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Protecting border spaces from risks of corruption and criminal behaviours

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Summary

This Policy Brief compares findings of research on corruption at the port of Rotterdam and at the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint between Bulgaria and Türkiye to examine how corruption and cross-border crime interact in border spaces. Despite significant differences between the two border spaces, the analysis identifies similar patterns in how criminal and corrupt practices evolve in response to strengthened border controls, enhanced technology and new regulatory frameworks.

Reforms can produce unintended consequences, including new opportunities and incentives for corruption. Criminal actors adapt by changing both corruption and concealment strategies to avoid detection, ensure “safe passage” of trafficked goods or humans and maintain profitability.

This Policy Brief argues that anti-corruption and border security interventions should specifically anticipate the evolution of criminal and corruption strategies.

Key recommendations



Map the system

Develop a strong understanding of underlying criminal dynamics in border spaces by mapping the stakeholders and their relationships, interests and incentives.



Use red flags

Build an anti-corruption framework using data-driven red flags and risk indicators.



Integrate anti-cross-border crime and anti-corruption approaches

Incorporate anti-corruption measures into efforts against trafficking and other cross-border crimes.



Focus on criminal adaptation

Design reforms and interventions with attention to how criminals may respond to them.



Use foresight and anticipatory governance

Adopt foresight techniques and anticipatory governance approaches to anticipate how corruption may evolve.

1 Introduction

Border areas are places where large quantities of goods are legally imported, exported and stored. These areas are designed to regulate movement, enforce legal frameworks and protect the territory against the negative impacts of illicit behaviours on safety, health and security. However, illicit activities such as smuggling, trafficking, sanctions evasion or tax offences frequently occur alongside legitimate trade, exploiting and parasitising those same channels.¹ And such illicit activities are often facilitated by corruption.

To better understand the relationship between border corruption and cross-border crimes such as trafficking, the Basel Institute's Prevention, Research and Innovation team examined this topic as part of the Horizon Europe FALCON (Fight Against Large-scale Corruption and Organised Crime Networks) project at two major border spaces:

- the port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands – the largest seaport in Europe; and
- the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint between Bulgaria and Türkiye – one of the EU's key external land borders.

A resulting Working Paper on the port of Rotterdam focuses on how corruption facilitates drug trafficking.² A separate article on the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint highlights how corruption there has evolved in the context of Bulgaria's accession to the EU.³

This Policy Brief compares the findings of these two publications, identifies overarching

insights and provides recommendations for policymaking.⁴

2 Strengthening controls at border areas

Efforts to strengthen control systems to combat illicit trafficking and criminal activities can be seen at the Kapitan Andreevo border crossing between Bulgaria and Türkiye, as well as at the port of Rotterdam.

The European Union has been instrumental in supporting these efforts at the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint by providing resources, guidance and technical expertise. Between the 2000s and the 2020s, the technical infrastructure and control capacities at this border crossing were renewed and expanded as a direct consequence of Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007.

At the port of Rotterdam, infrastructure innovation and capacity building are driven by political actors' prioritisation of combating drug trafficking. Within this framework, the port authority's aim is to develop "a leading, safe, efficient and sustainable port".⁵

Overall, the analysis has identified common trends behind the enhancement of border control capacity in the two border areas, even if the underlying motivations differed. These include:

- the modernisation of border infrastructure;
- the introduction of control technologies such as scanners, X-ray machines and thermal detectors;
- improved information-sharing systems for better data exchange between border authorities at EU level;
- better trained and equipped personnel; and

1 Costa, Jacopo, and Saba Kassa. 2025. 'Border Corruption'. Quick Guide 38, Basel Institute on Governance. <https://baselgovernance.org/resources/publications/qg38>.

2 Kassa, Saba, and Jacopo Costa. 2025. 'Corruption as a facilitator of drug trafficking in the port of Rotterdam'. Working Paper 58, Basel Institute on Governance. <https://baselgovernance.org/resources/publications/wp-58>.

3 Costa, Jacopo, et al. 2026. 'The Evolution of Corruption and Crimes at Kapitan Andreevo Border Checkpoint: The Impact of EU Accession'. Journal of Illicit Trade, Financial Crime, and Compliance 2: 30. <https://doi.org/10.65879/3070-6122.2026.2.03>.

4 Unless otherwise indicated, the information presented in this Policy Brief is drawn from these two publications, and readers should refer to them for the full references and sources underlying the analysis.

5 Port of Rotterdam Authority. N.d. "Purpose, mission, vision and strategy". <https://www.portofrotterdam.com/en/about-port-authority/purpose-mission-vision-and-strategy> (accessed 5 August 2026).

- new forms of collaboration between teams and border authorities.

In short, both border areas adopted innovative approaches to enhance the detection of anomalous behaviour and suspicious activities.

3 Understanding corruption in border settings

Corruption is widely understood to involve a transactional exchange of resources and power between those who give bribes and those who receive them. In border settings, this refers to the illegal exchange between border officials acting as bribe takers, and ordinary citizens, businesses and criminals acting as bribe givers. However, corruption in border spaces is rarely as straightforward as this definition suggests.

Rather than through isolated actions by a few bad apples, corruption typically occurs through networks built on pre-existing social connections. Public officials can also become part of such criminal networks through repeated exchanges involving bribes, favours and gifts. These networks rely on slowly built trust, reciprocity and proximity, as well as forms of hierarchy and informal obligations. All of this allows corruption to become embedded in the social and political fabric.

Empirical analysis and literature reviews have shed light on three types of corrupt relationships in border spaces: collusion, coercion and infiltration.

- **Collusion** involves mutually beneficial exchanges of information or assistance between public officials and criminals.
- In contrast, **coercive relationships** involve pressure, threats or extortion, either by criminals against public officials or by officials against citizens.
- **Infiltration** occurs when individuals associated with illicit activities become public officials – and thus insiders – in the border area.

The precise configuration of these corrupt relationships differs depending on the context, involved actors, influence exerted and objectives pursued.

Cross-border crime and border corruption must be understood in relation to their environment, not in isolation. They are shaped by the broader social, political and economic conditions in which they occur. This also means that changes in border environments and control settings can reshape criminal strategies and corruption mechanisms.⁶

The following sections compare the effects of such changes at the port of Rotterdam and the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint, and present overarching insights.

4 Evolving strategies in response to strengthened controls and enforcement

4.1 Evolution of corruption dynamics

The evidence from the port of Rotterdam and the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint shows that the objectives, strategies and *modi operandi* of corruption are not static, but evolve and adapt over time in response to changes in institutional and enforcement environments.

At the port of Rotterdam, increased detection and stronger enforcement changed the role of corruption. As control mechanisms grew more effective, corruption became an increasingly necessary tool for overcoming enforcement barriers and ensuring the continuation of illicit activities. Paradoxically, the greater the efforts against crime, the greater the reliance on corruption seems to become. In this context, the active involvement of organised crime groups is a critical factor, given the pressure to penetrate legitimate structures and engage in cooperative agreements with border officials and customs agents.

⁶ Costa, Jacopo, and Claudia Baez Camargo. 2026. 'Conceptualizing the evolution of corruption: an empirical analysis from Italy' Trends in Organized Crime. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-025-09586-0>.

A similar shift can be observed at Kapitan Andreevo, where corruption has become a means of bypassing intensified border control and enforcement. Although corruption and criminal activity have long been associated with this border checkpoint, corruption now increasingly appears to be used to bypass EU regulations on the quality, safety and standards of imported goods. For instance, corrupt actors reportedly manipulated automated number plate recognition systems to enable smugglers to bypass alerts and inspections.

In addition to corruption strategies evolving to circumvent new regulatory frameworks, there is also an opportunistic aspect to this adaptation. After Bulgaria's EU accession, border-control reforms unintentionally created new openings for corruption at the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint and opportunities for illicit gain. This was particularly linked to coordination requirements between customs and border officials, creating additional procedural interfaces that could be exploited through corrupt practices. Such schemes included VAT "carousel fraud", fictitious exports and inflated export values allowing claims for fraudulent VAT refunds.

4.2 Evolution of concealment strategies and changing trafficking routes

Criminal circumvention in border spaces is not limited to corruption. Criminal strategies also evolve. No matter how sophisticated detection systems become and how well law enforcement agencies understand existing concealment methods, criminal actors will adapt, following the path of least resistance. They will innovate in how they manage transportation and deliveries to satisfy demand. Smugglers and traffickers may modify, refine or diversify their concealment strategies to avoid detection.

In the context of drug trafficking, the port of Rotterdam has introduced tighter controls, which had the unintended consequence of encouraging increasingly sophisticated forms of concealment.

Drugs are hidden within legitimate cargo and embedded in seemingly ordinary commodities, including wood, metal and timber products. Once authorities detect one of these methods, traffickers and smugglers switch to another, more innovative method that allows the illicit trade to continue. There is also a risk that criminals may change their trafficking routes entirely, from Rotterdam to transit points in other countries.

At Kapitan Andreevo, the severe penalties associated with drug-related offences, coupled with stricter controls on the Turkish side of the border, mean that the corrupt facilitation of drug trafficking may be considered too risky. Consequently, concealment becomes a safer and more viable strategy than bribery or insider assistance.

5 Overarching insights

The contextual factors of the port of Rotterdam and the Kapitan Andreevo border crossing differ substantially, but both show similar underlying patterns. Enhanced border control technology and strengthened enforcement did not necessarily suppress criminal activity. Instead, they appear to have caused criminal actors to modify both corruption and criminal strategies in order to avoid detection, secure the safe passage of illegal goods across the border and maintain profitability.

This adaptation can manifest in various ways:

- Where concealment alone is no longer sufficient, corruption becomes a more important means of overcoming enforcement barriers.
- Where corruption is especially risky, concealment may remain the preferred strategy and evolve accordingly.

The two are often complementary. Criminal actors may combine innovative concealment methods with selective forms of corruption, adopting different strategies depending on factors such as the commodity, route, regulatory environment and level of risk involved.

These adaptive responses also have organisational implications. As enforcement intensifies, formerly useful staff profiles may be too closely monitored to remain effective collaborators. This can create a demand for new insiders or intermediaries. It can also cause corruption to shift from stable collusive arrangements to more coercive or extortive practices, particularly where organised crime groups can pressure vulnerable officials or logistics providers. Adaptation therefore concerns not only methods, but also the social relations and power dynamics through which criminal schemes are organised.

More broadly, the findings suggest that changes to rules, procedures and enforcement practices can have unintended consequences, including increased risk of corruption, criminal innovation or new opportunities for illicit exploitation.

Whether in contexts of entrenched corruption or more robust institutional governance, criminal actors adapt to pressure. While intensified controls can constrain illicit activity, they can also reshape it by driving changes in corruption and concealment methods and generating new forms of interaction between criminal actors, public officials and enforcement systems.

6 Recommendations for policymakers and practitioners

Based on lessons learned from the port of Rotterdam and Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint, we suggest the following concrete recommendations for policymakers and practitioners involved in designing and implementing anti-corruption interventions and legislative solutions to combat border corruption.



Map the system

As a first step, it is crucial to develop a strong understanding of the criminal dynamics in border spaces. Practitioners need to understand how criminal actors operate in border environments, how they interact with

public officials and private actors, and how illicit activities are embedded in local structures. This involves mapping the stakeholders within the system, their relationships and their respective interests and incentives. Without such contextual understanding, enforcement measures risk addressing symptoms rather than underlying mechanisms.



Build a data-driven red flag system

A further measure is to design and implement data-driven red flag systems and risk indicators, i.e. digital procedures that can detect anomalies and patterns indicative of corruption in border-crossing activities. Irregular patterns can include, amongst other things, unusually frequent crossings, atypical transit times, deviations from established trade routes or specific officials often being on duty when suspicious border crossings occur. Anything that differs from normal movement or normal commercial or administrative behaviour may indicate smuggling, tax evasion, corruption or other illicit activities. Importantly, red flag systems should not be understood as proof of criminal conduct, but as tools to identify suspicious patterns and prioritise investigative attention.⁷



Align anti-cross-border crime and anti-corruption strategies

As efforts to combat cross-border crime can have unintended effects on corruption risks, and vice versa, it is crucial to align anti-cross-border crime and anti-corruption strategies in border governance. In particular, strategies against trafficking and other cross-border crimes should integrate anti-corruption measures as a core component rather than treat them as a separate policy concern. Trafficking, organised crime and corruption should not be treated as

⁷ For more information on red flags and border corruption risk indicators see Aly Abdou et al. 2024. 'Comprehensive list and definitions of corruption risk indicators' FALCON public deliverable. https://www.falcon-horizon.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2025/06/FALCON_D2.2_Comprehensive-list-and-definitions-of-corruption-risk-indicators_public.pdf.

separate or isolated phenomena.⁸ At the same time, a growing body of research suggests that they are often addressed through overlapping policy frameworks and are sometimes treated as functionally equivalent. This is not ideal either. These are distinct, though closely interconnected risks, and policy should address them in a coordinated way, without collapsing them into the same thing.



Design reforms and initiatives with criminal adaptation in mind

The findings show that criminal actors react to changes in institutional and enforcement environments. Therefore, practitioners should design interventions with a clear awareness of how criminals may respond to new technologies, stricter controls or institutional reforms. This involves looking not only at the authorities' intended outcomes, but also at the likely reactions of criminal actors to new measures. This can help practitioners identify unintended consequences and emerging risks that might otherwise undermine the effectiveness of anti-corruption initiatives.

This is particularly relevant in border governance, where tighter controls may push criminal actors to increasingly rely on corruption to circumvent new barriers. If not carefully designed, interventions against cross-border crime may therefore inadvertently create new incentives and opportunities for corruption. In practice, this means embedding corruption risk analysis into the design of new border technologies, procedures and governance frameworks.



Adopt foresight and anticipatory governance approaches

Addressing these challenges requires a more anticipatory policy approach. Foresight techniques and anticipatory governance can help identify how corruption may evolve and where unintended consequences may emerge over time.⁹ These tools can be used to outline potential future scenarios. They can also help practitioners track changes in corruption strategies and new risks that may arise. At the same time, anti-corruption frameworks must be regularly updated to reflect new *modi operandi* and emerging risks.

Learn more

This Policy Brief is based on findings from:

- 'Corruption as a facilitator of drug trafficking in the port of Rotterdam', Working Paper 58, Basel Institute on Governance
- 'The Evolution of Corruption and Crimes at Kapitan Andreevo Border Checkpoint: The Impact of EU Accession', article published in the *Journal of Illicit Trade, Financial Crime, and Compliance*.

Keywords

- border corruption
- corruption risks
- anti-corruption
- organised crime

8 Guiver, Chris, Jacopo Costa and Helen Gibson. 2026. 'Recommendations for Combatting Border Corruption'. Policy Brief of Project FALCON. <https://baselgovernance.org/resources/publications/recommendations-combatting-border-corruption-falcon-policy-brief>.

9 Costa, Jacopo, Claudia Baez Camargo and Saba Kassa, 2026, 'Anticipating future corruption: Strengthening anti-corruption through foresight and anticipatory governance', Working Paper 63, Basel Institute on Governance, <https://baselgovernance.org/resources/publications/wp-63-anticipatory-governance>.

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