

GLOBALIZATION AND TECHNOLOGY SEE ITALIAN MAFIA GOING GLOBAL

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This issue brief delves into the changing landscape of Italian organized crime, focusing on the ‘Ndrangheta, a potent criminal group originating from Calabria. It explores how the ‘Ndrangheta has diversified its criminal activities, including drug trafficking and environmental crimes, and its alleged connections with international criminal and terrorist organizations. The brief also sheds light on the emergence of the youthful “Baby Mafia,” or Camorra in Naples, known for its decentralized structure and social media presence glamorizing criminal life. It emphasizes Italy’s efforts to combat organized crime and the necessity for a united European approach to address the mafia’s global influence and adaptability across borders.

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During a 2022 speech, former Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi warned his nation that organized crime families had “assumed new, but equally fearful forms,” and that beyond the threat of violence, Italy’s mafia had “insinuated itself into the boards of companies, polluting the economic fabric from the real estate sector to wholesale supply chains” while controlling nearly 9 percent of Italy’s economy.¹

Although Italy’s Sicilian Cosa Nostra mafia has long dominated media attention, the ‘Ndrangheta, who have been operating from the southern region

of Calabria since the 18th century, has eclipsed its nefarious counterpart, recently being deemed by Italy’s Anti-Mafia Investigative Directorate (DIA) as the “absolute dominant force in the criminal world.”²

Of all the crime families in Italy’s history, none have experienced a generational shift quite like the Neapolitan Camorra, also known as the “Gen-Z Mafia” or “Baby Mafia”, which the Italian government has called the most violent and deadly organized crime group in the country. For Italian authorities, arresting Camorra members has

become a never-ending cycle. Just as quickly as Camorra youth are taken into custody, new, young, and eager faces step in to fill the void. And whereas the 'Ndrangheta operates in tradition, secrecy, and strict codes of honor, the Baby Mafia is more brash and lacks a traditional hierarchy.

The Clans of Calabria: Crime and Community

The 'Ndrangheta remain the only mafia-structured organized crime group to successfully extend its illicit network to all seven continents worldwide.³ Raking in nearly \$72 billion in annual revenues,⁴ a figure estimated to be more than three times the income of all Mexican drug cartels combined,⁵ the 'Ndrangheta sells nearly all of the cocaine trafficked and consumed in Europe, which it imports from Latin America. The crime syndicate uses ports and routes not typically associated with the drug trade to launder and disguise the origin of their illegal product.

Central to 'Ndrangheta's power and longevity is its clan-like structure, which results in strict loyalties between members. The cartel recruits based on family ties, including blood relationships and marriage. At the top of its two-tier structure sits the *Crimine*, the 'Ndrangheta's Supreme Council, with the *Campo Crimine*, the crime boss, at the helm. Below the *Crimine* is the *Mandamenti*, which is comprised of smaller regional familial clans. Due to the organization's closely knit framework, the police rarely encounter defectors, making it difficult to penetrate. Italian authorities estimate there are around 20,000 'Ndrangheta members around the world, while the FBI estimates membership at about 6,000.⁶ The discrepancy highlights how difficult it is to accurately determine even the size of the syndicate.

"The Calabrian mafia, the 'Ndrangheta, has become the most powerful mafia in Italy [due to its] ability to expand into new territories, both in Italy [especially in northern Italy], and in Europe and

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in many other countries around the world," says Maurizio Catino, author of *Mafia Organizations: The Visible Hand of Criminal Enterprise*. "The 'Ndrangheta is the only mafia organization capable of reproducing its organizational model in new territories, [and] unlike the Cosa Nostra, the 'Ndrangheta has never implemented a grueling strategy of attack on the State, but has preferred peaceful coexistence, trying to keep the use of violence low, unlike the Camorra."⁷

The Italian government imposed some of the strictest lockdowns in the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in thousands of businesses being forced to halt operations overnight. Hundreds of thousands of low-income employees, many of whom who relied on a salary of 30 euros a day, faced months without income. The 'Ndrangheta saw the crisis as an opportunity to further build ties with the community. They stepped up and provided those in need with basic necessities, mimicking a response similar to that of an international aid agency.

Locals trusted the 'Ndrangheta to respond to the crisis "more quickly and efficiently" than the state administration, according to Nicola Morra, an Italian politician and Chairman of the Parliamentary Anti-Mafia Commission. In doing so, the mafia was able to gain "social consensus and authority,"⁸ thus

strengthening its base of support and maintaining its position of power in Italian society. Yet, throughout the early days of the pandemic, the mafia did not blindly provide arbitrary assistance to Italy's most despondent, on the contrary, they provided need to those who are the most useful – those who would recall their deeds at the ballet box, for instance.

These ties to the community are also important for another source of income for the 'Ndrangheta — loan sharking. Whereas conventional lenders such as banks ask for collateral before considering a loan and charge market interest rates, the Calabrian mafia require no upfront payment and offer low interest rates. The crime syndicate choose to loan mostly to struggling entrepreneurs, anticipating that many of them will be unable to repay their debts, allowing the 'Ndrangheta to take over the business. Owners who default on these payments usually don't resist the henchmen who take over their businesses or report the coercion to the authorities because they fear for the safety of their families. Operating these small local businesses gives the mafia control over much of the community and allows them to launder their drug money.

The 'Ndrangheta also engage in various activities related to ecological pollution, such as illegal waste disposal, illegal logging, illegal fishing, and illegal

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mining, in order to make a profit. These activities have had serious environmental and health consequences for local communities.⁹

Some sources also claim that the 'Ndrangheta has established ties with various international organized crime syndicates and terrorist groups. The alliances have resulted in extortion and arms trafficking with organizations such as Al-Qaeda, the Irish Republican Army, and Colombian paramilitary groups, among others.¹⁰

However, other mafia experts, such as Sergio Nazzaro, an investigative reporter and the spokesman for the President of the Anti-Mafia parliamentary commission in Italy, have countered that the 'Ndrangheta's prime focus is business, not collaboration with terrorist organizations.¹¹ Publicly affiliating with foreign extremists would be detrimental to the cartel's image, Nazzarro argues, especially among the local population. Many Calabrians silently support the 'Ndrangheta, often out of fear, but this support would likely wane if they were seen collaborating with terrorists.¹²

The Camorra: Italy's Gen-Z Mafia

When many of the Camorra's most-wanted crime bosses were arrested in the early 2000s in Italy and the United States as a result of years-long joint investigations, many hoped that the days of organized crime in Naples would be reduced to a memory. But, even as the old generation of

mob bosses were left to wither in prison, a new generation stepped in to fill the vacuum.

Mafia families typically designate a mob “boss” to serve as the undisputed head of the family. Below the boss sits his *consigliere*, who acts as his trusted confidant and advisor. The “underboss,” or second in command, is often groomed to take over the crime family in the future and is typically a family member, such as the son of the boss. Below the underboss is the “capo,” a ranking member who commands a group of “made men” known as the “soldiers,” who are the lowest ranked level of the mafia.¹³

The Camorra, on the other hand, is comprised of hundreds of smaller cells in Naples, often competing with one another for territorial control. This horizontal structure allows for increased autonomy among its vast network,¹⁴ but it also leads to perpetual gun fights in the streets. Another major difference between the Camorra and traditional mafia families is the age of its members. Many of Camorra’s mob bosses are in their early 20s, while their youngest members, known by the Italian slang term *paranze* (meaning baby gangsters), have been arrested as young as 13.

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Unlike their predecessors, the *paranze* fail to abide by a code of honor or “family” values like traditional mafia. These young men, motivated by power, drug use, and impatience, wait for their moment to be recognized by an established member of the Camorra.¹⁵ Though this life of crime is often marked by extreme violence¹⁶ and multiple trips to prison—Italy has an 80 percent re-incarceration rate¹⁷—many young men choose it because they see few options to get ahead. In Italy’s southern regions, 16.6 percent of youth aged 18-24 drop out of school or training programs, compared to 9.7 percent in the rest of Europe.¹⁸ Italy’s youth unemployment rate is nearly 21.7 percent.¹⁹

Whereas traditional mafia families operate discretely to avoid prosecution, the Baby Mafia takes to Tik Tok and Instagram to portray their version of the gangsters they have seen in Hollywood films. Their videos show the luxury, partying, and brotherhood of life in the Camorra, and serve as a recruitment tool for young men looking for power, money, and respect. Social media, however, also gives authorities live data about cartel members’ activities and whereabouts, which they can use to apprehend the *paranze*. Rival gangs can also use this information to pinpoint their opponents’ location and set up ambushes.²⁰

While the *paranze* might get clicks, Nazzaro believes they are “a tool of those who really rule.” Traditional families might “operate more in the shadows” but they are much more powerful than the young guns, bringing in more revenue through both legal trafficking, such as public works contracts, and illegal trafficking, such as drug sales.²¹ “These young boys are the cannon fodder of the drug market that has no limits whatsoever and generates monstrous revenues.”²²

Digital Currency, Entrepreneurship, and Expansion

The Camorra’s main sources of income include drug trafficking, money laundering, and counterfeiting

efforts—all standard mafia *modus operandi*, however the Camorra have also recently begun delving into entrepreneurship.

Both the Cosa Nostra and the ‘Ndrangheta have also taken an interest in cryptocurrencies including Bitcoin and Monero. These digital currencies allow for swift and anonymous transactions while dodging the watchful eye of banking institutions and government regulators. The ‘Ndrangheta uses cryptocurrency to process drug money payments for its extensive cocaine trade with Colombian cartels.²³ In response, the Italian police have boosted the number of units dedicated to investigating this relatively new method of money laundering.²⁴

The criminal capabilities and international reach of Italy’s mafia families have proven to be the most threatening organized crime network across Europe. At the same time, Italy’s anti-organized crime efforts are viewed as some of the most sophisticated worldwide. According to the 2021 Global Organized Crime Index, Italy is only one of nine countries in the world with high levels of criminality alongside robust frameworks and mechanisms in place to counter organized crime. The Italian DIA was established in 1991 as a means to strengthen the state response as a result of the growing threats the mafia presented to stability across Italy and abroad. The DIA focuses a majority of its efforts on preventive measures, including predicting criminal trends.

As a result, Italy’s crime families have begun to move their fortunes to other European countries.²⁵ Germany and the Netherlands currently have no anti-mafia legislation in place or asset seizure capabilities, as is the case in Italy. This freedom of movement, and fluidity of money, digital currencies included, have allowed for the mafia’s traditional methods of crime to flourish beyond its borders as a result of globalization and digitalization in today’s modern world. At a minimum, a pan-European effort to harmonize anti-mafia legislation across the

EU, including closer cooperation and intelligence sharing, along with the expedition of extradition requests would help tackle the mafia’s ability to exploit inadequate and limited regulations outside Italy’s jurisdiction.²⁶

In response to the risks the Italian mafia presents to Europe and beyond, Franco Gabrielli, the Italian Chief of Police and Director General of Public Security, believes taking a limited territorial, national approach to targeting the mafia will undermine overall objectives. Rather, a multi-front, concerted international effort is necessary, as the criminal dynamics of the modern mafia have essentially gone global.²⁷

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