



The Expansion in the EU of Baltic Organized Criminal Groups

by Edward Gillmore

Two recent reports have highlighted the expansion into the EU of organized criminal groups trafficking drugs, human beings and arms. The reports analyze the structural and functional features of these groups as well as the economic mechanisms supporting their activities.

In February the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) issued the report *Crime and Instability: Case Studies of Transnational Threats*. It describes how organized crime poses an international threat, even though there has been continued law enforcement under the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Convention against Corruption. However, the report argues that this cooperation does not form a global strategy. Significant regional cooperation has been seen, but the continued global changes in organized crime require more initiatives to be taken by law enforcement, government and academia both regionally and globally. The report complements a previous report by Europol: *EU Organized Crime Threat Assessment* (2009), which presents an analysis of the structural and functional features of organized criminal groups. The report paints a picture of the dispersion of Baltic groups, their makeup, relevant fields of activity and their diversity. While there is already considerable cooperation but little initiative in acknowledging, let alone tackling, widespread Baltic networks, the purpose of the report is to elevate the preventive emphasis to a level of regionalization within the EU and beyond.

Organized crime, originating from Baltic countries, is international as seen in the makeup and areas of expertise of organized criminal groups and is also visible in the level of intergroup activities. Arguably, even in states where the activities of organized crime have a national scope, international relationships are important. This makes the collection of data on the activities and numbers of these groups difficult, which in itself suggests a greater need for initia-

tives between qualified practitioners. The spread of Baltic organized criminal groups is not a phenomenon specifically isolated to the EU. Trafficking of drugs, human beings and arms, and money laundering are increasingly global and organized. The rapid spread of organized crime in the EU is becoming more and more integrated in many regions in the world, ranging from South and North America, Africa, Asia and Central and Eastern Europe.

A Regional and International Concern

States regularly collect and analyze data on organized criminal groups operating in their territories. Most EU member states not only monitor them but law enforcement agencies cooperate regionally with their foreign counterparts. The Europol report analyzes trends as well as future developments of these groups. Its purpose is to highlight priority areas where initiatives should be taken. The report concludes that the areas where the activity of these groups is greatest in the EU are human and drug trafficking, illegal immigration and money laundering. The activities of these groups have effects with transnational implications. These hubs allow the markets in which criminals act to expand.

The areas within which criminal organizations operate can be broken down into five hubs. These are the North West, the South West, the North East, the Southern and the South East criminal hubs. They function as centers where these groups are active in narcotics, arms and human trafficking. These hubs are central to any analysis of the activity of the Baltic organized criminal groups. It is important to understand that operating within and outside



of these hubs requires a level of interaction between different groups.

A quick look at the presence of such Baltic groups in EU member states reveals how widespread and diverse they are becoming. There are no specific statistics detailing their presence, but groups within these hubs can be scrutinized on a state by state basis. Their organized structures are central to providing evidence of their spread in the EU. Many of the groups present are headed by and largely made up of nationals from Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. There is also a strong presence of Central and Eastern European nationals including Ukrainians, Croats, Serbs, Albanians, Bulgarians and Romanians.

Positioning Baltic Organized Criminal Groups within the EU

Baltic and Central and Eastern European organized criminal groups have established a significant presence in the EU. In Germany and Austria they are involved in traditional areas of organized crime, such as drug trafficking and prostitution. Italy is a stronghold for national groups, seen in its mafia, but there is also a growing presence of Russian and Baltic groups highlighting the phenomena of the post-Soviet spread of Baltic groups.

The geographical position of France and Belgium has made them a major region for drug and human trafficking. National organized criminal groups have links with Estonia, Latvia, Russia Spain, Turkey, Albania, Poland, as well as a host of Latin American and Northern African states. Law enforcement agencies have uncovered links between their geographical position, the drug trade, human trafficking and East-West transport corridors.

Due to Spain's closeness to North Africa, roughly 60 per cent of its organized criminal groups are foreign nationals. There are well established drug trafficking routes and ties with African gangs, South Americans and Baltic, Central and East European groups. Recently the Swedish news agency TT reported that 69 arrests had been made in coordinated European police raids against mafia groups from Russia and other Eastern European countries. Raids have been undertaken in Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Germany and Austria.

There is an increasing presence of Baltic criminal elements in Scandinavia. Sweden, Finland and Denmark have

seen an expanding market for drugs and associated products of trafficking; these countries are also increasingly being used as routes for trafficking. Their closeness to Baltic States has allowed the increased movement of Baltic organized criminal groups.

The Global-Baltic Organized Criminal Group Nexus

The alliances between Baltic, Central and Eastern European and global crime groups have led to the continuing change of organized criminal groups from national threats to regional or global threats. Law enforcement agencies have significant difficulties singling out immigrant communities that are used as gateways by such groups.

Another trend is the increased cooperation among organized criminal groups. There is increasing evidence that ethnically structured criminal groups are strengthening collaboration. Involved in trafficking of arms, drugs and human beings, the demand for trafficked goods and migration flows are major factors behind the expansion of organized criminal groups from the Baltic countries and Central and Eastern Europe.

This process is broadly the same for arms and drugs. However, there is growing international concern over the proliferation of intercontinental trafficking, seen in human and drug trafficking in the Baltic countries, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia to the United States, the Middle East, Europe and Asia. This phenomenon is multi-layered and leads one to conclude that groups from the Baltic region work in and around trafficking corridors, in what can be described as loose cooperation, together with a broad range of other similar groups.

Ways Forward

The spread of organized criminal groups from the Baltic countries and Central and Eastern Europe is massive. To take them on, insights from a number of disciplines are needed as the structures, within which these groups operate, are complex. Agencies must be able to find solutions for improved information exchange and legal cooperation as well as strengthening trust. There is a need to draw together regional law enforcement officers, researchers and law and policy makers to provide specialist technical knowledge and expertise. There is also a need to overcome and



reduce the domestic demand of products trafficked, as this demand is the major driving force in the expansion of organized criminal groups. An understanding of national and supranational justice legislation within the EU is needed so as to overcome misunderstandings, mistrust and red tape. This could lead to strengthened cooperation between governments and also induce law enforcement agencies to find new ways to solve the problems created by the organized criminal groups nationally and regionally.

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