

Brexit: disorganized on crime

As an antidote to the trivia which infests the legacy media, it was almost a relief yesterday to see a serious piece in the *Guardian website* for publication today in the *Observer*.

Headlined, “Colombia’s cartels target Europe with cocaine, corruption, and torture”, it tells the story of how armed Belgian police raids had “lifted the lid on a sinister new front in the drugs war”, retailing the details of “Operation Sky” where 1,600 police officers were ordered into action around the Belgian port city of Antwerp.

This was cited as the largest police operation ever conducted in the country and potentially one of the most significant moves yet against the increasingly powerful narco-gangs of western Europe. And, with that, there are hopes that the operation will herald the downfall of a generation of local bosses, although the Belgian and Dutch “godfathers” largely now hide out in Dubai and Turkey, hoping to be out of reach of the authorities.

The mystery about the piece though is that the paper has chosen to publish it now when the details were in the public domain over a month ago.

But, while the narrative offered covers a victory for the forces of law and order, the article would have made much more sense if it had been cross-referenced to a report issued just a week ago by Europol, its Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment, for the European Union, known as the EU SOCTA 2021.

The assessment is published every four years but this year the working title is “A corrupting influence: the infiltration and undermining of Europe’s economy and society by organized crime”. It details the operations of criminal networks in the EU and how their criminal activities and business practices threaten to undermine its societies, economy, and institutions, and slowly erode the rule of law.

It provides “unprecedented insights into Europe’s criminal underworld based on the analysis of thousands of cases and pieces of intelligence provided to Europol”, revealing a concerning expansion and evolution of serious and organized crime in the EU.

The document thus warns of the potential long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and how these may create ideal conditions for crime to thrive in the future, highlighting serious and organized crime as the key internal security challenge currently facing the EU and its Member States.

From this, it concludes that serious and organized crime has never posed as high a threat to the EU and its citizens as it does today, stating that the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential economic and social fallout expected to follow threaten to create ideal conditions for organized crime to spread and take hold in the EU and beyond.

Once more confirmed by the pandemic, the report states, a key characteristic of criminal networks is their agility in adapting to and capitalizing on changes in the environment in which they operate. Obstacles become criminal opportunities.

Like a business environment, the core of a criminal network is composed of managerial layers and field operators. This core is surrounded by a range of actors linked to the crime infrastructure providing support services. With nearly 40 percent of the criminal networks active in drugs trafficking, the production and trafficking of drugs remains the largest criminal business in the EU.

The trafficking and exploitation of human beings, migrant smuggling, online and offline frauds, and property crime pose significant threats to EU citizens. Criminals employ corruption. Almost 60 percent of the criminal networks reported engage in corruption.

Criminals make and launder billions of euros annually. The scale and complexity of money laundering activities in the EU have previously been underestimated. Professional money launderers have established a parallel underground financial system and use any means to infiltrate and undermine Europe's economies and societies.

Legal business structures are used to facilitate virtually all types of criminal activity with an impact on the EU. More than 80 percent of the criminal networks active in the EU use legal business structures for their criminal activities. The use of violence by criminals involved in serious and organized crime in the EU appears to have increased in terms of the frequency of use and its severity. The threat from violent incidents has been augmented by the frequent use of firearms or explosives in public spaces.

The final point it makes is that criminals are digital natives. Virtually all criminal activities now feature some online component and many crimes have fully migrated online. Criminals exploit encrypted communications to network among each other, use social media and instant messaging services to reach a larger audience to advertise illegal goods, or spread disinformation.

Although written in the context of the European Union, it would be unwise to the point of foolhardy to assume that this problem stopped at the Channel. By way of a small example, we see another report in the *Guardian* covering the trafficking of a Vietnamese boy into Britain.

The boy, the paper says, was one of the hundreds of children trafficked from Vietnam every year and forced to work in hidden cannabis farms across the UK: small cogs in the vast criminal machine that supplies Britain's £2.6 billion cannabis black market. It is quite stunning to find that just this small segment of the UK drug market is worth this much, the illegal drugs market itself being just one part of the vast international enterprise that is organized crime.

The reports themselves reminded me that I had addressed the issue in Flexcit, where I wrote that, according to the UN Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC), annual turnover of transnational organized criminal activities such as drug trafficking, counterfeiting, illegal arms trade, and the smuggling of immigrants is around \$870 billion.

That was in 2009, and even then it was this was six times the amount of official development assistance, comparable to 1.5 percent of the global domestic product, or seven percent of the world's exports of merchandise.

Drug trafficking was the most lucrative form of business for criminals, with an then estimated value of \$320 billion a year. Human trafficking brought in about \$32 billion annually, while some estimates placed the global value of smuggling of migrants at \$7 billion per year. At \$250 billion a year, counterfeiting was also a high earner for organized crime groups.

In the context of Brexit, I wrote, the problem is that attempts to free up the international movement of goods often have the unfortunate side-effect of creating opportunities for criminals. Therefore, no independent trading policy can be complete without structured components aimed at reducing system vulnerabilities and improving enforcement, all directed at containing the growth in transnational organized crime (TOC).

There is simply no point in freeing up trade and reducing “red tape”, I asserted, if the main beneficiaries are criminals of one type or another. Better constructed cost/benefit analyses might lead the way here, costing in the impact of criminal activities, and policing to set against benefits which might accrue to the legitimate economy.

One important issue here is freeports, a cornerstone of the Johnson administration’s post-Brexit policy yet, as recently as last year we were advised that Brussels was clamping down on 82 free ports or free zones after identifying that their special tariff and duty status has aided the financing of terrorism, money laundering, and organized crime.

While many might argue – with some justice – that the Johnson administration itself is an offshoot of organized crime, one wonders whether the implications of the Europol report are being factored into UK planning.

The latest UK strategy document I can find is from October 2013, pre-dating Brexit by many years, and in 2019 the National Crime Agency was warning that Britain risked losing fight against organized crime.

Then the NCA’s director-general, Lynne Owens, was warning that the threat from organized crime groups was at unprecedented levels. “It is chronic and corrosive. The message needs to be heard by everyone”, she was saying. Yet nothing since then seems to have changed the situation and, if the Europol warnings are to be heeded, COVID is a serious complicating factor.

Back in 2013, when I wrote Flexcit, I posited that asked the extent to which the situation could be improved by the efforts of a single country was questionable but nevertheless argued that an independent Britain would have greater freedom to raise issues in global forums than as part of the EU, where the “common position” dictated the line taken.

Where the balance of advantage lay, I mooted, was “unknown”, so I suggested that there was a debate which must be had before Britain could determine its own priorities and the direction of its post-exit settlement.

So far, I see no signs of that debate taking place and, from this current administration, there is no expectation that we will see anything of consequence. This, it would seem, another corner of Brexit that has been left to fester from the

incompetence of its progenitors, so much so that it scarcely registers with our political masters.

How long this can last, we can only guess. But if the issue continues to be neglected, about the only thing organized left in this country will be crime.

Also published on *Turbulent Times*.

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