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Editor's Note

Heloise Giraudon

Whilst a definition of 'organised crime' is not provided by the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (which has long been considered a major flaw), organised crime groups (OCGs) are defined as "a group of three or more persons existing over a period of time acting in concert with the aim of committing crimes for financial or material benefit" (Europol, 2021).

However, due to the rate at which global organised crime is evolving, making use of 'new markets and technologies, and moving from traditional hierarchies towards more flexible, network-based forms of organisation' (Galeotti, 2014, 1), this definition has been criticised for not 'adequately' describing the elaborate and flexible nature of organised crime networks today (Europol, 2021).

Whilst the twentieth century was dominated by the Cold War, and since 9/11 the war on terror has been the fixation, undoubtedly the struggle against organised and transnational crime will 'become a parallel defining security theme of the twenty-first century' (Galeotti, 2014, 1). What has previously been thought of as a 'handful of mafias operating in a few problem cities' now 'poses a serious threat to security, development and justice' (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021, 5).

The transformation of transnational crime in just a few decades has changed beyond recognition. This is a result of geopolitical, economic and technological shifts which have occurred since the end of the century. Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) have been some of the biggest beneficiaries of globalization as the global illicit economy has boomed in the last twenty years. They have taken advantage of the opening of new markets, supply chains and technologies, while exploiting weak regulation in financial markets and cyberspace (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021, 9). Today, tackling transnational organised crime, rather than being low priority should be top priority as it is a 'common denominator to climate change, pandemics, inequality, migrations' as both an enabler and profiteer (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021, 9).

International organised crime posits a threat to peace, security and stability. States with unconsolidated democracies, and weak or corrupt governmental and administrative structures are especially vulnerable. In some countries, criminals have created safe havens where organised crime, corruption, and the state are intertwined. This fosters instability and undermines the reach of the law. Subsequently, this hinders states ability to protect themselves and others from national security threats such as terrorism and hostile state activity (Home Office, 2019). The power of organised crime cannot be understated, as they are often powerful enough to create their own 'states-within-states.' Examples range from 'the poppy fields of Uzbekistan's to Morocco's cannabis-growing Rif region' which undermines the integrity of both host states and national borders (Galeotti, 2014, 2).

The first article, by Liis Molter, highlights this. Detailing the similarities and differences between organised crime in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the societal implications for stability, state institutions, and increased

regional conflicts. This article details the convergence between the state and organised crime, highlighting the detrimental effects of 'weak' states which leave room for criminal leaders to gain support by providing those public goods that the state fails to. Similarly, the next article by Max Cramer highlights the state's role in the proliferation of OCGs but from the reverse perspective. Rather than state 'weakness' being taken advantage of by OCGs for their benefit, state policy can also work to their benefit as outlined through the genealogy (and its destructive nature) of the drug prohibition norm. This created vast opportunities for criminal gangs to benefit and profit from a system where organised crime groups now control drug production.

This transformation in organised crime has been largely facilitated through the rise in technology. Information communications technology (ICT) has vastly improved communications, 'increasing crime groups adaptability to enforcement measures and expanding the size and diversity of both groups and markets' (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021, 9). New technologies have also enabled mobility in people, goods and capital strengthening existing activities as well as creating new ones, such as cybercrime. Specifically, the Internet, due to its inherently transnational character, has enabled criminal actors to 'operate in countries where there are loopholes in legislation and security' and connect with distant criminal peers (Shelley, 2003).

Undoubtably, this has changed how OCGs operate. A shift has occurred from rigidly structured gangs which once were based on a single ethnic group (or home region or village) who 'provided everything from internal language to operational culture' (Galeotti, 2014, 3) to drug and people trafficking groupings today which operate as loose networks, enabling them to work flexibly across borders. Increasingly, organised crime is becoming more inclusive, as the scale at which individuals with the right skills 'contacts or territory can be accepted into the network, as long as they prove able to operate within the dominant culture' has increased exponentially (Galeotti, 2014, 1). This appears to be the way organised crime will continue to evolve, with loosely spanning networks uniting.

Whilst such a large and impactful shift in the past 20 years has radically changed how organised crime operates and what it looks like, this ability to adapt and change is not new. OCGs have always been flexible and able to quickly adapt to 'exploit new victims, evade countermeasures, or identify new criminal opportunities' (Europol, 2021). The adaptability of OCGs is a prominent theme in many of the articles in this journal, as the ability of these groups to utilise times of change and insecurity to exploit new opportunities is evident. The third article highlights this, as Lyes Tagziria (analyst at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime), details a global account of the effects of Covid-19 on organised crime; the opportunities it has presented, its reinforcement of organised criminal activity, and how covid-19 has exacerbated and revealed inequalities both within and between countries, creating the perfect environment for OCGs to exploit.

In line with this, Siobhan Bahl explores the opportunities Covid-19 has enabled for OCGs specifically in relation to the Mafia in Italy. Whilst the Italian government has had to make cuts and limit freedoms and business activity, the Mafia has stepped in to this void to compensate. Similarly, Alex Carter in his article on the 'Ndrangheta, a Calabrian organised crime group, details their history and development, showing how

the national and international failure to address and tackle them in their early stages has enabled their development. Similarly, they have been able to undermine the Italian government and have also benefited from the pandemic. Despite the court case against them which is currently underway, their adaptability leads one to question whether this will have an enduring impact on their activity. Ultimately, these three articles highlight the ability of OCGs to leverage times of uncertainty for their benefit.

Organised crime as a phenomenon has a long history. In the United Kingdom, from a period well before it's establishment, there have been criminal bands, 'some of which have been involved in trans frontier operations such as smugglers, pirates, horse thief's and brigands' (Anderson, 1993, 293). Despite this, organised crime being dealt with by international cooperative action is fairly recent. Cooperation between states did occur prior to the Second World War. For example in 1923 the International Criminal Police Commission was created to enable states to communicate on police enquiries and for information pertaining to ordinary crimes, but this was informal and cooperation was not mandatory. However the recognition that there is a collective benefit in joint action to combat organised crime, and that 'effective crime control is only possible by concerted international actions' is relatively new (Anderson, 1993, 293).

As criminal networks span the globe and can now easily operate across borders, the need for consistent cooperative action and diplomatic responses is becoming increasingly important. Modern organised crime therefore requires a multi-disciplinary approach to prevent and counter it, as international efforts must ensure groups and networks do not redirect activities to countries where cooperation is weak and subsequently criminal justice responses are weak. Communication and cooperation between states therefore is the way to disrupt these networks. Bilateral agreements covering issues such as extradition, policing of common frontiers, transfer of evidence are all integral. Additionally, multilateral organisations and conventions provide a key space in which countries are able to develop more coordinated responses to organised crime issues. Adopted in 2000, the 'United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime' is the 'main international instrument in the fight against transnational organised crime' (UNODC, 2018). Three protocols supplement this, targeting specific areas: the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (Especially Women and Children), the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air; and the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms (UNODC, 2018). Specifically, at the UNODC the importance of law enforcement officials is integral, as a core pillar of their work is to build criminal investigative and other law enforcement capacity. Technical assistance includes; institutional and operational capacity, building of law enforcement, judicial bodies to strengthen investigation, and prosecution of organized crimes (UNODC, 2021). This enables a more comprehensive approach which strengthens international cooperation.

In this vein, the final article, in the form of an interview, is from Lejda Toci, a Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer at the UNODC. She gives specific insight into the work carried out by an international organisation to combat organised crime, specifically in the area of wildlife, forestry and fisheries. Specifically, she highlights the profitability of this industry which has previously been neglected as low priority, and how the work of the UNODC supports countries to address these serious crimes which threaten the environment, development and security.

This volume of the Diplomatic Post explores a variety of issues brought about by Organised Crime. Most pertinent, is the adaptability of OCGs and the issues this raises for combating their activity. This has been seen especially in the last twenty years as globalisation and the Internet has provided these groups with ever increasing means to carry out and expand their operations. Subsequently, the importance of international cooperation has been highlighted as the only means to combat organised crime in an increasingly interconnected world. Ultimately, the importance of addressing organised crime as a means to ensure stability, peace and sustainable development cannot be understated.

The Crime-State Nexus: Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan

Liis Molter

In Central Asia, particularly Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, there has been a convergence between the state and organised crime. This has led to the development of the crime-state nexus, which became more prevalent after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This is because the newly independent states were “weak”; they were undergoing both significant economic and institutional transformations. This left a gap for criminal leaders to gain support “by assuming public functions that their weak states were unable to fulfil” (Kupatadze, 2012: 1-2).

In Kyrgyzstan the legal and illegal dimensions have often colluded when the interests of the state officials and criminal organisations have coincided; “the Kyrgyz state and criminal structures overlap but are also visible as two coexisting phenomena” (Marat, 2006: 129). This is unlike in Tajikistan where the crime-state nexus has been deeply institutionalised and it is often difficult to distinguish between the lawful and unlawful actors and domains. The further institutionalisation of the crime-state nexus in Tajikistan is due to the Tajik Civil War (1992-1997) which fragmented the state further and provided economic incentives for both sides to become involved in the narcotics trade. These motivations have remained for the ruling elite even in the post War period.

In Kyrgyzstan state officials started working with some of the underworld actors in the mid-1990s when it was viewed as mutually beneficial. Rent-seeking, customs and tax corruption, and the narcotics trade are some of the key features in the crime-state nexus. The Tulip Revolution in 2005 saw protests against corruption and authoritarianism of President Akayev and his supporters. It also provided a brief “window of opportunity” for the underworld leaders to seize more control, but they failed to effectively do so. Despite Akayev resigning, post-Revolution, “most of the illicit practices have survived, and now show a trend of being monopolized by the ruling regime rather than by the previously powerful underworld” (Kupatadze, 2008, 293). This indicates that the relationship between the state’s elite and criminal activities is becoming increasingly strong in Kyrgyzstan, whilst little is done to strengthen the fundamental fragmented basis and institutions of the state.

The crime-state nexus has had significant implications for Kyrgyzstan’s stability. There have been many protests over the years with the three key motives for the Kyrgyz people seeming to be: “assertion of people power, demand for constitutional reform, and the perceived stagnation of the past 30 years” (Dzhuraev, n.d. 6). These can be seen from the October 2020 uprisings when the protestors took the streets as a consequence of the alleged vote-rigging in the recent parliamentary elections. Some concessions were made, including the resignation of President Jeenbekov and the annulment of the election results (BBC, 2020). However, in most cases, it seems to be that one corrupt elite seems to be replaced by another even after protests and elections. For example, a convicted kidnapper Sadyr Japarov became the interim president after Jeenbekov’s resignation. Thus, it remains to be seen whether the June 2021 parliamentary elections will make much of a difference.

Similarly, Tajikistan has suffered from instability and weak institutions. Tajikistan was especially vulnerable due to the increasing socio-political tensions over who should control the state, which led to a civil war (1992-1997). During the Tajik Civil War, both sides were involved in drug trafficking. For example, Yaqub Salimov, the Minister of Internal Affairs (1993-1995), has been described as a “mafia” figure (Roy, 2007). The 1997 Peace Treaty also provided certain individuals, who had previously been involved in illegal activities, with governmental positions. This subsequently legitimised and institutionalised some of the state-crime nexus early on in the state’s independence. By the 2000s, “organized crime and the state became deeply interrelated phenomena” (Marat, 2006: 129), with the ruling elite essentially having centralised control over the drug trade. Corruption is known to be widespread and rampant where the “politically connected traffickers are protected” whilst smaller and less connected dealers and sellers are arrested to keep up Tajikistan’s image (Markowitz and Omelicheva, 2020, 11).

Unsurprisingly, the crime-state nexus has had extremely negative implications for both Tajikistan’s traditional and non-traditional security means. The state and its institutions are threatened by the elite’s exploitation and corruption. This is because the criminal interests have been co-opted to the state apparatus (Engvall, 2006, 830) disadvantaging those who are not part of the illegal networks. Arguably, the drug trade, despite being monopolised by the state, has significant negative consequences. The widespread narcotics trade, in and through Tajikistan, has created increased potential for regional conflicts if neighbouring countries like Uzbekistan feel like the Tajik drug trade is overspilling and negatively affecting their citizens. Furthermore, not only does the narcotics trade encourage people to turn to it as a source of income - but it also puts the wider population in danger due to the spread of diseases like HIV and AIDS. According to the World Bank, 70 to 80% of injecting users are likely to become HIV positive (Engvall, 2006: 840-844). This poses a serious societal security risk, particularly since Tajikistan’s healthcare system would be unable to cover proper treatment for most citizens.

Overall, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have been particularly vulnerable to the emergence and strengthening of the crime-state nexus because they are economically weak and politically fragmented states. However, rather than fixing these fundamental issues, the states’ involvement in illegal activities, such as the narcotics trade, means that they are stuck in a “vicious cycle as drugs trade further weakens the state” (Cummins, 2012, 151). It is important to note that despite this, in Kyrgyzstan “the level of collusion between the upperworld and underworld is high” but the two remain separate (Osmonaliev, 2003, as cited in Kapatadze 2008, 281). This is in stark contrast to Tajikistan where the legal and illegal worlds are deeply intertwined and often difficult to tell apart. Not only does Tajikistan face potential societal problems and instability; there are also serious dangers of the state elites’ regulated narcotics trade escalating regional tensions into regional (armed) conflicts.

The Origins and Effects of the Drug Prohibition Norm on Organised Crime

Max Cramer

Drug prohibition has become one of the most entrenched norms of the contemporary international system. How did this happen when as recently as the mid-20th century, the use of now illicit substances was not only widespread but enforced by imperial powers? Beginning with a small set of norm entrepreneurs primarily in the United States, the prohibition revolution enforced by the United Nations has been simultaneously one of the most multilateral and unsuccessful acts of the international community in the 20th and 21st century. This futile exercise has had hugely detrimental consequences in particular for addicts (which have increased in number) and formerly colonised peoples. In fact, the war on drugs has re-drawn the global colour line in the de-colonised world. The only ones who benefit from this system are the organised criminal gangs who control drug production, one of the world's largest industries at an estimated 1% of all global trade. These criminal organisations often act in service of authoritarian states like the Maduro regime in Venezuela or terror groups like Hezbollah. Criminal gangs pushed for prohibition in the 1950s and they are pushing against drug reform today. The best way to stop them is to take away their most lucrative source of funding and provide actual support to the addicts they exploit and abuse.

The concept "drugs" is not a scientific classification but a product of prohibition. As Jacques Derrida wrote, "there are no drugs 'in nature'" rather the concept is "instituted on the basis of moral or political evaluation" (Koram, 2019, 12). This becomes abundantly clear when evaluating the norm entrepreneurs who pioneered prohibition and the consequences of their actions. Substances known today as "drugs" were once so common they were even used by Queen Victoria (who started almost every day with opium) and Winston Churchill (who chewed gum laced with cocaine that he often shared with the queen) (Castella, 2021). In fact, rather than being banned, opium was a large export of the British Empire, especially to China. No one in the early 20th century would have understood the concept of "drugs". Yet, what started "as a fringe concern of a few religious missionaries and anti-vice moralists, ended the century as an established international legal norm" (Koram, 2019, 2).

This process began in the United States not with Reagan or Nixon as conventional knowledge suggests, but with a man called Harry Anslinger only a few decades after Queen Victoria's death. Harry Anslinger was the first commissioner of the U.S. Treasury Department's Federal Bureau of Narcotics from 1930 to 1962. Following *Webb v. United States*, where the Supreme Court ruled that the prescription of drugs to addicts from doctors (instead of criminals) to treat their addiction was illegal, Anslinger began closing down heroin clinics across the country and imprisoning doctors (Hari, 2015). This was despite the fact that data from the time clearly showed that the majority of addicts lived normal lives thanks to this medical intervention (Hari, 2015, 36).

Anslinger believed policing ethnic minority communities could provide solutions to two vexing problems facing the U.S at the time: the civil rights movement and communist infiltration. Following the civil rights movement, it became more convenient for white Americans to believe that rebellion by black communities was caused by drugs rather than legitimate grievances with their treatment in an unjust society (Alexander, 2019). Anslinger also cooked up tails of Chinese dealers hooking white women on opium to perform heinous

sexual acts on them and to create an army of addicts willing to commit treason to serve their addiction (Hari, 2015). Following Finnemore and Sikkink's understanding of the power of language acts in norm production (Sikkink, 1998), another way drug use was racialised was by the usage of the term "marijuana" instead of the Latin name "cannabis" as the former associated the drug with Mexican communities (Halperin, 2018). Racialised policing continued after Anslinger's time, most notably under the Nixon administration. In another demonstration of how drug policy is guided by politics rather than harm reduction, Nixon's senior advisor, John Ehrlichman admitted that the intention of the drug crackdown was to police the primary enemies of the administration: black people and the anti-war left. "By getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, we could disrupt both communities ... Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did" confessed Ehrlichman (Nutt, 2020, 325). As we can see, from the very beginning of prohibition, the social construction of drugs as a security threat was inherently racialised. This would have profound implications for non-white people and the recently decolonised world as prohibition was globalised.

The world's first drug control treaty, the International Opium Convention, was signed at the Hague by 13 nations in 1912 with the intention of restricting the export of (rather than banning) coca and opium. The Convention entered international law when it was incorporated into the Treaty of Versailles but the United States, despite spearheading the convention, withdrew because it fell short of total prohibition of all drugs including cannabis. This American dream was finally realised in 1961 with the passage of the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. International prohibition was an inherently moralistic project; the 1961 treaty is the only UN treaty ever to use the word "evil" (even conventions on genocide and war crimes do not use this word). As legal scholar Rick Lines has argued, the use of this word has serious human rights implications as it stigmatises drug users and carries the implication that 'evil acts' are justified to enforce this treaty (Lines, 2011).

Not all states accepted this reconstruction of the social world. Force was often needed to coerce compliance from reluctant states. The Mexican government in the 1930s for example, continued to supply drugs so they could monitor their purity, a similar policy to that which was pursued by the United Kingdom until 1967. Anslinger responded by cutting off the supply of all opiates to Mexico, including to hospitals. Mexican patients suffered from horrific operations without pain relief until the government eventually submitted to the will of the United States (Hari, 2015, 140-141).

While Anslinger's racism is considered intolerable by most serious people in the modern day, his personal bigotry has left a profound scar on our world via the international norms he helped create. W.E.B. Du Bois notoriously argued that the 20th century would be defined by the "colour line" created and enshrined in law by European imperialism. In the advent of European imperialism and now that formal legal racism is gone, the war on drugs is one of the primary ways the global colour line manifests itself as formerly colonised people and nations are disproportionately targeted by and the victims of prohibition (Koram, 2019). While plenty of research has been conducted into the racial character of the Prison Industrial Complex in the United States, this needs to be put into a wider context of global mass incarceration and policing, especially of formerly colonised people (Koram, 2019). For example, after prohibition was forced on Mexico under pressure from the United States, organised crime has killed tens of thousands of people (Harp, 2010). All of

these deaths were entirely avoidable had the drug trade not been taken away from medical professionals and handed to organised crime.

This is ultimately the fundamental problem with prohibition: it empowers the exact group it ostensibly opposes. This was predicted by one of America's most prestigious doctors of the time, Henry Smith Williams who wrote as prohibition was first being implemented that lawmakers "must have known that their edict, if enforced, was the clear equivalent of an order to create an illicit drug industry. They must have known they were in effect ordering a company of drug smugglers into existence" (Hari, 2015, 36). While lawmakers might not have realised this as Williams thought, organised criminal groups certainly did. In fact, the bureau chief in California who assisted in rounding up doctors who ran heroin clinics was later found to be an employee of Woo Sing, the infamous leader of a gang of opium dealers (Hari, 2015, 40). Organised criminal groups knew they could benefit from prohibition and even paid to speed up its implementation.

Henry Smith Williams' prediction has appeared incredibly prescient in the present day as the organised criminal network responsible for the drug trade has grown exponentially. Even the militant group Hezbollah, a proxy force of the Iranian theocracy based primarily in Lebanon and Syria, has entered the drug industry by expanding its operations in South America. An intelligence dossier given to the New York Times detailed this complex network and the complicity of Nicholas Maduro's regime in Venezuela (Casey, 2019). One of Maduro's closest confidants Tareck El Aissami is directly implicated in giving Hezbollah militants free roam of the nation and shielding tons of chemicals used in cocaine production. The illicit drug market, which is entirely a product of prohibition, is one of the primary ways many terrorist groups and authoritarian regimes fund their operations.

There is plenty of evidence that prohibition not only creates organised crime by creating a market for criminals but also worsens the issue of drug related violence. Professor Jeffrey Miron of Harvard University has shown that there is a direct positive relationship between policing and homicide even when controlling for other factors (Miron, 2004). The likely reason for this is that arresting the leaders of drug gangs creates competition between other dealers seeking to take over the old leaders' empire. Policing also incentivises violence because the most violent dealers are the least likely to be snitched on out of fear of the consequences (Miron, 2004). Prohibition also makes drugs themselves stronger and therefore more dangerous. This is known as the "Iron Law of Prohibition": more powerful drugs are easier to smuggle with higher profit margins (Burrus, 2018). For example, under alcohol prohibition the consumption of less dangerous drinks like beer and wine decreased as the sale of spirits increased. This was because spirits with a high alcohol percentage were easier to transport in high quantities. For many contemporary illegal substances there is also a consistent pattern of less dangerous drugs being replaced with more dangerous alternatives. For example, PMA, fentanyl, skunk, and crack are all more toxic forms of other drugs developed or sold because of prohibition (Nutt, 2020).

Worst of all, the violence of policing does not even achieve its stated goal of reducing drug abuse and addiction. While rates of drug consumption may be marginally pushed down by aggressive policing, this has a marginal effect on rates of addiction and death (Nutt, 2020). As the pre prohibition era demonstrated, without policing the majority of addicts lived not only normal but functional lives (Hari, 2015, p. 36). Often it

is the ostracization and abuse addicts receive under prohibition which ruins their lives (Hari, 2015). The experience of states which have tried to treat addicts as human beings requiring treatment rather than morally reprehensible individuals demonstrates the efficacy of this approach. For example, heroin use in Portugal has halved since the drug was decriminalised while use continues to rise exponentially in the United States (Brown, 2016). Recreational users who do not have a problem (which even the UN Office on Drug Control estimates are 10% of *all* users worldwide (Hari, 2015, p. 148)) should be free to use pure drugs without unknown quantities of dangerous chemicals and without funding organised crime (Hari, 2015, 284, 302). Just as criminal networks pushed for prohibition they are now pushing against these reforms, fully aware that they would destroy the profits of their organisation. Norwegian politicians pushing for decriminalisation now require bodyguards and Mexican radio hosts fear for their lives if they speak out in favour of drug reform.

There is no reason for organised criminal networks to control 1% of all global trade. This is especially the case if this does nothing to help victims of drug abuse and contributes to the reproduction of the global colour line in the decolonised world. Fortunately, since this link was formed by the international community, it can also be cut by the international community. Many states are already following this agenda including Portugal, Uruguay, Norway, Switzerland, Israel, the Netherlands, Czechia and perhaps the United States under Joe Biden. As the paradigm of drug prohibition is undermined by contradictory evidence, the norm of drug prohibition is already beginning to fade. Hopefully, the same multilateral character of drug prohibition in the 20th Century can be achieved in the 21st Century as this disastrous policy is reversed worldwide. If achieved, this could be the single largest blow to organised crime of the last 100 years.

Consolidation of the Old, Emergence of the New: Impact of Covid-19 on Illicit Economies

Lyes Tagziria

Analyst at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

In the space of little under a year, the not-so-novel coronavirus has spread from one city in Eastern China to almost every single country in the world. Just as the movement of people across borders has helped the COVID-19 virus propagate throughout the world, so too has the phenomenon of globalisation facilitated and exacerbated the threat of organised crime, making it the global phenomenon that it is today.

During the initial stages of the outbreak, many believed that the pandemic would prove to present a major disruption to the global illicit economy. Just as organised crime benefitted from the increase in global trade in the first two decades of the new millennium, it was thought that the likely reduction in trade flows caused by state-imposed restrictions in an effort to curb the spread of the virus would simultaneously reduce the opportunity for illicit flows to continue unimpeded.

Indeed, criminal actors around the world did face disruptions. The forced closure of the night-time and entertainment economies proved to be a critical hit to organised criminal actors who systematically use bars, cafés, restaurants and nightclubs as fronts for money laundering, as marketplaces for the drug trade and as hubs for sexual exploitation networks. The reduction in operation, or outright closure, of factories brought the illicit market for counterfeit goods to an abrupt halt; dramatic reduction in footfall in the world's cities and towns reduced the space for criminal actors to hide, and increased police presence on the streets facilitated the identification and apprehension of these criminal actors.

Almost a year on, the initial outlook on the impact of the pandemic on the global illicit economy appears to have been overly optimistic. Rather than prove fatal for illicit markets and criminal actors around the world, it can be argued that post-pandemic, there are in fact more opportunities for organised crime. While this new world provided new opportunities for criminal actors in the form of new markets, for example the illicit market for new types of counterfeit medical products and fake vaccines, it is clear that the pandemic has also simply accelerated the trends that were already in motion over the past decades.

New frontiers for the global illicit economy

That criminal elements within society seek to exploit national – and global – emergencies is nothing new, and true to form, from the very beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, reports of all types of criminal activity related to the pandemic were abundant. Initially, the emerging informal economy centred around the illicit trade of medical products, both real and counterfeit. Opportunistic criminal entrepreneurs and sophisticated gangs alike took advantage of the global scramble for personal protective equipment (PPE), selling counterfeit face masks on the dark web (Martin, 2020). Federal investigators in the United States have found that millions of counterfeit, and potentially substandard, N95 face masks have been purchased in the country (Levenson & Kanno-Youngs, 2021). Little over two months after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global health emergency, a global Interpol operation had already seized 34,000 counterfeit and substandard masks

(Interpol, 2020). In some cases, while the products were legitimate, they were being purchased and traded illegally on the black market, inflating prices and lining the pockets of smugglers. In Iran, for example, authorities had seized millions of medical products by the beginning of March that were being hoarded by black-market traders (Eqbali & Rasmussen, 2020).

As the global crisis evolved, so too did the tactics employed by criminal actors. With regular testing being identified as a key pillar in the fight against the spread of COVID-19, fraudsters have capitalised by offering fake coronavirus testing kits. Mere days after Kenya registered their first official case of the virus, authorities raided a shop in Nairobi who claimed to have sold approximately 600 testing kits thought to be fake (Al Jazeera, 2020). Global restrictions on movement, in particular government-imposed entry requirements, have catalysed the emergence of a novel illicit market, cutting out the middleman so to speak and offering falsified negative test results. Test-related fraud has been witnessed in numerous countries across Latin America, from Peru to Mexico, and Colombia to Ecuador (Tegel, 2021), as well as in France (BBC News, 2020) and the Republic of Ireland (Gallagher, 2021). If there was ever a question mark over the ability of organised criminal groups (OCGs) to adapt to new circumstances and exploit global crises, any doubts must surely now be put to bed.

Like any good entrepreneur, sophisticated organised criminals keep tabs on current affairs, monitor political developments and leverage any turn of events to their advantage. And this is exactly what occurred following proclamations by Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump, president and former president of Brazil and the United States respectively, falsely pushing the use of the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine as a cure for coronavirus (Kirkpatrick & León Cabrera, 2020). After the drug was touted as an effective therapy for COVID-19, demand across the globe spiked. 120 boxes of hydroxychloroquine were seized in Brazil last May, having been smuggled into the country from neighbouring Paraguay (Goodwin, 2020). Aside from the potential danger of using unproven treatment, the spike in demand for the drug has caused a supply shortage, causing significant damage to patients around the world who require the drug for the ailments for which it is intended.

Similar dynamics also played out in Africa, with authorities in Senegal noting a sharp rise in demand for a similar anti-malarial, chloroquine, to which criminal networks responded by trafficking and selling a substandard version of the drug (Kane, 2020). Furthermore, the WHO reported nine variations of falsified chloroquine discovered in three different African countries: Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Niger (Abet, 2020). Fake medicine is by no means a new phenomenon, in particular on the African continent where the scourge of counterfeit pharmaceuticals is felt most acutely (Cartwright & Baric, 2018), but it is clear that the pandemic has allowed the illicit economy to thrive even more (Piranty, 2020).

The latest development in Covid-related criminal activity is the emergence of the illicit trade of coronavirus vaccines, most often counterfeit ones. In December 2020, Interpol issued a global alert warning of 'potential criminal activity in relation to the falsification, theft and illegal advertising of COVID-19 and flu vaccines' (Interpol, 2020). In February 2021, South Africa, the African country worst-affected by the pandemic, received its first shipment of coronavirus vaccines. However, the theft of pharmaceuticals in the country is a well-known issue, and given that the vaccines are not barcoded, their theft by criminal actors remains a real and worrying possibility (Taylor, 2021). Arguably more worrying, however, is the recent proliferation of falsified

coronavirus vaccines emerging in black markets around the world. In Mexico, not only are OCGs such as the Familia Michoacana and the Jalisco Cartel New Generation likely to attempt to steal legitimate vaccines by infiltrating themselves in the supply chain, but criminal groups have already set up laboratories to create fake COVID-19 vaccines in numerous states across the country (Sullivan, 2021). Offers of fake vaccines have also been reported in Bolivia (La Palabra del Beni, 2021) and Colombia (Infobae, 2021), among other Latin American countries, as well as in China (The Standard, 2021).

Political leaders across the world often evoke the cliché of ‘everyone being in the same boat’ when it comes to coronavirus, a disease wreaking havoc in every country around the globe, infecting rich and poor, black and white. However, it is clear that the novel virus is not the great equaliser some may claim it to be. In fact, the pandemic has shone a light on the structural inequalities entrenched in countries in every corner of the globe, whether they be along racial, ethnic, occupational or socio-economic lines (The Lancet Public Health, 2021).

Moreover, the global race towards population-level immunity via vaccination has exposed further the inequities between developed and developing nations, and given rise to ‘vaccine nationalism’. While some of the most developed nations in the world have made tremendous progress in the rollout of coronavirus vaccines, research by the People’s Vaccine Alliance suggests that at least 90% of the populations of low-income countries are unlikely to receive the vaccine in 2021 (Dyer, 2021), and due to vaccine hoarding by rich nations, more than 85 developing countries are unlikely to have widespread access to a vaccine before 2023 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021).

And an anxious, frightened and vulnerable population is one that is prime for exploitation by criminal actors. As communities are devastated with the double whammy of the virus and the crippling economic ramifications associated with it, they become easy prey for fraudsters, conmen and gangsters to whom these vulnerable individuals may turn in the hope of securing even a scintilla of stability and security.

Existing markets thrive (for the most part)

While the emergence of specifically COVID-related illicit economies has understandably been the focus of a lot of research over the past year, it is important to recognise that among the most significant impacts of the pandemic on the global organised crime landscape have been those hitting existing forms of criminality. Cybercrime, for example, was one of the illicit economies most boosted by the pandemic, as there was a huge shift to remote working, e-learning and, as a result of citizens around the world being confined to their homes, a general increase in the amount of time spent online (Feldmann, et al., 2020). The number of phishing scams and malware attacks that took place in the initial months of the pandemic increased at a staggering and unprecedented rate (The Associated Press, 2020). Malicious actors preyed on people’s fears, boredom and innate human desire for clarity during an uncertain and fast-moving situation to scam and defraud them when they were at their most vulnerable (Mahadevan, 2020).

However, online fraud and scams are not the only form of criminality to have experienced a growth amid the pandemic. One of the most significant consequences of the increased internet usage throughout 2020 is the increased vulnerability of people around the world, but in particular women and children, to online sexual

exploitation (Interpol, 2020). However, not only has the prevalence of incidents of online child sexual exploitation likely increased over the past year, but victims of such crimes are likely to face increased obstacles to accessing protection, support and rehabilitation as a result of coronavirus-related containment measures (Wagner & Hoang, 2020).

Unfortunately, online sexual exploitation is but one of the forms of human trafficking to have experienced a boost as a result of the pandemic and associated restrictions. The spread of coronavirus has exacerbated many of the primary drivers of vulnerability to human trafficking: poverty, lack of social or economic opportunity and limited labour protections. For many people working in sectors that are known to be hubs of exploitation, there is an increased risk of further exploitation as abusive employers seek to lower their costs to make up for lost profit as a result of economic downturn. The economic and social fallout of the pandemic has provided a fertile ground for armed groups and criminal gangs to recruit new members, and the closure of schools around the world has exacerbated the recruitment of children. From Colombia, to Kenya and South Africa, children with nothing to do and no income coming in are either forced or lured into working for gangs, delivering drugs and guns, and in some cases even carrying out violence themselves (Stanyard, 2020).

Finally, as previously mentioned, global drugs markets are among the most lucrative and dynamic illicit economies in the world, and accordingly tend to be those most discussed when talking about organised crime. However, despite the hopes of many researchers and policymakers that the pandemic would act as a silver bullet to dismantle drug trafficking organisations and bring the global illicit drug trade to a standstill, most research since the outbreak of coronavirus suggests no such impact has materialised. That is not to say that the transnational drug market did not encounter obstacles, in particular at the very beginning of the outbreak, such as the inability of drug mules – who primarily use commercial air travel - to operate, or reduced demand for certain ‘party drugs’. However, these disruptions appear to have been relatively minor and fairly short-lived.

In particular, it has been found that the pandemic overwhelmingly had little impact on the production of most drugs. Opium poppy harvests were unaffected in the primary geographies of production, namely Afghanistan, Myanmar and Mexico; the cultivation and production of cocaine in Latin America producer countries was largely unaffected; and cannabis cultivation was similarly unhampered by the global outbreak (Eligh, 2020). In the United Kingdom, drug supply remained fairly stable during the first few months of the outbreak as suppliers had enough stock to last, and there was no discernible impact on the ability of people who use drugs to find a supplier (Release, 2021).

Nevertheless, supply shortages were experienced as the lockdown was lifted, once suppliers began to run low on their stock, which translated into inflated prices. This notwithstanding, the number of people reporting increased drug use amid the pandemic far outweighs the number of those reporting decreased or unchanged consumption patterns (Release, 2021). This has potentially important public health implications, in particular in light of some evidence suggesting that the pandemic has severely affected the provision of harm reduction programmes in many places around the world (Choudhury, 2020).

The greatest impact of the global health emergency on the transnational drug trade appears to be on the distribution of illicit drugs, but even in this regard, the disruptions are likely to be felt only in the short term. The almost complete halt on international air travel and enhanced land border controls meant that drug shipments via air and land reduced significantly, forcing drug trafficking networks to make increasing use of maritime routes. A drop in container traffic (UNCTAD, 2020) meant that drug suppliers were loading increasingly sizeable volumes of drugs onto a smaller number of shipments, which perhaps explains the large seizures reported in the initial months of the pandemic. However, although the pandemic has presented challenges to the illicit drug markets, the evidence suggests that DTOs are adapting quickly (McDermott, et al., 2021). The emergence of new trafficking routes has in fact been among the most noticeable impacts of the pandemic, as criminal networks adapt (EMCDDA, 2020).

Long term implications

While it is still too early to draw any firm conclusions from the impact of COVID-19 on transnational organised crime, it is clear that the early prognostics of the pandemic delivering a decisive blow to global illicit markets were overly optimistic. On the contrary, it appears as though the pandemic has merely magnified trends that were already underway prior to the outbreak and has not fundamentally disrupted any global markets in any way other than temporarily.

History illustrates that criminal actors, in particular those involved in the illicit drug trade, as Eligh (2020) argues, have proven themselves exceptionally adept at adapting to environmental disruptions and developments. With criminal networks bolstering their activity in existing illicit economies, while at the same time venturing into new ones, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the COVID-19 pandemic has merely reinforced organised criminal activity. However, the one silver lining that can be taken away from the global health emergency, perhaps, is that it provides an opportunity for the global community to rethink the ways in which we approach transnational organised crime. Periods of great disruption – of which the COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly one – provide an opportunity for policy change. However, these windows of opportunity close just as quickly as they come about, and whether or not the opportunity is seized in such a crowded global agenda remains to be seen.

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criminal activity. Holding dual British-Algerian nationality and having grown up in Italy, Lyes is fluent in English, French and Italian. His Spanish is a work in progress.

The Mafia Covid Allegiance

Siobhan Bahl

The Italian mafia has always thrived in a climate of crisis. The world-wide lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic has seen the unfurling of a crisis on multiple planes. Italy, one of the most hard-hit countries went into nationwide lockdown in March 2020. This Easter Italy is set for half of its 20 regions to re-enter the 'red-zone', returning to some of the tightest lockdown restrictions. It is in this climate of death and suffering that the Covid-19 virus has forged an allegiance with the Italian mafia. Hand in hand the two have infiltrated and infected all levels of society. Somewhat invisible, equally as dangerous, the R rate of the mafia has grown in tandem with the virus.

Capitalising on the fragile informal Italian economy, many of Italy's leading mafia experts fear that the COVID-19 pandemic has given the mafia the perfect opportunity to burrow into the economic infrastructure of Italy.

As Sofia Bettiza wrote for the BBC World Service, "the ability to get a foothold in the formal economy, in the day to day ordinary business is precisely the sort of camouflage large mobs need, especially the mafia with such a strong public image" (2020). The Mafia has thrived in an atmosphere of resentment to an Italian government which had to make cuts, take away freedoms and limit business activity. In a period of absence, the mafia with excess expendable funds has been able to offer immediate 'help' to small and medium business owners with no other choice. The pandemic hit off the back of several years of low employment and slow economic growth in Italy, catapulting many small business holders into the realm of desperation. As one restaurant owner in Palermo told Bettiza "Right now my business is sinking. And when someone throws a life vest at you, you can either choose to drown with your ideals, or swim" (2020). The Italian government has been unable to help everyone, with 3.3 million workers engaged in Italy's informal economy, roughly worth 211 billion euros, many have been excluded from the governmental financial support schemes. This exclusion, the sink or swim predicament has given the Italian mafia access to a vulnerable community (Nazzaro et al., 2020, 1).

Investing and loaning money to informal workers and small businesses is the perfect method of camouflage for Italy's most wanted organised crime network. The wealth that mafioso have at their disposal is enormous, one syndicate in Calabria, the 'Ndrangheta generate 30 billion euros from the cocaine trade a year (Nazzaro et al., 2020,4). With such huge sums of expendable income at their fingertips, the benefits vastly outweigh the risks when it comes to investing in an economy in crisis. Gaining such a foothold in the economy is the exact disguise needed by the mafia, one which hides the illicit proceeds. As Sergio Nazzaro, an adviser to the Parliamentary Anti-Mafia Commission put, when people live in an economic crisis "there will be a gap and as always, the mafia will find its way in" (Klein, 2020).

It is in this way that the mafia mimics their partner in crime, the Covid-19 virus. The mafia have taken on a similarly invisible cloak, ever present yet hidden to the common eye. Mafia killing has gone down by an estimated 90%, yet fraud has gone up 6.5%. Moreover, the Bank of Italy has reported an increase of 7% in suspicious financial operations (Follain & Migliaccio, 2021). These are markers that the mafia virus is still pulsating in the economic fabric of Italy, thriving from financial exploitation.

This involvement in lawful businesses masquerading the criminal activities of the mafia is of particular concern with the enrolment of the European Crisis Recovery Fund. The Fund of 1.8 trillion euros will be dispersed across struggling firms and businesses across Europe. With criminal mafia groups, particularly in the southern Calabria region and Cosa Nostra in Sicily, imbedded into the local economy there is a likely danger that they will be first in line to get the EU aid (Follain & Migliaccio, 2021). This poses a difficult conundrum to the Italian government. On the one hand, increased anti-mafia checks could be implemented in the roll out of financial aid. However, Italy already fails to spend much of the structural funds it receives from the EU. By the end of 2019 only 30.7% of allocated funds had been used. Therefore, can the country really afford to risk stalling the implementation of crisis support to an economy which has contracted by 8.9% since the pandemic hit? (Follain & Migliaccio, 2021). Moreover, the government will play into the 'abandoning the people' narrative which the mafia thrives from if they withhold support which has been made publicly aware.

Yet the other side of the coin falls on risking bolstering the strength of the mafia even more.

This is where Federico Cafiero de Raho, the Italian national Anti-Mafia and Counter-Terrorism Public Prosecutor appeals to the Italian people. In the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime article 'A Parallel Contagion' he stated "I believe that every citizen has a crucial role to play...I am talking about reporting to the authorities" he goes on to say "sometimes, a single report is enough to form the basis of an investigation" (Nazzaro et al., 2020, 10).

As much as we must all have faith that lockdown restrictions and the mapped out vaccination schemes will see the defeat of the pandemic, the Italian people must apply the same trust in the government when it comes to the mafia. The question is how long will it be before the right vaccine is found to eradicate the Italian mafia's presence?

The 'Ndrangheta: The Epitome of *Glocal* Crime

Alex Carter

In 2013, a Calabrian organised crime group (OCG) made an estimated annual turnover of €53bn. For perspective, that equates to more than the turnover of Deutsche Bank and MacDonald's combined in that same year (The Guardian, 2014). Yet, despite the enormity of its financial assets, many of us are unlikely to have heard of the organisation behind this considerable criminal capital. They are called the 'Ndrangheta or known at other points in history as the 'Honoured Society'. Despite a relatively contemporary emergence into concerns of international crime they have operated for as long as the Italian state has existed. Their sudden emergence as a dominant organisation in the international crime hierarchy, surpassing the more commonly known Sicilian Cosa Nostra, has raised many questions. How did a mafia-like organisation based in Italy's historically poorest region come to undermine the Italian government in plain sight? What solutions in law enforcement, if any, are being put into practice? And finally, what has been the consequences of a pandemic on Italy's fiercest crime group?

To trace the roots of the 'Ndrangheta, we must return to Toledo, Spain. Here in 1412 a bunch of rag-tag criminals established an association specialised in the profitable arena of gambling. What was originally known as the Garduna then transferred its base of operations to the geographically diverse and financially poor Southern Italian region of Calabria. The poverty-stricken region then fast became host to a network of kidnappings and ransom payments (The Guardian, 2014). And thus, the beginnings of one of the world's most powerful crime organisations were established. However, their ascent to dominance as a global crime organisation is a far more recent affair. A report produced in 2013 saw Europol outline the evolution of the 'Ndrangheta from 1970s. It concluded that the almost exclusive focus of the Italian state on bringing the Cosa Nostra to justice in the 80s and 90s gave the 'Ndrangheta 'room to grow' (Europol, 2013). This also aligned with the overturning of illegal narcotics markets in the 1970s. Whereas the main demand had previously been for heroine, and fulfilled by the Sicilian mafia, the 80s and 90s saw a boom in European demand for cocaine. The 'Ndrangheta surfaced as the central European crime organisation for Mexican cartels to turn to as a way into European markets. As a result, drug trafficking has remained the OCGs central form of revenue. The research institute Demoskopika estimated that drug trafficking was responsible for over half of 'Ndrangheta's earnings back in 2013 alone.

However, this sharp rise in the international crime hierarchy can also be attributed to the oversight of multiple European governments. The report describes the 'Ndrangheta as being 'long underestimated' due to its relatively rural structural model (Europol, 2013). In terms of evading suspicion as the organisation expanded, its centre of coordination in rural Calabrian hamlets functioned much like camouflage. What appeared as a monolithic Italian crime syndicate, was in fact by the early 2000s a complicated and fragmented network of immersed organisations, situated from Canada to Australia and everywhere in between. Europol disclosed 'Ndrangheta's methods of using well integrated Calabrian communities across the world as 'fertile ground' for an immersion process likened to osmosis by some sociologists (Europol, 2013). The success of the 'Ndrangheta model of operation has even led sociologists and criminologists to establish a new behavioural model. Labelled '*ndranghetism*', the model dictates an organisation's ability to manipulate social networks and relationships (Sergi & Lavorgna, 2016). Crucially, this is not always by

criminal means, as sociologists Anna Sergi and Anita Lavorgna have insisted, stating familial support, marriage between families and even a certain etiquette to follow in society are fundamental principles in the 'Ndrangheta's methods of infusion into a community (Sergi & Lavorgna, 2016, 3). Surprisingly, these indicators of mafia activity in Calabria were only recognised under law as such by the Italian government in 2010. The term 'mafia' indicates a criminal structure that transcends issues of class and blurs the divide between legal and illegal activity (Von Lampe, 2008, 7-17). Thus, it would appear concerning that the Italian government took well over thirty years to identify the 'Ndrangheta as a central mafia organisation.

The failure of the Italian government to tackle 'Ndrangheta's success in the early stages has been echoed in international circles, particularly by United States. A WikiLeaks release back in 2011 revealed several confidential cables (dated December 2008) by an unnamed U.S. official (Malta Independent, 2011). The contents revealed accusations that stated had Calabria not been a part of Italy, it would be considered a "failed state" (Malta Independent, 2011). Corruption of the region's politicians, port officials and an undermanned prosecutor's office amongst other things were noted as failures of the Italian state. These explicit accusations are difficult to ignore, particularly when the Demoskopika report calculated 'Ndrangheta's annual revenue in 2013 was the equivalent of 3.5% of Italy's GDP (The Guardian, 2014). Law enforcement and judicial positions in Calabria were not the only structures argued to be at fault by the cables. The leak exposed a direct attack on the federal government in Rome for not providing adequate assistance and earning the title "dysfunctional." However, despite the controversy of the leak, it may well have contributed to a nationwide crackdown on 'Ndrangheta activity in Italy in more recent years. The urban centre of the region, Reggio Calabria, has since evolved into a fortress for prosecution and law enforcement, filled with soldiers and carabinieri. Since the leaked report, the Italian government has arrested nearly 400 members of the organisation and crucially in mid-January at the start of this year opened the biggest mafia trial in decades. The inquiry is expected to last two years and has already exposed corruption at the highest levels of government. A lawyer and former senator for ex-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia party, Giancarlo Pittelli, has been named amongst others. The charges range from control of cocaine entering Europe from South America, to murder, loan sharking and extortion. The progression of this trial, the largest of its kind since tackling Cosa Nostra in the 1980s, would generally indicate that 'Ndrangheta's period of dominance may be coming to a gradual end.

And to the untrained eye, the COVID-19 pandemic might be considered a timely second nail in the coffin for the 'Ndrangheta. Surely as transnational corporations struggle to import and export goods, an organisation reliant on drug trafficking and illegal waste disposal would suffer similar setbacks? Unfortunately, however, this has not appeared to have been the case. It is no secret that early on in the pandemic Italy's death toll dwarfed the rest of Western Europe (Bettiza, 2020). It has also struggled to accelerate economic growth since 2008, with unemployment rife across the country. Amidst growing pressure from the authorities, the 'Ndrangheta may well have found a way to exploit the borderline apocalyptic experience of coronavirus. And it is not necessarily via new methods. The mob has often upheld a lifeline-like distribution of food and essentials to the poor to build rapport with local communities and often to establish an "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine" system (Bettiza, 2020). The price with which financial assistance comes is a considerable one. Minor return favours can include voting a certain way in local or general elections. More commonly, mafiosos look for small business that require assistance. In turn, that business becomes a front

for money laundering operations. A concern, not only for the Italian state, but governments worldwide, is that if the 'Ndrangheta maintain a concrete foothold in the villages and towns of Calabria, the 60,000 criminals across thirty countries can continue to uphold the threateningly extensive crime network due to the *glocal* structure of the organisation.

Therefore, even with the so-far fruitful inquiry of the 400, amidst the 'Ndrangheta's exploitation of the ongoing pandemic it is difficult to ignore the words of Federico Varese, a professor of criminology at Oxford. He definitively states that "you can throw them in jail but if you don't take away the root cause of why they exist, they'll just reproduce." (BBC News, 2021) Worryingly, he appears to be correct. Even with so many high-ranking clan members providing testimonials in a fortified courtroom in Reggio Calabria, the 'Ndrangheta continues to evolve and expand right under our noses. Furthermore, the economic downturn that the world will be left with in the wake of the pandemic, a rival to the Wall Street Crash, will see swathes of poor Italian's and other nationalities across the world exposed to potential exploitation by the 'Ndrangheta. The COVID-19 pandemic may well have offered the already elusive OCG another opportunity to reinforce its dominance in the international crime hierarchy.

A practitioners perspective: wildlife, forest and fisheries crime

Interview with Lejda Toci, a Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

‘Each of us can do their share in addressing these crimes, by being a responsible consumer and being careful of the origin and nature of products we buy or consume.’

‘The pandemic we are living in is an example of how, deforestation and wild-life trafficking are affecting all of us.’

Bio: Lejda Toci is an experienced professional in diplomacy, international NGO’s, and the private sector in the areas of global security, environmental crime, and multilateral diplomacy.

This interview is given in a personal capacity, the views expressed are not of the United Nations.

How has your academic background in environmental sciences and international Affairs helped you in your current work at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime?

My postgraduate studies at the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna in a multi-disciplinary field that combines environmental sciences and diplomacy have been an excellent guidance in my current career. What one often sees when following the current discussions in relation to the major environmental issues such as the climate crisis, is that there is a division between the scientific view and the view of politicians and decision-makers. The very different and often irreconcilable perspective of these two key groups have perhaps contributed to the very alarming situation in which our planet finds itself today, where development has not been sustainable for a long time and action to address this matter not sufficient. It has also made the negotiations on important environmental agreements extremely difficult and lengthy. There is therefore a clear need to equip policymakers with the scientific knowledge to understand the environmental challenges the world is facing, and also to equip scientists with the necessary knowledge and set of skills to engage in the difficult task of policymaking successfully. Having a scientific background myself, I have very much benefited from diplomatic training, and can confidently say that it has enabled me to navigate the difficult environment of multilateral organizations more confidently.

You work at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, focusing on the area of wildlife, forest and fisheries crime. What are these crimes and how do they link to the mandate of the UNODC on addressing transnational organized crime?

Yes, I currently work as Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Officer and the UNODC, based at the headquarters of the organization in Vienna, Austria. The Global Programme I am working at, is focused on

supporting member States to combat wildlife, forest and fisheries crime, as well as other crimes that have an impact on the environment. It is a fascinating and very important area of work, which is gaining more and more momentum worldwide. For a long time these crimes have been considered as “low priority” and have not been considered as “serious crimes”. For this reason, it has over time turned into a “low risk high reward” industry. Research shows that wildlife trafficking is today the fourth most profitable global crime, after the trafficking of arms, humans and drugs. These crimes are frequently linked with other forms of serious crime such as fraud, money laundering, and corruption. Therefore, the UNODC as a guardian of the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the UN Convention against Corruption has a key role to play in supporting countries to address these crimes that not only negatively impact the planet, but also socio-economic development and security. They undermine biodiversity, trade, economic development, security and human health.

What is the scale of these crimes?

The magnitude of wildlife, forest and fisheries related crimes is not always fully appreciated as illegal operations are often concealed in trade relations, transnational transportation networks, financial sectors and legitimate businesses with clandestine connections to criminal networks. In addition to long established illicit markets, new illicit markets are constantly emerging and pushing species into the endangered category, for example the European eel, among others.

World Wildlife Fund, in its Living Planet Report estimated that Earth has lost 52% of its wildlife over the past 40 years. According to another report from Global Forest Watch, we lost globally close to 12 million hectares of tree cover in 2019, of which 3.9 million hectares was primary forest. That equates to the size of one soccer field of forest being lost every 6 seconds. This results to a striking 50% of timber supplies in some areas provided by illegal forestry. If we look at the fisheries sector, it is estimated that one third of global fish catch comes from illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. In fact, a recent study by the Guardian found that nearly 40% of the fish products in markets and restaurants are mislabeled. The thousands of species that are at the brink of extinction are not only a concern for the health of the ocean, but also for millions of people whose livelihoods and food security is closely linked to the fishing industry. If we also factor in other crimes that impact the environment such as waste trafficking, and illegal mining, the magnitude of these crimes is even bigger and more alarming.

What threats to security do, for example, wildlife, forest and fisheries crimes produce?

Environmental crimes have an impact on the environment, development, and security. They decimate wildlife and fisheries populations as well as forest cover, negatively affecting biodiversity and climate change. Illegal timber trade, for example, not only threatens protected forests and their habitats, but also drives down the price of timber on international markets, undercutting legal industry and making it even more difficult to compete on the global market.

Moreover, the pandemic we are living in is an example of how deforestation and wild-life trafficking are affecting all of us.

Lastly, we see that wildlife, forest, and fisheries crime, undermines rule of law, destabilizes governments, empowers criminals and fuels other crimes. The billions of dollars generated by this illegal business are being used to further nefarious ends. In some cases, money goes to financing terrorism and contributing to instability. These crimes are also convergent with other serious crimes such as arms, human, and drugs trafficking.

Are many states failing to tackle environmental crimes?

Crimes that affect the environment are particularly acute in countries that are under resourced and where Governments lack the capacity to regulate the exploitation of their natural resources. Rather than promoting economic progress, poorly managed natural resources can lead to bad governance, corruption, or even violent conflict. This is also a transboundary issue, as most of the biodiversity hotspots and critical freshwater ecosystems are transboundary. The crimes taking place in one country impact other countries, making these crimes a regional concern.

When we talk about wildlife, forest and fisheries crime, most of us consider it a problem that only concerns Africa and Asia, as the biggest source and destination markets for the trafficking of iconic species such as elephants, rhinos and tigers. But we must recognize that this is very much a problem that concerns the whole world. For example, Europe is a source, transit, and destination of illegal trafficked wildlife, timber and fish. For example, according to the last findings of the UNODC World Wildlife Crime report, the EU is considered the top global importer in terms of value of wildlife, ranging from live reptiles and birds to caviar and reptile skins. The EU is the source region for glass eels, a transit region for ivory, and a destination region for live pets and exotic flora. It is also a major transit for bushmeat.

While progress is being made in enforcement of wildlife crime, new species are emerging as at risk from the illegal wildlife trade on a regular basis. Such is the case with glass eels, that are trafficked from their breeding grounds in Europe to Asian luxury fish markets.

This uptick in illegal trade shows the caveats in increased protection for species without proper measures put in place for demand reduction or thought given to alternative sources of supply. Thankfully, the increasing number of seizures and recent successful prosecutions of traffickers also suggests that enforcement efforts are ongoing to ensure the species are adequately protected, despite strong incentives to poach them.

How do you at UNODC work to combat these issues?

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime takes this issue with great concern and respect. The UNODC is the Secretariat for the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the UN Convention against Corruption.

UNODC Global Wildlife and Forest Crime Programme provides policy guidance and technical assistance to the governments, working with the wildlife law enforcement community and the criminal justice system to prevent and stop wildlife and fisheries crime, as well as illegal logging.

This specific approach can be visualized as “from crime scene to court.” We seek to ensure that wildlife, forest, and fisheries crimes are no longer low-risk, high-profit activities. We also work for and with the national line agencies in a country and we work to motivate countries to recognize that these crimes are serious transnational organized crimes.

For example, my portfolio includes coordinating a project supporting developing countries to address crimes in the fisheries sector and recognize the impacts they have on the economies and livelihoods of coastal communities. This is achieved through support for strengthening their legal systems, capacity building for investigators, prosecutors, anti-corruption and awareness raising. This is done by analyzing the whole fisheries value chain of one country and identifying potential vulnerabilities and entry points for crimes such as fraud and forgery, corruption, tax crimes, trafficking in persons, amongst others. Considering the high complexity of the fisheries sector and its strategic importance for coastal countries and the livelihoods of millions of people, it is crucial to address illegality in the sector and recognize that there is need to complement the traditional fisheries management approach with a criminal justice approach.

What are the main challenges to tackling these crimes?

Corruption is one of the main enablers of wildlife, forest and fisheries crime at the global level. Criminals thrive on corruption as it enables them to commit, conceal, and avoid conviction for their crimes. Without tackling corruption, these sectors are left vulnerable to organized criminal activities. In other words, all other efforts to combat wildlife, forest and fisheries crime will fail unless corruption is addressed.

Crimes related to the environment and natural resources crimes would not be possible without a network of corrupt officials, who can be bribed to falsify paperwork, licenses, or to look the other way to ensure a shipment is not seized.

To remain in illicit business, perpetrators of wildlife crime must identify ways to avoid getting caught. Therefore, there will always be a risk that corruption is used to facilitate crime, as criminals engage in corrupt activities in order to reduce the likelihood of their illegal activities being detected or punished.

As mentioned earlier, the lack of awareness of the serious nature of these crimes is also one of the main challenges that are faced, leading to an often-weak response and low understanding of the impacts they have on the environment.

What can be done to address these crimes?

First of all, we need to raise awareness on the serious nature of wildlife, forest and fisheries crime and their links to security not only amongst the government agencies but also the public. Each of us can do their share in addressing these crimes, by being a responsible consumer, for example being careful to the origin and

nature of products we buy or consume. For example, pangolin or shark fin soup is unfortunately still on the menu in a number of countries in the world, and so are ivory products. It is important to know that we contribute to illegal activities by buying these products. The demand for these products is the cause of their existence, and therefore the role of us as consumers is key.