonnes of cocaine were [seized in Guayaquil](#) in Ecuador. Drug trafficking from Guayaquil to Antwerp [increased](#) from 6 tonnes in 2018 to almost 56 tonnes in 2021.

The devastating security situation in Ecuador impacts the entire region. In response, Peruvian President Dina Boluarte [declared](#) a 60-day state of emergency in key northern areas bordering Ecuador and Colombia in January 2024. Andean Community foreign, interior and defence ministers (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru) held an [urgent meeting](#) in January 2024, to discuss the problem of cross-border drug crime.

The government has proposed [raising security spending](#) by US\$214 million in 2024, as it deploys the military to help fight violence. Security spending would reach US\$3.52 billion – up from US\$3.3 billion the previous year. In addition, Noboa has [declared](#) that Ecuador will seek financial support from the US and the EU for the country's war on gangs. [According](#) to HR/VP Borrell, the EU

is planning to mobilise new funds for 2024 to build-up state and community resilience in some of the most affected areas of the country. Moreover, the EU is strengthening its cooperation, financial assistance and collaboration with European law-enforcement and investigation agencies to reinforce the fight against transnational organised crime and facilitate joint operations between Ecuador and European security agencies. In December 2022, Ecuador – identified as a key international partner in reducing the global supply of cocaine by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) – was included in Europol's list of priority partners. The agency is subsequently striving to conclude [Working Arrangements](#), which Ecuador and Europol signed in October 2023. This new framework aims to enhance the cooperation between law enforcement authorities from EU Member States and their Ecuadorian counterparts in the fight against multinational drug cartels.

In February 2023, Commissioner Johansson visited Ecuador with Minister Verlinden. They met with President Noboa and the foreign affairs, interior and defence ministers and visited the port of Contecon in Guayaquil. The visit reaffirmed the EU's commitment to support the security sector in Ecuador through [ELPacCTO](#), COPOLAD, [Eurofront](#), and [Seacop](#). On 17 July 2023, HR/VP Borrell and Foreign Minister of Ecuador, Gustavo Manrique, signed a [Memorandum of Understanding \(MoU\)](#) on the agenda for enhanced political and sectoral dialogue and cooperation for the next decade, during the Brussels EU-CELAC Summit. The security agenda, including the fight against transnational organised crime, illicit drug trafficking and production is amongst the eight priorities to guide the development of EU-Ecuador relations. Moreover, in February 2024, the [mayors](#) of Rotterdam, Antwerp, and Hamburg visited Ecuador in the framework of the new Ports Alliance launched by Commissioner Johansson. Together with national authorities, the Commission will launch a specific assessment of the vulnerabilities of the ports of Guayaquil and its bay area, to prioritise future activities, including EU support.

The European Parliament held a [debate](#) on the state of emergency in Ecuador on 16 January 2024. In a speech (delivered by Commissioner for Transport, Adina Vălean, on behalf of the HR/VP), the HR/VP stated that drugs and narco-terrorism are an international challenge with a direct impact on the EU.

Peru

Peru's political landscape is highly unstable. Since 2018, four of six presidents have been impeached or were forced to resign. In 2022 and 2023, [political instability](#) reached a peak: violent protests erupted across Peru, following Congress's removal of then-president, Pedro Castillo on 7 December 2022, after he was accused of an attempted self-coup. Former Vice-President Dina Boluarte Zegarra was sworn in by Congress on 7 December 2022, becoming Peru's first female head of state and the country's sixth president in five years. [Peru's Ombudsman](#) reported that 66 Peruvians were killed and over 1 300 injured in clashes between protesters, on the one hand, and military and national police forces, on the other. [Observers](#) consider an informal coalition with centrist and right-wing parties supports Boluarte's efforts to retain power, as her removal would trigger early elections and precipitate other legislators' departure from office. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that Boluarte will have to step down before her term ends in 2026. In addition, Peruvians have a deep mistrust in state institutions: Congress has a 90% [disapproval rating](#), while Boluarte's rating is 84%.

In parallel to the political crisis, cocaine production in Peru – the world's second largest producer of coca leaf and cocaine (36% of global production) – has increased dramatically in recent years. Drug trafficking, organised crime and widespread impunity [undermine state functioning](#). In 2022, coca cultivation reached an all-time high. The hectares of land dedicated to coca cultivation increased by 18% in 2022 compared to 2021, and nearly 54% compared to 2020. Although the cultivation of coca is legal for traditional purposes, it is [estimated](#) that almost 90% of Peru's coca is used in the illicit drug trade, with most Peruvian drug production [going to the EU](#). [According](#) to the Council, one third (32%) of the total number of tested cocaine samples seized in the EU originated from Peru.

In December 2020, Peru adopted its [National Policy Against Drugs towards 2030](#). This legal instrument contains three priority objectives: the first aims to improve the socio-economic situation and institutional conditions in the strategic areas of intervention, by optimising the performance of licit value chains and increasing the presence of the three levels of government (national, regional and local) to close existing gaps. The second objective refers to reducing illicit drug production and commerce. The third priority objective seeks to reduce drug use, in vulnerable populations in particular, through preventive strategies. President Boluarte [confirmed](#) her government's commitment to keeping the fight against illegal drug trafficking active when she participated in the incineration of 14 tonnes of drugs seized between February and May 2023. Moreover, the government of Peru formally requested US support to combat narco trafficking in December 2023. According to Peruvian Foreign Minister Javier González-Olaechea the cooperation could follow the lines of the former 'Plan Colombia', providing US high-tech equipment that Peru lacks in particular, to better tackle narco trafficking.

Some [experts](#) fear that, as with Ecuador, Peru could soon experience an explosion of drug-related violence. The mega-port of [Chancay](#) being built by Chinese state-owned Cosco Shipping Ports will be inaugurated by the end of 2024, and could become another important hub for narco trafficking in the region.

The EU is stepping-up its cooperation with Peru to increase the effectiveness of drug control and the fight against organised crime, including environmental crimes and human trafficking. To this end, the EU and Peru hold an annual [High Level Political Dialogue](#) (HLPD) to discuss drugs, amongst other political issues.

In October 2022, HR/VP Borrell and Foreign Minister of Peru, César Landa, signed a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) on an Agenda of enhanced political and sectoral dialogue and cooperation for the next decade (and the [EU-Peru Framework Participation Agreement](#) for Peru's participation in EU crisis management operations). The Memorandum of Understanding identifies six priorities to guide the development of EU-Peru relations, including the fight against illicit drug cultivation and trafficking.

Tackling organised crime and illicit drugs trafficking has also become one of the priorities of the EU's bilateral [Multiannual Indicative Programme for Peru](#) (2021-2027). A [specific programme](#) of about €17 Million is aimed at supporting the fight against illicit drug trafficking and organised crime in Peru. On 15 May 2023, the Council authorised the opening of [negotiations](#) with Peru (as with Bolivia, Brazil, Mexico and Ecuador) for an agreement on the exchange of personal data between Europol and the Peruvian authorities competent for fighting serious crime and terrorism.

Outlook: El Salvador's war on drugs to become a template?

The president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, is currently the [most popular leader](#) in Latin America. For some commentators, this raises the question whether this approach to tackling security challenges caused by criminal gangs could become a [template](#) for other countries in Latin America. El Salvador was the most dangerous country in the world in 2015, with 103 homicides per 100 000 inhabitants. The security situation in El Salvador has improved significantly under Bukele: the average [homicide rate](#) in the five years before he came to power in 2019 stood at 72, and had fallen to 2.4 by 2023. However, concerns have been raised over the president's authoritarian governance style. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), the authorities have committed widespread human rights violations, including mass arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, ill-treatment in detention, and due-process violations.

Nevertheless, Costa Rica's security minister, has [said](#) that the country should adopt El Salvador's security policy, and Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa has [announced](#) that construction is to begin on two maximum and super maximum security prisons like those Bukele has built in El Salvador. Similarly Senator Xóchitl Gálvez the main opposition candidate for the presidential elections in Mexico on 2 June 2024 is pledging to build a maximum security prison. Moreover, analysts point out

that Latin Americans are increasingly willing to sacrifice democracy for security and economic prosperity. According to a 2023 [survey](#) from AmericasBarometer, support for democracy declined a decade ago and remains comparatively low. In parallel, tolerance for executive coups continues to rise in the LAC region. The proportion of individuals tolerating executive coups [doubled](#) between 2010 (14 %) and 2021 (30 %).

[Experts](#) stress that while hard-handed policy produces short-term results and enables social control, it has always ultimately failed, as it does not address root causes: the lack of rule of law, and structural poverty and social inequality. The [UN Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace](#) stresses that failure to tackle the root causes of violence can lead to over-securitised government responses. These can be counterproductive and reinforce the very dynamics they seek to overcome, as their far-reaching consequences – local population backlash, human rights violations and abuses, exacerbation of gender inequalities and distortion of local economies – can be powerful drivers for terrorist or armed group recruitment.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, has [expressed](#) concern about the human rights impacts of states of emergency introduced to address organised crime and violence. Moreover, at the 67th Session of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs that took place in Vienna from 14-22 March 2024, Türk urged a transformative change in global drug policy and called for a new approach with human rights and development as core pillars.

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