


Internal Briefing

Crime Unmasked: How Organized Networks Threaten the Heart of Democracy

January 30, 2024



Topic Introduction

This report is based on an internal briefing organized by the Democratic Solidarity Latin America, the Democratic Solidarity Africa, and the International Coalition for Democratic Renewal on January 30, 2024. Organized Crime (OC) has had an immense and severe impact on the democratic systems around the world. Criminal organizations undermine the stability of institutions, the trustworthiness of governments, and the rule of law of affected countries. The aim of this briefing was to discuss and debate this complex issue. Additionally, experts on the topic explored possible ways in which to challenge and counter the growing stranglehold of criminal organizations on democracies. Differences and similarities between various cases were investigated, giving attendees an insight into the machinations of organized crime in varying environments such as Europe, South America, and Africa.

Discussion Summary

Common and Differing Traits of Organized Crime Around the Globe

Participants found many characteristics that are universal to organized crime. Most importantly, it is imperative to realize that the criminal organizations of today are vastly different from the archetypical image of the Italian mafia. Criminal organizations of today are more sophisticated and, consequently, less visible. One expert summarized the situation: “Gangsters of today are not (only) protected by men with UZI guns but by small armies of lawyers and accountants.”

Furthermore, relating to the previous point, OC nowadays oftentimes works “inside” the system, not merely against it through corruption, threats, and violence. Several cases of so-called “hybrid criminal governments” can be found in regions such as South America and Africa (e.g., Venezuela). The wicked symbiotic relationship between government and organized crime allows political leaders to stifle opposition through criminal organizations, which in return are allowed to operate with impunity.

Speakers have agreed that one of the greatest problems regarding the fight against OC is power vacuums in certain regions inside the countries. In the region without proper governmental control, criminal organizations have the opportunity to emerge and grow, eventually completely supplanting the state institutions in the area.

What Can Be Done?

Participants agreed that the response to the threat to democracy coming from organized crime must be holistic. Strong and strict laws are not enough. According to one expert, it is imperative to break the hold of criminal organizations in the prison systems (especially in South America). To quote one of the speakers: “Prisons are the universities and logistical hubs of organized crime.”

A speaker from Zambia emphasized the need for genuine separation of power, which is lackluster, to say the least, in the country. Too much power is concentrated in one individual, which consequently makes it nearly impossible to go against the government. This, in turn, allows the ones in power to employ

criminal elements to stifle opposition more easily. Legislation such as the Public Order Act (which has been in effect since colonial times) allows the government to repress demonstrations. Therefore, legislative changes are necessary to combat OC and secure democratic governance.

Another topic the participants discussed was the censorship of journalists by criminal organizations. Journalists either self-censor because of the apparent danger in reporting about topics that would shed light on the activities of criminal organizations or journalists working for small, local news outlets are often killed outright if they persist in their reporting of “touchy” subjects. More prominent journalists are not killed but are bogged down with lawsuits. One of the participants argues for “naming and shaming” as a counterstrategy to these practices. As OC moves further into the shadows, it is important to call them out, he argues.

CONCLUSIONS

The panelists concluded the briefing by re-emphasizing the main points and takeaways. The increased sophistication of criminal organizations was iterated. “Actors need to think about the way organized crime has developed and changed in the last 20 years” was part of an answer one panelist gave when asked about the way to combat transnational organized crime. Additionally, the startling interconnectedness of criminal organizations was touched upon. As a result, criminal groups specialize more and focus only on a small part of the process (e.g., maritime transportation). Thorough interconnectedness also allows for the creation of the so-called ‘supercartels’.

