

37. Országos Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia
Had- és Rendészettudományi Szekció
Budapest, 2025. április 22-24.
Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem
Hadtudományi és Honvédtisztképző Kar

Ecuador – In The Shadow of Violence

Jelige: Amazonia

Pályamunka lezárásának időpontja: 2025.01.

2025.

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List of Abbreviations

EU: European Union

UN: United Nations

USA, U.S. : United States of America

FARC: Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

SENAIN: National Secretariat of Intelligence

UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

IACHR: Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

CELAC: Community of Latin American and Caribbean States

EU-LAC partnership: European Union-Latin America and the Caribbean partnership

EU-CELAC: European Union-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States

1. Introduction

Ecuador might not seem like the most significant country in South America, since it is the smallest Andean state, but because of its crude oil reserves, it has important connections with both the United States of America and with Asia. Ecuador is the area where the Andes mountain ranges are the narrowest, therefore it is the shortest route between the coast and Amazonia.¹ Its strategic position is also a disadvantage, as the continent's two largest coca-growing and cocaine-producing countries, Peru and Colombia, neighbor Ecuador. For decades, Ecuador seemed to be able to avoid getting more deeply involved in the drug business, and the violence that is present in Peru and Colombia will not spread to the country.² Today, however, Ecuador is a major player in the international drug trade, and according to the 2023 data of Statista, Ecuador has the highest rate of drug trafficking per 100.000 people in the region.³ Cartels operating in Ecuador are fighting each other for the control of the Pacific ports, which are used to transport goods to Central and North America, Asia and to a lesser extent, Europe, as cocaine is becoming increasingly popular.

Drug trafficking is a major part of organized crime. It affects all parts of society. People in poverty are forced to join the cartels, and those who do not join are the victims of the violence, kidnappings and murders that prevail in the country.⁴ The population of the country is 18 million people, and in 2023 alone there were 3,568 homicides in six months, compared to 4,800 in the whole year of 2022.⁵ Various criminal gangs have invaded universities and hospitals, kidnapped people and held prison staff as hostages. Prisons have been the scene of several clashes between rival cartels, which resulted in many casualties. After the early elections, organized due to the stepping down of President Lasso, for not being able to control the country any longer, the freshly elected, 36-year-old President Daniel Noboa declared a state of emergency and imposed a curfew at the beginning of 2024. A big question is whether he will

¹ Soltész, B. - Szenté-Varga, M.: Ecuador, - Szenté-Varga, M.- Bács, Z. Gy., ed.: Dél-Amerika a 21. században - társadalmi, gazdasági és politikai konfliktusok. Dialóg Campus, 2019, 77-92.

² Berg, R. C., Bledsoe, R.: In the Eye of the Storm: Ecuador's Compounding Crises, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/eye-storm-ecuadors-compounding-crises>

³ Crime and violence in Ecuador – statistics & facts. Statista, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/topics/11334/crime-and-violence-in-ecuador/#editorsPicks>

⁴ River, M.; Kipreos, C., B.; Castano, A., E., H.; Baur, B. : Inside Ecuador's rising gang violence fueled by booming cocaine trade, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/inside-ecuadors-rising-gang-violence-fueled-booming-cocaine/story?id=107366161>

⁵ Crime and violence in Ecuador – statistics & facts. Statista, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/topics/11334/crime-and-violence-in-ecuador/#topicOverview>

succeed in reducing the violence in the 18 months that are at his disposal until the next general elections.⁶

My main objectives during my research defined how I approached the topic. I wanted to investigate to find answers to the following questions. What were the underlying factors that put Ecuador in such extreme conditions? What measures has the leadership of the country taken to restore public safety and reduce violence? What were those actions that promise to be effective, and could be the solutions for the problems? I was also interested in, what consequences could the boom of Ecuadorian drug trafficking routes have, and what implications this could carry for Europe.

This research paper examines the path that led to the current state of Ecuador, starting in 2007, the year when the pink-tide politician, Rafael Correa began his presidency, the longest one in the history of the country, that lasted a decade. Following the introduction to the general context, in the third chapter, the basic methodology behind the research is discussed. In the fourth chapter, the history of Ecuador is examined. In the fifth, the paper collects and analyses information about the criminal groups in general, the biggest drug cartels and drug trafficking organizations of the country. It also documents and studies the surge of violence from 2021 until 2024. In chapter six, the different approaches and solutions provided by Ecuador's leaders on organized crime and violence are analysed, in the time period of 2007 and 2024, which covers four different presidents. The effect drug trafficking has on Europe and the European Union is the topic of the seventh chapter. After that, conclusions are drawn.

2. Method

I would like to develop my research inductively, examining the selected country's political and economic status, social processes, public security, regional and international relations up to the present day. I primarily intend to carry out qualitative research using context analysis, relying on the processing and analysis of academic articles, press articles and governmental portals. I intend to complement the qualitative research with quantitative analyses, by secondary analysis of statistics, mainly based on data related to Ecuador from InSight Crime and the 2024-BTI Country Report on Ecuador. This paper will investigate the reasons behind the deterioration of Ecuador's public safety, and it seeks to understand and summarise the path that led to the current

⁶ River, Kipreos, Castano, Baur, 2024.

crisis. During my research, I have used both English and Hungarian sources to collect diverse opinions and analyses, and to approach the topic from different perspectives.

3. Brief history of Ecuador

3.1. Ecuador in the 20th century

Ecuador became independent from the Spanish Crown in the 1820s as part of Gran Colombia. Independence did not change its economic realities though, it retained its subordinate position, producing principally primary products. Cacao became the most significant export crop of Ecuador by the beginning of the 20th century. Sugar and rice also became important goods. The depression period that followed in the early 1920s caused the increase of food prices, less demand for luxury products, and the overall drop in exports. The national currency also lost its value. Another disaster followed, as the country's cacao plants were infected with a fungus, and it resulted in a sharp drop in production. The depression caused riots, urban dissatisfaction and massacres by the army.

Between 1925 and 1948 chaos ruled in the country. During this time, modernization was slowed down due to the internal disunity of the social structure, education and communication. Ecuador allowed the United States of America to install military bases on its territory, but they had little to no effect on World War II., as they did not participate directly. The first few years of the war were quite favourable as the prices of raw materials skyrocketed.⁷

Even though Ecuador did not take part in WWII, it had serious secondary effects. There had been a long dispute between Peru and Ecuador about the Amazonian territories. The tension grew until a war broke out in 1941. During the war Peru invaded the whole of the disputed territory. Being under pressure from the United States of America and some Latin American countries, a ceasefire had to take place in order not to face a military conflict in the Americas during WWII. Ecuador and Peru agreed in 1942, and the unity of the Western Hemisphere was restored. Peru annexed the disputed territory as victor.⁸

After World War II., Ecuador had a long period of constitutional government with free elections. There were also 2 terms of military government. The era's most dominant person was

⁷ River, Kipreos, Castano, Baur, 2024.

⁸ Long, J.: The time Ecuador and Peru fought a 34-day war over a patch of Amazonian jungle. HistoryNet, 2024, <https://www.historynet.com/cenepa-war-peru-ecuador/>

José María Velasco Ibarra. He was the president of Ecuador five times, but he only completed three terms. His last year was 1972, and military officers ran the country afterwards for seven years.⁹

Another economic crisis and dissatisfaction by the people resulted in the comeback of populist politics in the 1960s. In the meantime, foreign companies found oil in the Amazonas. In 1972, the construction of the pipeline through the Andes was finished, which helped to get the oil to the coastal area. This is how Ecuador became the second largest oil exporter in Latin America. This boom increased the middle class' wealth and size. In 1982, Osvaldo Hurtado's government faced the newest economic crises. They had to battle high inflation, budget deficits, money loss, increasing debt repayment and an uncompetitive industry. This situation did not improve during the terms of the next years, the country had three democratically elected presidents between 1996 and 2006, but none of them could fill their time in office.¹⁰

3.2. At the beginning of the 21st century

During the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, Ecuador had several years of political and economic turmoil. In 2000, Jamil Mahuad took an unpopular step, he was planning to adopt the U.S. dollar as Ecuador's new currency. This idea was so repellent, that he was shortly removed from office. Surprisingly, his successor, Gustavo Noboa Bejerano followed through Mahuad's idea and converted to U.S. dollars. Despite his decision being unpopular, it helped to stabilize the economy. By 2005, improvement was noticeable. In those days the Minister of Finance was a young economist, Rafael Correa.

Expectations about economic growth, stability and well-being helped him to be elected as president in 2006 and he stayed in office for ten(!) years between 2007 and 2017.

His successor was Lenín Moreno, who had been Correa's vice president from 2007 to 2013 and considered to be his political heir. Nonetheless, after coming to power, he tried to distance himself from the previous president and even called a referendum to limit Ecuadorian presidents to two terms. Voters approved it in 2018, which prevented Correa from running for the presidency ever again.

⁹ Knapp, G. W. : History of Ecuador, Britannica, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Ecuador>

¹⁰ Skidmore, T. E.; Smith, P. H. and Green, J. N. : Modern Latin America (8th Edition). Oxford University Press, 2013, 180-182.

Moreno was very unpopular – partly due to the mishandling of the Covid epidemic -, so he decided not to run in 2021 for reelection. The main candidates were the Conservative Guillermo Lasso and the pro-Correa Andrés Arauz and the indigenous leader, Yaku Pérez. In the first round of voting, none of the candidates received enough support to win, therefore a second round was organized for the two candidates with the most votes. The difference between Pérez and Lasso was minimal but based on the official results, finally Lasso got to the second round together with Arauz. At the end, Lasso won the elections with 52.5 percent of the votes. However, more than 18 percent of the voting papers were purposely spoiled as a protest, and only one-fifth of voters exercised their right to vote even though voting in the country is mandatory.

Lasso, though having a long past as a political figure, lost control of the country, which led to his abandonment of power and the calling of early elections in 2023. The campaign period was really violent and included the assassination of journalist and presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio. Concern about safety played a big part in the voters' choices. Surprisingly, the only 35-year-old Daniel Noboa, son of a wealthy banana plantation owner, came in second in the first round, and later won the elections with 52 percent of the votes. His term will end in 2025.¹¹

4. The State of Violence

4.1. Drug trafficking and drug cartels

For decades, it seemed like Ecuador could avoid getting involved in drug trafficking. The fact that the country is located between the two biggest coca cultivating and cocaine producing countries -Peru and Colombia- has not made this transformation slower. Nowadays, Ecuador stands in the middle of the international drug trafficking's crossfire. This chapter aims to investigate the process of the transition of a once peaceful country to the current state of Ecuador.

“In 2019, Ecuador was considered one of the safest countries in Latin America.”¹² What could have possibly happened in only 5 years that now Ecuador is one of the most dangerous places

¹¹ Knapp, 2024.

¹² Berg, Bledsoe, 2024.

in Latin America? First of all, it is important to clarify that Ecuador itself is not a major producer of narcotics, it is a transit country for both the chemicals coming in, needed to process the narcotics and the narcotics themselves leaving South America. Cocaine and heroine are mostly trafficked through the country from Colombia and Peru, and then the drugs are shipped to the United States and Europe.¹³ Ecuador is geographically a perfect place to smuggle narcotics from, as it has a big coastline. This created an excellent opportunity for foreign cartels and gangs, such as Mexican and Venezuelan groups to get involved with Ecuador's drug trafficking.¹⁴ This is how Guayaquil, located on the Pacific coast, is now the epicenter of violence. Ironically, the fact that the Colombian government made peace with a communist guerilla group, the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) in 2016 had negative side effects on Ecuador. FARC mainly supported themselves by drug trafficking in the post-Cold War period, and they also ruled the Ecuadorian smuggling routes for years. According to Will Freeman, a fellow for Latin American studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, when Colombia and the FARC made peace, it created a power vacuum, which allowed the drug cartels to sneak their way into Ecuador. Freeman also said that the cartels “are obviously not flying little planes from Colombia to France”, since the demand in Europe for cocaine increased.¹⁵ Drug trafficking is mainly controlled by the Colombian, Mexican and Albanian mafia, and they work together with local criminal groups.¹⁶ “Based on seizures made by Ecuadorian authorities, the proportion of cocaine destined for Europe increased from 9 percent in 2019 to 33 percent in 2021, increasing to more than 50 percent when only counting cases where the destination was known.”¹⁷ This has made the control of ports more important, which are the perfect place for smugglers, as Ecuador is one of the world's largest banana exporters, and the export of cocoa is also significant, so the country has an already adequate port capacity. In addition to this, authorities often found drug shipments in boxes full of bananas or even hidden in the fruit itself all over Europe's coastline. There was even a case when cocaine hidden in banana containers was seized by the police in Hungary.¹⁸ “In 2021 most of the largest seizures in Ecuador were made at the

¹³ International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2016/vol1/253260.htm>

¹⁴ Luciak, CD. G.: Cocaine, cartels, and corruption: The crisis in Ecuador, explained, Vox, 2024, <https://www.vox.com/world-politics/2024/1/11/24034891/ecuador-drugs-cocaine-cartels-violence-murder-daniel-naboa-columbia-crime>

¹⁵ Luciak, 2024.

¹⁶ Criminality in Ecuador-The Organized Crime Index, 2023, <https://ocindex.net/country/ecuador>

¹⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime-Global Report on Cocaine, 2023, page 58. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/cocaine/Global_cocaine_report_2023.pdf

¹⁸ Bálint, M.: Így bénít meg a kábítószer egy egész államot, Ringier Hungary Network, 2024, <https://noizz.hu/melyviz/ecuador-droghkartell-bunozes/9dppkt6>

port city of Guayaquil”¹⁹ Border control is also difficult in countries like Ecuador, with extensive mountain ranges and rainforests, as a result these geographic conditions lead to increased border porosity. This promotes the smuggling of goods and the unregulated migration of people.²⁰

4.2. Criminal groups

The crime rate in Ecuador skyrocketed in the last three years. A noticeable growth of homicides can be observed in 2016, but it became even more significant in 2020, as the country suffered through the Covid-19 pandemic. This caused the struggling of a lot of workers, who lost their jobs because of the restrictions. The pandemic and the lockdown aggravated poverty, “and by mid-2023, 4.9 million Ecuadorians lived in acute poverty (with an income of less than \$3 a day, and 1.9 million lived in extreme poverty (with an income of less than \$1.60 a day).”²¹ There has not been a general survey made of the recruitment of the gangs, but it can be stated that the most dominant gangs target the unprivileged youth, mostly in the coastal areas.

Ecuadorian gangs do not work like drug cartels. They are ‘prison-based organizations whose logistical centers are penitentiaries.’ Each section of the prisons is controlled by one of the major gangs, and this way they are able to rule organized crime on the streets. The most prominent cause of homicides is the competition for control of these prisons.²² This is why the capturing of gang members is basically useless, as the prisons are ruled by the criminal organizations. The government completely lost control over certain prisons, leading to horrific killings happening inside these institutions between gang members.²³

4.3. Los Lobos and Los Choneros

“The struggle for control of drug-trafficking routes among mafia groups has led to a gang war that has serious impact on society, with terrorist threats becoming more common. The police forces and the military are unable to enforce law, allowing the country to become a hub for organized crime. This war has also led to hundreds of people dying due to constant outbreaks of violence in the prison system.”²⁴ It is essential to understand how these criminal

¹⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime-Global Report on Cocaine, 2023, page 58.

²⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime-Global Report on Cocaine, 2023, page 97.

²¹ Berg, Bledsoe, 2024.

²² Berg, Bledsoe, 2024

²³ Marton, M.: A tehetetlen állam: az ország, amelyet a börtönökből irányítanak a maffiacsoportok, Index, 2024, <https://index.hu/kulfold/2024/01/16/ecuador-valsaghelyzet-maffia-bortonlazaradas/?token=f09eba65657c3839fdb3f6169af72464>

²⁴ Criminality in Ecuador-The Organized Crime Index, 2023, <https://ocindex.net/country/ecuador>

organizations work, in order to actually see the arising problems. In this part of my research, I aim to describe and examine the structure and the operation of the two major gangs in Ecuador, Los Lobos and Los Choneros. “Ecuador’s two largest gangs, Los Lobos and Los Choneros, had long maintained an uneasy peace, but assassinations of gang leaders in 2020 sparked a power struggle.”²⁵ Since then, these groups have quickly torn apart into smaller fractions to compete for territory.

Los Choneros is one of Ecuador’s most feared criminal organizations. It was formed in the 1990s, by young men²⁶, and has been involved in drug trafficking since then.²⁷ Since 2011, it has evolved into Ecuador’s fiercest prison gangs. The group is one of the main reasons why the crime rate has increased massively since 2020. It is a classic example of gangs running federal penitentiaries. They control the main drug smuggling routes in Ecuador. They have good connections with the transnational organized crime syndicate based in Mexico called Sinaloa, which is one of the most powerful drug trafficking organizations in the world. “Drug trafficking gangs such as Los Choneros, with ties to powerful drug cartels in Mexico, threaten the lives and livelihoods of communities in Ecuador and throughout the region,” the Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian E. Nelson stated.²⁸ According to rumours, Los Choneros provided security and logistics to the Sinaloa cartel. Marcías Villamar, alias ‘Fito’, is known as the group’s only leader since 2020. He was sentenced to prison in 2011 for various crimes, such as murder and drug trafficking. They provided him access to phones and to the internet in prison, therefore he could still oversee the operation of Los Choneros. The latest wave of violence happened when the Government of Ecuador discovered that José Adolfo Marcías Villamar was missing from his cell in January 2024, just before his planned move to a maximum-security prison in Guayaquil as an attempt to minimize his criminal influence.²⁹ Responding to the gang leader’s escape, the Government declared a 60-day state of emergency, which encouraged further prison fights and riots all over the country. Because of Los Choneros, Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa stated that Ecuador is in a state of internal armed conflict.³⁰

²⁵Luciak, 2024.

²⁶ Bálints, M.: Így bénít meg a kábítószer egy egész államot, Ringier Hungary Network, 2024, <https://noizz.hu/melyviz/ecuador-drogkartell-bunozes/9dppkt6>

²⁷ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Ecuador: Treasury Sanctions Ecuador’s Notorious Los Choneros Gang and Its Leader, 2024, <https://ec.usembassy.gov/treasury-sanctions-ecuadors-notorious-los-choneros-gang-and-its-leader/>

²⁸ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Ecuador, 2024,

²⁹ InSight Crime: Los Choneros, 2023, <https://insightcrime.org/ecuador-organized-crime-news/los-choneros/>

³⁰ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Ecuador, 2024.

Recent changes in the leadership of Los Choneros generated internal conflicts between the gang and its branched gangs. In 2021, Los Choneros was targeted by the cooperation of smaller criminal groups, including some of their previous allies, such as Tiguerones and Chone Killers. During the next 2 years, the group evenly lost their power to an alliance, which is led by Los Lobos, another significant Ecuadorian gang. “The Lobos have united most of the Choneros’ enemies, including the Tiguerones and Chone Killers, taking over drug trafficking routes once owned by the larger gang.”³¹

Los Lobos became Ecuador’s second largest criminal organization, having more than 8000 members throughout the country’s prisons. They are known for having a part in many killings, which has led to more than 315 deaths in 2021 alone. Authorities call organizations like Los Lobos ‘microcartels’. Their history started as a splinter group from Los Choneros. They became important around 2020, and took control of a strong federation of gangs, like the Tiguerones and the Chone Killers, to compete for the control of Ecuador’s prisons and drug trafficking. Since 2016, the group and their allies have provided weapons for the Mexican Jalisco New Generation Cartel.

Because of the weakening of Los Choneros, a few gangs created an alliance, and they call themselves the New Generation. The name refers to their alleged ties to Mexico’s above mentioned cartel. In 2021, the New Generation started attacks against leaders of Los Choneros. The targets of these were potential successors of the founding member ‘Rasquiña’ (who was killed in 2020), alias ‘JR’ and alias ‘Fito’. They escaped alive, but 80 people died in the prison. Another major violent action occurred, when members of Los Choneros and Los Lobos clashed in a Guayaquil prison in 2021 during a prison riot.³²

The leader of the group was Wilmer Chavarría, alias ‘Pipo’, until in 2021, when he was killed in a prison riot in Cuenca. His successor is possibly Alexander Quesada, alias ‘Ariel’. Given his aggressive nature and position, he has influence over the Tiguerones and the Chone Killers as well.³³

³¹ InSight Crime: Los Choneros, 2023.

³² InSight Crime: Los Lobos, 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias-crimen-organizado-ecuador/lobos/>

³³ El Español: Quiénes son ‘Los Lobos’, la banda de 8.000 sicarios que atemoriza a Ecuador tras el crimen de Villavicencio, 2023, https://www.elespanol.com/mundo/20230810/lobos-banda-sicarios-atemoriza-ecuador-crimen-villavicencio/785671654_0.html

“The Lobos operated primarily in the cities of Latacunga and Cuenca, in the Amazonian province of Pastaza, and in the coastal city of Machala.”³⁴



1. Map <https://www.britannica.com/topic/his>

But since they began to have national influence, they have stated their presence even in high-security prisons. Allegedly, they have full control of the Turi prison in Cuenca.³⁵ Their main source of income comes from shipping cocaine for Colombian and Mexican groups. Gangs like Los Lobos had a huge part in the process of increasing Ecuador’s involvement in cocaine trafficking. “The Lobos’ criminal activities include protecting drug shipments in port cities, debt collection and contract killings for international partners or allied groups.”³⁶ They are also involved in microtrafficking inside of Ecuador, especially in cities like Guayaquil and Quito. Los Lobos managed to get control

over illegal mining, therefore this sector became a strong income for them. According to rumours, the gang members have taken over gold mining in the northern parts of Ecuador, while charging a 10% tax over the extracted minerals.³⁷

The organization has a wide range of connections to international actors, including Balkan criminal groups, especially Albanian ones. The New Generation is supposedly supplying cocaine that is being shipped to port cities. They are also linked to the 48th Front, a dissident

³⁴ Cifuentes, C.: Los Lobos y Los Choneros: las bandas criminales que estarían tras el asesinato del candidato ecuatoriano Fernando Villavicencio, La Tercera, 2023, <https://www.latercera.com/mundo/noticia/los-lobos-y-los-choneros-las-bandas-criminales-que-estarian-tras-el-asesinato-del-candidato-ecuatoriano-fernando-villavicencio/YVMH67O3AZAB3IJXU7XRNDPO2I/#>

³⁵ The Cuenca Dispatch: Turi Prison: A Battleground for fear and Uncertainty, 2023, https://thecuecadispatch.com/turi-prison-a-battleground-of-fear-and-uncertainty/#google_vignette

³⁶ InSight Crime: Los Lobos, 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias-crimen-organizado-ecuador/lobos/>

³⁷ La Hora: Los Lobos están detrás de la minería ilegal, 2022, <https://www.lahora.com.ec/imbabura-carchi/los-lobos-estan-detras-de-la-mineria-ilegal/>

group of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces. Naturally, their biggest enemy is Los Choneros, since they split up at the beginning of 2021.³⁸

In conclusion, the current situation is strongly linked to the conflicts between the influential Ecuadorian gangs. Their fight for the control of the smuggling roads and prisons led to the explosion of violence and many deaths. This is why it is important to get to know the main actors of this process, and to understand their motives and structure.

4.4. Violent actions

Ecuador has experienced a massive increase in violence and organized crime in the last 4 years. As a result of this, homicide rates skyrocketed to unprecedented levels in the country. This chapter aims to collect the most notorious and prominent actions from 2021 to 2024, to be able to detect trends and tendencies as well as the underlying motives behind them.

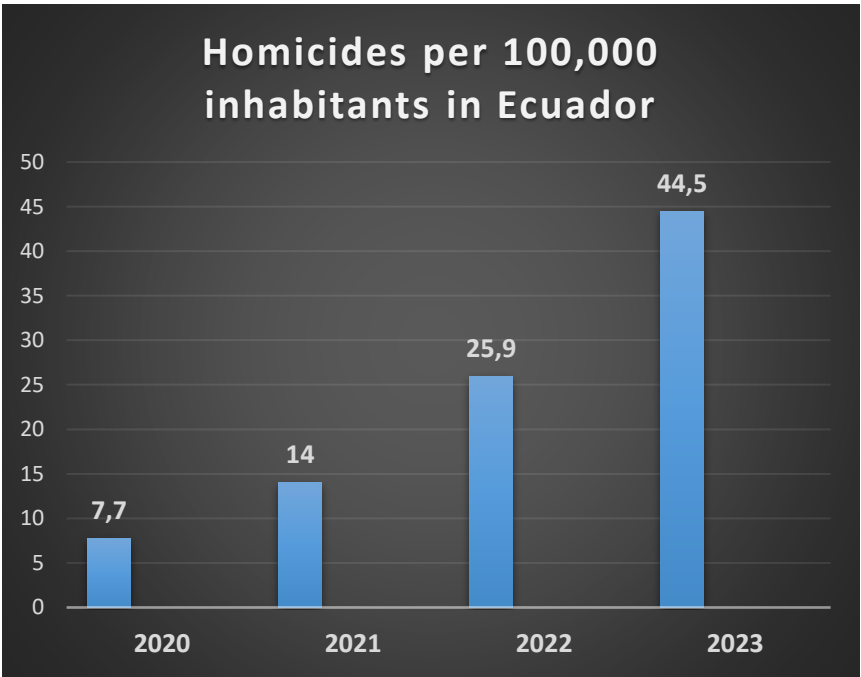


Table 1. Source:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/984868/homicide-rate-ecuador/>

The start of this process could be linked to the gang war that began in 2021, when Los Lobos splintered from Los Choneros, and started to form an alliance with other smaller groups against them, in order to get the upper hand over the criminal world of Ecuador. As they are fighting for territorial control, they have used

brutal ways of violence, for example dismemberments, decapitations, car bombings, murders of journalists, judges and political candidates. One of their tactics is extortion. “Between January and June 2023, the National Police received over 4,600 extortion reports, doubling the number in the same period in 2022.”³⁹ This statistical data alone calls the attention but it also

³⁸ InSight Crime: Los Lobos, 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias-crimen-organizado-ecuador/lobos/>

³⁹ World Report 2024: Ecuador, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/ecuador>

has to be taken into account that a large portion of the victims do not report these cases to the police as they find the police ineffective and corrupt and fear that they might get into even more trouble if they turn to the authorities for help. Therefore real numbers must be much higher than official statistics.

In February 2021, riots broke out in four large prisons in Ecuador. These prisons, namely in Guayaquil, Cuenca and Latacunga host 70% of all prisoners held in Ecuador. The riots have left at least 79 prisoners dead. The government called these “concerted actions of criminal organizations.” Special forces and soldiers were sent to control the riots, and none were reported killed or injured. Authorities claim that these uprisings are consequences of the power struggle between criminal groups, following the murder of ‘Rasquiña’, the leader of Los Choneros in a shopping center.⁴⁰ He was fatally shot in a food establishment. He was released from prison in June 2020, after serving 60% of his sentence. His murder could possibly be the main reason why the war has started out between the gangs.⁴¹

On the 28th of September in 2021, Ecuador saw the deadliest prison riot in its history. At least 119 inmates were killed and 80 injured in the Litoral penitentiary in Guayaquil. It was the third upheaval that year, in July 22 prisoners were killed in the same prison, and in February, 79 inmates were murdered. It took several days for the authorities to gain some control over the prisons and to recover the bodies. It was hard to identify the victims, as many were mutilated, burned, stabbed or even blown up with grenades. 12 bodies could not be identified. These techniques have been the trademark of Mexican cartels, but this kind of brutality is quite new to Ecuador.⁴²

In November, another massacre happened in the same prison as the mass murder of September. At least 68 prisoners were killed and 25 injured, after rival gangs clashed in the Litoral penitentiary. This pushed the death toll to more than 280 prisoners in total in 2021. Victims were burned alive and shot. The riot was triggered by the release of a gang leader. In the prison of Guayaquil, 11 people were found hanged earlier in October. Although the authorities claimed

⁴⁰ World Report 2022: Ecuador, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/ecuador>

⁴¹ Vivanco, J. M.: Dozens Killed in Prison Uprisings in Ecuador, Human Rights Watch, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/24/dozens-killed-prison-uprisings-ecuador>

⁴² Collins, D.: Agony of Ecuador’s brutal prison massacre endures for bereaved relatives, The Guardian, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/oct/10/ecuador-prison-massacre-relatives>

they were all suicides, it is unlikely.⁴³ The situation got out of hand, therefore President Lasso declared state of emergency three times in 2021.⁴⁴

The year 2022 was marked by high-profile prison massacres, assassinations and general street violence. The first significant violent action happened on the 9th of May, in the Bellavista prison of Santo Domingo. Approximately 43 people were killed in a fight between rival gangs, Los Lobos and R7. Around 112 prisoners who tried to escape were later captured by security forces, while 108 inmates managed to escape.⁴⁵ Authorities stated that the riot broke was caused by the transfer of the gang leader to the Bellavista prison.⁴⁶

A fight between Los Lobos and their rival factions broke out in the Bellavista prison on the 18th of July, just 2 months after 43 people were killed in the same prison. The riot in July has left 13 inmates dead and two injured. The Interior Minister of Ecuador, said that “members of the R7 gang had targeted inmates who were in the process of setting up a rival gang.”⁴⁷

In November 2022, 10 inmates were murdered in Ecuador’s capital Quito, at El Inca prison. The cause was the government’s decision to relocate three gang leaders to a high-security prison. One of them was the Los Lobos gang boss Jonathan Bermudez. He was responsible for other killings at El Inca.⁴⁸

On the 14th of August, a car bomb exploded in a neighbourhood in Guayaquil, the most populous city in Ecuador. The explosion killed at least five people and wounded 26. The interior minister of Ecuador claimed that it was a declaration of war by criminal organizations against the government. Eight houses and two cars were destroyed. Guayaquil experienced all kinds of targeted killings and shootings throughout the year. Journalists, political figures and business owners were targeted in these killings.⁴⁹

⁴³ Collins, D.: Ecuador: 68 inmates killed and 25 injured in latest prison massacre, The Guardian, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/13/ecuador-68-inmates-killed-and-25-injured-in-latest-prison-massacre>

⁴⁴ 2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ecuador, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ecuador/>

⁴⁵ Aljazeera: Dozens dead in latest Ecuador prison riot, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/9/dozens-dead-in-latest-ecuador-prison-riot>

⁴⁶ Valencia, A.: Ecuador’s latest prison riot leaves at least 43 dead, BBC, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuadors-latest-prison-riot-leaves-least-43-dead-2022-05-09/>

⁴⁷ Buschschlüter, V.: Ecuador jail violence: Fight at Bellavista kills 13, BBC, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-62205977>

⁴⁸ Aljazeera: Ten killed as gang bosses’ transfer sparks prison riot in Ecuador, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/19/ten-killed-as-gang-bosses-transfer-spark-prison-riot-in-ecuador>

⁴⁹ Buschschlüter, 2022.

In November 2022, the Ecuadorian government declared another state of emergency in the coastal city of Esmeraldas. It was preceded by frequent attacks, including shootings and bombings by criminal gangs.

The electoral year 2023 saw a massive wave of violence in Ecuador. One of the most shocking and high-profile criminal actions was the assassination of the presidential candidate and former journalist, Fernando Villavicencio. He was killed by gunmen on motorcycles on the 9th of August after a campaign rally as he was leaving a school in Quito. Two suspects were sentenced to 34 years and 8 months in prison, and three of their partners got 12 years of prison sentence. Prosecutors accused two of them for belonging to Los Lobos. One suspect, namely Carlos Angulo, was held at a prison and coordinated the murder from there, and also instructed the person who executed the murder. Laura Castillo was believed to be in charge of providing money for the gunmen. Three other accomplices, Erik Ramírez, Víctor Flores and Alexandra Chimbo alerted the actual killers of Villavicencio's movements. "The sentences for Angulo and Castillo included a compensation payment of \$100,000 by each to the politician's family. The other three defendants were ordered to pay \$33,000 each."⁵⁰ When the judges announced the sentence, the friends and family of Villavicencio protested on the streets of Quito. Just a week after the assassination of Villavicencio, another political leader, Pedro Briones was murdered in San Mateo de Esmeraldas. In July, the mayor of the coastal city of Manta, Agustín Intriago, was fatally shot.

Prison riots were still big contributors to the increasing death rate in 2023. In July, a riot at the Litoral Penitentiary in Guayaquil, resulted in the deaths of at least 31 inmates. In October, violent confrontations resulted in 30 deaths in various establishments, mainly in Guayas and Azuay provinces.⁵¹

In 2023, criminal groups often targeted public infrastructure, including bombings of police stations and government offices. Big cities were not spared, for example in October, a car bomb explosion in Guayaquil, killed several people.⁵²

⁵⁰ The Guardian: Five Jailed Over Assassination of Ecuadorian Presidential Candidate Fernando Villavicencio, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/13/five-jailed-over-assassination-of-ecuadorian-presidential-candidate-fernando-villavicencio>

⁵¹ The Guardian: Ecuador declares prison emergency as inmates killed and 100 guards taken hostage, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/25/ecuador-prison-state-of-emergency-hostages-killings>

⁵² U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Ecuador, 2024.

Throughout 2023, the Ecuadorian government repeatedly declared states of emergency. In July, it was declared in Guayas, Esmeraldas, and Manabí provinces.⁵³ In October, it happened after the murders of police officers and explosive attacks in Guayaquil.⁵⁴ “From January to June 2023, intentional homicides with firearms increased by 897 percent compared to the same period in 2019.”⁵⁵ About 8000 people have died of violent deaths, making 2023 the most violent year in the history of Ecuador.⁵⁶

At the beginning of 2024, a state of emergency was declared after crime groups started widespread attacks, including bombings and kidnappings. The attacks were mostly triggered by the leader of Los Choneros, José Adolfo Macías’ escape from prison. Other criminal groups interpreted this as a war and took police officers and civilian hostages. After Macías’ escape, riots broke out in a lot of prisons, and the military has to intervene. During this period, multiple shootings, bombings and ambushes can be linked to criminal groups that targeted police officers, security forces or even civilians. They even took officers as hostages. Additionally, they kidnapped university students from the University of Guayaquil. Markets, banks and shops were closed in Quito in order to protect the customers from armed attacks. Daily killings became a commonplace. In March, Noboa extended the state of emergency by 30 days.⁵⁷ First, “the murder rate had halved from 24 killings a day to 12 and over 11,700 people had been arrested since the beginning of the conflict.”⁵⁸ On the 17th of April, however, the mayor of Camilo Ponce Enríquez, José Sánchez was shot dead, as well as the mayor of Portovelo, Jorge Maldonado.⁵⁹ “Currently, Ecuador holds the highest rate of violent deaths in Latin America, with 47.25 deaths per 100.000 residents, a figure eight times higher than in 2016. Once the second safest country in South America, Ecuador has now become the most violent in less than a decade.”⁶⁰

⁵³ Reuters: Ecuador declares state of emergency amid violent clashes, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuador-declares-state-emergency-amid-violent-clashes-2023-07-24/>

⁵⁴ Buschschlüter, 2022.

⁵⁵ Berg, Bledsoe, 2024.

⁵⁶ Aljazeera: Ecuador’s narco gang violence: A timeline of the recent crises, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/10/ecuadors-narco-gang-violence-a-timeline-of-the-recent-crisis>

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch: Ecuador: Unchecked Abuse Since ‘Armed Conflict’ Announcement, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/22/ecuador-unchecked-abuses-armed-conflict-announcement>

⁵⁸ NBC News: Ecuador extends its state of emergency by 30 days, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/ecuador-extends-state-emergency-30-days-rcna142431>

⁵⁹ RFI: Second Ecuadorian mayor killed ahead of anti-crime referendum: police, 2024, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international-news/20240419-second-ecuadoran-mayor-killed-ahead-of-anti-crime-referendum-police>

⁶⁰ Álvarez, C.: Paradise Lost?-Firearms Trafficking and Violence in Ecuador, ReliefWeb, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ecuador/paradise-lost-firearms-trafficking-and-violence-ecuador-june-2024>

5. Solutions provided by the country's leadership

5.1. Rafael Correa (2007-2017)

Shortly after being elected as the President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa's government started a rehabilitation process that involved the legalization of some of the country's criminal groups.⁶¹ Their origin was often the United States of America, from where they were deported. Correa's plan was to integrate them into society, and treat them as full citizens, to reduce violence. The plan was aimed at the development of public and national security. The biggest setback in this plan was the fact that at that time when Correa became president, about 35% of the population lived below the poverty line. 25-30% of the people were unemployed. These are factors that can seriously contribute to criminal activity. This legalization project was addressing the root causes of violence, which are poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education.⁶²

The social inclusion model allowed some gangs to register as cultural groups, all of this legally and with the government.⁶³ The most significant gangs were the Latin Kings and the Ñetas.⁶⁴ It allowed them to receive money for education, work training, and community programs, all funded by the government, and it helped to mitigate the basic causes of violence. Legalizing gangs also aimed to build relationships between rival gangs. "After implementing the gang legalization policy, Ecuador has seen a drastic drop in its murder rate and other gang-related crime throughout the decade. Homicide rates dropped from 15.35 per 100,000 in 2011 to 5 per 100,000 in 2017. Research suggests that legalization helps to reduce violence and crime drastically and provides a cultural and legal space for the social capital of gangs to promote behavioural change."⁶⁵

A positive example that the gang legalization has provided is the case of the Latin Kings. They were one of the first gangs present in Ecuador, and they had many international connections.

⁶¹ IScanInfo: The legalization of gangs in Ecuador: Between Social Reintegration and Criminal Infiltration of the State, <https://www.iscaninfo.com/article/15844615/The-legalization-of-gangs-in-Ecuador-between-social-reintegration-and-criminal-infiltration-of-the-State>

⁶² Collins, P. B.: After Legalization of Gangs, Ecuador's Murder Rate Dropped Sharply, 2019 <https://whowhatwhy.org/podcast/after-legalization-of-gangs-ecuadors-murder-rate-dropped-400/>

⁶³ Whiten, A.: Gang Legalization in Ecuador and the Social Inclusion Approach to Criminal Justice, Georgia Journal on International and Comparative Law, 2021, <https://georgia-international-journal.scholasticahq.com/post/884-gang-legalization-in-ecuador-and-the-social-inclusion-approach-to-criminal-justice>

⁶⁴ IScanInfo: The legalization of gangs in Ecuador: Between Social Reintegration and Criminal Infiltration of the State.

⁶⁵ Whiten, 2021.

This organization was the first one to go through the legalization process and to be formally recognized by the government. They were able to have good influence on other gangs and to encourage them to register for a legalized status.⁶⁶ One part of the gang has converted into a small catering business named Kings Catering. When they started their business, only 20 people were willing to join, and now they operate with over 1000 people.⁶⁷ They work with the Catholic University of Quito to give their young members a chance to receive proper education.

Although this initiative of Correa's has helped to create a somewhat peaceful relationship with gangs, many people blame him and his rule to be the cause of the current lawlessness of Ecuador.⁶⁸ He has also launched an immigration reform, a universal immigration-citizenship policy. This opened the opportunity to visa-free travel from a lot of countries to Ecuador. This was alluring for Colombian, Slovenian, Italian, and Albanian gangs and crime bosses to move to Ecuador in the 2010s. During this period, organized crime and drug trafficking could smoothly work without too much violence. The shift started when Europe and Asia became export destinations, and this is when the government began to track down drug smuggling.⁶⁹

He also closed the USA's military base in Manta, and he also ended Ecuador's partnership with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, alleging to protect national sovereignty. "As a result, Ecuador's maritime exclusive economic zone—the fifth-largest in South America, covering over 1 million square kilometers of ocean—was left effectively free of surveillance."⁷⁰

All in all, Correa reduced the homicide rate of Ecuador to a historic low, by decreasing poverty and aiming for equality between his people. Nevertheless he created a ticking bomb by weakening the country's capacity to combat transnational drug smuggling.

⁶⁶ Whiten, 2021.

⁶⁷ Miranda, B.: Ecuador 'Legalizes' Gangs and Slashes Murder Rate, Insight Crime, 2018, <https://insightcrime.org/news/ecuador-legalizes-gangs-slashes-murder-rates/>

⁶⁸ Oppenheimer, A.: Ecuador presidential candidate Villavicencio's murder may be warning of worse things to come, Miami Herald, 2023, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/andres-oppenheimer/article278176677.html>

⁶⁹ Berg, Bledsoe, 2024.

⁷⁰ Freeman, W.: A Surge in Crime and Violence Has Ecuador Reeling. Council on Foreign Relations, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/surge-crime-and-violence-has-ecuador-reeling>

5.2. Lenín Moreno (2017-2021)

Ever since Lenín Moreno was elected as president, Ecuador's homicide rate has risen from 5.6 per 100,000 people in 2017 to 20 per 100,000 in 2022.⁷¹ He was focused on demolishing Correa's legacy, after rumoured domestic spying and a personal fallout with him. He re-opened the partnership with the United States of America, which was also a sign of distancing himself from pink-tide, new Leftist Correa. In 2018, Ecuador launched a security plan with the USA, meaning buying military equipment, weapons, and cooperation in intelligence sharing.⁷²

Moreno started by eliminating the National Secretariat of Intelligence (SENAIN). The decision was announced on March 19, 2018. SENAIN was created with Public Security Law in June 2009. "Intelligence will no longer be based on a national security doctrine as in the past, but rather on the new vision of integral security; taking the human being of the center of the tasks."⁷³ Moreno highlighted SENAIN's role in political abuses and he stated that there is a need for managing security matters with a better system. Despite the promised improvement, Ecuador lost much of its ability to track down organized crime, which allowed criminal groups to operate relatively freely without an effective intelligence program.

Moreno's policies included significant cuts to public spending, which affected the police, judicial system, and prisons. The Ministry of Justice, which managed prisons, and the Ministry of Security Coordination were demolished. The Ministry of Justice was replaced by the Secretary Coordination of Human Rights. Budget reduction highly contributed to the overcrowding of prisons, which are the epicenter for violence.⁷⁴ Because of Lenin Moreno's budget cuts, the abolition of ministries and security coordination, and the dismissal of public workers, especially those who are responsible for the control of the penitentiary system, one of the bloodiest prison massacres happened on 23 February 2021.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Berg, Bledsoe, 2024.

⁷² Fox News: Ecuador says it is launching security effort with US, 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/ecuador-says-it-is-launching-security-effort-with-us/>

⁷³ El Comercio: Lenín Moreno ordena la eliminación de la Senain como medida de austeridad, 2018, <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/seguridad/leninmoreno-eliminacion-senain-inteligencia-austeridad.html>

⁷⁴ Berg, Bledsoe, 2024.

⁷⁵ Aljazeera: Ecuador's interior minister quits over deadly prison riots, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/6/ecuadors-interior-minister-quits-over-deadly-prison-riots>

5.3. Guillermo Lasso (2021-2023)

By the time Guillermo Lasso was elected, Ecuador was already in the depths of serious violence. His main goal during his presidency was to push economic reform bills through the opposition-led National Assembly. He described the ever-increasing violence as a war between the criminals and the Ecuadorians. By the time he was trying to focus on the state of the country's public safety, it was already too late. His idea was a national referendum about constitutional reforms of the fight against crime, but he spoiled it by adding his own self-serving institutional reforms to the referendum. The result was a complete defeat, which led Lasso to dismiss the Assembly in May 2023.⁷⁶

During his presidency, he legalized the possession of firearms for self-defense by individuals. He also declared numerous criminal groups as terrorist groups, therefore giving the military a more relevant role in the fight against organized crime. These efforts were hardly effective. The military was reluctant to fight criminals on the streets as it is not their task but that of the police.

An alarming fact is that the Albanian mafia is rumoured to have cornered members from Lasso's inner circle. In January, La Posta published an article discussing a leaked police document about the possible mafia ties of several government appointees. "Two police generals were subsequently caught on tape discussing closing the investigation into the allegations in order to protect the president."⁷⁷

The ineffectiveness of Guillermo Lasso made the National Assembly begin impeachment proceedings against him on 16 May 2023. The next day, he dissolved the Assembly, therefore bringing forward presidential and legislative elections. This was the first time in Ecuador's history when a president used this constitutional measure to avoid impeachment. He did not run in the following elections.⁷⁸

Guillermo Lasso's ineffectiveness was mainly caused by him trying to combat drug trafficking without targeting the root causes of violence. He also lacked public sector

⁷⁶ Freeman, W.: A Surge in Crime and Violence Has Ecuador Reeling, Council on Foreign Relations, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/surge-crime-and-violence-has-ecuador-reeling>

⁷⁷ Freeman, 2023.

⁷⁸ Valencia, A.: Ecuador president Lasso dissolves National Assembly, triggers early elections. Reuters, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuador-president-dissolves-legislature-bringing-elections-forward-2023-05-17/>

experience and a team with a clear strategy, which is crucial if someone wants to lead a country, especially an unstable one like Ecuador.⁷⁹

5.4. Daniel Noboa (2023-)

Daniel Noboa was elected as the 48th president of Ecuador on 23 November 2023. He is the second-youngest president in the country's history, and the youngest democratically elected state leader in the world, who is currently serving.⁸⁰ Noboa was a member of the National Assembly, which was dissolved by Guillermo Lasso, after the constitutional measure used to provoke a new presidential election.⁸¹ Noboa won the elections with almost 52 percent of the votes. In his presidential campaign, he promised to improve the justice system and take measures against the growing violence. He only has 18 months to govern before the next planned elections.⁸²

Two days into his term, he ordered the Ministry of Interior to eliminate the Drug Consumption Table, which he described as something that encourages micro-trafficking.⁸³ He also proposed an idea to deport about 1500 foreign prisoners who have at least been in Ecuadorian prisons for 5 years, so they can spend the rest of their sentences in their home country. This idea of his aimed to reduce overcrowding in prisons, and in this way lessen the chance of massacres. According to him, there are more than 3000 foreign prisoners in Ecuador, thus they heavily contribute to the crisis of these institutions. These inmates are mainly Venezuelans, Peruvians and Colombians. His plan also included the construction of at least 2 brand new maximum security prisons, and temporary options until the new buildings are ready for use.⁸⁴

On 7 December 2023, Noboa moderated the open debate of the United Nations Security Council in New York. He stated that his government will prioritize any international cooperation in order to confront violence and protect the borders. "I believe in a State whose first objective is

⁷⁹ The Dialogue: Can Ecuador's Next President Make the Country Safer? 2023,

<https://www.thedialogue.org/analysis/can-ecuadors-next-president-make-the-country-safer/>

⁸⁰ Zambrano, S.: Daniel Noboa, el Presidente del Ecuador más joven de la historia. Metro World News, 2023, <https://www.metroecuador.com.ec/noticias/2023/10/16/daniel-noboa-el-presidente-electo-de-ecuador-con-el-87-de-actas-escrutadas/>

⁸¹ The Columbian: Banana tycoon's son pulls off upset in Ecuador president race, 2023, <https://www.columbian.com/news/2023/aug/21/banana-tycoons-son-pulls-off-upset-in-ecuador-president-race/>

⁸² Zambrano, S.: Daniel Noboa, el Presidente del Ecuador más joven de la historia. Metro World News, 2023, <https://www.metroecuador.com.ec/noticias/2023/10/16/daniel-noboa-el-presidente-electo-de-ecuador-con-el-87-de-actas-escrutadas/>

⁸³ Daniel Noboa Apoya la Eliminación de la Tabla de Consumo de Drogas en Ecuador, La Hora, 2024, <https://www.lahora.com.ec/pais/daniel-noboa-tabla-consumo-drogas-eliminacion/>

⁸⁴ Wright, N.: Ecuador's President Noboa Proposes Deporting 1,500 Foreign Prisoners to Ease Overcrowding, Bollyinside, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231217055119/https://www.bollyinside.com/news/crime-and-justice/ecuadors-president-noboa-proposes-deporting-1500-foreign-prisoners-to-ease-overcrowding/>

to reduce violence and return to progress, a custom,” he said. He also touched upon the topic that Ecuador as an elected member is responsible for strengthening the efforts of other delegations to prevent violence. Early warning mechanisms, crime prevention and the modernization of criminal justice are crucial in the process of reforming the security sector. He closed his speech with this thought: “For my Government and for me, personally, there is an outstanding debt since during the elections we had a presidential candidate murdered. Likewise, in two caravans we had armed attacks and almost every day, for the last 60 days, we have had death threats against the ministers and their families. Peace is a debt, it is a debt that we owe to our voters, many of them young people and women.” He promised he would do absolutely everything to help those who are the most affected by violence and asked the international community for support.⁸⁵

Noboa started 2024 with deploying a sixty-day state of emergency and a nighttime curfew from 11:00 pm to 5:00 am⁸⁶, after Los Choneros’ leader, José Adolfo Marcías Villamar, alias ‘Fito’ escaped from a Guayaquil prison, when he was scheduled for transfer to a maximum-security prison. He sent the Army to control the prisons, but the criminal groups fought back. There were riots happening in many prisons, car bombings, kidnappings and attacks.⁸⁷ These groups even stormed a television broadcasting station, the TC Televisión, where the gunmen were holding a gun to the head of one of the crew members, and after they were showing the cameras their home made explosive weapons.⁸⁸ On the 9th of January, the Ministry of Education suspended face-to-face education and ordered online classes until the 12th of January.⁸⁹

Noboa commented that he is driven to stop his country from becoming a narco-state, and he believes that the only way to stop the chaos is the arrest of the gangs. He stated that the country is in a state of war. “We aren’t going out to hunt people down and kill them, but we are at war and we are fighting against people who are heavily armed, organised, with domestic and

⁸⁵ America Time News Service: Remarks by Daniel Noboa Azin, Constitutional President of the Republic of Ecuador and President of the Security Council for the Month of December, at the UN Security Council Briefing on Transnational Organized Crime, 2023, <https://www.america-times.com/remarks-by-daniel-noboa-azin-constitutional-president-of-the-republic-of-ecuador-and-president-of-the-security-council-for-the-month-of-december-at-the-un-security-council-briefing-on-transnational/>

⁸⁶ MercoPress: Curfew extended as Ecuador “winning battle” against organized crime, 2024, <https://en.mercopress.com/2024/01/23/curfew-extended-as-ecuador-winning-battle-against-organized-crime>

⁸⁷ Abderson, J., L.: Ecuador’s Risky War on Narcos, New Yorker, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/06/24/ecuadors-risky-war-on-narcos>

⁸⁸ Földi, K.: „Háborúban állunk”- mondja Ecuador elnöke, 444.hu, 2024, <https://444.hu/2024/01/13/ecuador-elnok-kezen-kezzel-kivan-leszamolni-a-tamadasok-mogott-allo-bandakkal>

⁸⁹ Eluniverso: Ministerio de Educación suspende las clases presenciales en todo Ecuador hasta el 12 de enero, 2024, <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/ecuador/suspension-clases-estado-de-excepcion-ecuador-enero-2024-nota/>

international financial backing and a structure of terror and criminality that reaches far beyond Ecuador's borders," he said.⁹⁰

By the middle of January, 850 arrests were made. "[These criminals have] violated every single human right that has ever been written. So I think [the crackdown] was our last resort."⁹¹

Since Noboa implemented the state of emergency, 14,765 people have been arrested, and 280 of them have terrorism charges against them. Even though they increased the security, 1543 cases of extortion and kidnappings happened between January and early March, according to official statistics.

A national referendum was held on April 21, on nine new security measures proposed by Noboa. The referendum was really successful, as the people voted in favor of the changes. The voters showed tremendous support for Noboa and his hardline security policies. The result caused changes in Ecuador's constitution, and it gave the military more room to be involved in fighting against organized crime. The government introduced laws that made the sentences for criminal offences harsher. The possession of illegal weapons was also restricted. This constitutional change came into effect in June.⁹²

"The Police and the Armed Forces proved to be up to these challenges," Noboa said, because until then, the military and police personnel were not equipped sufficiently enough to be effective. He raised the value added tax from 12% to 15% to use this money for his efforts to make Ecuador safer.⁹³

All in all, Daniel Noboa began his presidency with strict rules and hard regulation. These are crucial in order to restore Ecuador's public safety and to successfully battle with the criminal gangs. With strengthening the military and police forces, implementing prison reforms and labeling the situation as it is, he could be on a right path towards the solution. In 2025, he will run for presidency again, for which his campaign has already started. The odds seem to be in

⁹⁰ Phillips, T.: 'We are at war': Ecuador's president vows to crack down on gangs behind week of violence, The Guardian, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/13/we-are-at-war-ecuadors-president-vows-to-crack-down-on-gangs-behind-week-of-violence>

⁹¹ Phillips, 2024.

⁹² Austin, A. ; Voss, G. : Ecuadorians Back President's Security Agenda But Challenges Await, Insight Crime, 2024, <https://insightcrime.org/news/ecuador-president-security-referendum/>

⁹³ MercoPress: Curfew extended as Ecuador "winning battle" against organized crime, 2024, <https://en.mercoPress.com/2024/01/23/curfew-extended-as-ecuador-winning-battle-against-organized-crime>

his favor, therefore winning the elections would mean he could continue his efforts to bring back Ecuador's peace.⁹⁴

6. Possible consequences on Europe

6.1. Smuggling towards Europe

Ecuador shares its borders with the world's biggest coca growers and cocaine producers, Peru and Colombia. This is the reason why it became a transit country for drug smuggling, with the shipments departing from Ecuadorian ports such as Guayaquil, to the main ports of Europe, like Valencia, Rotterdam or Antwerp. The fact that the demand for cocaine has grown significantly in Europe has contributed to the fact that most of the narcotics coming from the Americas and entering Europe are no longer from Colombia or Venezuela, but from Ecuador.⁹⁵ The increase in drug production has led to growing homicide rates, which shows a direct link with the increasing flow of drugs. "While the current government alleges that the gang war in the country is due to record seizures by authorities, it is rather attributable to the fact that quantities seized in drug operations are becoming larger."⁹⁶ The presence of Balkan crime groups who are involved in drug trafficking is also noticeable in Ecuador, and the local criminal organizations follow their violent tactics to fight for control of the trafficking routes to Europe.

"According to UNODC, in 2021 Ecuador was the country with the third most seizures of illicit drugs in the world (7%) after Colombia (41%) and the US (11%). In 2022, close to 200 tons were seized in the country, the second highest amount in the history of Ecuador." Additionally, drug consumption is also becoming an issue in the country, which has fuelled criminal activity.

In July 2024, authorities found the second-largest drug shipment that was ever recorded in Europe and one of the biggest in the world. It was shipped to the southern part of Spain, hidden in a cargo container full of bananas. In total it was 13 tons. Antonio Jesús Martínez, the leader of the central narcotics team of the National Police stated that the Spanish market cannot handle the amount of drugs that have flown into the country, because it was intended to be distributed all over Europe, before the authorities have found it. The ship carrying the containers arrived

⁹⁴ Puga, K. S.: ADN, de Daniel Noboa, fue inscrito en el CNE con un número 'especial', El Comercio, 2024, <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/politica/daniel-noboa-partido-adn-elecciones.html>

⁹⁵ Borrell, J.: Why the events in Ecuador matter for the EU, European External Action, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-events-ecuador-matter-eu-0_en

⁹⁶ Criminality in Ecuador-The Organized Crime Index, 2023, [Criminality in Ecuador - The Organized Crime Index](#)

from Guayaquil.⁹⁷ In 2022, 110 tons of cocaine were seized by the police in the port of Antwerp, and 605 of the narcotics came from Ecuador.

The European Union is also involved in finding a solution to Ecuador's problems. The EU and its member state support the security sector in Ecuador, through programs developed to fight transnational crime, such as Eurofront and Seacop. Cooperative activities were developed to offer emergency support for prison security in Ecuador.⁹⁸ The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) diagnosed that there is a need for more prison guards, and based on this EU agreed to provide a total amount of 2.5 million euros, which will be used to train and specialize prison staff.⁹⁹

In July 2023, the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) held a summit in Brussels, to strengthen cooperation between the regions. They have developed a comprehensive bi-regional agenda, and the fight against organised crime was a focal point during the discussion. The leaders present agreed to strengthen the EU-LAC (Latin America and the Caribbean) partnership, and the EU-CELAC Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism on Drugs.

The European Union feels the negative effects of the growing violence and gang war caused by drugs. The aim is to improve the lives of citizens on both continents, and to defend democracy. Even though far-away Ecuador does not seem like a relevant country to the EU at first sight, the situation has changed dramatically in recent years. The strengthening of criminal organizations in the country affects the well-being of EU citizens with the massive amounts of drugs flowing into the continent.¹⁰⁰

7. Conclusion

The surge of violence in Ecuador can be linked to various factors, including the lack of money and staff, limited education and equipment for law enforcement authorities, and corruption. But the root of the problem lies within the lack of control over criminal organizations. Ever since the legalization of gangs was introduced, it is more difficult to keep track of their operation,

⁹⁷ Euronews: Spanish police seize record 13 tonnes of cocaine in banana shipment from Ecuador, 2024
<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/07/spanish-police-seize-record-13-tonnes-of-cocaine-in-banana-shipment-from-ecuador>

⁹⁸ Borrell, 2023.

⁹⁹ El Pacto: Contribution of 2.5 million euros from the EU to help Ecuador's prison crisis, 2022,
<https://elpacto.eu/en/news/contribution-of-2-5-million-euros-from-the-eu-to-help-ecuadors-prison-crisis/>

¹⁰⁰ Borrell, 2023.

even though some groups decided to cooperate with the authorities and quit illegal business. In addition, the influence of foreign gangs, especially Mexican ones, is really strong in Ecuador. The main catalysator why the country became part of drug trafficking is because of its geographical location in South America, situated between the two largest cocaine producer countries, Peru and Colombia, and also providing the shortest way between Amazonia and the coast. It was just a question of time when the criminal activity connected to narcotics would start to seek its way into Ecuador. The main reason of the current state of the country's public safety is drug trafficking, and the fight between gangs to take over the control of the smuggling routes. In terms of solutions, the most recent attempts of Daniel Noboa seem to be Ecuador's best chance to tackle the problems. His strict rules about arresting gang members, building new and larger prisons and educating more staff members is all for preventing Ecuador from becoming a narco-state. Yet 'mano dura' can have negative impact on human rights and violence can breed violence. He must make sure that tough measures do not backfire like in some Central American countries. Noboa has just 18 months to prove he is capable of restoring peace, and the 12 months he has spent in office were highly successful, his approval rating is 80%. The growing demand for drugs from Ecuador could also be linked to the growing demand for drugs in Europe. Nowadays it is relatively easy to obtain narcotics, therefore people can purchase more of these. The high demand caused Europe's big ports, such as Valencia or Rotterdam to become the starting points of drug trafficking. The European Union noticed the risks of these activities, and cooperates with organizations from Latin America to try to find solutions.

Ecuador is still deep in violence, and to solve this will take more than just a few years. The right leadership and real commitment for the country could be the answer to the majority of the problems. Ecuador has to protect its people, since they are the ones who are the most affected in their day-to-day lives. Reducing drug trafficking as a whole will be a very complex task, but it is necessary in order to be able to put an end to killings and general violence and save Ecuador for future generations.

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