



Intermodal transport and international flows of illicit substances: Geographical analysis of smuggled goods in Italy



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ABSTRACT

In this study we describe the smuggling activities involving drugs and cigarettes within the Italian multimodal logistic system in the period between 2004 and 2014. Data concerning the smuggling flows intercepted by Italian authorities are used to carry out detailed studies about the evolution of the trafficking of illicit substances.

Several dimensions of these episodes, including geographical analyses, are assessed using quantitative methods to investigate how the international trafficking of such categories has evolved over the last decade. Numerical data shows how the illicit substances and the methods to smuggle them have evolved over time in the Italian logistic network. Detailed data about the geographical areas of origin and the destination of these flows are also provided.

These results can be used to implement and develop more robust and effective methods to contrast illegal substances trafficking and/or to evaluate the effectiveness of the measures to curb smuggling activities that are adopted by Italian custom offices and institutions.

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1. Introduction

According to the European Commission (2003), the direct costs of breaches in transport security accrue to several billions of euros per year in the European Union (EU). Moreover, crime is not restrained by national boundaries, nor focused on a single transport mode. Criminals might attempt to introduce drug, weapons or explosives by a legitimate shipment on route, or may even transport illegal products disguised as a legitimate shipment.

International illegal trafficking of drugs and cigarettes has attracted the attention of press and media in the last decades. However, researchers and scientists have neglected this field given that monitoring patterns and trends is practically and methodologically challenging. In addition, due to the illegal nature of these traffics, the subject itself is "murky and dangerous" (Schiray, 2001).

A study conducted by the Canadian Police in 2008 assessed that the contraband of tobacco and cigarettes contributes to an underground economy that is worth hundreds of millions of dollars a year. Even if tobacco and cigarettes smuggling is generally perceived by the general public as victimless crimes, these illegal traffics represent a significant source of income for organized crime. Moreover such illicit profits are often reinvested to support other criminal activities (Police, Royal Canadian Mounted, 2008).

According to a recent report, published by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, drug use is one of the major causes of avoidable mortality among young people in EU (EMCDDA, 2015). Most studies show mortality rates among young people in Europe between 1% and 2% per year, with a yearly amount of deaths in EU between 10,000 and 20,000 (mainly opioid users). In addition, about 1.6 million people received treatment for illicit drug use in EU during 2013.

In the context of worldwide drug trafficking, Europe represents an important market, supported by both domestic production and drugs smuggled from other regions. Latin America, West Asia and North Africa are important source areas for drugs entering into Europe. EU also represents an important crossroad for drugs directed to other continents and a producing region for cannabis (mostly for local consumption) and synthetic drugs (mostly exported to other areas). The European drug markets is continuously changing and rapidly evolving as a result of a series of factors such as: globalization, Internet, new trafficking routes, innovations in drug production and trafficking methods.

A better comprehension of the illegal flows can help to understand how criminal groups are organized. This would have significant implications to develop effective strategies and action plans aimed at contrasting crime. It should be noticed that measures aimed at preventing and fighting the supply of drugs are not easy to be implemented since they might involve collaboration of many stakeholders (e.g. governments, NGOs, public and private institutions) from different countries.

In this paper, the evolution of the drug trafficking episodes as well as the contraband of tobacco and cigarettes are analyzed. The proposed study is based on the occurrences in which these substances have

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been intercepted in the Italian intermodal and multimodal hubs in the last decade. The evolution of the prevalent transportation mode used by traffickers over the last 10 years as well as geographical aspects (location of the Italian logistic facilities, origin/destination of the illicit traffic, etc.) are analyzed.

The paper is organized as follows. In [Section 2](#) a short overview of the recent studies about the worldwide and European drug trafficking is proposed. [Section 3](#) covers a deep multidimensional analysis of the illegal trafficking. Its evolution and the main logistics nodes affected by the smuggling episodes are studied. [Section 4](#) proposes a geographical analysis of the international flows of smuggled goods in Italy. Finally, [Section 5](#) concludes the paper and presents some recommendations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review on the relevance of drug trafficking and contraband

Due to the illicit nature of drug trafficking and contraband, assessing the evolution of such phenomena represents a challenging task. The scarcity of data is the main limiting factor which has probably resulted in a lack of quantitative works in the scientific literature. More detailed studies could significantly foster the cooperation among national agencies and customs services to prevent, detect and investigate smuggling episodes.

The smuggling of tobacco and drugs represents one of the main sources of profit for criminal organizations all over the world. Tobacco smuggling causes heavy losses to the budgets of EU States mainly due to the loss of custom duties and taxes. In addition, smuggled tobacco poses great risks to consumers. Similarly to the drug market, it is difficult to estimate the dimension of the illicit tobacco market, mainly because contraband and counterfeiting are clandestine and very dynamic activities characterized by sudden changes in the main actors involved. Over the 2012–2014 period, the investigative activities of OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office) and the joint customs operations of the European member states contributed to seize more than 800 million cigarettes in EU (OLAF, the European Anti-Fraud Office, 2015).

The increase of cigarette prices as a consequence of both strict tax policies to discourage smoking and to limit the profits of the manufacturing firms has led to an escalation of distribution of contraband tobacco products over the last years (Joossens and Raw, 2012). Consequently, the involvement of organized crime in illegal tobacco activities has substantially risen. Moreover, since the profits of tobacco smuggling are most often invested in more lucrative illicit activities such as drug and gun trafficking, the linkages between crime organizations devoted to drug and cigarette contraband should not be neglected. According to a recent threat assessment in Canada, more than one hundred organized crime groups of varying levels of sophistication appear to be involved in the illicit tobacco trade. The majority of them (70%) are also involved in drug trafficking (mainly marijuana and cocaine) and/or weapons trafficking (Police, Royal Canadian Mounted, 2008). The use of threat and violence to maintain their market positions and to ensure illicit profits do not only characterize crime groups which are focused on drug trade but also those related to cigarettes smuggling. Moreover, smugglers adopt flexible networks in order to conceal and change flow patterns minimizing thus the risk of being detected by eluding the controls of police officials.

A study by UNODC (2014) has shown that, globally, between 3.5% and 7% of the world population aged 15–64 has used an illicit drug (cannabis, opioid, cocaine or amphetamine) at least once in 2011. A recent European drug report (EMCDDA, 2015) has estimated that almost a quarter of the adult population in the EU has tried drugs at some point in their lives. In Europe over a hundred new psychoactive substances were detected in 2014. The rapid emergence of new drugs and the diversity of available products has posed several challenges to the EU policymakers. At the national level, a range of measures have been used to control the spread of these new substances. Despite the

heterogeneities in the definition of the offences and in the penalties applied in each EU country, responses tend to focus on supply side of the market rather than on the possession and use of these substances.

The most commonly used drug in EU is cannabis followed by cocaine, amphetamines and MDMA (EMCDDA, 2015). Looking at the drug supply, the long-established Balkan route remains an important corridor for the transit of heroin from Afghan to the lucrative markets in Western and Central Europe. However, the Balkan route is facing a decline due to a more effective law enforcement and to a shrinking drug market in Western and Central Europe. The so-called “southern route” is expanding, with heroin reaching Europe, via the Middle East and Africa, as well as directly from Pakistan. Western and Central Europe still represent the second largest market for cocaine produced in South America, while the European market of cannabis is facing significant changes. More specifically, cannabis herb produced locally or regionally are now gaining ground over cannabis resin, largely sourced from Morocco.

As it was mentioned, the clandestine nature of the drug market makes the analysis of its dynamics a challenging task. Analyzing the routes of the illegal drug smuggling can strengthen the fight against crime organizations and improve the effectiveness of the detection systems currently in use. Based on a better knowledge of the illegal flows, improved security measures can be adopted (Schilk et al., 2007). Through a better cooperation between Customs border authorities and firms it would be possible to increase security and to guarantee, at the same time, seamless freight flows avoiding congestions, delays, external and internal costs, as well as conflicts between public bodies, operators and customers.

A better knowledge of the dynamics of the drug smuggling could also improve the understanding of the structure (e.g. hierarchy, rules, communication, adaptability, specialization, coordination, procedures) of the criminal organizations behind these flows and their networks. Several efforts have been made in the past years to discover common characteristics of international organizations devoted to drug trafficking.

According to Benson and Decker (2010), groups involved in illegal lucrative activities such as tobacco, drug and/or human smuggling are characterized by high levels of organization and coordination. These criminal groups are most often rationally structured in order to increase their efficiency, to minimize the risk of being discovered, and to limit the seizures and punishments. The achievement of these goals most likely limits the creation of large, structured and monopolistic crime organizations or their persistence over time.

It is generally acknowledged that the features of the illicit tobacco and drug market determine the main characteristics of the criminal actors dealing with these illegal activities (see e.g. Paoli, 2004). Therefore, trafficking groups are in continuous evolution to adapt themselves to the fast changing nature of the drug/tobacco market and to the improved controls of police authorities. Crime organizations involved in drug trafficking, generally adopt flexible and dynamic partnerships. The formal hierarchical structure is replaced by more flexible, pragmatic and opportunity oriented mechanisms. Moreover, geographical distance does not appear to limit the criminal connections of drug offenders.

A better understanding of how criminal groups are structured and interact with each other would have significant implications on how to develop and apply theories and policies against crime. One of the first attempts to link the features of crime organizations to drug flows is due to Reiss (1988). In his work, a basic distinction of crime organizations among gangs, groups, and networks is proposed as a useful starting point in understanding the nature of such organizations and their impact on crime activities.

According to a study by Schiray (2001), the geographical analysis of drug trafficking represents a critical factor to assess its consequences on economies and societies. By analyzing the economic and social aspects of the drug trade, it emerges that policies against drug trafficking

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