Cocaine Brokers: The ‘Ndrangheta in South America

#NdranghetaLATAM
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## Table of Contents

1. **The ‘Ndrangheta: Versatile Middlemen in the Cocaine Pipeline to Europe** ..................................................... 5
   - The North America-Colombia Cocaine Connection .............. 6
   - The Perfect Cocaine Route to Europe ......................................... 7
   - A Sea Change at Gioia Tauro? ................................................... 8

2. **The ‘Ndrangheta Connection to Colombia’s Paramilitaries** ................................................................. 10
   - A Way Out .................................................................................. 12
   - After the AUC ........................................................................... 13

3. **Cocaine Brokers: The Flexible Backbone of the ‘Ndrangheta Trafficking Empire** ................................. 15
   - A Leaderless Model................................................................ 16
   - Switching Brokers..................................................................... 17
   - The ‘Ndrangheta’s Future................................................................. 18

**Related Content** ......................................................................................... 19
Italy’s ‘Ndrangheta Mafia has capitalized on South America’s cocaine boom to secure its role as one of the most influential drug trafficking groups in the world. Based in the southern Italian region of Calabria, this group has grown to become a multibillion-dollar enterprise with a presence that spans the globe.

In this three-part series, InSight Crime explores the ‘Ndrangheta’s role in South America’s cocaine trade.

Chapters are dedicated to how the Italian port of Gioia Tauro became a cocaine gateway for Europe, how the ‘Ndrangheta’s enduring connections with Colombian paramilitaries flooded Europe with cocaine, and how one trafficker, Rocco Morabito, exemplified the Italian group’s modus operandi in Latin America.
The ‘Ndrangheta: Versatile Middlemen in the Cocaine Pipeline to Europe

The port of Gioia Tauro was buzzing with activity in December 2020. In addition to deliveries of legitimate cargo, a container from Santos, Brazil, had arrived carrying 300 kilograms of cocaine.

One of the world’s most powerful criminal organizations, the ‘Ndrangheta, allegedly paid a customs officer 261,000 euros to doctor the container’s X-ray scans so it could pass inspection.

But that officer wasn’t acting alone, according to Italian authorities. Complicit dockworkers shifted the cocaine into a second container, which was then loaded onto a truck belonging to a complicit freight company. Local coordinators ensured the smooth execution of the complex plan.
Those involved likely didn’t know that Italy’s Financial Police (Guardia di Finanza) would descend on Gioia Tauro less than two years later, having planting undercover officers in the port and accessed encrypted phone calls with the goal of breaking up the ‘Ndrangheta’s corruption ring.

In a raid on October 6, authorities arrested 36 people, including dock workers, customs officers, truck drivers, and field coordinators. The suspects allegedly formed part of a smuggling network that annually brought up to 30 tons of cocaine into Italy, and was headed by members of some of the main ‘Ndrangheta families.

Gioia Tauro is Italy’s biggest port, and one of the largest in Europe, making it a key gateway for cocaine entering the continent. It also happens to lie in Italy’s Calabria region, the heartland of the ‘Ndrangheta -- a network of family clans that share cultural and criminal ties, but operate largely independently.

Over several decades, ‘Ndrangheta clans have become the main European allies for some of Latin America’s most experienced cocaine traffickers.

From Mexico to Ecuador, and from Colombia to Brazil, ‘Ndrangheta operatives have been arrested on drug trafficking charges in virtually every country in the Americas.

Even Uruguay detained one of the ‘Ndrangheta’s foremost leaders, Rocco Morabito, in 2017, leading to a rollercoaster in which he escaped over the roof of his prison and spent two years on the run before his May 2021 recapture in Brazil.

But the ‘Ndrangheta did not always seem fated to become one of the main suppliers of cocaine to Europe. The mafia group’s rise is partly due to luck and happenstance. And its future, too, may depend on circumstances that are outside its ability to control.

The North America-Colombia Cocaine Connection

The ‘Ndrangheta was born in Calabria, likely in the 19th century. As the clans became more tightly interwoven with Calabrian society, massive emigration from the area, driven by political and economic turmoil, sowed the seeds of the ‘Ndrangheta’s future international operations.

By the 1960s, ‘Ndrangheta clans began accumulating large quantities of money through legal and illegal activities that included labor racketeering, extortion, and kidnapping. From the 1970s onwards, the clans invested profits in lucrative illegal activities, especially cigarette smuggling, in partnership with Sicilian mafia families in the United States, known as Cosa Nostra.
Soon after, in the 1980s, wealthy ‘Ndrangheta clans started investing in cocaine shipments from Colombia to the United States, arranged by the Italian mafia families in the United States, in particular the Cosa Nostra.

Although ‘Ndrangheta clans were able to establish a more permanent presence in some countries, including the United States, Canada, and Australia, they weren’t able to do the same in Latin America. To this day, even in countries like Argentina with large Calabrian diaspora communities, ‘Ndrangheta presence is usually limited to individuals who broker drug trafficking deals on behalf of others.

Roberto Pannunzi was a pioneer in this regard, according to University of Essex criminology professor Anna Sergi, who specializes in Italian organized crime.

Pannunzi had struck it rich. Born in Rome, he had established himself as an independent broker in Colombia in the late 1980s, bridging the gap between Pablo Escobar’s Medellín Cartel and Italy’s Cosa Nostra and ‘Ndrangheta clans. He became an influential cocaine broker, setting up multi-ton shipments of cocaine across Europe before being arrested twice, escaping twice, and finally being caught in Colombia and extradited to Italy.

While the ‘Ndrangheta initially piggybacked on these connections, they were soon able to deal directly with the upstream cocaine brokers. Around the turn of the century, the clans had their own network of local representatives in Colombia.

The timing could not have been better. Just as the US government intensified its “war on drugs” throughout the 1980s and 1990s, demand for cocaine increased in Europe.

The ‘Ndrangheta clans were in a perfect position to exploit this growing market. Their connections to Latin American brokers were a strong plus but they had an even more important advantage: their control over the port of Gioia Tauro.

The Perfect Cocaine Route to Europe

The port of Gioia Tauro became operational in 1995, and the ‘Ndrangheta established a strong presence there from the start using labor racketeering and extortion. One of the clans, the Piromalli family, reportedly charged $1.50 for each of the 570,000 containers that were transshipped at the port each year.

The strong ‘Ndrangheta control in the port made it also ideal for cocaine trafficking, as the clans could offer an almost guaranteed entry of illicit shipments.
“It became the obvious choice, even for other traffickers,” Sergi told InSight Crime. “The ‘Ndrangheta became kind of a guarantor for cocaine trafficking in Europe because they had Gioia Tauro, which was, for years, basically an untouched door.”

An Italian parliamentary anti-mafia commission said in 2008 that the ‘Ndrangheta handled up to 80 percent of the cocaine shipments to Europe.

Four years later, a report solicited by the European Commission came to a similar conclusion, stating that the internationalization of ‘Ndrangheta activity in the 1990s corresponded with the construction of Gioia Tauro, and that it was “likely that organized crime enjoyed a bonanza as a result of the port operations.”

A Sea Change at Gioia Tauro?

The October 6 raid illustrates that ‘Ndrangheta clans still use Gioia Tauro to import big cocaine loads into Europe. But the port’s criminal heyday may be ending due to increased scrutiny from law enforcement combined with changing global dynamics of both licit and illicit trade.

Italian law enforcement and customs have been ratcheting up interdiction efforts and criminal investigations around the port over the past two decades, targeting the main ‘Ndrangheta clans operating there. In 2021, authorities seized 13 tons of cocaine at the port, representing 97% of all cocaine confiscated at Italy’s borders, and roughly 20% of all cocaine passing through Italy’s territory, as stated by Bruno Megale, the police commissioner for the region of Reggio Calabria, in a December 2021 parliamentary inquiry.

Moreover, Gioia Tauro has lost importance as a trade hub for both legal and illegal goods relative to other European ports. For traffickers, legal trade flows often dictate the routes of illicit trafficking. A smaller amount of legitimate shipments passing through Gioia Tauro offers fewer opportunities to sneak in illicit cargo.

Traffickers have instead turned to Europe’s biggest ports, Antwerp and Rotterdam. Belgian and Dutch authorities in those two ports seized 89 and 70 tons of cocaine respectively in 2021, much more than Gioia Tauro’s 13 tons.

The ‘Ndrangheta is also facing increasing competition from other European trafficking networks. In Colombia, the main cocaine production country, criminal organizations have broken apart into smaller factions. This has opened the door for other European groups, like Albanian networks, to buy cocaine directly in South America.
The ‘Ndrangheta, however, appear well positioned to survive Gioia Tauro’s declining importance as a gateway for cocaine to Europe.

The clans’ control of other Italian ports has helped keep their trafficking operations in motion. In August 2022, Brazilian authorities seized over half a ton of cocaine destined for the port terminal of Vado Ligure, which the ‘Ndrangheta use as an alternative for Gioia Tauro, according to Italian media outlet Reggio Today.

The port of Genoa, part of the same port cluster, is among “the most infiltrated by the ‘Ndrangheta,” Federico Cafiero de Raho, Italian National Antimafia and Counterterrorism Prosecutor said in 2017, according to a 2022 Parliamentary Commission report.

Also, the ‘Ndrangheta are now often partnering with other groups, trafficking through different European ports and sharing the costs and risks for a shipment.

“The ‘Ndrangheta share trafficking infrastructure because the routes have changed. When they import via ports like Rotterdam and Antwerp, the clans need to make alliances,” Sergi said. “Drug trafficking is no longer a monopoly; it is a table with more seats.”
The ‘Ndrangheta Connection to Colombia’s Paramilitaries

Salvatore Mancuso, one of the most powerful paramilitary commanders in Colombia, and Giorgio Sale, a well-connected Italian businessman, helped each other become rich men.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the two became lynchpins of a connection between the ‘Ndrangheta, Italy’s largest mafia group, and Colombian paramilitaries, which lasts to this day.

Mancuso headed the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC), which controlled vast areas of coca production across the country. The paramilitary group needed buyers for cocaine and partners to launder the immense wealth they were accumulating, and Mancuso set out to find them.

Giorgio Sale was the perfect partner. He was an Italian entrepreneur with plentiful investments all over Colombia and a good reputation among the South American country’s upper classes. His businesses included the luxury clothing company Gino Passcalli, which had dozens of stores and employed over 600
workers. He counted several judges on Colombia’s Supreme Court among his circle of friends. And his fine-dining restaurants were focal points for the societal elites of Colombia’s main cities.

One restaurant, in particular, stood out. L’Enoteca, in the city of Barranquilla on Colombia’s Caribbean coast, offered an array of expensive wines, refined foods imported from Italy, and dishes that cost $150 -- more than Colombia’s minimum monthly wage at the time. The restaurant was also financed by Mancuso to the tune of $3 million and was instrumental in laundering the AUC’s dirty money, according to Colombian court records.

In addition to providing a money laundering outlet for the AUC, Sale would also regularly send cash the AUC earned through drug trafficking from Europe back to Colombia using human carriers. In 2002, several Italian citizens were arrested as they entered Colombia at Bogotá’s El Dorado International Airport carrying sums of between $120,000 and $150,000 that allegedly belonged to the Sale family.
Giorgio Sale and his sons — David, Stefano, and Cristian — also proved useful cocaine trafficking partners to the AUC. During testimony to a United States court following his extradition in 2008, Salvatore Mancuso declared that Cristian Sale was in contact with Gerson Álvarez, alias «Kiko,” a paramilitary leader from whom the Sales would buy cocaine to introduce it into European countries, including the Netherlands, Spain, and Italy.

This relationship would be pivotal in ensuring a steady flow of cocaine across the Atlantic and in allowing the ‘Ndrangheta to dominate much of Europe's cocaine trafficking, as a commission of Italy's parliament concluded in a 2008 report.

“The ‘Ndrangheta has been able to create a solid business relationship [with the AUC], which allowed it to climb towards ‘majority’ control of the entire system linked to the trafficking of Colombian cocaine [into Europe],” the commission found.

A Way Out

Collaboration made both Mancuso and Giorgio Sale rich. And the trans-Atlantic ties they built would outlast the unraveling of their relationship.

The vast quantities of cocaine Mancuso and Sale moved had caught the attention of the United States. Meanwhile, Colombia's government had opened peace talks with the paramilitaries that would eventually lead to the AUC demobilizing its forces.

The United States charged Mancuso with drug trafficking in 2002 and requested his extradition. Colombian authorities initially accepted the extradition request but later suspended it, wanting to finalize the peace process first.

Between 2003 and 2006, the AUC officially disbanded its forces. According to the deal they brokered with the Colombian government, their leaders would face reduced sentences if they confessed their crimes.

In 2005, Mancuso became one of the first AUC leaders to turn himself in. In December 2006, he confessed to his role in massacres, corruption, and drug trafficking. And in May 2008, after Colombian authorities accused him of breaking demobilization conditions, he was extradited to the United States.

Faced with a lengthy potential sentence in US prison, Mancuso turned on his former partners, testifying in 2009 against Giorgio and Cristian Sale, who had already been arrested on drug trafficking charges in 2006 as part of an international operation.
After the AUC

While Sale and Mancuso’s relationship laid the foundation for an ongoing cocaine trafficking partnership, their downfalls had little impact on the ‘Ndrangheta’s activities because neither the paramilitaries nor the ‘Ndrangheta clans dealt exclusively with each other.

The connection also survived the demobilization of the AUC. Vicente Castaño, one of the founders of the AUC, broke away from the demobilization process in 2006 and rearmed, creating the group that would morph into the Urabeños -- (who call themselves Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia – AGC, and are also known as the Gulf Clan (Clan del Golfo) -- that would become one of Colombia's greatest drug trafficking powers.

Today, several ‘Ndrangheta clans maintain alliances with the Urabeños, but they are in no way limited to this one supplier.

“There is no such thing as a singular mind of the ‘Ndrangheta, which decides who to deal with, [there is] no exclusivity with anyone,” Anna Sergi, professor of Criminology at Essex University, and author of the recently published book Chasing the Mafia, told InSight Crime.

As in the days of Mancuso and Sale, it is independent brokers who connect the two networks. Miro Rizvanovic Niemeier, a German citizen born in Bosnia and who spent time in Colombia, was arrested in Italy in 2017 and murdered in Colombia a year later.

Colombian Jaime Cano, alias “Jota,” was arrested in Medellín in 2021. Both were believed to be independent brokers who provided a link between the Urabeños and the ‘Ndrangheta.

Recently, authorities’ crackdowns on both sides of the Atlantic put pressure on the ‘Ndrangheta clans and the Urabeños.

In June 2022, a year-long transnational police operation between Colombian authorities and multiple European counterparts, particularly the Italian police, ended with the arrest of 38 suspect drug traffickers and the recovery of 4.3 tons of cocaine. Those arrested belonged primarily to the Urabeños and the ‘Ndrangheta.

And in October, authorities raided the Italian port of Gioia Tauro and dismantled a ‘Ndrangheta network that would import up to 30 tons of cocaine a year from the port of Turbo in Colombia, an Urabeños stronghold.
In Colombia, the Urabeños still control most of the drug trafficking routes out through northern Colombia and are still reliable connections for the ‘Ndrangheta. However, their power also appears to be diminishing, especially since the 2021 arrest and extradition of their talismanic leader, Dairo Antonio Úsuga, alias “Otoniel.”

These blows, however, are unlikely to put an end to a decades-long connection. Time and again, the ‘Ndrangheta clans have proven the resilience of their flexible, broker-based model.
Rocco Morabito could see beachfront bars from his hotel room in João Pessoa, in the Brazilian state of Paraíba. He could feel the breeze dancing in off the Atlantic Ocean, swimmers paddling the blue waters, and sunbathers enjoying the golden sands.

But when authorities tracked him down in May 2021, Morabito was trapped inside his hotel. As a prominent member of the ‘Ndrangheta’s Morabito clan and Italy’s second-most wanted man, he could not afford to take risks.

Morabito had helped the ‘Ndrangheta bolster its connections with South American cocaine suppliers, aiding the Italian mafia group’s rise as one of Europe’s most powerful trafficking organizations.
However, despite Morabito’s important role in the ‘Ndrangheta, his time on the lam hadn’t majorly disrupted its operations. The network of clans that make up the ‘Ndrangheta act largely independently of one another, meaning the structure as a whole is highly resilient to the loss of even top-level players.

Being on the run was nothing new for Morabito. He had fled his native Italy in 1994 after police staged a sting operation in which he offered undercover agents millions of dollars to buy a ton of cocaine.

He left Europe for South America and eventually became one of the most important cocaine brokers for several ‘Ndrangheta clans in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. He also played a fundamental role in connecting powerful Calabrian families to numerous international drug trafficking organizations.

“He was like an ambassador for the ‘Ndrangheta in South America,” Roberto Saviano, an Italian journalist and mafia expert, once said of him.

Authorities in Uruguay caught up with Morabito in 2017, but he and several others escaped from prison there in 2019.

He went on the run again, ending up in João Pessoa, sharing the hotel with another ‘Ndrangheta operator. In July 2022, a little over a year after his arrest by Brazilian authorities, he was extradited to Italy, where he is expected to spend the rest of his life in prison.

A Leaderless Model

The ‘Ndrangheta’s decentralized operations give the clans the flexibility to adapt to leadership losses while limiting the fallout to the broader network.

“Outsiders can only contact the one person from the ‘Ndrangheta clan that they need for the drug deal; others do not get exposed,” University of Essex criminology professor Anna Sergi told InSight Crime.

At the same time, each clan benefits from being associated with the ‘Ndrangheta brand -- a stamp of approval that stands for reliability in the criminal world.

“Drug trafficking demands a lot of trust between the two sides. So the more reliable you are, the more you can buy. And the ‘Ndrangheta are like a Swiss watch. They’re always on time with payments,” journalist and mafia expert Sergio Nazzaro told InSight Crime.

The ‘Ndrangheta’s structure also makes it easier for new clans to enter the cocaine market, with established clans providing entrants access to brokers while acting as guarantors for drug shipments. This referral system, according to Sergi, has increased the number of ‘Ndrangheta clans active in the transnational cocaine trade from around 10 in the 1990s to between 35 and 50 clans in the 2000s.
Arrests of Main ‘Ndranghetisti and ‘Ndrangheta Affiliates in Latin America in the Past Decade

Marc Feren Claude Biarti
- Boca Chica, Dominican Republic

Franco D’Agapiti
- Jacó, Costa Rica

Joseph Bruzzese
- Goiânia, Brazil

Nicola and Patrick Assisi
- Praia Grande, Brazil

Vincenzo Pasquino
- Paraiba, Brazil

Rocco Morabito
- Montevideo, Uruguay (1), Paraiba, Brazil (2)

Pantaleone Mancuso
- Puerto Iguazú, Argentina

Ferdinando Sarago, Fabio Pompetti, and Giovanni di Pietro
- Buenos Aires, Argentina

Click on each box to see details about the person

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Source: InSight Crime Investigations and open source information
Bosses of ‘Ndrangheta clans don’t always get directly involved in the drug trade. Despite being one of the most prominent ‘Ndrangheta drug traffickers in South America, Morabito was not the boss of his own clan. He made cocaine deals independently on behalf of the clan without having to ask for its approval.

“He was kind of the executive manager. But the president with the real power was someone else,” Sergi said.

**Switching Brokers**

Morabito followed in the footsteps of other similar brokers who had gone before him, in particular Nicola Assisi.

Like Morabito, Assisi operated independently, using ‘Ndrangheta contacts and the brand name but not limiting himself to working with only one ‘Ndrangheta clan.

He first appeared on the radar of Italian authorities in the 1990s when he was linked to cocaine trafficking from Barcelona, Spain, to Turin, Italy, and Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

He was arrested in Turin in 1997 as part of a cocaine seizure that was the largest in the city's history at that time. Assisi served one year in pretrial detention and was released pending a court case that would drag on for the next decade.

In 2002, Assisi’s mentor and a prominent broker, Pasquale Marando, mysteriously disappeared. Assisi allegedly took over the management of Marando’s Colombian cocaine supplier network, becoming a middleman for several powerful ‘Ndrangheta clans in Turin.

But in 2007, a court in Turin sentenced him to 14 years in prison, spurring him to flee Italy, first for Spain and then to Latin America.

Assisi quickly made connections in South America’s underworld, eventually collaborating with the Brazilian First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital – PCC), who would organize logistics through Brazilian ports, while other ‘Ndrangheta clans facilitated the reception of the cocaine in European ports.

Buying cocaine closer to the source allowed Assisi and his partners to promise good profit margins to their ‘Ndrangheta clients.

When Brazilian authorities arrested Assisi in São Paulo in July 2019, the ‘Ndrangheta once again showed its resilience. Morabito, having recently escaped from the Uruguay prison, allegedly stepped in to make sure the cocaine flow to Europe continued uninterrupted.
The ‘Ndrangheta’s Future

Italy’s anti-drugs authorities believe the ‘Ndrangheta remains one of the most powerful and dangerous criminal organizations in the world, notwithstanding recent arrests of figures like Assisi and Morabito.

Nonetheless, the clans are facing increasing competition from other European cocaine trafficking networks.

Other actors, especially Albanian networks, learned from the ‘Ndrangheta model and now also operate upstream, securing cocaine from closer to the source through independent brokers.

“Albanians were brought in to simply move stuff from A to B. But they became experts in European logistics, and these logistics networks now mainly belong to Albanian criminal groups,” Nazzaro said.

The ‘Ndrangheta clans have adapted in turn and often cooperate with Albanian networks.

“The Albanians aren’t competitors. They are partners,” Sergi said.

Yet with Latin America currently witnessing record levels of cocaine production, there is plenty of business to go around.
Related Content

Don’t miss out on InSight Crime’s past coverage and investigations into the ‘Ndrangheta, the Urabeños, long-term partner of the ‘Ndrangheta in Colombia, and the cocaine trade to Europe.

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