Dismantling Organised Crime

In Physical and Digital Environments

powered by phygital-oc

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INSIDE EUROPE'S HIDDEN THREAT

UNDERSTANDING ETHNIC MAFIA-STYLE CRIME

phygital-project.eu

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This magazine launches at a time when organised crime is becoming more complex, more connected and more difficult to see, yet its impact is felt across communities, institutions and borders.

Our aim is simple: to shine a spotlight on the problem, explore how it is changing, and share the experiences of those working every day to understand it and tackle it.

PHYGITAL is not just another publication about organised crime. It is a space for voices from across the Phygital-OC Alliance – including law enforcement professionals, civil society organisations, researchers, practitioners and project partners – to share their first-hand experiences and perspectives on the problem. Through this magazine, we want to bring those perspectives together, create space for reflection and exchange, and help build a clearer picture of what ethnic mafia-style organised crime looks like today.

Each issue will dive deeper into key aspects of the problem, the response and the solutions being developed. You will find a mix of articles, interviews, case studies, features and resources. Some contributions explore big-picture trends, such as how transnational networks are reshaping the criminal landscape or how digital technologies are being exploited. Others focus on lived experience, from frontline investigations to organisations supporting victims of trafficking. We also include practical insights, research highlights and project updates to help connect knowledge with action.

This first issue, *Inside Europe's Hidden Threat: Understanding Ethnic Mafia-Style Crime*, reflects that diversity. From analysis of digital transformation and cross-border security, to interviews, features and personal accounts, it offers different ways of understanding a complex problem. It also showcases the work of Alliance members and partners who are developing innovative approaches, supporting affected communities, and contributing to change on the ground.

Thank you for reading, and welcome to the first issue.

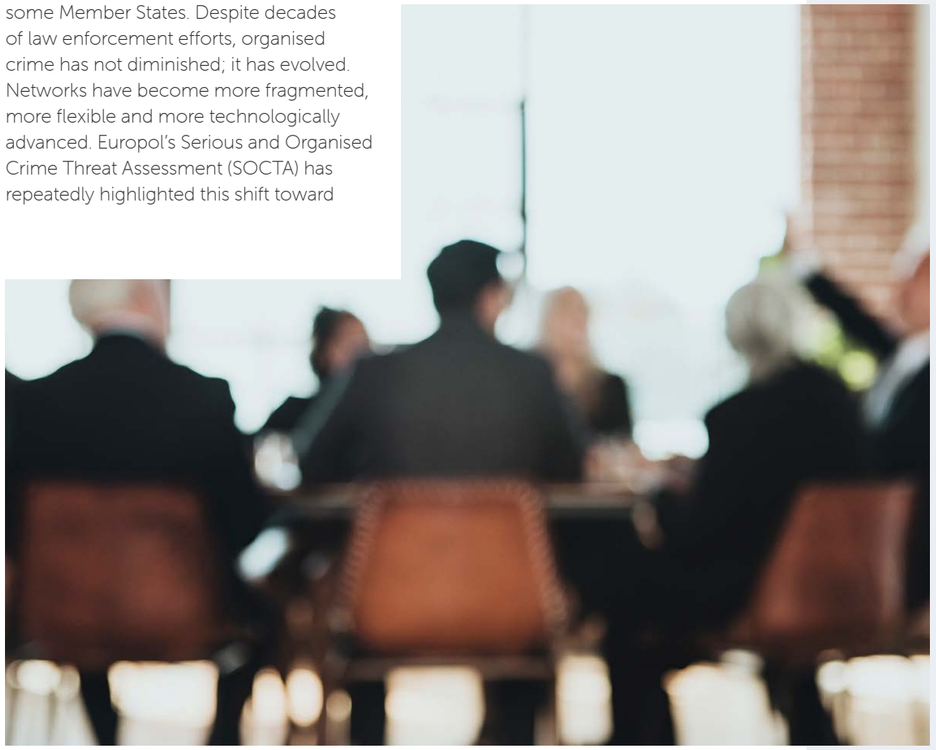
ORGANISED CRIME IN A PHYGITAL WORLD

Organised crime is not a distant or abstract problem confined to police investigations and courtrooms.

Organised crime impacts individuals, communities, and public institutions across Europe. It affects local economies, distorts markets, and undermines trust in government and public services. Its presence also fuels corruption and, in some cases, violence, while exposing vulnerable people to exploitation. Much of this is enabled by gaps in regulations, weak oversight, and uneven law enforcement between countries.

The scale of the problem is significant. Europol estimates that the main criminal markets operating within the European Union generate up to €188 billion in illicit profits each year – a figure comparable to the national budget of some Member States. Despite decades of law enforcement efforts, organised crime has not diminished; it has evolved. Networks have become more fragmented, more flexible and more technologically advanced. Europol's Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) has repeatedly highlighted this shift toward decentralised, digitally enabled criminal activity that is harder to detect, disrupt and dismantle.

Within this broader landscape, ethnic mafia-style organised crime groups pose a particular challenge. Unlike loose criminal networks, these organisations are often built around family ties, community bonds and shared identity. These relationships create strong loyalty, discourage cooperation with authorities and make infiltration extremely difficult. The Italian mafias – Cosa Nostra, Camorra and 'Ndrangheta – remain the most widely known examples of this model, but they are not the only ones. Albanian, Turkish and other ethnically cohesive criminal groups have developed similarly structured networks that now operate across multiple European countries.



These groups are particularly effective at building influence at the local level. By investing in businesses and real estate, they can become embedded in local economies and communities. This allows them to exert control without always using visible violence, relying instead on corruption, intimidation and economic dependency. From this position of local influence, they engage in polycrimes – including drug trafficking, human trafficking and money laundering – often in ways that remain largely out of public view.

These groups are also highly transnational. Their activities stretch far beyond their countries of origin, connecting Africa, the Balkans and Europe through complex smuggling routes. Major European ports, transport hubs and logistics centres have become critical nodes in these illicit supply chains. Many criminal operations are concealed behind legitimate businesses, making detection more difficult – a pattern widely documented by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).

Financial systems play a central role in sustaining organised crime. Networks rely on shell companies, informal banking systems and sophisticated money-laundering techniques to move and conceal profits across borders. At the same time, fragmented legal frameworks and inconsistent levels of international cooperation continue to create safe spaces where criminal assets can be hidden.

Sergio Bianchi
Agenfor International

Organised Crime in a Phygital World

Victims of trafficking and exploitation suffer severe physical and psychological harm. Communities affected by organised crime experience fear, corruption and declining trust in public institutions. Environmental crimes, such as illegal waste dumping, damage ecosystems and pose long-term risks to public health.

In the past decade, organised crime groups (OCGs) have increasingly merged physical and digital operations. These groups use encrypted messaging platforms to coordinate activities, reducing their reliance on face-to-face meetings. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat have become recruitment tools, particularly for young and vulnerable individuals who are drawn in by images of wealth and status.

At the same time, some groups are experimenting with cryptocurrencies, dark web marketplaces and emerging technologies, such as AI, to obscure identities and automate parts of their operations. Europol has warned that this blending of online and offline crime – often described as "hybrid" or "phygital" crime – requires new investigative approaches beyond traditional policing.

Behind these structures are real human consequences. Victims of trafficking and exploitation suffer severe physical and psychological harm. Communities affected by organised crime experience fear, corruption and declining trust in public institutions. Environmental crimes, such as illegal waste dumping, damage ecosystems and pose long-term risks to public health – issues repeatedly highlighted in GI-TOC research on environmental crime in Europe.

Addressing this challenge requires more than conventional law enforcement alone. It demands stronger cross-border cooperation, better information sharing and closer collaboration between police, judicial authorities, researchers and civil society.

This is the rationale behind the Phygital-OC project, an EU-funded initiative led by the Central Operational Service of the Italian Ministry of the Interior. The project brings together law enforcement agencies, academic institutions and civil society organisations from across Europe to Dismantle Organised Crime in Europe and beyond.

Through active exchange of information, insight, and intelligence, the project aims to build a deeper understanding of how transnational criminal networks operate in both the physical and digital world. On this basis, it will use advanced technologies to better track and monitor these networks, and will establish rapid response centres and specialised teams of analysts and investigators to carry out joint investigations across borders.

By strengthening coordination and collaboration across Europe, Phygital-OC seeks to make communities safer and more secure for everyone.

Sergio Bianchi is a Board Member and Director of Research and Innovation at Agenfor International, an Italian NGO specialising in participative security, international law, and human rights. Agenfor is a lead partner delivering the Phygital-OC project.

PODCAST EPISODE 1 ETHNIC MAFIA STYLE CRIME

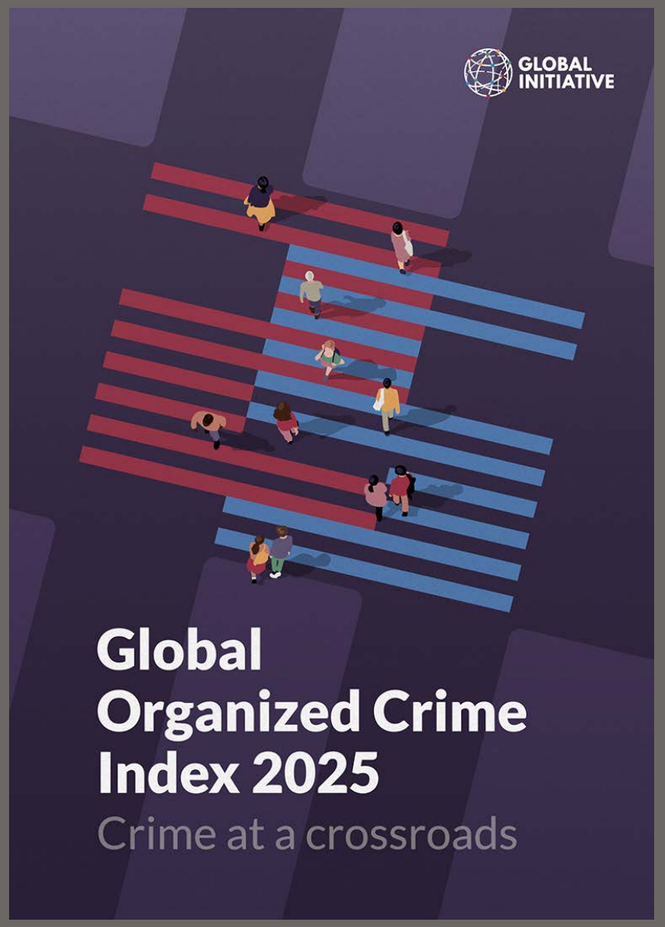
Phygital-OC has launched a new podcast series that brings together experts and practitioners from across Europe to explore the growing threat of ethnic mafia-style organised crime.

In this first episode, we hear how criminal networks operate across borders, their links to drug trafficking and human trafficking, and how they use digital technologies to organise and expand their activities. The discussion also looks at the real-world impact of organised crime, the challenges faced by law enforcement, and why understanding the link between physical and digital crime is essential. Featuring voices from Italy, Greece and the Western Balkans, the podcast offers an accessible introduction to the project's work and shows how Phygital-OC is building knowledge, strengthening cooperation and developing new approaches to help Dismantle Organised Crime.

Watch the podcast in full...

GAP BETWEEN CRIMINALITY AND RESILIENCE IS WIDENING

Read more...



Just over a third of all 193 UN Member States (66 countries, or 34%) are characterized by high criminality and low resilience (up from 57 countries in 2023)

according to the new Global Organized Crime Index (ocindex.net) released by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). A unique, expert-led assessment of criminal markets, actors, and resilience dynamics worldwide, the third edition of the Index is an x-ray of organized crime in 2024.

Criminal markets are intersecting with global mega-trends, such as dramatic changes in geopolitics, technology, the environment, as well as conflict and instability. *"We now have five years of data that enables us to measure trends. This information shows us that organized crime is not only expanding, it is reorganizing"*, warns Mark Shaw, Director of the GI-TOC.

While state-embedded actors remain the most pernicious type of criminal actor, foreign criminal groups are gaining ground. Financial crime is the most prevalent criminal market in Africa and Europe and is in the top five markets on all continents.

Central America, South America and Western Asia are the regions most impacted by criminality. While organized crime is getting worse, resilience is plateauing. This is opening a dangerous gap, an opportunity space in which organized crime is flourishing.

"Resilience is not keeping pace with criminality", warns Laura Adal, Director of the Global Organized Crime Index. *"Despite this, the Index data shows us where concrete steps can be taken to close this dangerous and widening gap".*

The Phygital-OC Project

Dismantling Organised Crime In Physical and Digital Environments

THE PROBLEM

Ethnic mafia-style OCGs

Organised crime is one of the biggest hidden threats to Europe's security and stability. Ethnic mafia-style OCGs are particularly concerning because their tight-knit family and community ties create highly resilient, hard-to-infiltrate networks. Key characteristics of ethnic mafia-style OCGs – which mirror the four defining characteristics of mafia-style groups: known identity, defined leadership, territorial control, and identifiable membership include:

- *Family, community and/or ethnic ties.*
- *Use of shared identity to build trust and loyalty.*
- *Strong internal cohesion and secrecy.*
- *Territorial influence control.*
- *Embedded in local communities.*
- *Infiltration of local governance structures.*

Poly-crimes

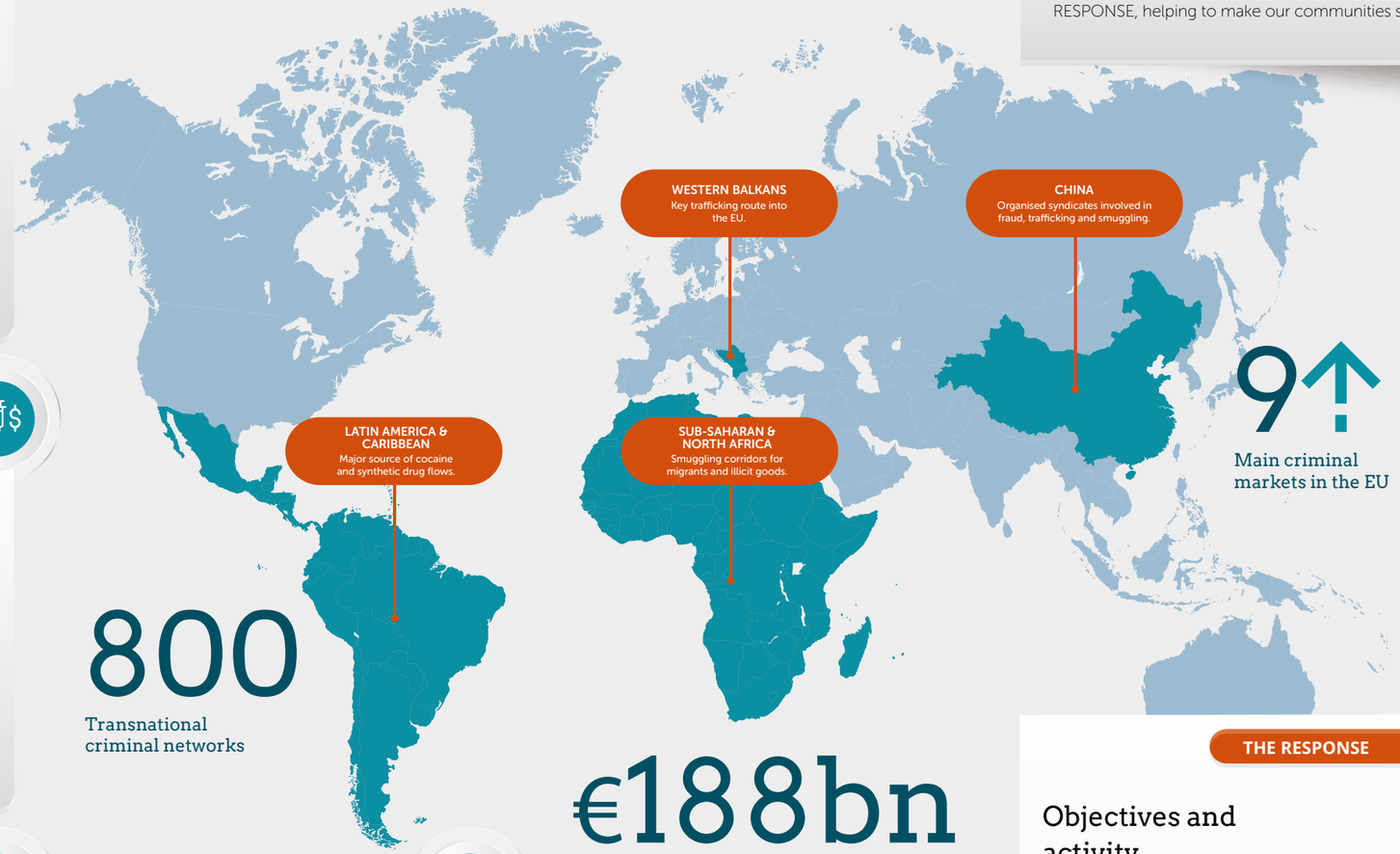
Today ethnic mafia-style OCGs engage in a wide range of criminal activities. This poly-criminal model is typical of modern organised crime ecosystems, which do not specialise but diversify activities to spread risk and expand profits. Crimes include:

- *Drug trafficking.*
- *Human trafficking.*
- *People smuggling.*
- *Money laundering.*
- *Cyber crime.*

The digital dimension

Organised crime in the digital age is now a hybrid threat. OCGs are now 'phygital' actors, operating in both digital and physical environments simultaneously. OCGs groups are exploiting the latest digital technologies to:

- *Coordinate logistics and operations.*
- *Recruit vulnerable individuals online.*
- *Market illicit goods and services.*
- *Facilitate payments and money movements.*
- *Expand reach within and beyond borders.*
- *Conceal identities and evade detection.*



800
Transnational criminal networks

€188bn
Generated by markets

9
Main criminal markets in the EU

Transnational networks

Organised crime groups operate across borders, collaborating with other OCGs to move people, drugs, weapons and illicit goods. These formal and informal transnational networks extend to key source regions around the world, including:

- *Latin America & Caribbean.*
- *Sub-Saharan and North Africa.*
- *China.*
- *Western Balkans.*

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THE SOLUTION

Phygital-OC

Phygital-OC is a new EU-funded project led by the Central Operational Service of the Italian Ministry of the Interior, designed to help dismantle organised crime groups (OCGs) and networks across Europe and beyond.

With a focus on ethnic mafia-style organised crime, the Phygital-OC project will first develop a better understanding of the PROBLEM – including how these OCGs operate across borders and online – and will then create rapid response centres, and train specialised teams of analysts and investigators to conduct joint investigations in RESPONSE, helping to make our communities safer and more secure for everyone.

THE RESPONSE

Objectives and activity

Launched in May 2025, Phygital-OC will bring together a new ALLIANCE of law enforcement agencies, judicial authorities, civil society organisations and others who are individually and collectively committed to Dismantle Organised Crime.

Through an active EXCHANGE of information, insight and intelligence, the project will foster a deeper understanding of the methods used by criminal networks in both the physical and digital world.

It will strengthen international cooperation and deploy advanced technologies to conduct joint investigations.

Research
Desktop analysis to develop shared understanding of ethnic crime - interconnections with drugs and human trafficking, as well as use of tech by OCGs.

Coordination
Organise regional Community of Practice events, bring together law enforcement and civil society to build a shared understanding of the problem.

Technology
Identify, procure and deploy advanced tech which will better track and monitor OCGs and criminal activity online, and support investigations.

Operations
Set-up and equip an Operation Room in Rome, and a number of transnational multi-agency Operational Task Forces (OTFs) in partner countries.

Training
Train OTFs 40 liaison officers in the use of advanced tech for the detection, monitoring and investigation of OCGs and high value targets.

Handbook
Develop a user manual for specialised teams of investigators and analysts on phygital investigations against ethnic organised crime.

Investigations
Identify OCGs in the EU, Western Balkans, Latin America & the Caribbean, and North Afric.
200 analysis on HVTs and 100 investigations.

ORGANISED CRIME IN A DIGITAL AGE

Luke Havill
REOC

Organised crime has entered a new technological phase. What was once primarily a territorial, real-world threat has become a hybrid phenomenon that blends physical control with digital capability – otherwise known as 'phygital'.

Today's organised crime groups (OCGs) are not simply using digital tools – they are structurally dependent on them. This shift has profound implications for how law enforcement and others working to dismantle organised crime must respond.

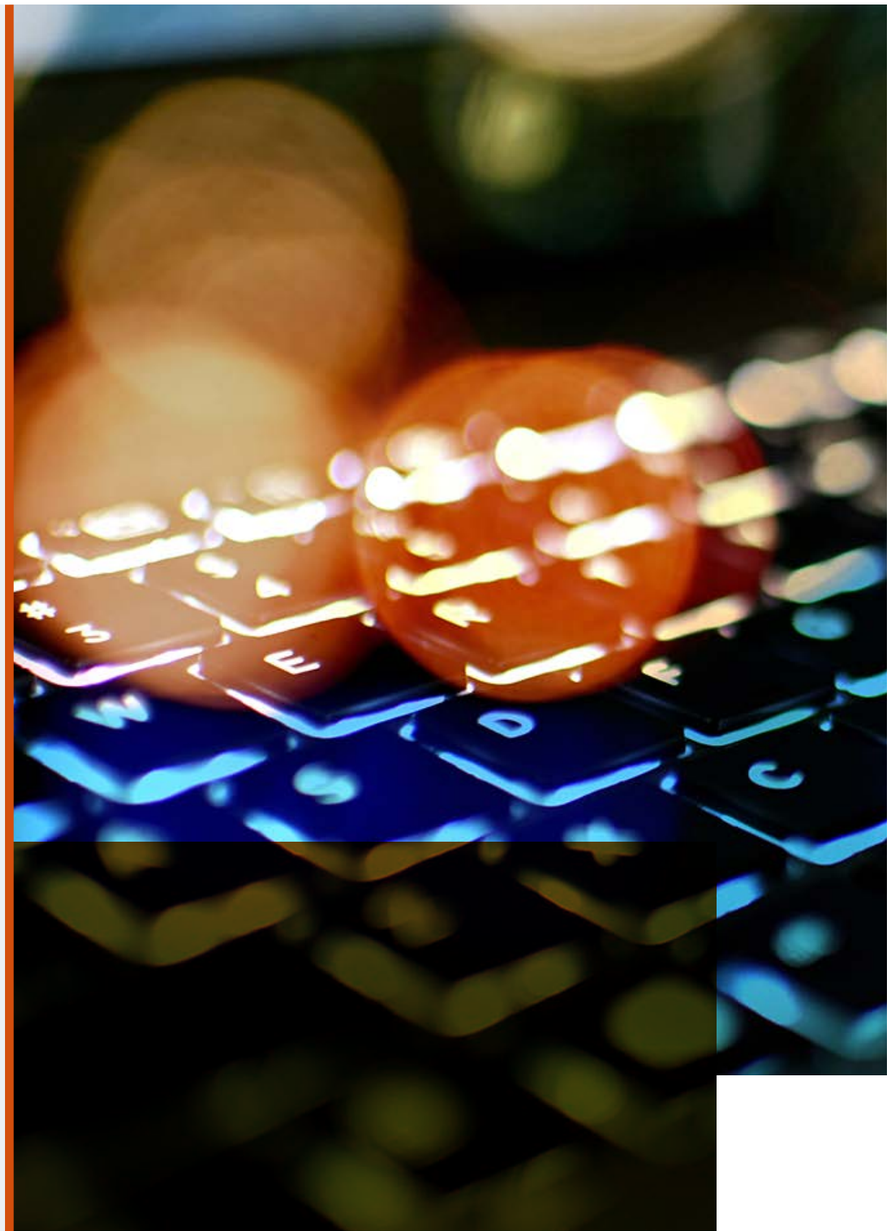
At the operational level, digital technologies now underpin almost every stage of organised criminal activity. Encrypted messaging platforms such as Telegram, Signal and WhatsApp are routinely used to coordinate logistics, manage supply chains and distribute tasks across geographically dispersed networks. Europol has repeatedly highlighted that secure communications are central to cross-border drug trafficking, human smuggling and money laundering operations, enabling criminal actors to operate with speed and reduced risk of detection.[1]

Recruitment has similarly migrated online. Social media platforms – particularly TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat – are increasingly exploited to normalise and glamorise criminal lifestyles. Through curated images of wealth, luxury goods and fast money, OCGs can target vulnerable young people at scale, lowering the threshold for participation in drug distribution, cyber-fraud or courier roles. Research by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) suggests that this digital recruitment ecosystem has created a "fluid workforce" for criminal markets, where individuals can be activated, deployed and discarded with minimal organisational commitment.[2]

Illicit markets have been reshaped by digital technology. Dark web marketplaces – accessed through anonymising tools such as Tor – now enable global trade in drugs, firearms, stolen data and cybercrime services. These platforms operate much like legitimate online shops, using escrow payments, seller ratings and dispute systems. This makes transactions safer for criminals while making it harder for authorities to trace them. Europol's Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment (IOCTA) warns that these ecosystems are becoming more professional and increasingly connected to mainstream digital tools.[3]

Organised crime groups are now using a wide range of digital tools for a wide variety of illicit activities. They exploit cryptocurrencies, online payment apps and informal digital transfer systems to move and hide illegal profits across borders more easily. While most digital payments are legal, these tools make money laundering harder for authorities to detect.

At the same time, criminal networks are adopting modern technologies such as AI and location-based apps. AI is being used to scale up fraud, create convincing deepfakes, and target victims more precisely, while GPS and delivery platforms help criminals move drugs, people and stolen goods more efficiently. As a result, many organised crime groups now operate more like tech-enabled businesses than traditional gangs.



Collectively, these developments point to a structural transformation of organised crime. Digital tools have expanded reach across borders, accelerated decision-making, reduced reliance on physical presence and increased organisational flexibility. The result is a more agile, distributed and adaptive criminal ecosystem that is harder to dismantle through traditional means.

For policymakers and law enforcement, this creates a pressing imperative: responses must be as technologically sophisticated as the threats they seek to counter. To do so, those responsible for dismantling organised crime groups and networks need to deploy advanced technologies to better understand and respond to the problem. This includes improving data collection and analysis, sharing information more effectively across agencies and borders, and investing in specialist digital investigation teams.

It also means working more closely with technology companies, financial institutions and civil society to detect suspicious activity, track illicit finances and protect vulnerable people. In short, tackling modern organised crime requires not only better tools, but stronger cooperation, collaboration and coordination at every level. The challenge is not simply to match criminals technologically, but to build a scale of response so that together we can prevent, detect and disrupt crime in its fully 'phygital' form.

References

1. *Europol, The Changing DNA of Organised Crime in the EU, 2023.*
2. *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), various reports on digitalised criminal markets and recruitment.*
3. *Europol, Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment (IOCTA) 2024.*
4. *Europol, assessments on cryptocurrencies and money laundering (included in IOCTA and SOCTA reports).*
5. *Reuters reporting on Europol warnings regarding AI-driven crime threats (drawing on Europol analysis).*

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF... VINCENZO FUSCO

Inside Italy's fight against organised crime.

From tracking evolving criminal networks to navigating the rapid pace of technological change, the work of modern policing is anything but routine. We spoke with Vincenzo Fusco of the Central Operational Service (SCO) at the Italian Ministry of the Interior, asking ten questions that offer a rare glimpse inside the role of a police officer tackling organised crime.

What does SCO do, and what are the main organised crime challenges in Italy today?
Organised crime in Italy is highly adaptive. These groups are not limited to one activity – they operate across multiple criminal markets at the same time, from trafficking and financial crime to cyber-enabled fraud and the infiltration of legitimate businesses.

What makes them particularly difficult to tackle is their ability to evolve quickly. They exploit digital infrastructures, operate across borders and at the same time maintain very strong local roots. This combination makes detection and evidence gathering increasingly complex.

At SCO, we address these challenges using both traditional investigative approaches and advanced technologies, facing also the evolution of artificial intelligence (AI). Structurally, we are divided into four main areas: one focused on mafia-type organisations such as 'Ndrangheta and Camorra; one on crimes like drug / human trafficking and serious violente crimes; a third – my division – focused on technology and investigative support; and a fourth dedicated to financial crime and cryptocurrencies.

From your perspective in the technology division, how has the threat evolved recently?
Technology is now central to everything we do. It has significantly improved our investigative capabilities – especially in data analysis, communications interception, and digital forensics.

But at the same time, it has made our work more complex. Criminal groups adopt new technologies very quickly – sometimes even faster than law enforcement. So it becomes a constant race to stay ahead.

Artificial intelligence is a good example. Its rapid development has accelerated both sides: it gives us powerful tools, but it also gives criminal networks new ways to operate more efficiently and at scale. We also started studying the evolution of quantum computing, as in a few years this technology will become more common.

What is your role within SCO, and what does your day-to-day work look like?
I'm the Head of Research and Development within the technology division. My team is responsible for identifying, testing and integrating emerging technologies that can support investigations across Italy.

We coordinate closely with police headquarters nationwide, manage procurement processes for specialised tools, and oversee European-funded projects aimed at improving operational capabilities and interoperability with international partners.

A typical day starts with reviewing incoming requests from across the country – both operational and technical. I then assign tasks to my team based on priority and complexity. A large part of the day is also dedicated to coordination calls with international partners and project meetings. We usually end with a review of ongoing activities and alignment on deadlines.

Does technology ultimately make your work easier or harder?
Both. On one hand, it enhances our capabilities enormously. We can analyse large datasets, identify patterns more quickly, and support investigations in ways that were not possible before.

On the other hand, it increases the level of complexity. Criminal organisations have significant financial resources, which means they can access cutting-edge technologies very quickly. There's a common assumption that law enforcement always has the advantage – but that's not necessarily true.

To keep up, we have to constantly monitor new developments, attend international events and continuously evaluate new tools. It's not a one-time effort – it's ongoing.

International cooperation seems central to your work. Why is it so important?
Because organised crime is transnational by nature. No country can effectively tackle it in isolation.

Working with international partners allows us to share intelligence, align technological standards and access broader datasets. It also enables joint operational responses and helps accelerate innovation through shared experience.

In short, cooperation is not optional – it's fundamental.

Who are SCO's key international partners?
We mainly collaborate with other law enforcement agencies, as well as organisations like Europol and Interpol.

In the context of European projects, we also work with prosecutor offices, customs agencies, and occasionally NGOs and academic partners. Each partner brings a different perspective, which strengthens the overall approach.

Can you tell us about some of the projects you're involved in, and the value they bring?
We are currently involved in projects such as Phygital-OC, which focuses on integrating physical and digital investigative environments, and COP-IDEA, which addresses migrant smuggling networks through enhanced data sharing and coordinated investigative methods.

These projects are extremely valuable because they give us access to technologies and capabilities that might not be easily available at a national level. They also strengthen collaboration with European partners.

The result is faster information exchange, improved analytical tools and more effective cross-border investigations.

Beyond the operational benefits, how do these projects help SCO as an organisation?
They significantly improve connectivity.

Through these collaborations, we can exchange information more quickly and work more closely with international partners. We also gain access to advanced tools – such as OSINT platforms and data analysis software – and can integrate them into our workflows.

This makes our investigations more efficient and more coordinated, especially when dealing with cross-border cases.

On a personal level, what is the toughest part of your job?
The hardest part is keeping pace with the speed of technological change.

It's not just about adopting new tools – it's about anticipating how criminal networks will use them. That requires constant learning. We have to follow developments in artificial intelligence, new digital capabilities and emerging technologies almost every day, while remaining within the applicable regulations.

My team is small – just five people – so we have to stay continuously informed. Even a single new development can become critical for investigations, so there's constant pressure to keep up.

What do you enjoy most about your work?
Definitely the international dimension.

I really value the opportunity to connect with partners from other countries and to see how they approach the same challenges. Visiting other countries, understanding their workflows, and exchanging knowledge about technologies and investigative methods – that's the most rewarding part.

It's not just about cooperation; it's about learning from each other and improving together.

THE DUAL FRONT: HOW ORGANIZED CRIME OPERATES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Anna Sergi
University of Bologna

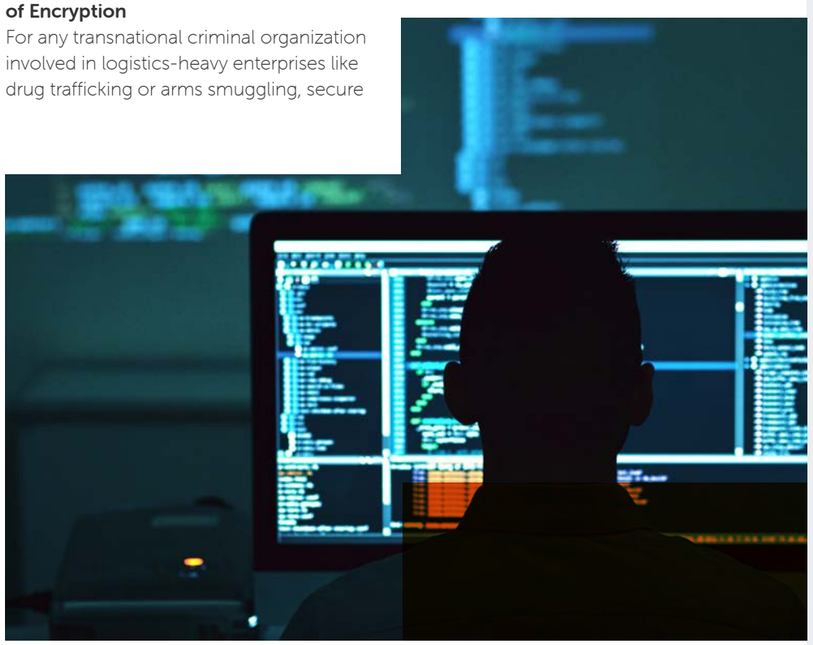
The perception of organised crime is often rooted in a bygone era, defined by strict hierarchies and clandestine meetings.

While those elements persist, the most sophisticated criminal organisations today have evolved into complex enterprises that operate across a dual digital reality: A highly secure, invisible layer for operations and a visible, often public-facing layer for narrative and influence. This isn't simply about adopting new tools – the usual old wine in new bottles (which does still exist of course); it's a fundamental adaptation to a globalised, digital environment where power is derived as much from cultural legitimacy as it is from criminal activity.

The Operational Layer: The Imperative of Encryption

For any transnational criminal organization involved in logistics-heavy enterprises like drug trafficking or arms smuggling, secure communication is the central nervous system. The move from physical couriers to digital channels has necessitated a deep investment in encrypted technologies.

This operational sphere is designed for absolute secrecy. Secrecy is necessary for organized crime and here platforms like Sky ECC, Encorchat in Europe, and ANOM in Australia, have shown how indispensable such platforms can become for coordinating drug shipments, arranging payments, and communicating orders across continents.



Encrochat specifically laid bare this dependency. It also highlighted a common tension within these groups: a generational divide in technological adoption. Younger, digitally native members often champion these tools, viewing them as efficient and essential for modern business. In contrast, older, more experienced leaders frequently harbour a deep-seated mistrust of a technology they don't fully control, wary that any digital trail is a potential liability. This caution is not unfounded; they understand that law enforcement agencies are engaged in a perpetual technological arms race. This internal friction reveals a critical challenge for these groups: how to balance the efficiencies of new technology with the security principles of traditional tradecraft.

The Narrative Layer: The Power of the Digital Echo Chamber

While their operations are hidden, the cultural values these groups exploit are often displayed in the open.

On public-facing platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, a powerful dynamic is at play.

It's often not a coordinated recruitment campaign but it manifests as an organic, algorithm-driven phenomenon where cultural identity and criminal apologism (by endorsing values of organised crime, gangsterism and mafias) become dangerously intertwined.

This process can be described as a "cultural drift." It begins with content celebrating a specific heritage, regional pride, or an anti-establishment ethos—values that resonate deeply with many communities. However, platform algorithms, designed to maximize engagement, can create powerful echo chambers. A user expressing pride in their roots may soon be fed content that romanticizes outlaw figures, justifies violence as a form of "respect," and frames the criminal organization as a defender of that very culture.

This performative use of social media serves multiple purposes. For some, it's an act of vainglory, projecting an image of wealth and power to attract followers and potential recruits, a tactic seen among Camorra groups in Italy. For others, it creates a "defensive public"—a community that feels marginalized and uses the platform to defend a traditional order, inadvertently shielding the criminal groups that claim to be its protectors. By blending cultural symbols, religious iconography, and folk traditions with criminal narratives, this content blurs the line between legitimate expression and support for a criminal enterprise.

A Symbiotic Strategy

These two digital fronts—the operational and the narrative—are not independent; they are symbiotic. A public-facing narratives of honour, loyalty, and respect reinforce the subcultural "glue" that ensures cohesion and discipline within the covert networks. The cultural legitimacy cultivated online provides a social shield, complicating law enforcement efforts and fostering a sympathetic environment that can aid in recruitment and intelligence gathering. This is particularly effective in diaspora communities, where digital content provides a continuous, romanticized connection to a homeland identity, strengthening the bonds of trust necessary for international collaboration.

Understanding dual footprint is critical. Countering modern organized crime requires a two-pronged strategy. It is no longer enough to focus solely on penetrating encrypted networks.

Authorities must also find ways to understand and disrupt the public narratives that grant these organizations their enduring power and social resilience. In the digital age, the battle against organized crime must be fought on both fronts simultaneously.

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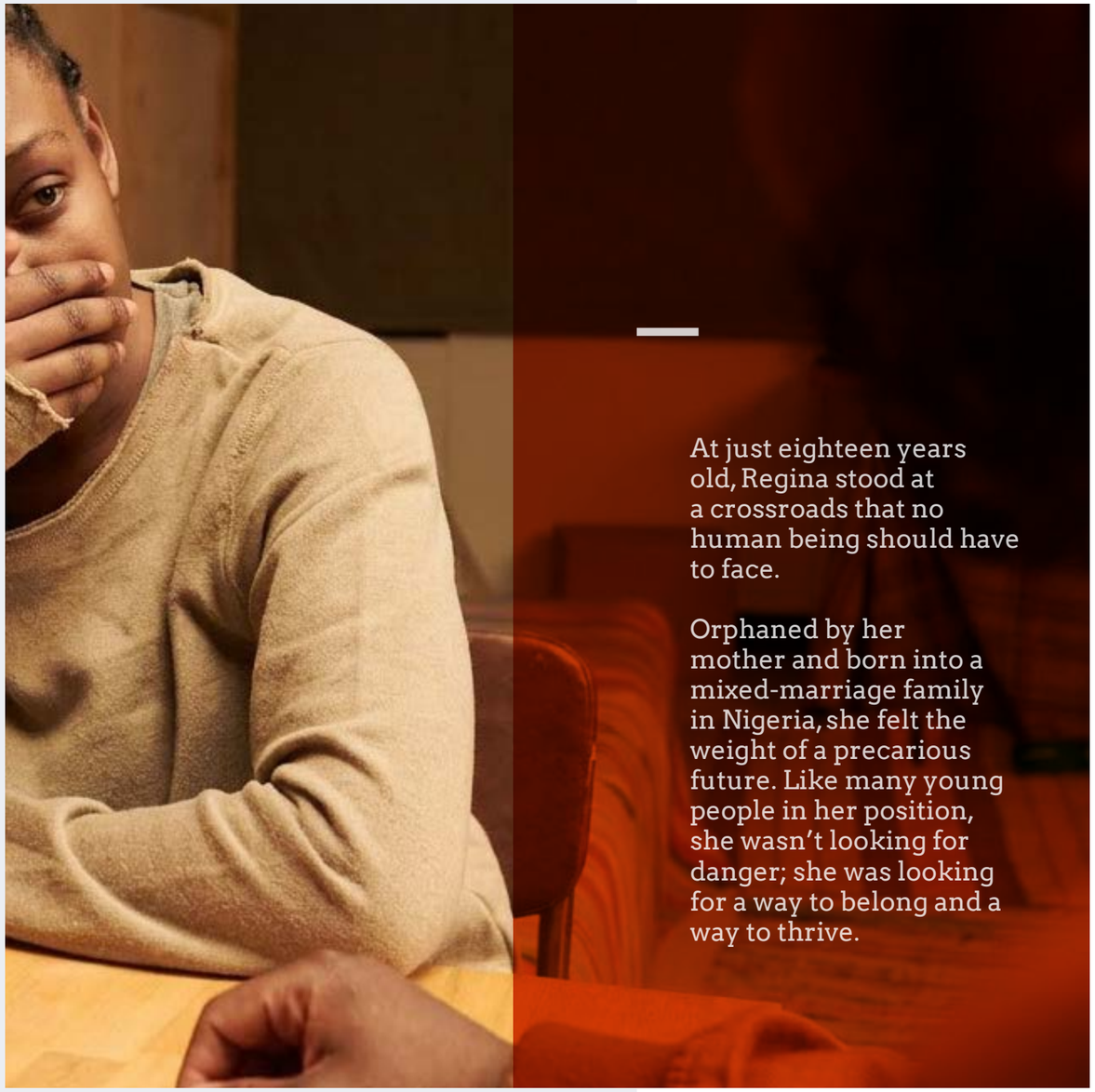
Gloria
Gilardoni
CAT

THE PRICE OF A DREAM: REGINA'S JOURNEY FROM DECEPTION TO REALITY



The Trap of Infinite Possibilities
The deception began in the most ordinary of places: a local market. It was there that Regina met an older woman who seemed to offer a super beautiful life. The promise was dazzling—a journey to Europe filled with "infinite possibilities." In this vision of the future, Regina saw herself studying, working, and finally having a place to call home.

However, human traffickers rarely reveal the true cost of their "help" upfront. To seal the deal, Regina was forced to undergo a traditional oath of secrecy called juju. This psychological bond is a common tactic used by traffickers to ensure total control over their victims through fear and cultural obligation. No violence, only mental slavery, and it works.

The Illusion of Debt
Along with the oath came a financial burden. Regina was told she would have to pay back 30,000. To an eighteen-year-old girl, the currency was a blur of confusion; she believed the debt was in Naira (a currency where 30,000 represents a relatively small sum).

She had no way of knowing that the debt was actually calculated in Euros, an astronomical amount designed to keep her in a cycle of exploitation for years. This "debt bondage" is the cornerstone of modern slavery – a debt that is never meant to be paid off, but used as a tool for permanent entrapment.

The Illusion and the Nightmare
The deception began at a local market, where an older woman promised Regina infinite possibilities – school, a career, a home. To seal this "gift" Regina was forced into a sacred oath of secrecy and told she owed a debt of 30,000. In her innocence, she believed the amount was in local currency (Naira); she had no idea it was an unpayable debt in Euros, designed to enslave her.

The dream shattered quickly. Instead of a classroom in Europe, Regina was taken to Libya. There, she was imprisoned in a "connection house" and forced into sexual labour. The reality of her situation became clear: she wasn't a student, she was a commodity, she was a body to exploit, to use and to sell.

The Crossing and the Rescue
After months of abuse, Regina was placed on a "lapa lapa" – a fragile, overcrowded boat – to cross the Mediterranean. This "journey of hope" is often a death sentence for many, but Regina was spotted and saved by a rescue boat. When she finally stepped onto Italian soil, she was exhausted, terrified and still bound by her oath of silence.

Finding Safety: The Italian Anti-Trafficking System
At the port, the invisible chains of trafficking were almost as strong as physical ones. It was only through the keen eyes of anti-trafficking social workers and operators that Regina was identified. They recognised the signs of a victim of human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Regina was offered a place in a specialised anti-trafficking shelter. It was the beginning of a slow, painful, but necessary journey. For over a year, she worked with professionals to untangle the web of lies she had been told. This "path of awareness" allowed her to finally name her abusers and understand the mechanisms of her own exploitation.

The Hidden Threat
The true depth of her fear was revealed only a year later. In a moment of profound trust, Regina confessed to her caseworker a chilling detail: the day she arrived at the port, her traffickers were there, waiting for her. They were standing just outside the gates, ready to reclaim their "property."

If it hadn't been for the immediate intervention of the social services and the protection of the anti-trafficking network, Regina's story would have had a very different ending.

A Call to Action
Regina's journey from a connection house in Libya to a life of freedom in Italy shows that identification is the first step toward salvation. Protecting victims means more than just a rescue at sea; it means providing long-term psychological support and a safe space where "stolen dreams" can finally be reclaimed.

Gloria Gilardoni is a project coordinator at C.A.T. Cooperativa Sociale, a Florence-based social cooperative NGO which supports survivors of human trafficking in Italy. C.A.T. is a partner delivering the Phygital-OC project.

CESIE: TACKLING HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN SICILY

Cloé
Saint-Nom
CESIE

CESIE ETS (European Centre of Studies and Initiatives) is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation established in 2001 and based in Palermo, Sicily.

The organisation works to promote social inclusion and support people in vulnerable contexts or situations through research, training and community engagement. Through its work in areas such as rights and justice, migration and education, CESIE ETS strengthens cooperation between institutions, civil society and communities across Europe and beyond to foster inclusive and sustainable development.

Combating Human Trafficking

In the context of dismantling organised crime, CESIE ETS' work specifically focuses on addressing trafficking in human beings (THB). CESIE ETS recognises that THB is a process rooted in inequality, exclusion and lack of opportunities. By addressing these underlying factors through empowerment processes, CESIE ETS helps break cycles of dependence, isolation and exploitation that criminal networks depend on, contributing to safer and more resilient communities.

CESIE ETS's efforts to tackle human trafficking comprises two strands of activity:

1. *Capacity Building and Multi-Agency Collaboration*

CESIE ETS supports frontline workers, law enforcement agencies (LEAs), and other professionals to enhance their capacity to respond to trafficking in human beings, particularly involving women and children:

- *We support law enforcement agencies (LEAs) on improving investigations, prosecutions and judicial responses to child trafficking based on digital evidence (through the DISRUPT project).* [1]

- *We support LEAs, judges, NGOs, businesses, mayors and social workers on identifying victims of THB, identifying gaps, sources and mechanisms including digital instruments and twinning events among different EU countries (through the ASIT project).* [2]

- *We provide training to judicial and frontline professionals, foster cross-border collaboration, and provide innovative technology to combat child trafficking (through the SafeBorders project).* [3]

- *We facilitate study visits and international cooperation between Europe and third countries to improve responses to THB (through the Reaching project).* [4]

2. *Prevention, Protection, and Social Integration*

CESIE ETS also focuses on preventive actions and support measures designed to promote the social integration of women and girls who are potential victims or survivors of trafficking (including sexual exploitation) and other forms of violence in migration contexts:

- *We support their recovery and integration through networking, employment training and psychological support (through the HEAL project).* [5]

- *We provide them with linguistic and psychological support, individual and tailored labour market counselling and integration into the local labour (through the WINGS project).* [6]

- *We support the development and/or enhancement of Women and Girl Safe Spaces in different countries to support their social and labour inclusion (through the SafeHut project).* [7]

- *We empower affected communities of women and improve service accessibility and coordination via the establishment of community hubs, which provide access to services, raise awareness about trafficking in human beings and exploitation, and equip them with tools to prevent re-trafficking (though the SIS-HUBS project).* [8]

CESIE ETS does not believe that migration processes should be criminalised and therefore does not work on the area of smuggling. Instead, its work emphasises inclusion of migrants and people with migrant backgrounds, including (potential) victims and survivors of trafficking. This includes promoting labour market inclusion, educational opportunities, well-being, language learning and empowerment.

CESIE: Tackling Human Trafficking in Sicily

Supporting Victims and Survivors
CESIE ETS works collaboratively with stakeholders in Sicily and beyond – including procurement offices, social services, municipalities, both public and private support services, professionals, and affected communities – to provide meaningful support strictly for (potential) victims and survivors of human trafficking, not for smuggling.

Our support framework is grounded in several essential, rights-based approaches:

- ***Intersectional approach*** *– Taking into account the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.*

- ***Gender and culturally sensitive*** *– It involves approaching victims and/or survivors, valorising the diverse backgrounds they belong to and considering how their gender, socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic background could affect their lives.*

- ***Avoiding re-victimisation*** *- Supporting victims and/or survivors of violence by reducing any risk factors that could lead to feeling overwhelmed and experiencing intrusiveness affecting their healing process and perpetuating their victimisation.*

- ***Trauma-informed approach*** *- An approach based on the awareness that exposure to trauma can affect an individual's neurological, biological, psychological, and social development.*

- ***Community-centred approach*** *- Actions are designed and implemented within the communities themselves, ensuring ownership and sustainability.*

Child-friendly approach - it means that the best interests of the child are at the centre of any intervention; that environments must be safe, healthy and protective; and that children's voices must be heard.

A Success Story
Among the successful initiatives implemented by CESIE ETS is the SafeHut project.

Launched in 2022 in response to the invasion of Ukraine, SafeHut aimed to protect non-EU women and girls at risk of or experiencing trafficking in human beings. Through collaboration among seven partners across six countries, the project established four new Women & Girl Safe Spaces (WGSS) in Greece, Lithuania, Romania, and Bulgaria, and enhanced one existing space in Italy based on the model developed by the International Rescue Committee. [9]

Women & Girl Safe Spaces are structured environments where the physical and emotional safety of women and adolescent girls is respected. Participants receive support through empowerment initiatives, access to knowledge, skills development, and a range of relevant services, alongside long-term assistance and support.

This initiative was recognised by the European Commission as a best practice in contributing to the protection of third-country national women and girls and potential survivors or victims of trafficking. [10]

Conclusion

Although CESIE ETS does not analyse organised crime as a whole in Sicily, its targeted work addressing trafficking in human beings represents a focused and impactful contribution to mitigating one of the most harmful effects of organised criminal activity.

Through capacity building, cross-border cooperation, community engagement, and empowerment-based support, CESIE ETS strengthens the ability of institutions and communities to respond to and prevent trauma and exploitation, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and resilient societies.

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AT THE CROSSROADS: HOW CRIMINAL NETWORKS ADAPT ACROSS GREECE'S PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL BORDERS

Across the Mediterranean, criminal networks have learned to move with the same speed and flexibility as the people and goods that pass through the region's borders.

Konstantinos Margaros
KEMEA

Greece, positioned between the Balkans, the Middle East and the wider European market, sits at a crossroads where physical routes and digital pathways merge. The result is a criminal ecosystem that is increasingly "phygital": rooted in geography but powered by technology.

Over the past years, a series of criminal investigations in Greece have revealed the scale of illicit activity and also how rapidly organised crime groups (OCGs) adjust to enforcement pressure, geopolitical shifts and technological change. These cases offer a rare window into how ethnic-based and transnational networks operate today and how they exploit both physical borders and digital infrastructures to thrive.

Forging Identities, Forging Pathways

One of the most evident examples of adaptation is found in document forgery, a longstanding criminal service that has taken on new dimensions. In Athens, Peristeri and Piraeus, police dismantled a large network that specialised in producing high-quality forged Syrian and Egyptian documents. It is believed that over 530 irregular migrants were assisted by this operation. The group operated like a business: safe houses served as production sites, brokers handled orders and encrypted messaging apps enabled discreet communication between smugglers and clients. [1]

In another case, a mixed Belgian-Greek network supplied falsified passports to Iraqi nationals seeking entry into Europe. Hundreds of documents were recovered, indicating that this was not to improvised criminal activity but to a structured, technologically enabled operation. [21]

Convoys, containers and criminal logistics

Mobility remains at the heart of organised crime. Along the Greek-Bulgarian border, authorities uncovered a smuggling ring that transported at least 350 migrants in luxury cars and pickup trucks, coordinating routes in real time through encrypted channels. [20] Another major case led to the arrest of 20 members of a large migrant-smuggling gang operating across multiple regions in Greece and the Balkans. [19]

At the Port of Piraeus, refrigerated seafood containers were used to conceal cocaine shipments originating from Latin America.

In two back-to-back seizures in May 2024, authorities discovered more than 300 kilograms of cocaine hidden in frozen shrimp and squid. [2, 3, 4]

Over the past years, a series of criminal investigations in Greece have revealed the scale of illicit activity and also how rapidly organised crime groups (OCGs) adjust to enforcement pressure, geopolitical shifts and technological change. These cases offer a rare window into how ethnic-based and transnational networks operate today and how they exploit both physical borders and digital infrastructures to thrive.

At the Crossroads: How Criminal Networks Adapt Across Greece's Physical and Digital Borders

Beyond cocaine, large-scale customs fraud cases show how ports are exploited for illicit financial gain. The CALYPSO investigation, for example, led to the seizure of more than 2,400 containers linked to tax and customs fraud at Piraeus, revealing the scale of infiltration in legitimate trade flows. [23]

Airports reflect similar patterns. In multiple recent cases, individuals arriving from Latin America attempted to import more than 17 kilograms of cocaine concealed in luggage. Arrests followed profiling efforts, canine inspections, and digital tracing of travel routes. [5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10]

The human cost behind the networks

Organised crime is not only about drugs, documents, or profit. It is also about people. In Thessaloniki, a Nigerian-linked trafficking ring recruited women online with false promises of employment before forcing them into prostitution. [11]

Sex trafficking is only one dimension of exploitation.

In a major modern-slavery case, Greek authorities dismantled a ring exploiting Nepalese migrants under abusive working conditions. This is another example of how criminal networks target vulnerable using both physical control and digital means. [22]

A separate prostitution ring active in Attica and Corinth revealed how traffickers combine intimidation, debt bondage, and digital recruitment to maintain control over victims. [12, 13, 14, 15]

Fluid networks, not static "Ethnic Mafias"

While public narratives often focus on "ethnic mafias," the reality is far more complex. Many networks uncovered in Greece were multiethnic alliances shaped by opportunity rather than rigid hierarchy. The Montenegrin clans involved in contract killings in Athens and Corfu exemplify this ecosystem-like structure. Their operations included drug trafficking, targeted assassinations, and complex financial movements-supported by multinational criminal associates and digital coordination tools. [16, 17, 18]

Similarly, Albanian groups have played a prominent role in trafficking operations, collaborating with Greek and other Balkan actors in a fluid, cross-border manner rather than as isolated ethnically uniform entities. [24]

The digital shift: When borders move to the screen

Behind all these cases lies a common thread consistently identified by Europol: the growing fusion of digital and physical crime. [25] Europol's recent threat assessments underline that the most threatening criminal networks operating in the EU are increasingly agile and digitally enabled, relying on encrypted messaging applications to coordinate activities, maintain operational security, and evade law enforcement. [26]

Online platforms are widely used for recruitment and deception, including the targeting of migrants and vulnerable individuals, while digital identity manipulation and international payment networks facilitate cross-border movement and profit extraction. [26, 27] Europol further notes that criminal groups exploit their ability to remotely monitor law enforcement activity, adjusting routes and tactics in real time. [26]

In response, law enforcement authorities increasingly rely on open-source intelligence, digital forensics, container-risk profiling, and cross-border investigative cooperation through platforms such as SIENA, Eurojust, and the EPPO. [25]

In this evolving landscape, borders are no longer defined solely by physical checkpoints; they increasingly exist in chat platforms, cloud-based infrastructures, and global logistics systems, where criminal coordination now routinely takes place. [25,26]

What these stories tell us about the Mediterranean today

The Greek cases illustrate broader Mediterranean dynamics that closely align with Europol's analysis of organised crime trends in Southern Europe. [25] Europol identifies sustained migration pressure as a key driver of demand for smuggling services and forged documents, reinforcing migrant smuggling as a high-profit criminal market across the region. [27]

At the same time, the expansion of maritime trade creates structural vulnerabilities that criminal networks exploit for drug trafficking and customs fraud, particularly in major ports and logistics hubs. [25] Diaspora and community links provide the trust-based social infrastructure that enables recruitment, concealment, and cross-border mobility, reinforcing the resilience of criminal networks operating across the Mediterranean. [26]

Europol also highlights how geopolitical developments and shifting enforcement priorities continually reshape trafficking routes, pushing criminal groups to adapt their operations with speed and flexibility. [25]

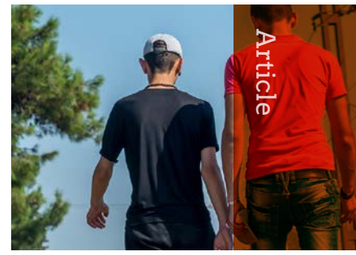
Digital tools accelerate every stage of illicit activity, from recruitment and coordination to logistics and profit laundering. [26, 27] As Europol consistently observes, criminal innovation in this context is not driven by sophistication alone, but by necessity: survival in a volatile and competitive operational environment depends on constant adaptation. [25, 26]

Conclusion: Understanding the Phygital frontier

Organised crime in the Mediterranean moves through borders, devices, diasporas and digital networks. The recent Greek cases reveal a world where physical and virtual routes are inseparable, where a forged passport may be printed in Athens using a design shared through Telegram, and where cocaine shipments enter Europe by exploiting weak points in global shipping systems.

To respond effectively, we must first understand this hybrid reality. And the stories emerging from Greece offer a clear message: today's organised crime is adaptive, fast-moving, and fundamentally phygital-shaped as much by technology as by geography.

Konstantinos Margaros is director at the Center for Security Studies (KEMEA) in Athens, a research organisation supervised by the Greek Ministry of Citizen Protection that supports security policy through research and strategic analysis. KEMEA is a partner delivering the Phygtail-OC project.



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EU SERIOUS AND ORGANISED CRIME THREAT ASSESSMENT (EU-SOCTA)

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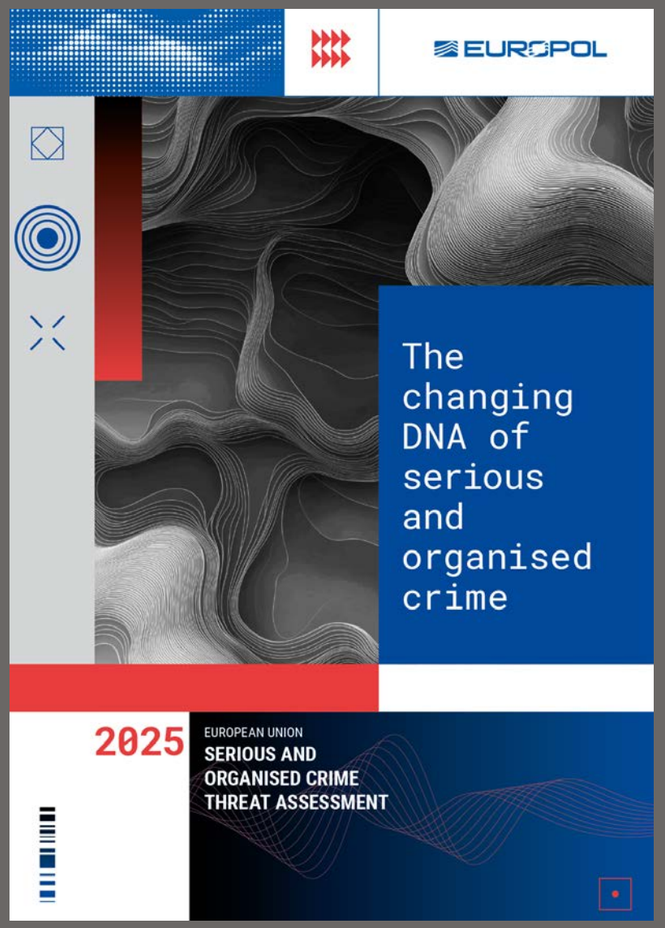


Serious and organised crime is an increasingly dynamic and complex phenomenon that requires robust, intelligence-led response by EU law enforcement.

While traditional crime areas such as international drug trafficking remain a principal cause of concern, the effects of globalisation in society and business have facilitated the emergence of significant new variations in criminal activity.

Criminal networks exploit legislative loopholes, the internet and conditions associated with the economic crisis to generate illicit profits at low risk, for example.

One of Europol's flagship reports, the EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (EU-SOCTA) updates Europe's law enforcement community and decision-makers on such developments in serious and organised crime and the threats it poses to the EU.

Informed by its analysis of the prevailing threats, the EU-SOCTA identifies a number of high priority crime areas that the operational response in the EU should focus on.

NO RESILIENCE WITHOUT CIVIL SOCIETY: RETHINKING THE FIGHT AGAINST ORGANIZED CRIME

Ruggero Scaturro
GI-TOC

When governments speak about fighting organised crime, the language is often dominated by seizures, arrests and legislative reforms. Success is measured in tonnes confiscated, networks dismantled and sentences imposed.

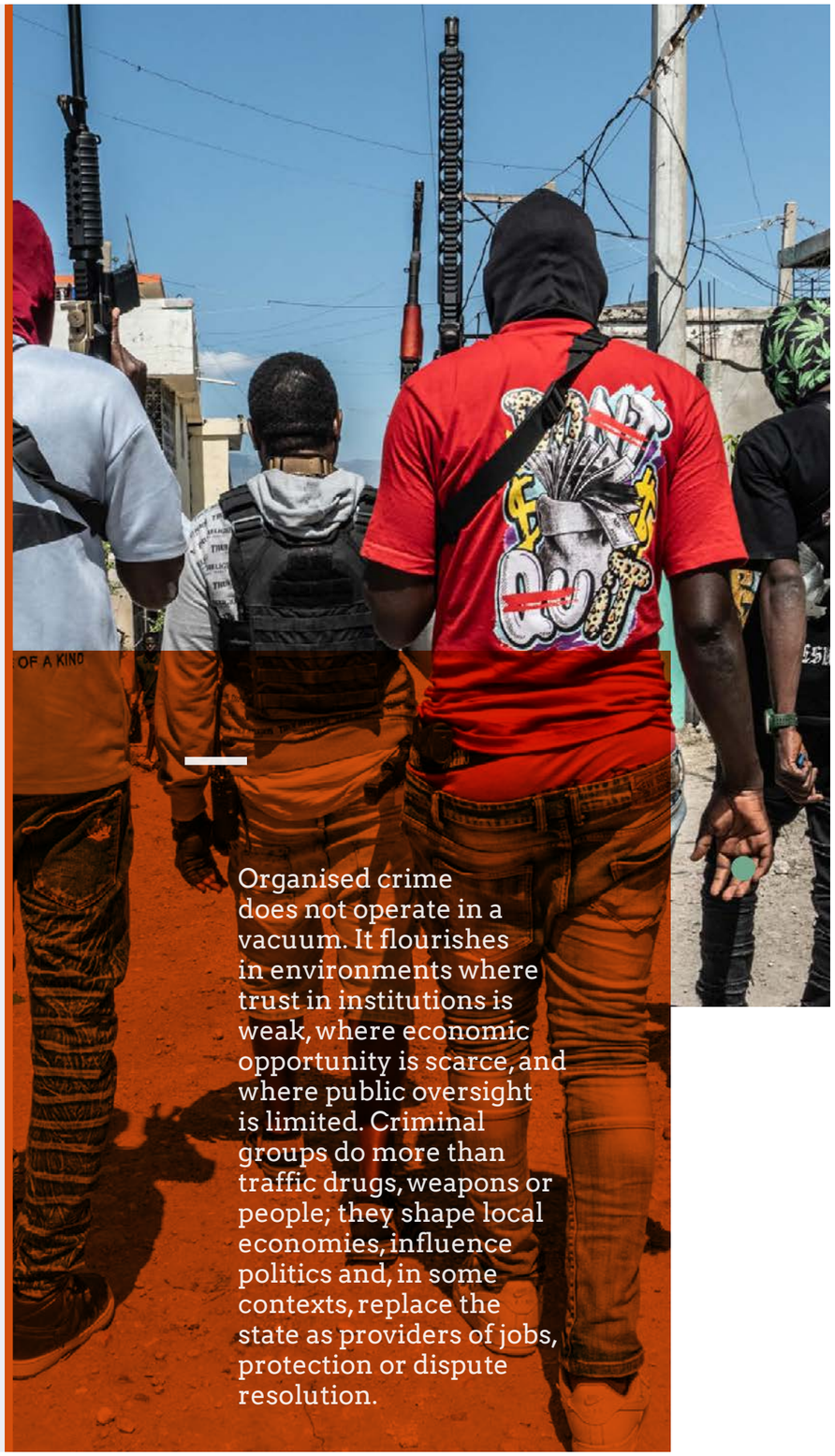
Yet beneath these visible markers of enforcement lies a quieter, often more decisive struggle: the work of civil society. In communities where organised crime embeds itself into everyday life, it is frequently journalists, grassroots organisations, faith groups, youth leaders and local activists who form the first and last line of defence against criminal governance. Without them, the fight against organised crime is not only incomplete – it is unsustainable.

Organised crime does not operate in a vacuum. It flourishes in environments where trust in institutions is weak, where economic opportunity is scarce, and where public oversight is limited. Criminal groups do more than traffic drugs, weapons or people; they shape local economies, influence politics and, in some contexts, replace the state as providers of jobs, protection or dispute resolution. In such settings, law enforcement interventions alone cannot address the underlying conditions that allow these networks to persist. Civil society actors are uniquely positioned to confront these deeper dynamics. They document corruption, provide services to victims, create alternative narratives to criminal legitimacy and, critically, foster social norms that reject violence and impunity.

GI-TOC's recent analyses from regions as diverse as the Mekong, the Pacific Islands and parts of Africa show a clear pattern: where civic space is restricted, organised crime expands. In the Mekong region, growing surveillance, restrictive NGO legislation and pressure on independent media have narrowed the ability of civil actors to investigate illicit economies and hold authorities accountable. When journalists and community groups are silenced, criminal actors benefit from the shadows.

The erosion of civic space is not simply a human rights concern; it is a structural vulnerability in the fight against organised crime.

Closing down civil society weakens the very ecosystems of accountability that deter criminal entrenchment.



Organised crime does not operate in a vacuum. It flourishes in environments where trust in institutions is weak, where economic opportunity is scarce, and where public oversight is limited. Criminal groups do more than traffic drugs, weapons or people; they shape local economies, influence politics and, in some contexts, replace the state as providers of jobs, protection or dispute resolution.

Conversely, where civil society is vibrant and resilient, it can act as a powerful counterweight to criminal influence. Italy offers a telling example. Despite facing some of the most entrenched mafia-type organisations in the world, the country has also cultivated a dense network of civic associations, educational initiatives and social movements committed to promoting legality and transparency. These actors have transformed confiscated mafia assets into social enterprises, built educational programmes that challenge the culture of silence, and mobilised citizens around collective resistance. Such engagement does not eliminate organised crime, but it raises the social cost of criminal domination and strengthens societal resilience. In global assessments of criminality and resilience, this civic fabric often explains why some countries are better equipped to withstand high levels of organised crime than others.

The importance of civil society is equally visible in smaller or geographically dispersed states. In several Pacific Island contexts, where state capacity may be limited and maritime territories vast, local NGOs and community leaders play a frontline role in identifying emerging trafficking routes, supporting victims of exploitation and raising awareness about environmental crimes. Their proximity to affected communities allows them to detect early warning signs that might never appear in official statistics. They bridge gaps between remote communities and central authorities, translating complex

No Resilience Without Civil Society: Rethinking the Fight Against Organized Crime

policy frameworks into local action. In many cases, they are not merely complementary to the state; they are indispensable.

Yet at the global level, the formal architecture for combating organised crime has struggled to fully integrate these actors. The UNTOC remains the cornerstone of international cooperation. While civil society participation has expanded over the years, meaningful inclusion in core decision-making and review processes remains limited. NGOs may attend conferences and deliver statements, but they are often excluded from the working groups and implementation mechanisms where substantive monitoring occurs. This disconnect risks producing policies that are technically sound but socially detached – frameworks that do not fully capture how organised crime manifests in local realities.

Bridging this gap requires more than rhetorical support for civil society; it demands sustained investment, protection and partnership. Over recent years, growing attention has been given to the idea of resilience – not simply the ability of communities to absorb criminal shocks, but to adapt and transform in ways that reduce long-term vulnerability. Civil society organisations are central to this process. They experiment with preventive strategies, from youth engagement initiatives that reduce gang recruitment to investigative collaborations that expose illicit financial flows. They operate at the intersection of research, advocacy and community action, translating data into tangible change.

Support mechanisms that provide small grants, foster peer networks and create safe spaces for dialogue have shown particular promise. By connecting activists from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Pacific, these initiatives facilitate the exchange of strategies and lessons learned across contexts that might otherwise remain isolated. They also help protect at-risk actors by embedding them within broader international communities of practice. In environments where speaking out against organised crime can carry significant personal risk, such solidarity can be transformative.

Ultimately, organised crime is not only a criminal justice challenge; it is a societal one. It corrodes public trust, distorts markets and weakens democratic institutions. A response that focuses exclusively on enforcement addresses symptoms rather than causes. Civil society, by contrast, operates in the spaces where organised crime intersects with daily life – in schools, neighbourhoods, media outlets and community centres. It shapes values, builds social cohesion and holds power to account. These functions cannot be replicated by police operations or international treaties alone.

If the international community is serious about confronting organised crime in all its complexity, it must treat civil society not as an observer but as a partner. Protecting civic space, ensuring meaningful participation in global governance processes and investing in grassroots resilience are not peripheral concerns; they are strategic imperatives. Organised crime adapts quickly to enforcement pressure. So too must the coalition that seeks to counter it – and that coalition is strongest when it extends beyond state institutions to include the communities most affected.

Ruggero Scaturro is a senior analyst at the GI-TOC and a PhD candidate on criminal justice and security in Slovenia. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a partner delivering the Phygital-OC project.

BUILDING CAPACITY AGAINST HIGH-RISK CRIMINAL NETWORKS IN THE EU

The PREVENT project

PREVENT aims to contribute to an improved intelligence picture of HRCNs, deepen understanding of how these networks infiltrate the legal economy, and promote a more integrated prevention approach.

Atanas Rusev
CSD

High-risk criminal networks (HRCNs) are widely recognised as one of the most serious security threats facing Europe today.

The contemporary organised crime landscape is increasingly characterised by networked, fluid and profit-driven operations that transcend national borders. Recent analyses have shown that many of the most harmful criminal networks successfully exploit the legal "upper world" – using legitimate businesses, financial structures and local economies to facilitate, disguise or launder criminal activities.

In response to these developments, the European Commission and law enforcement agencies at both national and EU levels have stressed the urgent need for better tools to identify the most dangerous organised crime groups and networks, and to understand how they operate within and across legal systems.

The PREVENT project
Against this backdrop, PREVENT is a multi-country European project designed to address these challenges in a comprehensive and integrated way. Rather than focusing solely on criminal justice responses, the project seeks to strengthen Europe's overall capacity to understand, prevent, and disrupt high-risk criminal networks.

PREVENT aims to contribute to an improved intelligence picture of HRCNs, deepen understanding of how these networks infiltrate the legal economy, and promote a more integrated prevention approach. A key element of this is exploring how administrative measures and the social reuse of confiscated assets can be used more effectively as crime prevention tools – an approach that remains underutilised in many parts of Europe.

Project objectives
The project is structured around four interlinked objectives:

1. Enhancing intelligence on HRCNs.
PREVENT brings together academic and institutional partners to strengthen data collection and analysis on criminal networks, their finances, and their business models. By improving knowledge about how HRCNs operate and interact with legitimate markets, the project seeks to improve the capacity of law enforcement agencies to identify high-risk networks and better understand their economic strategies.

2. Promoting administrative approaches.
The project examines how administrative measures – such as regulatory controls, licensing systems, and other non-criminal tools – can be used to prevent and disrupt HRCN activities. PREVENT maps existing practices across Europe and identifies promising approaches that could be adopted more widely at national and EU levels.

Building Capacity Against High-Risk Criminal Networks in the EU

3. Boosting the social reuse of confiscated assets.
A central and innovative component of PREVENT is its focus on the social reuse of assets confiscated from organised crime. Instead of viewing confiscation solely as a punitive measure, the project explores how seized properties and resources can be repurposed for social and community benefit. This is intended both to counter the harmful effects of organised crime and to support alternative, lawful local economic development models. The project aims to raise awareness among stakeholders of the preventive potential of social reuse.

4. Strengthening strategic public–private cooperation.
Recognising that tackling HRCNs requires collaboration beyond law enforcement, PREVENT fosters dialogue between public authorities, civil society organisations, and social economy actors at local, national, and EU levels. The goal is to build partnerships that link crime prevention with broader community development and social innovation.

Outputs and activities
To achieve these objectives, PREVENT delivers a range of analytical, practical, and participatory outputs, including:

- *HRCN Scorecard combining harm and threat indicators*
- *Assessment of the threats and harms of HRCN at the local level in the EU*
- *Assessment of the HRCNs' infiltration into the legal economy at the local level in the EU*
- *Overview of existing and promising administrative measures against HRCN*
- *A feasibility and impact assessment of the social economy approach against HRCN*
- *A model approach for prevention and fight against HRCN at the local level and remedy for the harmful effects for society through social reuse of assets*
- *10 Workshops and Events engaging experts, policymakers, and civil society actors to discuss measures to prevent and tackle HRCN*
- *4 local action plans in Sofia, Brussels, Utrecht and Madrid, engaging local actors to promote social innovation and reuse initiatives and to counter the influence and impact of HRCN in local communities*
- *EU Forum on Social Reuse of Confiscated Assets in Brussels and a field visit in Naples, Italy*
- *A Final EU conference in Gent to disseminate results and promote the adoption of best practices across Europe*

Local action and European exchange
PREVENT combines EU-level learning with local-level experimentation. Four pilot cities – Sofia, Brussels, Utrecht, and Madrid – are developing local action plans that engage municipal authorities, community actors, and social enterprises.

These initiatives aim to promote social innovation, encourage the reuse of confiscated assets, and reduce the influence and impact of high-risk criminal networks in local communities.

At the European level, the project includes an EU Forum on Social Reuse of Confiscated Assets in Brussels, complemented by a field visit to Naples, Italy, where asset reuse has been implemented in practice. The project will conclude with a Final EU Conference in Gent, designed to disseminate results and encourage the uptake of best practices across Europe.

Who benefits from PREVENT?

The project is intended to benefit a broad range of stakeholders involved in preventing and countering high-risk criminal networks at European, national, and local levels.

This includes EUROPOL and key European Commission Directorates-General such as DG HOME, DG REGIO, and DG EMPL, as well as national and local law enforcement authorities, Asset Recovery Offices (AROs), and Asset Management Offices (AMOs). Municipal authorities are also important beneficiaries, alongside civil society organisations, social enterprises, and other social economy actors engaged in community-based responses to organised crime.

Towards an integrated prevention approach
Overall, PREVENT represents an effort to move beyond fragmented responses to organised crime by combining improved intelligence, administrative prevention tools and socially oriented solutions. By linking law enforcement, local governance and community-based initiatives, the project seeks to contribute to a more integrated and sustainable approach to countering high-risk criminal networks across the European Union.

Atanas Rusev is Director of the Security Program at the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) in Bulgaria. CSD is a lead partner delivering the PREVENT project.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Explore upcoming events around the world which take a look at the latest challenges in dismantling organised crime, and register your interest to attend Phygital-OC events.

Phygital-OC Exchange Event 3

May 28
Rome

To discuss the nature and scale of the challenges posed by transnational organised crime groups (OCGs)...

Community of Practice Event 3

May 27 - May 28
Bangkok

To assess how different criminal groups from the region operate and their links to organised crime groups in Europe...

Community of Practice Event 4

July TBC
Latin America

To assess how different criminal groups from the region operate and their links to organised crime groups in Europe...

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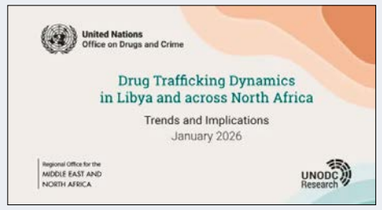

Drug Trafficking Dynamics in Libya and across North Africa

January 19, 2026 |.UNODC

Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings

June 6, 2025 | GRETA

Anti-Mafia Investigative Directorate Annual Report

March 4, 2025 | DIA

The Global Organized Crime Index 2025

November 10, 2025 | GI-TOC

EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (EU-SOCTA)

May 9, 2025 | EUROPOL

Organized child sexual exploitation: Addressing motives and response needs in South East Asia

July 3, 2025 | GI-TOC

Balkan Crime Groups Tightening Grip on South American Drug Trade

April 1, 2025 | GI-TOC

The Phygital-OC Project is being led by a consortium of leading European agencies involved in dismantling serious organised crime, including the Central Operational Service of the Italian Ministry of the Interior (SCO), Agenfor International, the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), Policia Murcia, Center for Security Studies (KEMEA), CAT Cooperative Sociale, and REOC Europe.