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Enhancing Law Enforcement
Investigations into Balkan
Transnational Criminal
Organizations with Sayari Graph

Balkan Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) are playing an increasing role in everything from narcotics and human trafficking to weapons smuggling and cybercrime. These groups have eschewed the rigid hierarchical structures of criminal groups from years past, opting instead for highly nimble transnational networks built on trust. Therefore, investigations to disrupt and dismantle Balkan TCOs increasingly require operational and strategic coordination between law enforcement agencies from various jurisdictions.

Moreover, Balkan TCOs are prone to conduct illicit activities like drug trafficking and money laundering through licit business structures and global trading activity, thus leaving a paper trail in the form of public and commercially available data. Public records are reliable, authoritative, and more easily shared, which is often critical for investigations involving multi-jurisdiction law enforcement coordination.

Below, we illustrate how Sayari Graph – which integrates and resolves global corporate and trade data across more than 250 jurisdictions – enhances international investigations into Balkan TCOs with the ultimate goal of targeting and disrupting their operations.

Case Study: Unpacking the Dritan Gjika Network

In February 2024, Spanish and Ecuadorian authorities – with support from Europol – dismantled a transnational criminal network allegedly involved in the importation of multi-ton quantities of cocaine into Europe as well as money laundering.¹ The operation resulted in 31 arrests in Spain and Ecuador² and serves as an example of how Balkan TCOs have moved up the cocaine value chain, embedding themselves in or near source countries to broker transnational cocaine deals.

The network was largely coordinated by Dritan Gjika, an Albanian national based in Ecuador, and Mario Fabian Sanchez Rinaldi, an Italian-Argentine businessman based in Málaga, Spain.³ Gjika, who escaped arrest and fled Ecuador, was allegedly in charge of negotiating and overseeing cocaine shipments from Colombia to Europe through Ecuador. Specifically, Gjika negotiated the purchase of four tons of cocaine per month from a Colombian supplier and subcontracted the movement of cocaine through Ecuador to local gangs for onward shipment to Europe.⁴ Rinaldi was responsible for laundering the network's ill-obtained proceeds.⁵

The organization largely relied on Ecuador-incorporated front companies exporting fruit to Europe to conceal cocaine shipments from Latin America, according to Spanish and Ecuadorian authorities.⁶

1 "Properties worth EUR 48 million frozen after cocaine sweep in Ecuador and Spain," *Europol*, February 16, 2024, Accessed on August 13, 2024, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/properties-worth-eur-48-million-frozen-after-cocaine-sweep-in-ecuador-and-spain>. See also Espinoza, Markus and den Held, Douwe, "The Pioneering Albanian Trafficker Who Took Ecuador's Drug Trade By Storm," *InSight Crime*, July 4, 2024, Accessed on August 15, 2024. <https://insight-crime.org/news/the-rise-of-albanian-dritan-gjika-and-his-cocaine-network-to-europe/>

2 Ibid.

3 *Europol*, "Properties."

4 Austin, Anastasia and Shuldiner, Henry, "Unmasking the Foreign Players on Ecuador's Criminal Chessboard," *InSight Crime*, March 7, 2024, Accessed on August 16, 2024. <https://insightcrime.org/news/unmasking-foreign-players-ecuador-criminal-chessboard/>

5 Espinoza and den Held, "The Pioneering."

6 *Europol*, "Properties."

Drug trafficking organizations have long concealed cocaine in perishable items like fruit⁷ and seafood,⁸ as these goods are likely to receive less scrutiny by customs officials due to the risk of spoilage. Similarly, legal entities registered in southern Spain were used to launder the proceeds.⁹

Examining Gjika’s Corporate Network

Gjika arrived in Ecuador in 2009 and received Ecuadorian citizenship in 2013.¹⁰ After obtaining citizenship, Gjika would go on to directly own and/or control at least 17 companies, 15 in Ecuador and two in Spain, according to Ecuadorian and Spanish public records. At least some of these entities allegedly served as key nodes in the organization’s drug trafficking and money laundering operations. The companies were purportedly involved in a number of economic activities, including the export of bananas, construction, real estate, and precious metals, among others.¹¹



Fig. 1: Sayari Graph visualization depicting entities in Ecuador and Spain directly owned or controlled by Dritan Gjika, an Albanian national accused of brokering shipments of multi-ton quantities of cocaine to Europe.

7 den Held, Douwe, "Cocaine Hidden in Fruit Feeds European Pipeline," *InSight Crime*, October 17, 2019, Accessed on August 16, 2024. <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/cocaine-hidden-in-fruit-feeds-european-pipeline/>

8 "Spanish police seize 7.5 tonnes of cocaine hidden in frozen tuna fish," *Reuters*, December 12, 2023, Accessed on August 16, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/spanish-police-seize-75-tonnes-cocaine-hidden-frozen-tuna-fish-2023-12-12/>

9 *Europol*, "Properties."

10 Espinoza and den Held, "The Pioneering."

11 *Ibid.*

A broader examination of Gjika’s corporate network provides evidence of overlap with the corporate holdings of Rinaldi, the other alleged high-value target, as well as other publicly known and unknown related individuals. Rinaldi himself owns and/or controls at least 15 companies across Ecuador and Spain.

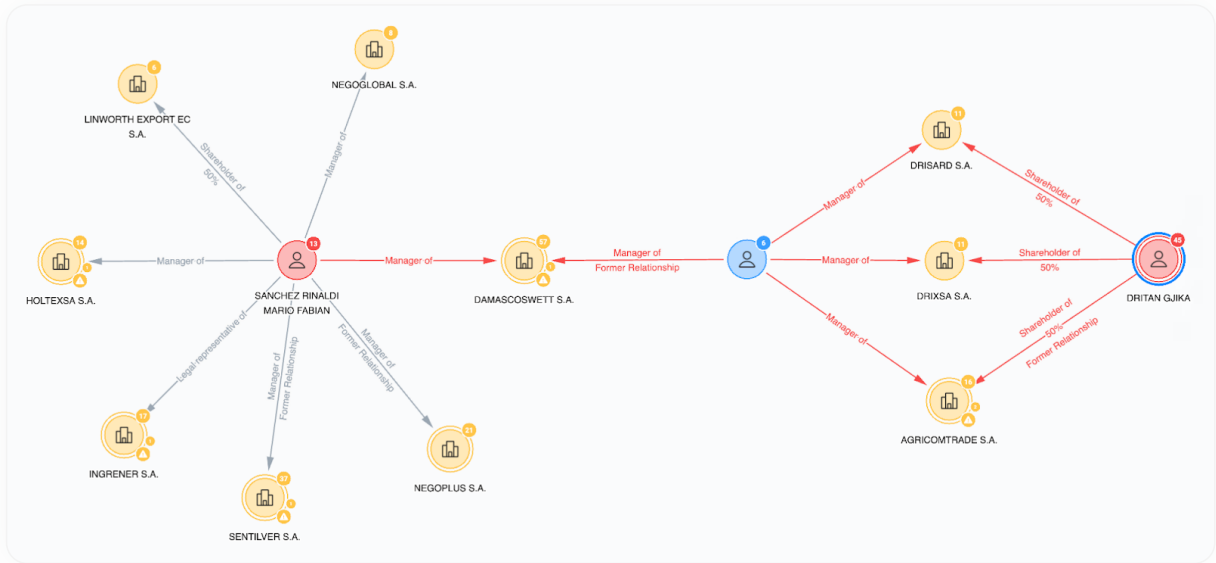


Fig. 2: Sayari Graph visualization depicting the relationship between Dritan Gjika and Mario Fabian Sanchez Rinaldi’s corporate network. Ecuadorian and Spanish officials allege that Gjika and Rinaldi ran a transnational criminal organization that moved multi-ton quantities of cocaine from Colombia through Ecuador to Europe.

Criminal networks often adapt after a major enforcement action, shifting supply logistics and laundering responsibilities to new individuals and companies. As such, any of these first-order relationships may provide additional leads on whether and how Gjika’s network is still active.

Pairing Corporate and Trade Data to Identify High-Risk Exports

Combining corporate data with global import/export data available in Sayari Graph provides insight into potential vectors through which Gjika and Rinaldi’s network may have introduced cocaine into Europe.

For example, between 2022 and 2023, Damascoswett S.A., an Ecuadorian general trading firm controlled by Rinaldi, exported at least 448 shipments of bananas to companies in Argentina, the United States, Morocco, Italy, and Russia, among other countries, according to Ecuadorian export records.¹² The high volume of exports over a single year suggests that Damascoswett likely engages in the legitimate trade of bananas. While a majority of these shipments may not have been contaminated with cocaine, Damascoswett’s ties to an alleged drug trafficker suggest that the company’s trading history may still provide leads into potential vectors for cocaine trafficking.

Between July and October 2022, Damascoswett exported three shipments of bananas from the port of Guayaquil in Ecuador to the port of Durres in Albania – all three shipments listed Albania-incorporated

¹² Ecuador import/export records available in Sayari Graph.

Alba Exotic Fruit (“Alba”) as the consignee. Albanian authorities have seized cocaine on at least six different occasions between 2019 and 2021 in shipments destined for Alba, according to Albanian news reports.¹³

Moreover, Alba received at least 27 shipments of bananas in 2022 from three additional Ecuadorian companies currently or previously managed by Rinaldi: Sentilver S.A., Damascoswett S.A., and Negoplus S.A. Eduart Dauti, the majority owner of Alba, was arrested in April 2022 in relation to the seizure of cocaine in shipments to Alba.¹⁴ Dauti owns and/or controls at least three additional confirmed companies – a bar/restaurant, vehicle import/export business located in Tirane, and a fruit trading business located in the Dutch port city of Rotterdam – according to Albanian and Dutch corporate records. Rotterdam has, for years, served as a key node for cocaine entering Europe.¹⁵

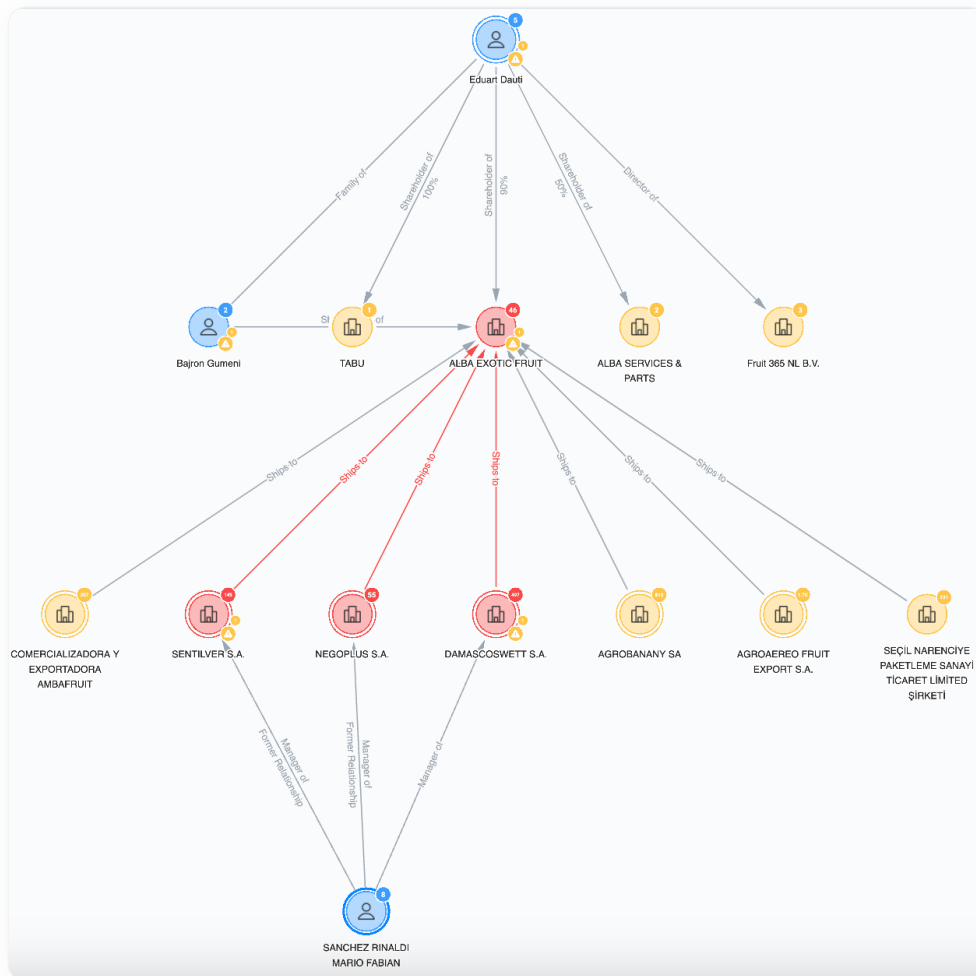


Fig. 3: Sayari Graph network chart depicting shipments of bananas by, among others, companies currently or previously managed by Mario Fabian Sanchez Rinaldi to Alba Exotic Fruit in Albania.

13 “Cocaine in the containers of “Alba Exotic Fruit”/SPAK declares incompetence: There is no evidence,” *Politiko*, August 12, 2022, Accessed on August 16, 2024. <https://politiko.al/english/e-tjera/kokaina-ne-kontenieret-e-alba-exotic-fruit-spak-shpall-moskompetece-ska-i465292>

14 Halili, Eduart, “Banana Company Administrator Arrested for Drug Trafficking,” *Albanian Daily News*, April 6, 2022, Accessed on August 16, 2024, <https://albandailynews.com/news/banana-company-administrator-arrested-for-drug-trafficking>

15 “Cocaine seizures by Customs see sharp rise in 2023,” Government of the Netherlands – Ministry of Finance, 17 Jan 2024, Accessed on 3 Mar 2025. <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2024/01/17/cocaine-seizures-by-customs-see-sharp-rise-in-2023>

Conclusion

Balkan TCOs represent the epitome of modern transnational criminal organizations: they are relatively flat, non-hierarchical groups that establish nimble, cross-border networks to facilitate a variety of illicit activities. As such, targeting and dismantling their operations increasingly requires a high level of coordination between and among law enforcement entities. Networked corporate and trade data can drive more effective and efficient investigations into these organizations while simultaneously encouraging enhanced country-to-country coordination.

A B O U T S A Y A R I

Sayari is the transparency company providing the public and private sectors with immediate visibility into complex commercial relationships. Drawing on a decade of innovation and support from industry-leading investors, Sayari delivers the largest commercially available collection of corporate and trade data as a dynamic, living model of global ownership and trade activity. Sayari's solutions harness this model to enable risk resilience, complex investigations, and clear-eyed business decisions.

Sayari is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and its solutions are trusted by Fortune 100 companies, financial institutions, and governments in over 35 countries.

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