

Cocaine and the port: Utopias of security, urban relations, and displacement of policing efforts in the port of Piraeus

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Anna Sergi 
University of Essex, UK

Abstract

In large commercial seaports policing and security efforts to counter the drug trade, especially cocaine, do not appear to be effective beyond a mere displacement effect. In the port of Piraeus, Greece, (perceived) rising quantities of cocaine have led to calls for further securitisation of the port to curb illicit trafficking. This article will present the current trends of countering and disrupting cocaine at the port of Piraeus and question how these efforts, together with the growth of the port, are affecting the overall territory of and around the port. This article will first argue that the (perceived) increase in cocaine trade towards/in the port of Piraeus has activated a 'utopia of security' in the policing and security responses at the port. This utopia of security leads to paradoxes when it comes to being effective against organised crime in the port. The article will conclude by discussing the possibility of a different approach, one of displacement of countering efforts rather than of cocaine flows. This different approach can also rebalance the focus of policing and security authorities on the relationship between the port and its territory.

Keywords

Cocaine trafficking, organised crime, policing, port of Piraeus, utopia of security

Introduction

The port of Piraeus (hereinafter Piraeus) stretches along 39 km of coastline over three municipalities in Attica, Greece (Piraeus, Perama, and Keratsini). It is the 33rd largest port in the world (2022¹) and the fourth largest port in Europe for volume of container trade (2021). Piraeus jumped to the fourth position from the 17th position in Europe back in 2007, due to privatisation and massive changes to its governance structure. The port has a rich history

Corresponding author:

Anna Sergi, Department of Sociology, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO3SQ, UK.

Email: asergi@essex.ac.uk

and has fundamentally shaped the territory around Athens and the rest of Europe. Piraeus dominates the Greek market with three container terminals (the last completed in 2016) serving over 90 percent of the containers handled in Greek ports.

Piraeus is today recognised as one of the principal import or transit points in Europe for large cocaine shipments from Latin American countries. This recognition comes from the latest annual drug reports by the Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection including Hellenic Police, Customs Service, Coast Guard, and Financial and Economic Crime Unit. This trend goes with more general trends that see cocaine increasing in Greece, primarily arriving via maritime routes (for the geo-morphic nature of the island): while the 2016 annual drug report indicated the seizure of 166,116 kg of cocaine, the 2020 annual drug report indicated a sharp increase for a total of 1,787,283 kg overall.² Open sources, including media, have reported on cocaine seizures at the port and discussed the reasons why these appear to have increased.³

The increase in volume of container trade, which arguably led to the increase in cocaine trade, is linked to the investments by Chinese COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited, as the new owner of the port of Piraeus (since 2016). COSCO's vision for Piraeus affected types and routes of cargo and 'securitised' the premises in and around the port terminals.

Research on organised crime, security, and ports has already looked at the overlap between crime prevention and security in the port space (Sergi, 2021) and at how cocaine flows in the cracks of security networks (Easton, 2020). Policing the port space has become entangled with port security to protect ports, as crucial nodes of the global supply chain, from crimes such as terrorism and cross-border trafficking (Eski, 2016). In fact, changes in international port security protocols Post 9/11, especially with the ISPS code (International Ship and Port Facility Security) in force since 2004, have securitised the port space, following successful narratives on how ports are security targets and vulnerable to security risks (Malcolm, 2016; Eski and Carpenter, 2013). Criminological interest in ports and port security has come to coincide with increased attention to drug-related cross-border crimes, and with the 'increasingly growing multitude of security interventions (including its public attention), targeting large global transport hubs' (Eski and Fiddeler, 2022: 1).

This article argues that the (perceived) increase in cocaine trade towards/in Piraeus has activated a 'utopia of security' in policing and security at the port. This utopia of security leads to paradoxes when measured against illicit trafficking. These paradoxes are (1) more security leads to smoother licit but also illicit trade; (2) policing of organised crime in the port grows detached from security; (3) the more effective Customs' actions in the port, the more overflow (and displacement) of cocaine trafficking might occur.

The aims of policing cocaine trafficking and those of port security are not aligned in Piraeus and need to be reconciled also in consideration of a contested relationship between the port and the (urban) territory. On this last argument, the article builds an unorthodox conclusion, going beyond Piraeus. It proposes that displacement of countering efforts rather than displacement of cocaine flows, might lead to counterintuitive results, including that of 'letting cocaine go' (to be 'policed' elsewhere). This approach might also rebalance the focus of policing and security authorities on any conflictual relationship between a port and its territory, like in Piraeus.

Ports as spaces of organised crime in the utopia of safety

This article is built on two strands of criminological research: first, studies of organised crime and ports, understanding ports as one of the *spaces* of organised crime (actors and activities); second, studies on policing and security within a paradigm of the utopia of safety, which here will be instead related to the concept of security.

The criminological literature on ports and crime is a relatively new effort. Research on ports as standalone environments for criminological enquiry surfaced just over a decade ago (Eski, 2011), building on previous studies on corruption in port space relating to organised crime (Zaitch, 2002). Research has focused on policing and security networks (Brewer, 2014; Easton, 2020; Eski, 2016), corruption (Eski and Bujit, 2017), and recently on organised crime and illicit trafficking (Antonelli, 2021; Sergi, 2022; Sergi and Storti, 2020; Roks et al., 2021; Sampò and Troncoso, 2022), and the policing/security dilemmas in ports (Sergi et al., 2021).

In addition to being hubs for the global supply chain and nodes of security networks, ports can be understood also as *spaces* for illicit trade and organised crime activities nationally and cross-border. As illustrated by Sergi and Storti (2021) when we look at literature on the links between organised crime and spaces, we find three main perspectives. One perspective identifies the ‘territorial context’ as a sort of container of opportunities and constraints, push and pull factors for organised crime (Kleemans and Van de Bunt, 2008; Von Lampe, 2016). A second perspective assumes that the territorial context is almost a ‘second skin’ of organised crime groups (Hess, 1970). A third perspective sees territorial contexts in which organised crime groups are active as ‘organisational environments’, fields where institutions, collective and individual actors are deeply interconnected between one another and shaped by conventions and shared values, so they are culturally and cognitively embedded at the local level (Hobbs and Antonopoulos, 2013; Sciarrone and Storti, 2019). Organised Crime Groups are actors shaping a social space. Ports, as crossroads – or socio-economic junctions – within the territorial areas in which they are located, can therefore become one of the social spaces shaped by organised crime groups (among other actors). In this respect, ports can be isolated, connected, or integrated entities with the territorial frame where they exist (Sergi et al., 2021). An *integrated* port is interconnected with local production systems and infrastructures (i.e. production clusters, industrial districts). *Connected* ports are more superficially embedded in the socio-economic context, while *isolated* ports do not have – or have lost – socio-economic connectivity and are distant, and foreign, in the social environments in which they exist.

The policing and the securitisation of ports are affected by the relationship of the port with its territorial context. The governance of the port space is increasingly a matter of plural or hybrid policing, and of networked coordination and cooperation among various institutions involved in security-making (Brewer, 2014; Easton, 2020; Eski, 2016; Sergi et al., 2021). As argued by Nøkleberg (2022: 20) ‘the experience and understanding of security are highly sensitive to commercial interests and the temporal orientations implicated in the trade regime’. This means that a trade-off between security and trade characterises everyday practices of policing agencies in global maritime hubs and

influences the ‘mentalities’ of these organisations, their subjectivity, and their operations. This needs to be considered when looking at how these agencies respond and adapt to ever-changing security demands.

Ports present several risks and vulnerabilities, since they are borderlands, gates, and ‘defensible’ spaces (Sergi, 2021) as well as nodes of global commerce (Eski, 2020). Neither policing nor security in ports has been very effective in curbing organised crime and illicit trafficking (Sergi et al., 2021). On the one hand, the ISPS code has been only deemed capable to restrict access and movement within the port itself (Easton, 2020; Sergi et al., 2021). On the other hand, the constant exercise of securitisation in ports – which include calls for technology advancements (e.g. smart ports), private security involvement, and the routinisation of security procedure – essentially makes ports another product of neoliberal politics reinforcing risk society and cultures of control (Eski, 2016, 2020).

As posited by Boutellier (2004: 13) in the book ‘The Safety Utopia’, contemporary culture is characterised by a ‘utopian desire for a convergence of maximum freedom and optimum protection’. The postmodern world has lost the *explicit* utopia and illusion of coherence (Bauman, 1993): an *implicit* utopia of safety is the result of such loss. The greater are the risks we perceive, the more ‘*safety unites*’ (Boutellier, 2004: 19). What characterises the utopia of safety, according to Boutellier, is that it is subjectively experienced, even if it develops under objective circumstances. Hence the use of the word *safety*, and its reference to inward/personal feelings, preferred to the word *security*, employed to refer to environments and collective experiences. In the context of ports, we do observe a utopian desire for a convergence of maximum freedom and optimum protection. Forms of plural policing, hybrid policing, security training, and cross-border programs make up this utopia (see e.g. the UN Container Control Program). As Eski (2020: 165) observes: ‘frontline policing staff in ports are responsible to prevent local security breaches from happening in order to keep the global flow of people and goods going’. Essentially, at the end of the day, most port officers’ job is ‘not to keep the port safe from harm, but from financial trepidation’ (Eski, 2020: 164). This confirms that not only security is often still seen as a *cost*, but also there often is a dealignment between the needs of port authorities/owners and those of security and policing agents (Sergi, 2021). The former aim to boost trade, while guaranteeing speed and efficiency in logistics, while the latter risk seeing their work becoming a matter of compliance rather than investigation. The *hypercommercial* nature of most port environments today arguably creates a utopia of *security* (rather than safety this time) in as much as port actors and users demand the maximum neoliberal freedom (of trade, commercialisation as well as optimum protection (from illicit trade too). While implicitly aiming at this utopia of security, other issues emerge such as criminal displacement and the fragmentation and dilution of organised crime and illicit trafficking through ports (Sergi, 2022).

Methodology

This article is the last leg of a research project on organised crime in commercial seaports. Fieldwork in nine ports (Genova, Melbourne, Montreal, New York/New Jersey,

Liverpool, Gioia Tauro, Felixstowe, Belfast, and Piraeus) was conducted between 2019 and 2022 funded by the British Academy and for Piraeus exclusively by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, within a bigger project whose report was published in July 2022. The conclusions drawn from the fieldwork and findings in Piraeus in January 2022 – which this paper presents – are consistent with those drawn from data collected and analysed at earlier stages of this project (Sergi, 2021, 2022).

Fieldwork followed a pilot study; during the pilot study a Greek speaking research assistant supported the collection of policy documents – the latest Annual drugs report (10) by the Ministry – and case law on drug trafficking or other illicit trade which involved the port of Piraeus.⁴ Case law related to any trial on cocaine trafficking and importation in national courts and only yielded five cases related to Piraeus, even going back 20 years. The paucity of case law data means that this data has been used mostly to corroborate interviews. Fieldwork included two (escorted) port visits in January 2021 and 16 interviews with representatives of law enforcement authorities and other key observers of the port and its territory. The idea was to capture those who gravitate around the port in a crime prevention/security professional capacity as well as, secondarily, those who observe the port economy and environment. The institutions were contacted individually with requests for interviews through their contact form, and they indicated the best person(s) to speak to and agreed to either collective or individual interviews; this reduces the selection bias to a minimum and ensures that there is consistency in the approach. The only omissions are authorities of other municipalities were Piraeus sits (Perama and Keratsini), due to time constraints, but other than that these interviews provide adequate coverage of the key security stakeholders at the port. A list from the local (Piraeus) to the national (Greece) to international (Europe) institutions was made based on the methodology the author has used in all other ports where previous research was conducted: Europol (one, collective), Green National Police, Customs (AADE) (one, collective), Hellenic Coast Guard (three, individual), Piraeus Port Dock Workers' Union (one, individual), Piraeus Harbour Dock Container Workers Union (one, individual), COSCO/Piraeus Container Terminal management⁵ (one, individual), Port Facility Security Officer (one, individual), Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Piraeus (one, collective), Municipality of Piraeus (one, individual), were selected as accessible and relevant. It needs to be pointed out that access to such authorities and individuals – especially customs – is indeed quite unique: port authorities are hard-to-reach populations (Eski, 2022). The port environment is often a hidden enclave – mainly due to securitisation (Nøkleberg, 2022), where expert interviews, purposefully sampled, require a lot of effort on the side of the researcher, in terms of access (Mason, 2002). In addition, journalists-experts in organised crime and in maritime matters were also contacted (three out of four identified were available for the interview) to obtain a more nuanced narrative of the port. One last interview with a representative maritime private investor agency was also carried out snowballing from a journalist. The interviews were semi-structured and tailored to the specific role of the interviewee in relation to his/her own experience of the illicit trade of cocaine in the port. This is a common way to sample expertise purposefully in hard-to-reach population, by preparing the interview based on specific agencies' roles while still maintaining a core semi-structure for the research project. The semi-structured interview in this case was

based on four main blocks of questions that each interview touched upon; in each block, specific questions were then asked tailored to specific roles and expertise.

- (A) How Piraeus changed in the past 10 years.
- (B) Knowledge of criminal activities and actors, specifically focusing on cocaine, in and through the port.
- (C) Enabling characteristics of organised criminality in, out, and around the port.
- (D) Security and governance of organised criminality in and through the port.
- (E) Other relevant aspects (e.g. business relations, relations with COSCO).

The research questions for the case study were:

- (a) What are the main trends of illicit trafficking, primarily of cocaine, in the port of Piraeus and how does that reflect, if it does, on the territories around the port?
- (b) What are the main characteristics of policing illicit trafficking, and how does this link with utopistic ideas of securitising the port?
- (c) How does the port-city relation contribute to the understanding of the above?

In addition to documents and interviews, the researcher also used a walking methodology in the areas surrounding the port (the cities of Perama, Keratsini, and of course Piraeus and Southern/West Athens). Such a methodology has supported the collection of data during port visits, as the researcher has chosen to walk around and to the terminals as much as feasible to grasp the sense of *space* of the port. This helped adding *cultural* meaning (Kane, 2004; Natali, 2016) to the complex space that is the port. In practice this has meant also taking pictures, recording self-reflective audio notes, and noting down sensorial backgrounds. This exercise was very useful when rethinking the context in which the other data collected was also 'embedded' (McClanahan and South, 2020), thus adding cultural meaning to the thematic and content analysis. The walking methodology was helpful when contextualising the relationship between the port and the city (cities) and helped shape the imagery of the port that will be later presented in this article, especially in relation to question 3.

A word of warning for the reader: albeit logically one might argue that the port-city dimension could have been separated (in two papers perhaps) by the cocaine-policing/security focus, the author believes that the two are needed together to fully grasp the complexity and the richness of the data and of the case study. Indeed, as argued before, the space and geography of the city and that of the port in the city might influence policing strategies and demands; indeed, as noticed by Sergi (2021: 12): 'the port represents a portion of urban identity and actively contributes to changing and defining it', whereas it follows that 'organised crime groups and activities in cities – even so in port cities – are often intertwined with the global trade as well as mirroring the different composition of ethnicities and the territorial fragmentation of the urban landscape'.

The analysis was carried out in two stages: documents/texts from the pilot and interviews from fieldwork were first coded for themes, and eventually analysed in content. Key themes are cocaine trafficking; changes in criminal patterns/actors; policing changes; security demands; security vs trade; privatisation; crime prevention; port-city;

border-identity. These themes were identified after a first round of transcript analysis of the interviews by (a) noting what keywords the interviewer(s) used and (b) attaching labels to texts and (c) weighing interviewees' judgement on the relevance of the themes they touched upon. As in most thematic analyses, themes were largely built around expectations from literature reviewed but were generated around the research questions systematically to generate trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017). The thematic analysis answers directly the research questions. The content analysis was the second stage and was used to identify and understand patterns, narratives, and relationships within the themes, as well as to explore how the data could further inform theoretical claims from and beyond the research questions. It was done by clustering themes and creating second-level coding by interpretation (Smith, 2000). Quotes or extracts were extrapolated when they related to one or more themes, that is, changes in criminal patterns in cocaine trafficking (two themes); crime prevention, security, and border identity (three themes). New codes were, therefore, created that constituted a second, more advanced, and more conceptual reading of the texts, for example, crime displacement; security utopia; overflowing of drugs; dealignment of purposes. These new codes were also matched to entries from the walking methodology.

While the thematic analysis will be presented to answer the research questions more descriptively, the final arguments of this article, through the content interpretative analysis, will embrace broader research in this field.

Thematic analysis: Findings

Background

A drastic change in the governance of the port of Piraeus in the last decade has affected its role in illicit trade. The year 2009 has been significant for Piraeus (and for Greece). Piraeus Container Terminal SA (PCT SA), a subsidiary of COSCO Pacific Limited (the Chinese government's state-owned shipping conglomerate) started operating the container terminal in October 2009. This led to an increase in traffic and specifically in transshipment volumes. In that year, following an international tender process, PCT SA has progressively undertaken the concession of Piers II and III (container terminals) in Piraeus for 35 + 5 (potential) years. The total operational capacity of Piers II and III together with the capacity of Pier I made Piraeus Port the largest container port in the Mediterranean and the 26th largest in the world in 2019.⁶

In 2016, COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited bought 51% of the Piraeus Port Authority (PPA) SA from the Hellenic Republic Asset Development Fund (HRADF), the Greek government's privatization agency, for €280.5 million. The contractual arrangement provided for COSCO to pay 88 million more Euros for an additional 16% stake by 2021, contingent on COSCO's investments in, and expansions of, the port for a total of €500 million further. By 2020, the Port of Piraeus was majority owned by COSCO with 67% of shares (16% in escrow shares). The HRADF retains 7.14% of shares. The rest (25.86%) was held by non-institutional investors. In October 2021, the HRADF transferred the 16% escrow shares to COSCO, for a further €88 million.⁷ As of today, COSCO effectively manages the Port Authority as well as concessions on the terminals.

The port of Piraeus is directly connected with 71 ports in the world over 29 countries, of which 16 are European, 10 Asian, and three African. Piraeus is directly connected (without a stopover) with countries with major container ports worldwide, such as Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and the Netherlands,⁸ confirming the importance of this Greek hub in global transport and logistics. The promise of the port, under COSCO management, is to serve every European port in 48/72 h, which makes it competitive for European trade.

Piraeus handles mostly transit cargo volumes (78.1% in 2015) and secondarily, domestic cargo traffic (11.7% in 2015).⁹ The 2021 financial report¹⁰ by the port authority indicates that the total volume of containers increased by 13.9% (from 540,591 in 2020 to 615,510 TEUs in 2021) due to the increase in transshipment volumes and a significant increase in local volumes. The transshipment volumes increased by 7.8% (from 445,949 in 2020 to 480,912 TEUs in 2021), mainly due to the contribution of the COSCO Shipping group, while the local cargo increased by 42.2% (from 94,642 in 2020 to 134,598 TEUs in 2021) corresponding to the increase in imports/exports observed in the Greek economy overall.¹¹

The investments by COSCO have clearly affected the type of container cargo handled in the port and 'securitised' the premises in and around the port terminals. The investments (or buy-outs) by COSCO are not a concern only for Piraeus, considering how the Chinese state-owned company is interested in expanding investments to various areas (and ports specifically) of Europe. On the one hand, there is a positive effect linked to COSCO's investments; Piraeus represents the turning point of logistics that can 'save' the Greek economy. On the other hand, however, this comes at a cost, in terms of the exclusion of Piraeus from the Greek economy itself, and in terms of instability of labour regimes (Neilson, 2019). Both these elements have been found to be relevant in the current research study and pose serious questions about the political influence that such economic ventures might imply (Stroikos, 2022).

Cocaine trafficking to/via Piraeus

Piraeus is recognised as one of the principal import or transit points in Europe for large cocaine shipments from Latin America, from various ports (primarily but not limited to Ecuador – Maersk directly connects Guayaquil to Piraeus – and Guatemala). This follows a trend of past decades where Piraeus was at the centre of contraband networks in Southern Europe (Antonopolous, 2008; Kostakos and Antonopoulos, 2010). The Annual Drug Report for 2020¹² recorded an increase (87.46%) in the total amount of cocaine seized in Greece (1,787,283 kg). This was the largest quantity of cocaine seized in Greece in a single year in the last 25 years, and it was the second year of such high quantities. As noticed by Customs, seizures at Piraeus remain small in quantity, but frequent; this demands a lot of effort from authorities and means that the route is established: 'rolling contracts', thus constant provision of cocaine arranged by criminal groups through Piraeus, are likely.

Modes of shipment and concealment methods vary, as shown by (scarce) case law and by the annual drug reports of the past 10 years; they go from special crypts in empty or full cargo, into bananas or coffee beans cargos; in the walls or roofs or back of the

container; in other food products; with large loads of timber; in the cooling compartments in refrigerated cargos. Trends seen elsewhere (Roks et al., 2021; Sergi, 2022) involving the random use of containers (rip-on/rip-off system) are confirmed in Piraeus.

An interesting element appears to be the connection with the Netherlands and, more generally, to Northern European criminal networks and illicit markets. According to a senior agent of the Hellenic Police in the Narcotics unit for Attika, 'Piraeus is the first choice of many groups in Europe importing cocaine, also following increased attention and seizures in Antwerp and Rotterdam, to which it is connected daily directly'. Indeed, Piraeus' role as a central hub for trade in Southern Europe contributes to making Greece an ideal node for transnational criminal networks.

Hellenic Police, Narcotics Unit, and Customs described that cocaine usually arrives in Piraeus after calling in Spain or Italy; largely via container, but other cargo vessels are also preferred carriers. Crucially, the destination of the shipment of narcotics is not always Piraeus: there appears to be a fast and 'reliable' connection between criminal groups between Athens and Thessaloniki. As shared by Customs:

In cases with drugs we have seized (lately) the last port of destination was not Piraeus, it was Thessaloniki, or maybe Dures (Albania), or Rijeka (Croatia). Very few cases we had where Piraeus was the destination of drugs. In Piraeus it's become very difficult to pick up things.

Hellenic Police, Organised Crime Unit, specified: 'the connection with Thessaloniki is strong: if they (the offenders/group) think there is a problem in Athens, they will just send it (cocaine/shipment) to Thessaloniki; the destinations can be changed'.

In Athens and Piraeus, local criminal networks support international ones for the transit/transshipment of narcotics arriving for the rest of Europe. As noticed by Hellenic Police, Narcotics:

Every case, we have Greeks involved, we have Latin Americans involved, people from the Netherlands, from Belgium, we then have people from Albania and the Western Balkans. Yes, people from the Western Balkans are very effective, but they are using other facilitators, Greeks.

The relevance of Greek criminal groups is confirmed by Europol and by case laws; the connection across Athens, Thessaloniki, and Sofia, in Bulgaria, confirms the role of locals, together with cross-border networks, in the transit and trafficking of drugs via Southern Europe, and the port of Piraeus, with different final destinations. Even though it is unclear from the data whether this has changed drastically in the past years, this also reflects a trend seen elsewhere in cocaine trafficking (Sergi, 2022). The Balkan route via Bulgaria, for easier controls at European borders, makes it possible to switch from sea means to land ones (i.e. lorries or trucks or cars), which facilitates the movement of goods, including illicit ones. As noticed by Hellenic Police, Organised Crime:

The beginning of the itinerary (of the illicit commodity) is through the Balkans. And through Bulgaria of course, which provides a very easy way for businesses to be established and be run without having an office, just an access. Many Greeks and many Greek criminals open

businesses in South Bulgaria; you don't need any passport to get there, so it's easier to move money from there.

One of the most revealing considerations by law enforcement relates to the quantities of the narcotics currently arriving, or estimated to arrive, in the port. In brief, agents of the Hellenic Police, Organised Crime, and Narcotics, don't believe that these quantities of cocaine are all for the local market, posing questions about the journey and the travel of the narcotics beyond Piraeus, Athens, and Greece. The Hellenic Coast Guard agreed:

It is mainly the transiting drugs that we seize, that is not for the domestic market. For sure. These quantities are not for the local market. Most of it is going to North European countries; that's what we understood. More than 1 ton of cocaine is probably already too much for the domestic market. We don't have such a big domestic market. So that's a question for the police, or Europol.

Policing and security at Piraeus

In Piraeus, security is part of the growth of the port. As noted by the PFSO (*Port Facility Security Officer*) at the port: 'Port security is about the vision of the PFSO and about how to control access, through land, sea, air, and virtually; that's what we constantly update, as a promise to clients'. Customs added: 'Security at Piraeus is at a very high level, it's a priority since COSCO, and in the past years'.

Like in many other large commercial seaports, there are many authorities involved in access control, crime prevention, and security provisions; for cargo control – and therefore containers – Customs (AADE) take the lead. Under Greek law, law enforcement and Customs have the jurisdiction, and the powers, required to act once they determine that trade activities are illicit. Other authorities, like Hellenic Coast Guard – with a dedicated unit in Piraeus – and Hellenic Police are also involved in securing and policing the premises around the port, the former from the sea into the coastline and the latter from the city up to the sea border. To protect the EU's external borders, Frontex has set up an office in Piraeus at the Hellenic Coast Guard's Headquarter in 2010. Hellenic Coast Guard and Hellenic Police must coordinate with Customs in case their investigations involve goods in containers and in container terminals, free trade zone, or in other port areas. Agencies will have a different outlook on the sea and the port and cooperate: Hellenic Coast Guard might have an insight on vessels and their patterns, or leads on drugs on vessels, smaller ships, or seafarers; Customs might lead investigations on container shipments; Hellenic Police organised crime and narcotics units might investigate organised crime groups in the country and cross-border using the port for various activities, while the economic crime unit might also investigate fraud and/or economic crimes via or in the Piraeus port. When various investigations and data relate to narcotics there is the possibility to coordinate activities across policing agencies. The Coordinating Body for Drug Prosecution (SODN)¹³ was established in 1990 to also function as a National Information Unit (NTUA) for drugs in the European Union.

Since the consolidation of COSCO's management, inside port terminals and the free trade zone crime has visibly decreased according to Customs, Hellenic Police, and

Hellenic Coast Guard. The presence of improved security is an asset for law enforcement, as noted by Hellenic Police, which cooperates with the port authority and, if needed, uses data extrapolated from port security databases. Indeed, as noted in the Narcotics Unit, ‘with more security in place, offenders are more likely to leave a footprint if they access or exit the port’.

Usually, in ports the interest of entrepreneurs is to increase security to increase their international credibility and reputation, while public authorities and law enforcement agencies increase security because countering drug trafficking is their task (Brewer, 2014; Easton, 2020; Eski, 2016). This is very visible in Piraeus and leads to better cooperation, according to Piraeus Municipality. As noted by Hellenic Coast Guard, in agreement with Hellenic Police and Customs, there is good cooperation with COSCO, which is a matter of will and opportunity but without hindering commerce:

We don’t have a problem with the port authority, they cooperate a lot. If we work fast, it’s good for them and it’s good for us. Customs are in charge to check the container box and let local authorities in charge of the investigations check the container box. Our problem is not even with Customs, nor other institutions. The problem usually arises with the recipient of the cargo. If you keep the container in the terminal, they pay for the extra days, so the pressure is from them.

The Chamber of Commerce of Piraeus, together with Customs, identifies that part of the issue with the cocaine trade in the port comes with scrutinising the large volume of containers and cargo due, for example, to the lack of proper numbers of scanners; more scanners mean more security.

The Port Authority declares a commitment to improving security at the port, but more importantly to improving the security network with other authorities. They noticed that Piraeus Container Terminal Single-member SA (‘PCT’) – which operates exclusively the New Container Terminal (‘NCT’) of the port of Piraeus¹⁴ – ‘has no authority nor any power to police the trade activities being carried out through the NCT’. However, as part of COSCO-PCT’s efforts to preclude any illegal trade activities being carried out in or through their terminal container, the company also declares it will carry out training and implement trade data reporting systems by encouraging the use of an electronic custom filing.¹⁵

The increase in physical security is combined with investments in digital efficiency at the port. Implementation of Piraeus-based ‘Hellenic Port Community System’ (HPCS) launched in 2019.¹⁶ HPCS was developed by COSCO-owned Piraeus Container Terminal (PCT) in cooperation with Eurobank, to coordinate online data between terminal operators, shipping lines and agents, freight forwarders, customs brokers, and customs authorities. Rail operators and the airport are expected to join HPCS. The platform is interconnected with the Hellenic Customs Administration, one of the main units of AADE; it promises to slash the time for container handling from 6 h to just 20 min.¹⁷ The launch of this platform, which essentially asks everyone who interacts with PCT to register their data online, has been criticised by the Chamber of Commerce in Piraeus ‘as creating a monopoly for services at the port or at the very least unfair competition with local businesses’.

The port and the city

The port is connected to the city, but growing increasingly *isolated* from its production, trade, and local business. Also, the relationship between the port and the city (cities) seems to be different depending on whether one looks at organised crime in the form of illicit trade, corruption, and/or other forms of delinquency. Urban criminality in the Piraeus area does not seem to be connected to the port. According to recent findings by the Be Secure Feel Secure EU-funded project in Piraeus,¹⁸ the port does not impact on people's perception of unsafety in the city: unsafe areas are not near the port. Additionally, when it comes to cocaine trafficking, farther areas in West Athens (e.g. Aspropyrgos), directly and easily connected to the port terminals, seem relevant for warehousing, storage, and for the logistics of the cocaine trade. As clarified by Hellenic Police:

It's very easy to find real estate in certain areas; in West Athens we have industrial areas, it's normal to see trucks coming and going, logistics companies established there, a lot of factories and the biggest companies in Greece for fuel for example have their main establishment area there. All this provides a big umbrella of legitimacy of industrialisation; the presence of warehouses for long-term rent and transportation is normal.

Conversely, in the face of rising cocaine arrivals in the port in the past years, the Chamber of Commerce of Piraeus expressed concerns on how businesses are affected by illicit trade, especially cocaine which travels on containers and legal cargos without importers knowing. The president of the Chamber, translating for a business-owner (importer of fruit) also present at the meeting, said:

Because of the increase in the freight volume of the containers, a lot of importers cannot afford to bring in these goods (fruit). Only the strong ones will remain in the market; these quantities must be transferred, and they now work for smaller importers too; they are even more afraid that their cargo gets contaminated, that they get involved in the investigations for something they know nothing about, arrested even for something they have no control over.

This speaks also to another issue with fast-expanding ports, especially one like Piraeus which has grown thanks to foreign investments: the challenge of striking the right balance between the 'new' owners and the 'old' users-actors. As shared by one of the Trade Unions, the existence of the port in the three municipalities where it sits, fuels conflicts with local business communities, that for some, including the Chamber of Commerce and shipping investors, might amount to unfair competition and '*quasi-monopolies*', as seen above.

Concerns about market dominance by COSCO were also voiced by Greek shipowners – including prominent individuals who themselves have been the subject of investigations on corruption and preliminary charges of involvement in heroin trafficking¹⁹ – Piraeus' Chamber of Commerce, and the Shipping Chamber.²⁰

The difficulty of handling local business relations is also mirrored in the relationships with the territory more generally. In the past 5–7 years the port has grown isolated from the cities, with fences making it difficult to access areas that used to be freely accessible and making the port space 'defensible'. Says the maritime journalist:

I used to be able to come here and talk to people, you know at the Perama fish market. Now it's all fenced, it's all moved. This is surely going hand in hand with the growing influence that COSCO has acquired in and around the port; it's their territory now.

It seems, however, that the port-city integration remains a priority for both the Piraeus Port Authority, led by COSCO, and for the Municipality of Piraeus, where it was noticed that 'Piraeus is both a city-port and a port-city'. Indeed, this port offers a dividing line into Europe, acting as an external border for the Middle East and Asia as well as an internal border into Europe. Under the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, Piraeus is set to become China's gateway to Europe, as well as other ports, increasing trade across continents (Gontika, 2021). Piraeus is a port-border with a duplex identity: on the one hand, it sits at the edge of the EU zone, acting as both an internal border (from the EU) and an external border (towards the EU). The port-border dimension is very visible with the passenger port, but less so for the container and cargo terminals. Nevertheless, the border dimension of Piraeus is the essence of Customs' work and of course Hellenic Police and Europol. The Hellenic Police Narcotics Unit notes:

Even when Piraeus is the entry point of the narcotics, Greece is part of the EU, so once something comes through our border it can then travel to Europe without any further check. And if it leaves from Piraeus towards Dubai or Emirates, for example, it still leaves from Europe, so the control will not be the same. In theory you can send pills, cocaine, into Greece and then move them to another country, within or outside the EU, but still as a European cargo.

Content analysis and discussion

This section will critically reflect on the content analysis: when connecting various themes and seeking to isolate relevant content, the researcher was able to identify and interpret underlying narratives. Paradoxes and utopias of security emerge, contextualised within the literature on organised crime, mainly cocaine trafficking, policing, and security, specifically across the themes seeking to answer questions 1 and 2. The port-city aspect leads us to consider the contested identity of Piraeus as a borderland, as emerging from content analysis of data and interpretation of themes related to question 3.

Utopias and paradoxes around countering cocaine trafficking

During fieldwork, it has become obvious that Piraeus has an attractive power for cocaine flows, notwithstanding its securitisation and policing efforts. In other words, the demand for cocaine remains *rigid* – in the economic sense that there are no substitutes for this good; the supply of cocaine through Piraeus, now more difficult to complete on the terminal, is 'forced' to overflow. Overflowing of cocaine means that traffickers and importers might need to find other ways to channel the flow *out* of the port or redirect it to another port. This was already visible in a case from the Supreme Court²¹ where a group of individuals who had almost 500 kg of cocaine from Greece (via Bolivia) through the shell company ΜΟΝΟΠΡΟΣΩΠΗ Ε.Π.Ε, moved the cargos from 'Piraeus Customs E' to the company's warehouses (in Aspropyrgos). The specific cargo was

considered suspicious since the shipping company's export activity has been almost non-existent for such a high-value cargo.

Overflowing is arguably a side effect of the utopia of security – intended 'as an implicit desire concealed behind many of our acts and claims' (Boutellier, 2004: 7) – shared by authorities in Piraeus: as seen, more securitisation of the port – for example, through technology advancements – means making it more difficult for traffickers to operate inside the port. This utopia is made of diverse goals (desires) of the various authorities.

First, for the port authority/COSCO, the security team at the port, and for the shipping sector, improving security is an aspiration, part of the vision and the promise of Piraeus as a modern and efficient port, and more importantly, a condition for the growth and reputation of the port, in line with what found by other research in ports (Sergi et al., 2021)

Here we find the first paradox: if there is no growth without improving security, but at the same time a bigger and more efficient port becomes more attractive for cocaine traders, then we find that feeding this utopia of security leads essentially to smoother licit *and* also illicit trade.

Second, for policing and law enforcement authorities, such as Hellenic Police and Hellenic Coast Guard, investing in security is linked to objectives of crime prevention and repression, within a strategy on countering organised crime, potential violence associated with it, and illicit gains. This brings us back to critical criminological scholarship on port security and policing: (organised) crime prevention and security have overlapped since 9/11 brought drastic changes in maritime regulations; however, the day-to-day practice of port security and policing is affected by occupational attitudes, practices and identities of police officers, port authorities, and (private) security officers (Eski, 2016; Eski, 2020).

The overall objective of law enforcement authorities in Piraeus appears to be the reduction of rewards for criminal groups through the disruption of the cocaine trade. This is also utopic; it will never have the desired effect. It ignores the realities of organised crime, as organised crime groups are proven to be resilient to repression and prevention; they can adapt and are not containable solely through crime prevention nor repression without clear long-term socio-economic policies and goals (von Lampe, 2011; von Lampe, 2016). This utopic approach also dismisses the dilution and fragmentation of the cocaine market and its tendency towards displacement (Boekhout van Solinge, 2022; Sergi, 2022). Improving security in Piraeus is only one side of the effort against organised crime for Hellenic Police; a lot is still down to intelligence *outside* and *far* from the port. Also, investigating cocaine is also only one aspect of organised crime policing around the port overall: investigations on entrepreneurs and political 'elite' gravitating around the port economy, who might exploit their access to the port for purposes of illicit trade, are arguably more complex as they require time and resources and are also serious and harmful.

Third, for institutions like AADE-Customs, improving security is part of a harm reduction strategy; in fact, in protecting the financial interests of the state, Customs are tasked with reducing any possible *disorder* from border control of duties and excises. The paradox here is that the more effective Customs' actions in the port are, the more overflow (and displacement) occurs, with cocaine transiting through the port in different ways or going to smaller or less monitored ports (Sergi, 2022). In Piraeus, the cocaine that

used to be visible in the port becomes invisible outside Piraeus, farther into the cities. As seen, this affects local businesses (e.g. fruit importers) who find themselves exploited for purposes of illicit trade, often without knowing. This is in line with the balloon effect that has been observed as a negative consequence of successful anti-drug enforcement actions (Giommoni et al., 2021; Guerette and Aziani, 2022).

Contested space and identity

Interpretation of data and themes also exposes another problem of countering and disrupting cocaine flows at Piraeus, connected to the paradox above: the contested *space* of the port enhanced by the *borderland*. Piraeus is often presented also as a borderland: political (Greek and EU border); geographic (city-sea); financial (global-local money flows). Because of that – and also because of the growing presence of foreign COSCO – it might have become a contested, more isolated, space. From the diary for the walking methodology, the following passage²² encapsulates this interpretation:

This port seems suspended above the city, or rather the cities, Perama, Piraeus, Keratsini, but also Athens. It touches them all somehow; it intersects with them all; it is visible from them all, as if it was either at the horizon, or just above them, tall above them. Why suspended? It has felt this way since I first arrived here by train two weeks ago. It is perhaps about the fact that it's always there, in everyone's discourse about the future of the cities, in everyone's analysis of the past years. But at the same time, it feels like very few see it from the inside, or at the same level as it was before, before when more locals worked here, when there were less fences, when there were local entrances. It feels like in the past years the port has raised above, more difficult to see in the inside, more mysterious; everyone and everything around here is under the large shadow the suspended port casts. And yet, its influence is almost aerial, and virtual, that is not on the ground.

One of the recurring sensations when walking around the port and approaching it from different angles, was that of an in plain-sight *division*, hence the feeling of *suspension*. This was prompted too in the interview with representatives of the Municipality and Chamber of Commerce of Piraeus, who noticed how there are competing needs in Piraeus: the needs of the 'ordinary' people who live near the port or work at the port; the needs of those people who are involved at any stage in the security of the port at the local level or in drug policy and countering of organised crime at the local, national, and international levels; the needs of criminal groups who act locally and transnationally. Everyone might perceive the vicinity and separation from the port differently, also for illicit purposes.

The growth of the port and its contemporary identity is a contested reality, with feelings of separation, detachment, and suspension, that can be a result of borderland constructions. As explained (Garcia Pinzon and Mantilla, 2021: 268) 'borders [or borderlands] are a socio-territorial construction resulting from the legal and geopolitical discourses of states, on the one hand, and the action of border societies, on the other'. In Piraeus, the global economy of the port, and the existence of the European and Greek borders, go hand in hand with the actions and feelings of the local communities and the actions and reactions of organised crime groups: they all form the complex borderland identity of this port. This is in line with what studies on Fortress Europe have taught us about the EU's normative power in

the peripheries (Del Sarto, 2016): EU's pushes towards regulatory convergence and efficient economic governance, together with border control practices, risks alienating local needs. As Piraeus is located at one external border of Europe with specific (utopian) EU-border security ambitions and regulations, this might lead to dystopian manifestations of security and crime control (Bossong and Carrapico, 2016).

As said, organised crime groups affect specific types of spatial construction (Sergi and Storti, 2021) by creating territorial networks and by linking various places together through flows of goods. In the cocaine trade, most organised crime groups are expected to be multi-sited entities; yet their 'passage' through Piraeus cannot go unnoticed. In fact, by making Piraeus their chosen 'door' for cocaine arrivals or transit – due to the advantages of crossing the EU border – they contribute to increasing the attention of law enforcement; this also contributes to increasing demands for security in and out of the port space. Indeed, organised crime groups also engage in 'border work' (Rumford, 2014) and in Piraeus too they perform 'bordering practices' (Garcia Pinzon and Mantilla, 2021; Idler, 2019). These practices, in turn, will affect the daily lives of locals (including importers and port workers) and contribute to the contested nature of Piraeus enhanced by the borderland. The same is valid for law enforcement and port authorities in their quest for improving the security and efficiency of the port (e.g. the promises of the port to deliver to Europe in 24/28 h); their actions too impact both organised crime and the local areas. As reminded by Hellenic Police, Narcotics:

The more you invest in logistics, rail or roads or dry port, to make the port more efficient in moving goods to their destination, by touching less and less the local port areas – arguably you also make illicit goods leave the port quicker, and the local areas: the more efficient is the port of Piraeus at pushing the trade outside of Greece, the faster cocaine will leave too, no?

Conclusion: Beyond Piraeus

The following findings, all emerging from data in Piraeus and discussed throughout this article, resonate as particularly important to push the arguments beyond Piraeus.

- The port is a contested space, as it is also a borderland: OCGs will be among the actors shaping border practices and thus shaping the port space in reaction to law enforcement action.
- Law enforcement agencies recognise that most cocaine is not for the local market but in transit, thus the exploitation of the borderland port becomes even more evident.
- Cocaine arrives as its demand is rigid and policing/customs activities only have displacement or disruption effects.
- The attractive power of Piraeus for cocaine is current but cannot be considered eternal due to constant changes in the cocaine trade and the natural tendency of the market to remain fragmented and diluted.
- Improving Piraeus, from both a port security and a trade perspective, will also imply that also illicit goods will run more smoothly.

Crucially, in the absence of a resolute drug policy for the legalisation or decriminalisation of cocaine at the European level, the inclusion of the borderland dimension of Piraeus to rethink a strategy against organised crime and cocaine in/via the port, can lead to interesting hypotheses and arguments. Primarily we can hypothesise that instead of attempting to displace the flows of cocaine, law enforcement could attempt to displace its own countering efforts instead, by using the borderland as a dividing line. Only cocaine destined to the local/national market would be subjected to disruption activities at/around the port, while cross-border cocaine trade (in transit) should be handled with a different approach via international cooperation, by letting cocaine go and reach its destination (to be then 'chased' and disrupted elsewhere). Law enforcement in Piraeus usually learns when cocaine is in transit elsewhere (through foreign 'companies' or for the involvement of foreign groups); indeed, intelligence and not random controls in the port are the most frequent ways to 'uncover' cocaine shipments, according to annual drug reports and law enforcement. This also would imply that the most relevant aim of policing cocaine and illicit trade at the port would not be reducing cocaine or rewards for organised criminals but looking at the local harm and the disruption of local markets and criminal groups. Indeed, if cocaine in transit needs to leave the country faster – and efficient Piraeus paradoxically facilitates that – we might wonder whether policing efforts are not best placed in focusing on the local reach and on the impact of the cocaine trade on local organised crime networks. Port security actors might contribute by supporting policing efforts with access to interconnected trade platforms across ports and by monitoring local logistics, including logistics that allows cargo to be 'sent out' of Greece faster (e.g. rail/feeders).

Albeit controversial – paradoxical perhaps – this approach would have three main implications:

- (a) Focusing on the destination rather than access points, as the latter tend to change and displace and adapt; this would further imply focusing on locally organised crime groups, their investors and protectors, and their role in the cross-border trade.
- (b) Reduction of harm connected to the narcotics at the national level by better streamlining local resources; this would also imply learning about cocaine use and abuse in the country.
- (c) A better understanding of how the port-borderland shapes the space and the communities where it exists, also for illicit purposes (with resources on local trade and local cocaine markets); this would imply a stronger alignment of anti-narcotics with local policing strategies to understand the local harm dependent on the port's growth.

There are of course issues with this and empirical problems. For example, one can wonder to what extent there is a clear separation between cocaine that transits but exits from Greece and cocaine that remains in Greece. Indeed, how does one ensure that actors involved in logistics of the cocaine trade at the local level (local groups) won't benefit from letting cocaine go? This is a question that demands more research.

Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine and predict whether police forces, in Greece or elsewhere, could ever 'let go' of a crime and if so, under what conditions. It could be

imagined that such a strategy would strengthen cooperation tools, at the national and international levels, such as the ‘controlled delivery’ of drugs across different port terminals, or operate thanks to new bodies at the European level or regional levels that can provide cross-border cooperation to chase cocaine to its destination. Hellenic Coast Guard in Piraeus advocated for the establishment of some sort of ‘*FRONTEx for containerised cargo*’, which would recognise the border dimension of certain ports and support cross-border deliveries, shared databases, and investigations. Overall, law enforcement agencies in/around Piraeus are confident that cooperation – primarily via Europol – could be explored and pushed further.

In conclusion, perhaps the utopias of security in Piraeus – mirrored in a tendency also seen in other ports to equate disruption and prevention of organised crime with increased securitisation (Sergi, 2021) – are bound to lead to another utopia; when it comes to managing expectations, implicit desires of conservation and personal safety at the local levels might indeed always prevail over any call to reason and to embrace wider perspectives. Both are utopias. After all, as reminded by Boutellier (2004: 29) ‘in the safety utopia, desire transcends the moral ambiguity of our times’.

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ORCID iD

Anna Sergi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9995-117X>

Notes

1. See <https://lloydslist.maritimeintelligence.informa.com/one-hundred-container-ports-2022>
2. These reports can be found online at http://www.astynomia.gr/index.php?option=ozo_content&perform=view&id=2676&Itemid=490&lang
3. Please consult the Global Organised Crime Index for Greece at <https://ocindex.net/country/greece> for more details about open sources on such claims.
4. Through the platform https://lawdb.intrasoftnet.com/nomos/3_nomologia_rs.php
5. COSCO/PCT management did not agree to an interview in person but agreed to answer a few questions by email.
6. See <https://www.olp.gr/en/services/container-terminal>
7. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/greece-port-cosco-idINKBN2GX1OV>

8. Greport 2020, Report on Greek Ports, Ports & Shipping Advisory, 2020, Piraeus, page 43.
9. Greport 2016, Report on Greek Ports, Ports & Shipping Advisory, 2020, Piraeus, page 18.
10. OLP – Piraeus Port Authority – Annual Financial Report for the Year ended December 31, 2021 – available <https://www.ulp.gr/en/investor-relations/annual-reports/itemlist/category/284-2021>
11. <https://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/766fa722-e657-a6b0-e1b1-9ab1c5f9ac39>
12. Annual Drug Report 2020, Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection – <http://www.astynomia.gr/images/stories/2021/prokirikseis21/09072021ekthesi.pdf>
13. See http://www.astynomia.gr/index.php?option=ozo_content&perform=view&id=3952&Itemid=129&lang=
14. In accordance with the Concession Agreement dated 25/11/2008 which has been ratified by Greek Law 3755/2008 (Government Gazette, Bulletin A’/52/30.3.2009).
15. email correspondence with COSCO-port authority, January 27, 2022.
16. See <https://hpcs.com.gr/the-international-port-community-systems-association-welcomes-another-new-member-piraeus-based-hellenic-port-community-system-hpcs/>
17. See <https://www.ekathimerini.com/economy/249903/not-everyone-is-happy-with-digital-system-in-piraeus/>
18. See <https://www.bsfs-piraeus.eu>
19. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-charges-marinakis-idUSKBN1H00M6> and <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/19/boats-to-broadcasters-greek-shipowner-amasses-political-power/>
20. See <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/cosco-faces-backlash-as-it-moves-to-tighten-grip-on-greek-port/>
21. Supreme Court of Greece: Areios Pagos. Criminal Department ΣΤ’ – Ποινικό Τμήμα ΣΤ – No. 796/2017
22. Author’s fieldwork diary, Piraeus – 20 January 2022

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