



Border corruption



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Border corruption – defined simply as an illegal exchange between border officials and private actors – is a complex phenomenon with serious impacts on safety, health and security. And stopping it isn't as easy as just stepping up enforcement.

This Quick Guide covers the what, who and why of border corruption. It is based on deep research for the EU-funded FALCON project. More such research is needed to help design effective strategies to prevent corruption from undermining border security.

How corruption helps evade border controls

Corrupt exchanges can take place at land, sea and air borders, either at official border check points or along difficult-to-protect sections of national land or maritime borders between official border crossing points.

They often involve the exchange of money in the form of bribes, but may include sexual favours or collusion with organised crime.

As usual, corruption plays a highly *functional* role. Corruption can help to overcome irregularities involving people, vehicles or goods. For example, when:

- individuals and business people lack necessary documents such as a visa, licence or insurance;
- they transport more than the allowed quantity of goods or carry prohibited goods or even humans; or
- permits or documentations have been falsified.

Corruption, smuggling and the impacts

The smuggling of goods across borders shows how corruption can play different roles depending on the need.

For example, traders might resort to bribery to avoid declaring goods and paying the correct taxes; to circumvent restrictions on certain goods; to transport counterfeit products or goods that don't meet health and safety standards; or simply to speed up border procedures.

As such, corruption leads to tax offences and to the entry of counterfeit, unsafe or sub-standard goods into a country's market. It may also facilitate sanctions evasion. These risks are exacerbated by the use of opaque corporate structures or subcontracting mechanisms to conceal ownership.

On the other hand, organised crime groups seeking to smuggle goods or humans illegally into another country may use corruption to strategically secure "services" from officials, co-opting them into: refraining from conducting border controls and surveillance; protecting smugglers from investigations or prosecution by the police; helping to store illegal goods or to move them safely out of the border zone; escorting private or commercial vehicles along the road; or sharing confidential information.

Who's involved?

Many public authorities operate at border crossings, including customs agents, immigration officials, border police, border patrol units and health authorities. Our research has mainly focused on three of these authorities, revealing that:

- **Customs agents** face particularly high corruption risks, since these are responsible for checking goods transported by commercial and private vehicles and reporting any irregularities with declarations and permits. They also collect taxes and make

sure that goods leaving or entering the country follow import and export rules.

- **Border guards** are also heavily exposed due to their role controlling checkpoints and monitoring the flow of vehicles and people entering and leaving the country. They check documents and screen for anything unusual, and can carry out more thorough checks with the help of dogs or technology.
- **Border patrol** units face high corruption risks given their monitoring tasks at difficult-to-protect border sections, preventing people including smugglers from crossing these illegally.

On the other side, private actors involved in border corruption can be divided into three groups:

- **Individuals** – people who cross borders in private cars, on motorcycles, commercial passenger vehicles or on foot, and on passenger ships and boats.
- **Formal organisations** include trading and transport companies, clearing agents, freight forwarders and intermediaries. They use commercial vehicles for land borders and commercial vessels for sea borders.
- **Informal organisations** – meaning traffickers and criminal organisations. They often use individuals or formal organisations as a cover to move illicit products across borders.

Corrupt interactions between these actors may involve collusion or coercion.

Collusion...

Collusion is when public officials and private actors collaborate for illegal activities. For individuals and formal organisations, collusion can be a way to speed up border or customs procedures and get around controls on documents or goods. For businesses, collusive corruption to reduce waiting time or cover up falsified documents can mean more profit.

For criminal groups, collusive corruption can help reduce the risks related to illegal activities, such as being detected and having goods seized because of inspections and controls. It can ensure the smooth and rapid transit of illicit goods and secure additional "services" from public officials.

...and coercion

The difference in power between public and private actors is the basis for coercion.

Often, private individuals or formal organisations are the victims of coercive corruption. A public official – a customs agent for example – may use their position of authority to request a fee for a service such as customs clearance. In these situations, people are forced to resort to corruption to get the services they need and may be entitled to.

When it comes to organised crime, the power imbalance is generally in favour of the criminals. It is common for organised criminal groups to apply intimidation strategies ("plata o plomo" – bribe or punishment) to get border officials involved in their criminal networks.

They infiltrate border control by capturing insiders to manage the safe passage of trucks or containers containing illegal goods or trafficked humans.

Changing criminal strategies in the face of increased enforcement

Border corruption evolves over time. And efforts to stop organised crime at borders can actually be one reason for that.

For example, authorities at the Port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands – a major entry point for goods into the European Union – have tried to stop drug trafficking with new technology and control mechanisms. But with demand for drugs in Europe remaining high, stronger enforcement can have unexpected consequences like:

- **Higher corruption risks** as increased controls at borders force traffickers to up their game and co-opt customs agents or border guards with insider knowledge.
- **A shift towards new routes and strategies**, with criminals moving to alternative border crossings or finding different ways to conceal and transport illegal goods or humans.

Designing effective strategies to counter border corruption

Border corruption is more complex than it sounds. But two things are clear:

First, it is not useful to simply strengthen enforcement at borders without considering how corruption is used as functional tool to evade border controls. Doing so may even backfire by increasing corruption or causing criminals to change their strategies.

Second, it is vital to take border corruption seriously given the risks for human health, safety and security.

More research is urgently needed to help design effective strategies to prevent corruption from undermining border security.

Learn more

More information on the FALCON project can be found at www.falcon-horizon.eu.

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