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Enhancing Africa's response to transnational organised crime

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Research Paper

Criminal colonialism

European organised crime in Africa – an exploratory study

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Summary

This paper examines the largely overlooked migration of European organised crime to Africa, from the late twentieth century to today. Focusing on Italian, Balkan and Eastern European actors, it maps their engagement in illicit markets, particularly cocaine trafficking and money laundering, and contextualises these activities within Africa's colonial and post-colonial legacies. The paper calls for strengthened intelligence, cooperation and enforcement across the continent, with European law enforcement playing a central role.

Key points

- For European organised crime, Africa is a low-risk transit hub, a safe haven for fugitives, a market for illicit goods and a money laundering hub.
- Italian, Balkan and Eastern European organised crime groups play various roles in various locales across Africa, with most reported presence in West and South Africa.
- Colonialism has had a powerful shaping influence, reducing Africa's resilience to organised crime and creating opportunities for European criminals.
- European law enforcement must strengthen intelligence and operations in Africa to tackle organised crime and uphold rule-of-law principles.

Introduction

The migration of European criminal actors to Africa is a largely unexplored subject, but an important one. In the Western contemporary discussion on global organised crime, there is a focus on the impact of African criminal organisations in Europe and perceived criminal flows from Africa to Europe, whether organised by Africans or not.[1]

Part of the reason for this is the degree to which the politics of what is widely referred to as the 'migration crisis' have forced the issue up the policy agenda in Europe: in simple terms, Africans are often seen as bringing criminal activity to Europe.[2] A companion ENACT paper will examine Nigerian organised crime in Germany and Italy and African diaspora crime in the Netherlands and France.

Scant attention is paid to criminal commodity flows from Europe to Africa, such as the growing trade in synthetic drugs and stolen automobiles

Europe pays little attention to European criminal groups in Africa, however, despite their long history on the continent and their outsized role in shaping Africa's evolving criminal economy. Similarly, scant attention is paid to criminal commodity flows from Europe to Africa, such as the growing trade in synthetic drugs and stolen automobiles.[3] Ultimately, the true nature of the criminal relationships between Africa and Europe has long been obscured by political narratives and agendas.

This paper seeks to explore and understand the migration of European organised crime to Africa from the second half of the twentieth century to the present day. It maps actors' motivations, geographical engagement and the cultural, social and historical factors that led to them leaving Europe and that have shaped their success or otherwise in Africa.

The first section of the paper will consider the legacy of the pre-colonial and colonial periods, which entrenched forms of economic activity that might now be considered egregious forms of organised crime, most especially slavery. It will also examine the longer-term impact of these periods in shaping the political, cultural and economic landscape of certain African states in a manner that has rendered them more conducive to European criminal activity.

The second section outlines actor types and historical waves to Africa, before turning to an analysis of the various roles undertaken by European criminal actors and mapping several key illicit flows from Europe to Africa. The section concludes with a look ahead for what the future for European criminal groups or actors in Africa might be. The third section urges European authorities to take seriously the phenomenon of European organised crime in Africa and makes recommendations in the areas of intelligence-gathering and cooperation.

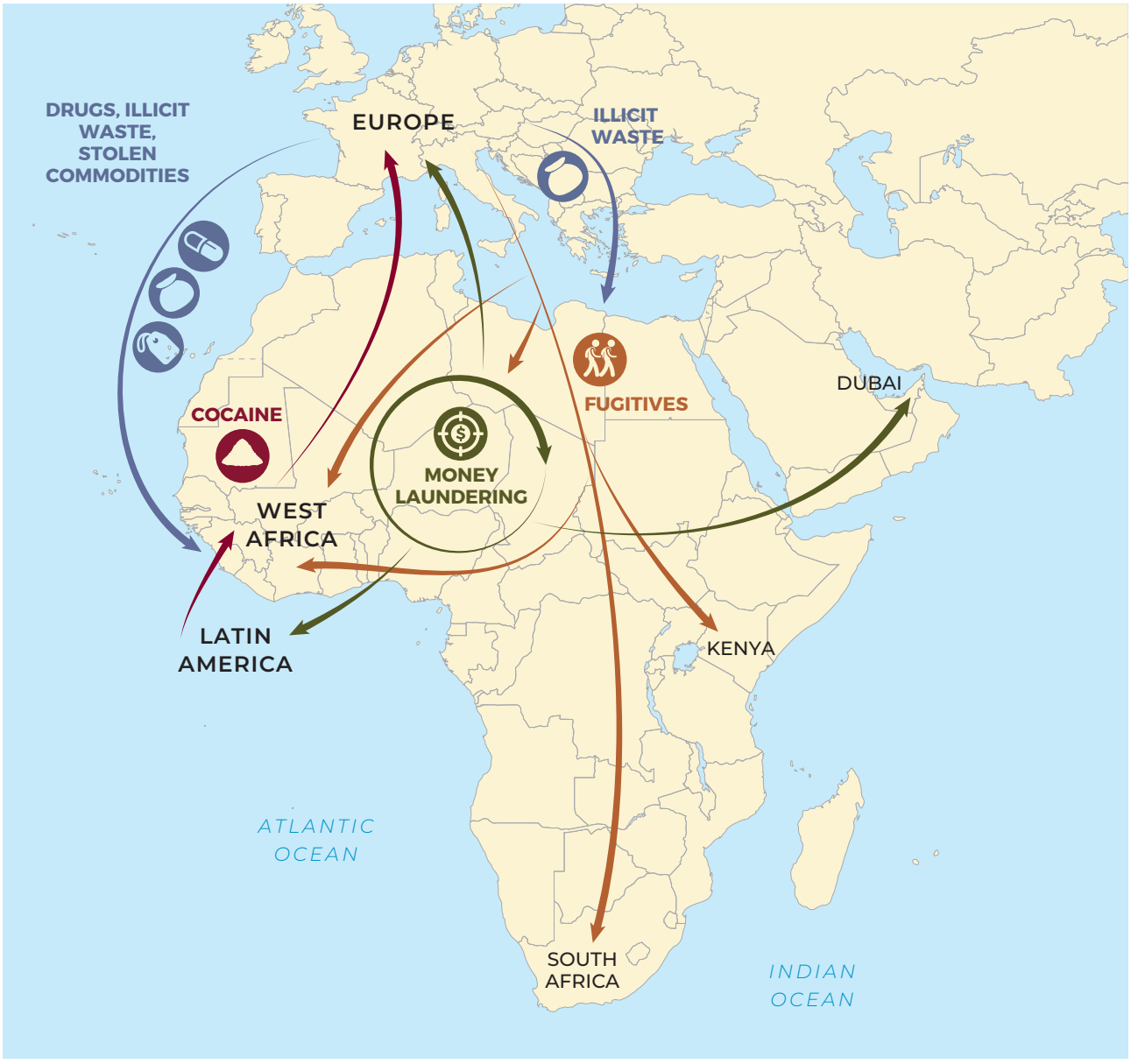
For the purposes of this paper, the term 'European criminal groups or actors' refers to criminal formations and entrepreneurs that originated in Europe, including what is known as South-Eastern Europe, but excluding Russia. This is not to suggest Russian actors lack influence in the African criminal landscape; indeed, our own research has detailed the impact of Russian organised crime on illicit economies and political violence in the region.[4] But the nature of the threat from Russia is somewhat different and best discussed in the broader political context of Russia.

The term 'organised crime' is also used broadly in the context of the discussion. In some cases, the Europeans involved are clearly part of European-based and -connected criminal groups and operations. In other cases, they are 'criminal entrepreneurs' – that is, individual criminal actors who may also be operators of legitimately registered businesses and who engage in a series of organised illicit activities over time. However, due to considerations of length and focus, this paper will not discuss European corporations working in the sphere of resource extraction implicated in cases of corruption and environmental crime. This is not to downplay the severity of such actions, which arguably outstrip those of 'traditional' criminal actors in warping African economies and state-building, but acknowledges that such actors need a different analytical approach.

The paper is built on extensive data and analysis gathered through the ENACT-funded Organized Crime Index for Africa. This is supplemented by interviews and data from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) and its four African observatories: East and Southern Africa, Central Africa, West Africa, and North Africa and the Sahel. These observatories act as platforms for the GI-TOC to conduct and share granular research and analysis on organised crime and illicit markets on specific regions in the continent. A wider review of secondary literature has also been conducted.

One final note: the paper focuses on the role played by criminals from Italy, Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, since there is sufficient data to be able to describe their roles with a certain degree of clarity, but there are certain caveats. Italian organised crime has been heavily focused on by researchers in recent years, which may create an information bias. Neither should the selection of actors be taken to imply the absence of others. Given the colonial advantages described above, for example, it would be logical for French organised crime to have an interest in West Africa, notwithstanding the recent pushback against French influence, but data remains scarce. Further work is needed to understand the penetration and roles of the full range of European criminal actors in Africa.

Chart 1: Map of the four pillars of European criminal engagement with Africa



Source: GI-TOC

Key findings

- For European organised crime, Africa represents a low-risk transit hub for cocaine and other illicit flows, a safe haven for fugitives, a market for illicit goods and a money laundering centre, especially through gold (see map on page 3).
- Italian, Balkan and Eastern European organised crime has a footprint in several African countries, although their roles, organisation and levels of success differ from place to place. In markets that are strongly linked to Europe – such as cocaine – European organised crime is particularly prominent. Their high-level position in these markets stems not only from their European links, but also from connections across the supply chain, such as Latin America in the case of cocaine. Other European nationalities may also be influential, but there is a lack of data.
- In South Africa, Europeans have played an important part in shaping the local criminal market, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, and in particular, actors from Eastern and Southern Europe. Vito Palazzolo, for example, helped make the country a key locale for money laundering for Cosa Nostra. East Africa is a base for Italian groups managing the transit of cocaine, in coordination with Nigerian syndicates. European organised crime is not highly influential in North Africa, except as money launderers and logistics providers. Instead, diaspora groups based in Europe, such as the 'Mocro Mafia', maintain both communal and business ties with contacts back home to coordinate activities.
- Countries that have strong European diaspora communities – such as South Africa, Kenya and Tunisia – are often used by fugitives, although it is rare for serious organised crime actors to flee to Kenya. West Africa, which has no strong diaspora communities, is also emerging as a base for fugitives, perhaps in part due to the ease of securing official protection from extradition.
- To tackle European organised crime in Africa, European law enforcement agencies, such as Europol, must improve their intelligence capacity and operational reach in Africa. This is partly pragmatic – the activities of these criminals, particularly cocaine, have real consequences in Europe – but it is also ethical. If Europe wishes to live up to its self-declared principles of the rule of law and justice, then it must make every effort to apply this to its citizens wherever they may be.

Context: crime as colonial inheritance

A willingness to travel in search of new opportunities, where the home country's law does not apply. A desire to undertake high-risk schemes for potentially big rewards. And finally, a readiness to use violence – and an ability to forge connections with local stakeholders that make violence unnecessary. In the broadest terms, this could be the story of the early European arrivals to Africa in the fifteenth century as they sought to open new markets, including most notoriously, the slave trade. But it could also describe another influx that took place centuries later: that of European organised crime.

There are many reasons to explain why European criminal actors and groups sought out Africa as a destination, which this paper will cover extensively. But it is worth lingering a while on the analogy of colonialism and crime.

One reason for this is that the driving force behind pre-colonial and colonialism periods and organised crime is fundamentally the same: an ambition to generate wealth with little regard for legal norms – or in the case of colonial authorities, bending such norms to their advantage.

The pre-colonial era[5] saw individual speculators, outlaw privateers and state-backed missions venturing to new coasts and engaging in what could be described as 'buccaneer capitalism'. This involved high-risk, high-return schemes that necessitated the creation of relationships with local populations to facilitate trade in various commodities, especially barter trade.[6] At times, both parties would profit, albeit in a lopsided manner, but the prospect of European violence was always a key factor shaping the power balance. In the late nineteenth century, this status quo changed, as European powers sought to add new lands to their burgeoning empires.[7] Transactional trade was subsumed by imperial sovereignty.

Organised crime across the world operates in a similar manner. It seeks high-return schemes that are outside the law and secures its deals with violence, or the threat of it. At first, such business is small-scale and transactional, but as illicit economies mature, they grow more complex and sophisticated, spawning hierarchies, specialists and often control over territorial or market-based 'turf'. As with colonialism, the ultimate goal is often to 'go legal', namely, to launder illicit proceeds into licit assets, political power or both.

Colonialism and transnational organised crime even share common enablers, both benefiting from a historical step-change in the scale and nature of global trade. In the pre-colonial and colonial phases, that was due to advances in shipbuilding and navigation, combined with increasing industrialisation, which drove the need to secure raw materials and open new consumer markets. In the late twentieth century, transnational organised crime profited – and experienced enormous geographic expansion – as globalisation and the internet transformed global trade.[8]

But aside from analogy, there may be a more direct – and causal – link between fifteenth-century European pre-colonial contacts and the rise of organised crime in Africa, with early Europeans undermining the coherence and independence of African political entities and therefore reducing resilience to crime. Four centuries of European engagement with Africa also bequeathed a cultural and economic infrastructure that has directly facilitated licit and illicit European activity in post-colonial Africa.

Transactional politics

As discussed above, European pre-colonial contacts embedded 'buccaneer capitalism' in certain parts of coastal Africa, particularly West Africa. By far the most lucrative activity was the slave trade, which had several ramifications for Africa's state formation and economic development, alongside the enormous human costs. At the political level, slavery greatly empowered and enriched local elites who had the resources needed to capture and coerce large numbers of people.[9] More broadly, it tilted Africa towards an economy of external dependency that relied on rents, encouraging 'the creation of institutions that favoured the extraction rather than the creation of wealth.'[10]

The imperial surge in the late nineteenth century worsened Africa's political and economic weaknesses, resulting in 'a shift in control over war making, justice, taxation and expenditures – that is, the core issues of politics' from local chiefs to foreign occupiers.[11]

When independence came, often following protracted conflict, the consequences of colonialism became keenly felt.[12] Attempts to create balanced economies and political arrangements frequently fell victim to the same impulses seen during the colonial and pre-colonial periods: namely, the use of violence, personal rule and cronyism. Some argued that the iniquitous social structures and economic practices of colonialism were simply continuing under new flags.[13]

Weak states carry less risk for criminals, and the transaction costs of crime are lower

What emerged in many post-colonial African countries has been described as the 'shadow state' by William Reno, in which rulers whittled down bureaucracies and expanded 'informal, commercially orientated networks' in their place. At heart, this 'shadow state' is predicated, as in colonial times, 'on rulers' abilities to manipulate external actors' access to markets, both formal and clandestine, in such a way as to enhance their power.'[14] In this framework, cocaine can be 'taxed' like any other commodity by local elites.[15]

This theory is not without its critics, such as those who argue that violence and predation are also at the heart of Western state-building, and that Africa is not unique in these arrangements, which can be found across the world.[16] But it does explain why late twentieth-century Africa has emerged as an attractive place for criminals of all stripes to do business. Weak states carry less risk for criminals, and the transaction costs of crime are lower.[17]

To conclude, a domino effect has been taking place over the past five or so centuries. Pre- and colonial European contact undermined the creation of formal independent African institutions, instead creating an economy of external dependency based on local elites negotiating the terms for foreign access and

extracting rents. In the post-colonial period, this legacy persisted, creating the ideal conditions for organised crime to embed and flourish.

Organised crime has in turn further eroded state integrity, as reflected in the fact that Africa has the lowest resilience score of any continent on the Global Organized Crime Index (a resilience score being the measure of the ability to respond effectively to organised crime).[18] In several countries in Africa, organised crime, along with conflict, has in effect assumed the mantle of colonialism as one of the biggest impediments to the development of the rule of law, political accountability and economic growth.

The European criminal advantage

The circumstances described above have benefited criminals of all nationalities, but certain aspects have also served to make Africa an especially accessible place for European criminals.

The pre-colonial and colonial eras created a number of advantages for Europeans in the post-independence era.[19] One of the most powerful and insidious was simply their continuing presence: Europeans did not disappear from Africa during the wave of independence, but retained a strong influence in many spheres, most significantly in business. Because of its sizeable population of European origin, South Africa has often been the place where the continental connection has appeared strongest, including in the shape of continuing European migrations to South Africa during the apartheid period. European corporations also retained lucrative interests in various sectors, from mining to oil – interests they have not been averse to pursuing with the aid of corruption, most notably in the case of mining giant Glencore.[20]

More indirectly, European culture, Christianity, Western education, diasporas, Western-influenced institutions, legal codes and languages such as French, English and Portuguese have reshaped certain aspects of African society, although less so in some places than others. African reception to these influences has been widely nuanced, including the rise of African nationalism in the nineteenth century that opposed Western influence and control. In addition, since colonial times, Africans have been used to working within two systems: within the 'official' colonial-style system and within 'unofficial' systems based on tradition and culture.[21]

The legacy of colonialism is indisputable, and relations between Europe and Africa still hinge on severe inequalities

But the legacy of colonialism is indisputable, and relations between Europe and Africa still hinge on severe inequalities that derive from the period. Europe's financial strength gives Europeans leverage in African business, while the Communauté Financière Africaine (CFA) francs have long tethered several African nations' monetary policies to the European Union. The CFA is pegged to the euro and until recently required the deposit of at least 50% of foreign exchange earnings in the French Treasury.[22] Travel is another discriminator: while Europeans can travel to many African countries visa-free or obtain a visa on arrival, Africans face steep hurdles when coming to Europe, with a higher visa rejection rate than the global average.[23]

Although these European 'advantages' may now be starting to wane, given Africa's pivot to other partners such as China and Russia, they have nevertheless provided Europeans with a set of specific pathways for integration or infiltration in Africa in recent decades. And these advantages have applied for Europeans on both sides of the law.

Taken together, the legacy of colonialism, both in shaping the transactional politics seen in many countries and in providing current pathways for European engagement in Africa, has served European criminal actors particularly well. European organised crime has been a direct beneficiary of European colonialism.

As this paper will discuss, for European organised crime, Africa means many things. It is a nearshoring hub, a place for fugitives and an opportunity to open new markets and launder money. But amid the modern cases, it is salient to reflect that the present is inevitably shaped by the past and that the long shadow of colonialism touches organised crime as it does so many other aspects of life in Africa.

Mapping European organised crime in Africa

The following sections will examine the range of motives that lead European criminals to migrate to Africa, the factors that underpin their desire to move and their ability to engage in new societies and the various roles they perform. It will also explore the reasons for the geographic concentration of European actors in some African countries and their absence from others.

Why move?

This section argues that the primary dynamic between European organised crime and Africa has been one of migration in the era of African independence. But as argued in the Introduction, it must be first acknowledged that Africa was already home to many Europeans. Were none of them criminals? Did European organised crime not exist in colonial Africa?

These are trenchant questions without easy answers, but some progress can be made with a definitional approach. All the features of organised crime as we consider it – commodities, violence and control outside the law – were certainly present in the colonial era – but they were permissible when perpetrated by the colonists under imperial rule. The law was present, of course, but its application was selective. Concepts such as 'native backwardness' and 'inferiority' were used to deny colonial subjects their legal rights, while still binding them to its provisions.[24] By contrast, colonisers enjoyed wide latitude including violence against subjects ('the right of correction') and were seldom punished due to the connivance of the imperial criminal justice system.[25]

Did European organised crime not exist in colonial Africa?

As such, the colonial project shared many aspects with what we would now term organised crime: in an era of rapacious predation, unpunished use of violence and the undermining of formal legal codes, the criminals were not outside society, but at the apex of it. It is also possible to speculate that European organised crime – such as it existed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century – would have found it difficult to enter the colonial markets, and also largely unnecessary. There was arguably no need to be a criminal when an entrepreneurial European could, with relatively few barriers, work in a colonial trading company, become a diamond broker or run a plantation, and so secure a fortune.

The transition to independence unseated these arrangements, although, as argued above, it did not displace them entirely. But the state umbrella was now gone: as a consequence, many ex-colonists left as 'repatriates', and those who remained would have to work within the new rules.[26] Given the paucity of historical information, it is difficult to say whether some Europeans transitioned to crime after independence, finding that their lucrative legal money-earners were now illegal. However, the more telling intersection could be the independence of African states with the rise of transnational organised crime, which had begun to develop following Prohibition and the passing of the Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914 in the United States (US).[27] As the colonial system faded in the mid-twentieth century, a new system for marshalling the flows of sought-after commodities was coming to the fore. A new European influx was coming to Africa – that of crime.

Of course, there were many variations in how these Europeans travelled to Africa, and understanding these variations helps provide a clearer picture of the range of criminal engagement with the continent. A previous ENACT paper that examined the movement and settlement of criminal actors in Africa assessed the level of resources and organisation of migrating criminals to generate a matrix of four distinct actor categories:[28]

- **Fugitives:** Criminal actors with access to significant financial resources but who have been forced, or pushed, to move. They leave in a hurry and arrive with little preparation and no clear strategic objective, which leads them to use their funds to buy local protection, including from politicians.
- **Family:** Criminal operators with significant resources and established home-based operations who move to strategically expand their business. The term 'family' does not denote movement as part of a family or kinship group, but draws on the mafia sense of the word: representatives of a closed criminal group moving under instruction and with the resources needed to expand criminal markets. In their approach,

European organised criminals cannot rely on large diaspora communities as support networks

this group arguably most resembles pre-colonial activities, focusing on resource management and deals with local elites to enrich stakeholders back home.

- **Fortune seekers:** Criminal actors 'pushed' by poor economic opportunities or by law enforcement pressure to move elsewhere, bringing few resources with them. This often results in highly entrepreneurial activity and collaboration with local criminal actors, although such actors may struggle to exploit opportunities given their lack of capital.
- **Franchisees:** Criminal actors who move as part of wider networks, but with few resources of their own. They are generally linked to larger criminal organisations elsewhere who spot opportunities to build new markets or agree to travel with this purpose. Such arrangements resemble 'franchising', in that criminal entrepreneurs may move to position themselves as connectors to a wider network and pay, willingly or unwillingly, for that privilege.

These four categories can be used to understand the successive waves of European criminal migration to Africa, which in many cases followed patterns of migration that had begun in the nineteenth century (see timeline).

One aspect of these migrations must be stressed. Unlike other foreign organised crime networks that moved within or to Africa, European organised crime never came in great numbers. It never had the critical mass to form a quasi-independent organisation or monopolise a market – unlike, for example, in South Africa in the 1990s, when Chinese triads took control of the abalone and shark fin markets and Nigerian organised crime came to dominate drugs and sex trafficking.[29] With the exception of South Africa, which has had sizable newly arrived European diasporas over recent decades, and Malindi in Kenya, European organised criminals cannot rely on large diaspora communities as support networks.[30]

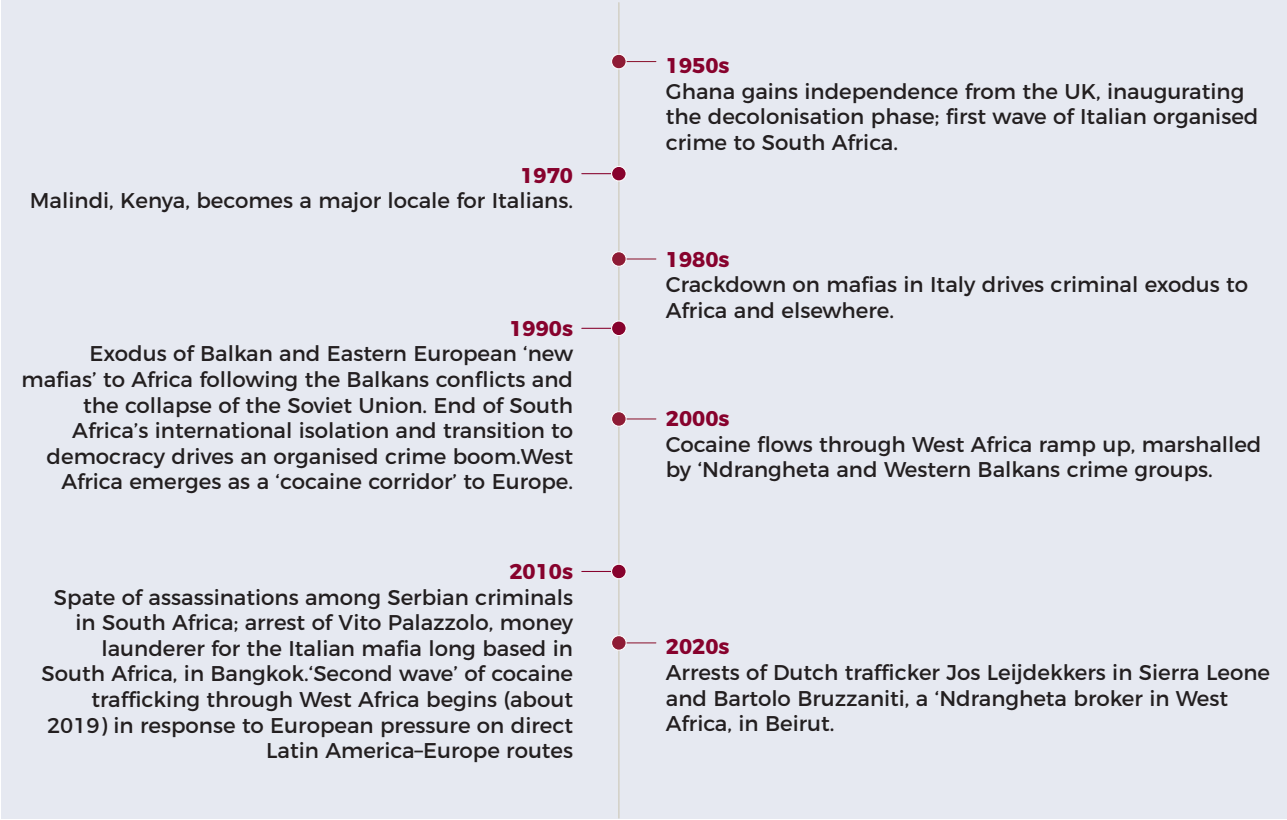
As a consequence, European organised criminals have not taken control of local illicit markets but instead have inserted themselves at strategic points in illicit flows, offered certain expertise or formed alliances with locals.[31] As the following sections will show, there is much variation within these approaches, but two key points emerge.

The first is that European fortune seekers in general face the steepest challenges in successfully embedding. As the examples below show, such actors often draw unwanted attention and lack the official or unofficial backing needed to protect them from law enforcement or rival criminal networks. The careers of several such European actors have often been bloody and short.

The second is that fugitives and particularly family actors stand the best chance of success. Fugitives with adequate finances and the ability to make connections can secure protection from both local and international law enforcement pressure,

often for many years. Family actors benefit from an organisational backing that provides local protection and access to illicit supply chains, shielding them from street-level risks, though they must still contend with others.

Chart 2: Timeline of European organised crime in Africa since WWII



The timeline shows the key events concerning European organised crime in Africa since the Second World War. Roughly speaking, these events can be thought of as occurring in three distinct phases: the first phase, immediately after the war, of Italians and Western Europeans, followed by a second phase of Western Balkans organised crime figures in the 1990s. The third phase is more mixed, comprising Eastern Europeans (notably Bulgarians) and further arrivals of Italians and Western Balkans, although in contrast to previous phases, these Italian and Western Balkans actors came not as fugitives, but as family or fortune seekers, with an eye on doing business in Africa.

Key European criminal actors

This section provides an overview of several groupings of European organised crime that have become active in Africa over the past five decades: Italian, Western Balkans and Eastern European. Other European nationalities are, of course, also involved in crime in Africa, but these are often as individuals or small groupings.

While this analysis proceeds by nationality, several geographic features can be observed. West Africa appears to be the hub of European criminal engagement, with Europeans strategically inserting themselves into illicit markets ranging from drug trafficking, including cocaine and synthetics, to money laundering and illegal waste (see below). West Africa may also be emerging as a base for fugitives, illustrated by two recent cases in Sierra Leone involving a Dutch drug kingpin and a British criminal seeking sanctuary there.[32] However, this claim of West Africa's prominence must be caveated by the fact that most research into European activities has been conducted in this region. Other regions may also experience significant European penetration that passes under the radar.

In South Africa, European criminals have largely operated on the fringes of organised crime, brokering deals, working for local crime bosses or engaging in money laundering. In part, this may be because the drug trade is crowded by more powerful and well-organised actors. The local retail trade is dominated by Nigerian organised crime, while the wholesale trade sees involvement from Colombian and Mexican cartels, rumoured to have operatives on the ground in South Africa.[33] Although the cocaine route from Latin America to Australia via South Africa may be among the most profitable in the world (based on the price of cocaine), it may be that Europeans do not have the necessary connections and/or inclination to service it, as they do with the West Africa–Europe pipeline.

In East Africa, Italian organised crime has been linked to the cocaine trade, and to a lesser extent heroin, in Kenya and Zanzibar.[34] The Italian presence in Zanzibar began in the late 1990s, when the mafia relocated from Mombasa after increased US law enforcement attention and began using the island's harbour for the heroin and cocaine shipments. Soon, the island became a major entry point for drugs into East Africa and saw a rise in local substance use. Italian criminal involvement seems to be primarily in transit shipments, handled in conjunction with Nigerian organised crime, rather than street-level retail.[35] Kenya has also been a place of refuge for various criminals, although, it seems, rarely major organised crime figures. A GI-TOC assessment of European fugitives deported or extradited from Kenya between 2017 and 2023 found that most were in hiding for financial crimes, often tax evasion, or violent crimes, though some organised crime figures may yet come to light.[36]

Europeans often act as logistics providers for the smuggling of drugs, fuel and cigarettes between Africa and Europe

The engagement of European criminals in North Africa hinges on the proximity between the two continents, with Europeans often acting as logistics providers for the smuggling of drugs, fuel and cigarettes between Africa and Europe.[37] Spanish and Italian organised crime groups, for example, have played a major role in transporting and commercialising Moroccan cannabis resin to Europe. The Camorra and 'ndrangheta are involved in this trade, as well as cocaine trafficking from Morocco to Italy. Italian investigations have also identified links between Moroccan criminal organisations and smaller Italian networks, such as the Nuova Camorra Organizzata in Campania and the Quarta Mafia Foggiana in Puglia.[38] In these engagements, the Moroccan groups involved maintain some presence in Italy. North Africa is also a base for fugitives, particularly for Italians (see below).[39]

Today, direct European criminal activity in North African territory is relatively uncommon, with most criminal activity in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya conducted by nationals of those countries.[40] Most European criminal activity in northern Africa comes in the shape of members of the 'Mocro Mafia', which is based in the Netherlands and Belgium, or the DZ Mafia, based in France, in Morocco and Algeria respectively.

Italian organised crime

Italians have long made a path to Africa, initially to the countries on the other side of the Mediterranean. Italians, and particularly Sicilians, began arriving in Tunisia in the nineteenth century – at some points, numbering as many as 100 000 – with Egypt and Algeria also destination countries.[41] Migration further increased after Italy forcibly took territories in Eritrea, Italian Somaliland, Libya and Ethiopia. Overall, about 460 000 Italians immigrated to Africa between 1876 and 1976, although the peak was over by the end of the Second World War.[42]

But at the other end of the continent, South Africa has also been a destination, sometimes a 'next step' for Italian migrants in Eritrea and other African countries. Although somewhat reduced from previous years, the Italian community in South Africa was the largest of all such communities in Africa in 2022.[43] A significant influx took place in the 1950s, when amid economic hardship in southern Italy, and particularly Sicily, many Italians came to South Africa to work, many in the mines.[44]

Elements of organised crime are said to have come in the 1950s wave, but evidence is scarce. The next wave of Italian organised crime to Africa in the 1980s and 1990s was larger, as law enforcement pressure drove fugitives and fortune seekers, both ordinary criminals and organised figures, a trend that continues today.[45]

Fugitives and fortune seekers

Italian fugitives and fortune seekers are widely dispersed across the continent, often travelling to countries where there are pre-existing Italian communities or where it is easier to secure local protection. In East Africa, Kenya's large Italian population – particularly in the beachside town of Malindi[46] – and its amenable officials have made it a favoured fugitive destination. Fleeing a drug conviction in Italy, Alberto Fulvio arrived in Kenya in 1993, and received Kenyan citizenship.[47] It took 24 years before he was finally deported.

Alberto Fulvio gained protection from corrupt Kenyan officials. It took 24 years before he was finally deported

There have also been several prominent arrests of Italian fugitives in North Africa, both high level and minor, particularly in Morocco and Tunisia, where there has long been a strong Italian diaspora.[48] However, arguably the most prominent case of an Italian fugitive in Africa came in South Africa: Vito Palazzolo.

Palazzolo was linked to the 'Pizza Connection', a major 1970s to 1980s heroin trafficking and money laundering operation connecting Cosa Nostra clans with American crime families, particularly the Bonannos.[49] The scheme involved producing heroin in clandestine labs in Sicily and distributing it across the US through a network of pizza parlours, which gave the case its name.[50] It is estimated that more than US$1.6 billion worth of heroin was trafficked during this period.[51]

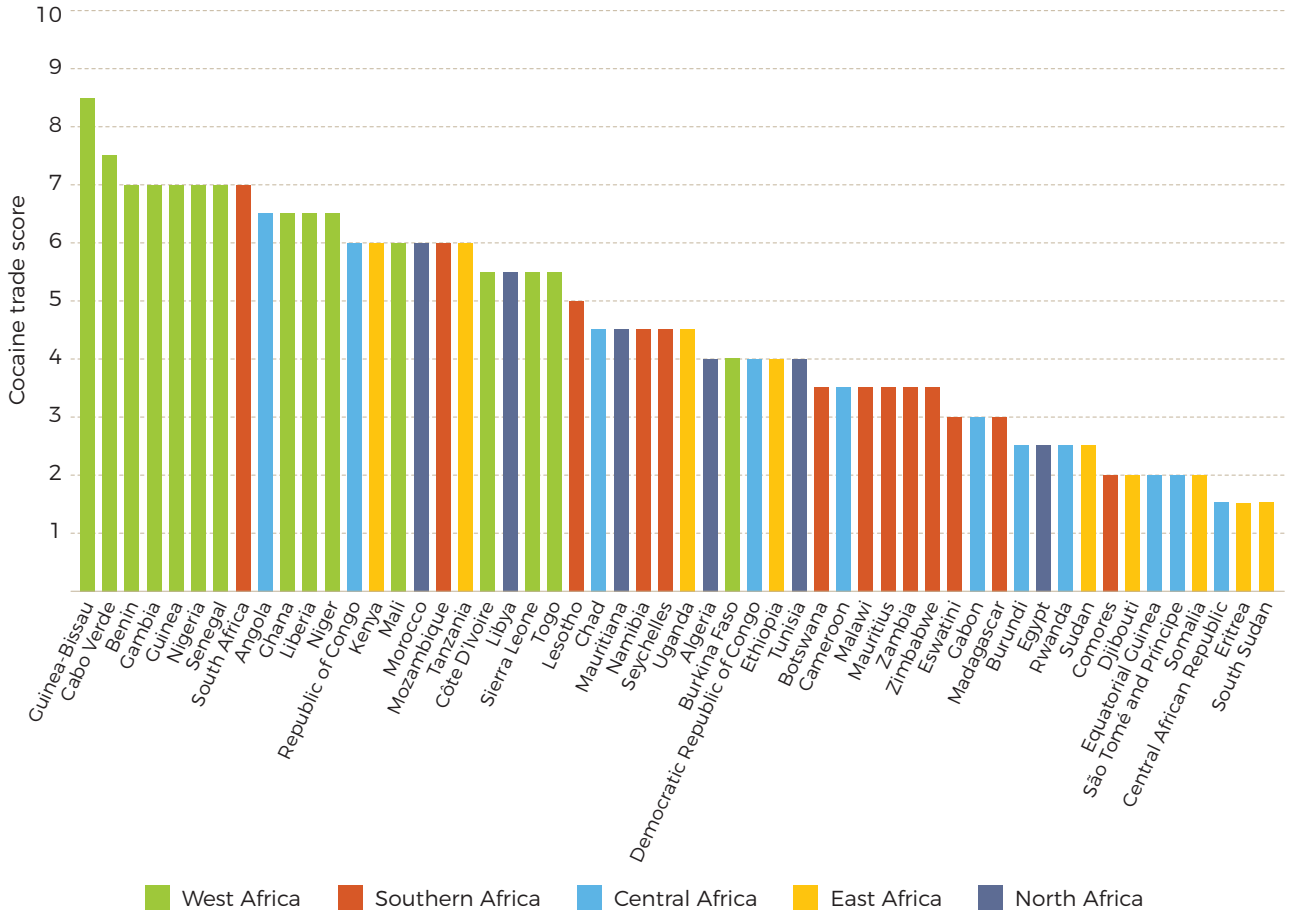
Palazzolo was convicted and sentenced but escaped during a prison leave pass to celebrate Christmas and headed for South Africa. Armed with considerable wealth, he soon obtained residency status and eventually a South African passport and set about securing official protection. Within a short time of his arrival, he had met several ministers and the president, PW Botha, himself.[52] Equally significantly, he also interacted with the head of organised crime in the South African Police.[53]

South Africa's dramatic transition to democracy did not faze Palazzolo. He expanded his business interests, allegedly including four diamond concessions in Angola, and quickly established connections with the ascendant underworld, holding court with local gang bosses at a coffee shop at Cape Town's popular waterfront. Interestingly, it was he who suggested to Cyril Beeka, the most prominent crime boss in South Africa at the time, that there might be opportunities for extortion within Cape Town's burgeoning drug scene – advice Beeka took to heart. For his part, Beeka provided the foot soldiers for Cosa Nostra's operations in South Africa, which were formed around a nucleus of eight people, headed by Palazzolo.[54]

Palazzolo's connections served him well. Despite being wanted by Italian authorities, he was able to live relatively freely in South Africa, weathering periodic arrests. Palazzolo has never been convicted in South Africa and has always denied any ties to organised crime. He was eventually arrested and extradited to Italy in 2012, while in Bangkok, after a career that had allegedly seen him launder US$1.5 billion for Cosa Nostra.[55]

'Family' actors in West Africa

Chart 3: Cocaine trade scores across African regions, 2023



Source: Global Organized Crime Index 2023

Italian 'family' actors, travelling with resources as part of a larger organisation, have also been influential in West Africa. Italian networks – particularly the 'ndrangheta, but also the Camorra – have a longstanding presence in West Africa, predominantly linked to the cocaine trade. However, they are diversifying into other licit and illicit markets, including money laundering operations. There is also evidence of an Italian network, the Mafia Capitale network, trying to engage in the gold and precious stones sector, exporting these commodities from Africa to Italy.[56] The 'ndrangheta operate in West Africa through two main mechanisms: the stable presence of 'ndrangheta members in certain countries in the region and via trusted brokers established through visits by 'ndrangheta clan family members.

Since the 1990s, cocaine has reshaped the illicit landscape in West Africa. According to the Organized Crime Index, of the 12 countries with the highest cocaine trafficking scores on the continent, 10 of them are situated in West Africa (see Chart 3).[57] International and regional law enforcement investigations indicate that elements of the 'ndrangheta appear to have been implicated in cocaine trafficking in countries across West Africa, including Senegal, Niger, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and potentially Cape Verde.[58]

Côte d'Ivoire is an 'ndrangheta stronghold in West Africa, both as a transit point for cocaine and a money laundering hub, where the 'ndrangheta invest in the construction, catering, timber, public works and road development sectors.

Prominent among investigations supporting this analysis was the Italian police's 2018 operation, 'Spaghetti Connection'. This operation unearthed a well-established 'ndrangheta ring, which had been importing cocaine from Brazil since 2014 using a number of front companies.[59] In September 2018, a tonne of cocaine was seized at Santos Port hidden in a consignment of heavy machinery due to be exported to a company in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.[60] According to investigative journalist sources, the trafficking scheme was orchestrated by an 'ndrangheta member from the Romeo-Staccu clan from San Luca. He was supported by several individuals based in Abidjan, including an Italian importer who operated with an Ivorian business partner. Previous Italian investigations had also identified the Commisso clan operating in Abidjan, including via the apparent establishment of family members in the city, in 2015.[61]

Operation Eureka, a three-year investigation that resulted in the arrest of 130 suspected 'ndrangheta members in Europe in May 2023, provided further insight into 'ndrangheta operations in Côte d'Ivoire.[62] Encrypted messages between members of the Bruzzaniti-Palamara-Morabito family intercepted in January 2021 revealed discussions about real estate assets, including a coastal property and restaurants, among them, pizzerias owned in Africa. The exact location of these assets is undisclosed in the chat, but the broader investigation showed that the clan was particularly active in Côte d'Ivoire.

Operation Eureka, a three-year investigation, resulted in the arrest of 130 suspected 'ndrangheta members in Europe

Bartolo Bruzzaniti, a central member of the clan, had been registered as a resident in Côte d'Ivoire since 2017.[63] Bruzzaniti, nicknamed 'Africa' by the clan, was found boasting of 'knowing which keys to touch in Africa' over encrypted messages and positions himself as able to move goods and buy protection on the continent. While Bruzzaniti's primary affiliation is with the Bruzzaniti-Palamara-Morabito clan, he operates as a broker for a wide range of actors, including other 'ndrangheta clans. It is, therefore, extremely likely that he operated as a key node in West Africa for multiple clans in the region.

Bruzzaniti also saw Côte d'Ivoire as a strategic location to hide from law enforcement. He suggested that one of the most significant cocaine traffickers in Europe relocate to Côte d'Ivoire, where Bruzzaniti claimed he could secure impunity.[64] Bruzzaniti himself was arrested in Lebanon in July 2023.[65] It remains to be seen how this will affect the network, but given the strong integration of 'ndrangheta clans, Côte d'Ivoire is likely to remain a key operating hub for them in West Africa.

More nascent evidence also points to potential 'ndrangheta involvement in cocaine trafficking via the Western hub, which comprises Senegal, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau,[66] The Gambia[67] and Cape Verde. Operation Imperium identified an entrepreneur, closely linked to the Mancuso clan, who holds investments in fish factories in Cape Verde.[68] A separate investigation also revealed 'ndrangheta members involved in a plan to smuggle gold from Senegal to Italy.[69]

'New mafias': the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe

Fugitives and fortune seekers

The first wave of the so-called 'new' mafias from the Balkans and South-Eastern Europe to Africa was driven by geopolitical factors in the early 1990s. For Serbian groups, this was the collapse of Yugoslavia; for Bulgarian groups, the collapse of the Soviet Union; and for Albania, the fall of Enver Hoxha's communist regime.

Many Balkans criminals made their way to South Africa in the early 1990s.[70] Large numbers of Serbians came to Johannesburg and the wealthy suburb of Bedfordview. Bedfordview, which is close to OR Tambo Airport,

offered several attractions: a strong European diaspora, especially Cypriots and Greeks, and a pleasant, upmarket atmosphere. Also, and not insignificantly, it was a meeting point for local criminals, many of whom had grown up in poorer surrounding neighbourhoods aspiring to move to Bedfordview.[71]

Arguably the most notorious Serbian fugitive to South Africa was Dobrosav Gavrić, a former policeman with close ties to the Serbian underworld who had been accused of killing Serbian paramilitary commander, Željko Ražnatović, known as Arkan, in 2000. (Arkan had been indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia for crimes against humanity.) Gavrić was handed a 35-year sentence but fled Serbia in 2006.[72]

The murder of former footballer Marc Batchelor may have been linked to a Serbian criminal group

In South Africa, Gavrić assumed a new identity and began working as a driver and bodyguard for Beeka and was driving him in March 2011 when Beeka was assassinated.[73] During the subsequent police investigation, Gavrić's true identity was revealed, and he was imprisoned, where he has spent years resisting extradition to Serbia.[74]

Gavrić's story highlights the risks faced by fugitives and fortune seekers trying to forge criminal careers in South Africa, and his case is by no means unique. Between 2018 and 2020, a gangland war erupted within the Serbian criminal community in Johannesburg, resulting in five prominent assassinations between April 2018 and March 2019. The July 2019 murder of former footballer Marc Batchelor, who was connected to Serbian national Ivan Djordjevic, assassinated in April 2019, may also have been linked to a Serbian criminal group. Rumours suggest that both men were involved in the disappearance of a tonne of cocaine sent to South Africa by the Serbs.[75] A further three murders related to South Africa took place in Serbia. While some speculated these killings were connected to Arkan's murder, the more mundane truth is that they were likely the result of drug-deal feuds involving Gavrić's associates in South Africa.

Today, the relatively prominent position once held by Serbian criminal networks in South Africa has largely been assumed by Bulgarian nationals, who came for similar reasons: fugitives fleeing justice in their home country. The wider Bulgarian network in South Africa has included some prominent criminal figures who are involved in both drug trafficking, mainly cocaine, and sophisticated frauds.[76] As with the Serbs, the Bulgarians' presence has been signified by a series of high-profile gangland murders, this time in Cape Town. In 2018, Angelo Dimov, a notorious fraudster, who had been involved in bank card cloning, was found murdered along with his wife in the plush southern suburbs.[77] In May 2023, Krasimir Kamenov, a prominent Bulgarian crime boss, was also killed in Cape Town.[78]

In part, all these murders speak to the highly violent context that is the South African underworld, but they also highlight the risks of operating away from home. Without resources, status or support, the criminal enterprises of this wave of fugitive Serbians and Bulgarians may have been able to make money, but their careers were short. However, in West Africa, a separate wave of Western Balkans criminals was also arriving, one with far greater organisational support and connections.

Radovan Krejčíř, the would-be Czech crime boss

Bedfordview was also the destination of Radovan Krejčíř, a Czech national who fled the country in 2005 and arrived in South Africa in 2007, where he was arrested under an Interpol Red Notice. He shared a cell with George Louca, a Cypriot criminal with local connections who helped him build a network in Bedfordview, encompassing criminals, businessmen and corrupt officials – a process facilitated by Krejčíř's ostentatious displays of wealth. By assembling his network, Krejčíř equipped himself with the means to engage in targeted criminal activities, including bank fraud and meth smuggling.[79]

But it quickly turned sour. Krejčíř's high profile and alleged links to violence eventually proved his undoing, frightening away his associates and leaving him vulnerable to law enforcement. He was linked to many murders, including Beeka's, whom Krejčíř had previously hired as his security consultant, and was himself the target of at least three assassination attempts. He was imprisoned for 35 years in 2013 for attempted murder and drug trafficking.[80]

Franchisees in West Africa

The movement of 'ndrangheta and Western Balkans actors to West Africa was driven by business opportunities rather than attempts to escape unfavourable situations back home, but there is one important distinction to be made. Members of the 'ndrangheta who moved to West Africa were 'family' actors, in that they could rely on massive organisational backing within Europe and globally. Western Balkans networks, by contrast, are smaller, flatter and less institutionalised, making them more 'franchisees' – criminal actors who move as part of wider criminal networks and do so with few resources, out to build new markets. These actors rely on their organisation's reach across Europe and in Latin America, where Western Balkans criminals have established themselves upstream to help direct cocaine flows, and with other organised crime groups, particularly the 'ndrangheta.[81]

The presence of Balkan criminal groups in some West African countries – most prominently Cape Verde – stretches back many years. However, the Albanian presence, in particular, seems to be escalating, again linked to cocaine trafficking from Brazil via West Africa to Europe in collaboration with the 'ndrangheta.[82] This is unsurprising given the significant role Albanian criminal networks play in supplying the European cocaine market.[83] For instance, a February 2023 seizure of 805 kg of cocaine off the coast of Dakar, Senegal, was traced to an Albanian organisation based in Spain, working together with the 'ndrangheta.[84]

One of the Albanian nationals connected to the case, who also had Spanish and Italian residency, made at least one exploratory visit to The Gambia ahead of the attempted shipment. During this visit, he investigated procedures for opening bank accounts and obtaining residency permits, indicating an intention to establish a medium-term presence in the country. Preliminary evidence also points to the engagement of elements of the network in neighbouring states, specifically Senegal.[85] Analysis of SkyECC data also found that Albanian-speaking individuals appear to have a significant presence in Guinea, where cocaine trafficking enjoys extremely high-level protection.[86]

Investigations have revealed a significant Brazilian network cooperating with Albanian traffickers to coordinate the movement of cocaine from the ports of Rio Grande and Itajaí in Brazil towards Europe, sometimes via West Africa.[87] At least two consignments were transshipped in waters off the coast of the Western hub. Investigation documents cite transshipment to have occurred off the coast of Guinea-Bissau/Sierra Leone – as these countries do not share a border, the exact location is unclear. The second tracked consignment, on 30 November 2022, resulted in the seizure of 4.6 tonnes of cocaine.[88]

Albanian-speaking individuals appear to have a significant presence in Guinea, where cocaine trafficking enjoys extremely high-level protection

This network, believed to be responsible for exporting at least seven tonnes of drugs to Europe, supplied an Albanian national. Investigations are ongoing, and the extent of the network's presence in Sierra Leone or neighbouring countries is unclear. However, the repeated transshipment locations suggest the network may have had links to one of the coastal states to facilitate the transfer process.

There have also been recent indications of an Albanian, French and Belgian network operating in Senegal, involved in international cocaine trafficking, with the network dismantled in January 2024.[89] According to police sources, this cartel operated in Senegal for many years. The network is believed to be of Albanian origin but is based in Belgium and Dubai.[90] The cartel members operating in Senegal were largely dual nationals, either Franco–Belgian or Franco–American. The network concealed cocaine in thrift shop parcels, which were sent from Dakar to Belgium and Dubai with the help of their binational agents.[91] The drugs were allegedly picked up by Albanian network members.

On the Cape Verde–Brazil axis, Montenegrin groups have featured more prominently, operating in partnership with the Brazilian organised crime group, First Capital Command (PCC).[92] Seafarers from Montenegro appear to play an outsized role in maritime cocaine trafficking, drawing from an estimated

7 000-strong pool of Montenegrin sailors working for international maritime companies.[93] Given that transshipments typically occur a significant distance from the Cape Verdean archipelago, the degree to which these networks are established on the islands remains unclear and subject to investigation. The PCC has also established alliances with other Balkan criminal groups, including the powerful Montenegrin-Serbian Šarić clan,[94] which also leverages routes via West Africa.

Trafficking cocaine in Mali

Miguel Ángel Devesa Mera was once a police officer in the Vigo police force but fatefully decided to cross the thin blue line. He was connected to the network of José Prado, known as Sito Miñanco, a major Spanish kingpin who reportedly entrusted him with the responsibility of the Africa operations, in liaison with the Colombian network.

Devesa duly established himself in Mali in 2008 as a businessman and began buying cocaine from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. The drugs were exported by air and sea from Venezuela to the West African coast, before being shipped on to Europe.[95] Devesa's network came onto the radar of Spanish law enforcement after the 2009 'air cocaine' case, when a Boeing 727 that had departed from Venezuela crashed in the Malian desert carrying 10 tonnes of cocaine.[96]

Devesa was arrested in 2010 while sawing apart the body of a Colombian associate, but released a year later. He was arrested again in April 2022 in Côte d'Ivoire in connection with cocaine trafficking, after which Ivorian authorities seized over two tonnes of cocaine. In 2024, he was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment and ordered to pay more than €91 million in compensation to the state.[97]

Illicit flows from Europe to Africa

The previous section focused on the migration of European organised crime to Africa, but another important dimension of this relationship lies in Africa-bound illicit flows. Two significant flows are illicit synthetic drugs and illegal waste.

In terms of synthetic drugs, there are reported increases in the availability of ecstasy trafficked from the Netherlands to several countries along the West African coastline, including The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. As yet, there is no consolidated data on the presence of European criminal networks based in West Africa linked to these flows, which appear to occur predominantly by air and through fragmented networks. Nevertheless, it is likely that European criminal networks are increasingly engaged in synthetic drug trafficking between Europe and West Africa. Engagement with Europol has flagged the likelihood of structured Dutch networks involved in ecstasy trafficking into West Africa and ecstasy–cocaine swaps with Brazilian groups, likely the PCC.

Kush is a highly potent street drug typically composed of cannabis mixed with synthetic substances

Another European-origin drug making inroads in West Africa is kush, a highly potent street drug typically composed of cannabis mixed with synthetic substances, including opioids. Use has grown dramatically, leading the presidents of Sierra Leone and Liberia to declare national emergencies over drug use in 2024, primarily due to the impact of kush.[98] An in-depth GI-TOC investigation identified the United Kingdom (UK) and the Netherlands as significant points of origin for synthetic cannabinoid kush destined for West Africa (see Chart 4).[99]

Similarly, there is a longstanding flow of illegal waste from Europe to Africa, often described as 'toxic colonialism'.[100] Electronic waste trafficking from Europe has been recorded to a number of locations in Africa, especially West Africa.[101] Illegal plastic waste has also been recorded as being exported from Europe to Ghana, Tunisia and South Africa.[102] Much of this dumping is done by legally registered companies, but Italian organised crime groups – known as 'eco-mafias' – have also been linked to the illegal disposal of waste in Africa, particularly North Africa.[103]

Chart 4: International trafficking routes of kush to Sierra Leone

Source: L Bird Ruiz Benitez de Lugo and K de Bruijne, Kush in Sierra Leone: West Africa's Growing Synthetic Drugs Challenge, Global Initiative, February 2025

Crime in, money out?

One area that requires further investigation is how European criminal organisations use African jurisdictions to launder money and, ultimately, repatriate it to Europe. This paper has already identified how the 'ndrangheta invest in various sectors in Côte d'Ivoire for money laundering, for example, but a larger analysis is needed of the financial pathways between Africa and Europe.

At present, there are severe vulnerabilities on both sides. As of June 2025, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) had listed 12 African countries on its grey list, including several with a presence of European organised crime, notably Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire and South Africa.[104]

On the other side of the balance sheet, Europe also has risks. Europe is Africa's main trading partner, but those flows are shrouded in secrecy. According to a 2017 report, 'over one-third of Africa's vulnerability to illicit financial flows in trade is through imports and exports with the European Union.'[105] The same report identified Europe as the major vulnerability for banking claims in 2016 in terms of secrecy risk, indicating jurisdictions where individuals can hide and launder money (see Charts 5 and 6 below). It noted that 'the UK and its combined network of satellite jurisdictions [were] responsible for a third of Africa's vulnerability to illicit financial flows in derived banking claims.'[106]

The above suggests a strong illicit architecture for organised crime to employ to transfer money from Africa to Europe, as well as the other way round. Many cases show dirty money from Africa being deposited in European banks and used to buy European real estate and other assets.[107] But more research is needed to understand the mechanisms and flows by which European criminal organisations use the African and European financial systems to extract their wealth from the continent.

Chart 5, 6: Vulnerability in imports and exports and banking claims, 2016

Source: Tax Justice Network, Vulnerability and exposure to illicit financial flows risk in Africa, *August 2019*

No discussion of money laundering in Africa would be complete without acknowledging the role of gold, not least since European refineries and companies are often key end customers. The value of this illicit flow is vast, as evidenced by a Swiss non-governmental organisation investigation, which estimated that gold worth US$30 billion was smuggled from Africa to the United Arab Emirates in 2022, with Swiss refiners as major buyers.[108] While much of this was undeclared gold mined by artisanal workers, gold's vehicle as a money laundering commodity makes this flow particularly conducive to organised crime involvement.[109]

The illicit gold trade has seen significant involvement by European actors. An investigation by Al-Jazeera in 2023 revealed a huge money laundering operation in southern Africa involving gold. A British citizen involved in the scheme reportedly suggested to Chinese criminals, who were actually undercover reporters, that they send a billion dollars in dirty money to Zimbabwe. Part of it would be used to buy gold, which

would be sold in Dubai, generating 'clean' money.[110] Several Europeans have also been implicated as being involved in or running illicit gold networks in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Most notably, Belgian Alain Goetz was sanctioned by the US for smuggling hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of gold each year from the DRC.[111]

The decline of European organised crime in Africa?

Has the heyday of European organised crime in Africa passed? Perhaps not for all, but there are several suggestions that in some areas, life may be more difficult than in the past.

European fugitives, for example, may find that the era of being able to hide away for decades is over. In Kenya, long a favoured refuge, there has been a spate of deportations and extraditions in recent years. If these continue, it is conceivable that the country may lose its attractiveness for those fleeing the law.[112] Increasing judicial cooperation between Italy and Tunisia in recent years has also reduced the margin of safety for Italian fugitives in Tunisia.

High-level official protection is still the aspiration for such criminals, but even this may have its limits in a world where the internet enables open-source intelligence gathering and international scrutiny. One recent example came when the Dutch drug kingpin Jos Leijdekkers, whom Dutch courts had sentenced in absentia to 24 years for drug trafficking, was reported in February 2025 to have been living in Sierra Leone for three years.[113] Sierra Leone's immigration chief was subsequently fired when footage emerged of him receiving a birthday present from Leijdekkers. The Dutch kingpin was also seen in church with the president's daughter, with whom he was believed to be romantically involved.[114]

European fugitives may find that the era of being able to hide away for decades is over

Of course, there will be countries where such revelations do not lead to action, but the eyes of civil society, empowered by technology, can be a powerful tool in rooting out such cases and bringing international pressure to bear. Hiding in a digital age is much more difficult than it was in the 1960s, when a fake passport and stuffed envelope could solve all manner of problems. That said, some fugitives take the opposite approach and appear to go out of their way to brag about the details of their escape. For example, in 2024, a British criminal posted a series of videos on Instagram detailing how he had fled the UK without a passport while on bail and made his way to Sierra Leone.[115]

European fortune seekers may encounter an increasingly mature local organised crime scene, which offers few inroads for those who do not speak the language, lack resources or have no organisational backing. The sophistication of other foreign criminal actors within Africa is arguably crowding out opportunities for Europeans to operate. In addition, global state actors, such as Russia and China, are increasingly taking an interest in Africa's natural resources and economic environment, which may also complicate matters for European organised crime, not least since involvement often includes a security component, such as Russia's Africa Corps, the state-directed entity that provides security and other services.

Ultimately, European criminals in Africa are likely to remain prominent in markets where there is an important supply chain link to Europe and less so in others where the connection to Europe is weak or absent. For this reason, European family and franchisee actors in West Africa, who have strong connections with Latin American cartels and back home, will probably continue to prosper, having carved out a niche.

But even here, the highly collaborative approach of European actors brings its own risk. The formation of ties between Western Balkans and Italian organised crime in West Africa, with further ties to organised crime in Latin America, speaks to the realities of transnational organised crime today, but the risks of more moving parts are obvious. The more actors are involved, the greater the chance for a misunderstanding, a theft or a deception; operating outside the law, organised crime notoriously lacks an enforceable mechanism of trust beyond violence. Such large alliances may be inherently unstable, or at least, lack long-term operational capability. The only hedge against instability is the huge sums of money involved, which may drive a more

business-oriented mindset, although these sums also raise the risk of one partner seeking more than their fair share.

What will emerge in Africa over the next decades remains to be seen. The blurring of the lines between African and European criminal spaces, enabled not only by technology but also dual nationals who travel freely between both contexts, is already in evidence, making continental distinctions more problematic. Indeed, given the criminal interplay between Europe and Africa in both directions, hard geographic boundaries for research and analysis may in fact obfuscate the issue, rather than define it.

The blurring of the lines between African and European criminal spaces is already in evidence

Much will also depend on developments elsewhere. Connections with Latin American cartels are currently key to cocaine flows in Africa, but the future drug market may look very different due to the rise of synthetic drugs.[116] Should synthetic drugs eventually displace 'organic' drugs such as cocaine, or indeed replicate cocaine to a sufficient degree, then transnational trafficking routes will fundamentally shift and in many cases shorten. Synthetic drugs can be produced anywhere so long as the chemists have access to precursors, potentially negating the need to ship tonnes of cocaine across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe, including via West Africa. One consequence may be the shifting of European criminal attention to other commodities, such as gold, minerals and weapons, with Central and East Africa as potential hotspots that have already seen European illicit engagement in gold and weapons.[117]

At heart, criminal business will remain what it has always been: logistics, money and violence. As each of these elements undergoes change in the coming years, European criminals will have to be highly responsive to maintain a foothold in Africa. But the prize is also worth it. As Africa's population and economy increase, there will be many opportunities for criminals, European and otherwise, to capitalise, driving a new cycle of predatory behaviour that once again evokes the shadow of colonialism.

Conclusion: Europe cannot turn a blind eye to Africa

This paper has highlighted several dimensions of European criminal engagement in Africa. It has argued for the importance of considering the legacy of colonialism and Africa's recent history, which created political and economic conditions that organised crime could exploit. It has also examined the regional variation of European presence on the continent, and how this intersects with international dynamics. Finally, it has analysed the factors that help European criminals succeed or lead to their failure.

The picture that emerges is complex and nuanced, but the threat should not be underestimated. In Africa, European actors, especially in West Africa, are significantly distorting the governance and economy of several countries through their facilitation of the cocaine trade and investment in various sectors for money laundering purposes. They also undermine the rule of law across the continent by seeking protection from extradition and local law enforcement, fuelling corruption. And in South Africa, European criminals are responsible for serious violence, although often this is contained within the underworld.

The consequences for Europe are much less severe, but they are real, nonetheless. European criminal networks can work in Africa with relative impunity abroad, shepherding vast global illicit flows, particularly cocaine, that enrich European-based criminal networks and drive the corrosion of European institutions and society. Offshoring activities such as money laundering to 'safe' jurisdictions outside Europe also create more nodes in the network, making it more difficult for European law enforcement to track, trace and take down European criminal networks. South Africa, for example, has become one of four countries where the mafia has 'the most significant presence outside the EU,' according to Europol, and it also maintains money laundering operations in neighbouring Namibia and Angola.[118]

Finally, there is the matter of reputation. Europe seeks to project the image of justice and the rule of law. If it cannot effectively pursue its own criminals, no matter where in the world they operate, there is a

clear reputational cost. As such, Africa and Europe must find common cause in dealing with the threat of European organised crime in Africa, which revolves around three key strands: drugs, money laundering and fugitives.

But at present, European law enforcement capability in Africa is weak. Although some individual agencies show strength in certain countries,[119] the overall intelligence picture is poorly developed and not well shared among European partners or with their African colleagues. For example, during a 2023 investigation into a Dutch national suspected of cocaine trafficking, intelligence services in Benin expressed frustration over the slow and limited information exchange by the Dutch authorities.[120] Improving the 'eyes and ears' of Europol and other European law enforcement agencies in Africa is therefore of central importance. If Europe does not understand what is happening in Africa, it will be unable to respond.

Although there may be difficulties, Europe must also improve cooperation with its African counterparts to facilitate the extradition of fugitives, including by providing intelligence on their whereabouts to limit corrupt officials' protection.

Ultimately, Europe needs to respond to the challenge of foreign criminal actors in Europe, but it also needs to respond to the challenge of European criminal actors abroad. This will bring a greater balance to prevailing political narratives and supply a measure of good faith that will help foster future collaboration with African stakeholders.

Notes

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2 See, for example, Reality Check: Are migrants driving crime in Germany?, *BBC Reality Check*, 13 September 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45419466.

3 On synthetic drugs: L Bird Ruiz-Benitez de Lugo and K de Bruijne, *Kush in Sierra Leone*, GI-TOC, 25 February 2025, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/kush-in-sierra-leone/; On cars: Interpol, French police arrest 13 for international vehicle trafficking, 20 September 2023, www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2023/French-police-arrest-13-for-international-vehicle-trafficking.

4 See, for example, J Stanyard et al, *The Grey Zone, Russia's military, mercenary and criminal engagement in Africa*, GI-TOC, February 2023, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/russia-in-africa/.

5 In this paper, 'pre-colonial' is used to refer to the era dating from the surge in European trading with the African continent that began in the fifteenth century until the so-called 'Scramble for Africa' in the late nineteenth century. Although European powers did wield sovereignty over territories in Africa in this period, the imperial focus at this point was largely focused on resource extraction, namely of gold, ivory, spices and, of course, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which saw at least 10 million slaves shipped to the 'New World'.

6 'In barter trade, on the other hand, the personal relations of the barter relationships become crucial.' K Rönnbäck, The business of barter on the pre-colonial Gold Coast, *Economic History of Developing Regions*, 35:2, 2020, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20780389.2019.1694408#abstract.

7 For an overview of European colonial engagement with Africa, see EC Onyeozili, Gunboat Criminology and the Colonization of Africa, *Pan-African issues in crime and justice*, 2017, 205–227.

8 See, for example, SM Patrick, How Globalization Affects Transnational Crime, interview with Phil Williams, Council on Foreign Relations, 31 May 2012, www.cfr.org/blog/how-globalization-affects-transnational-crime.

9 A Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, 4.

10 E Akyeampong, RH Bates, N Nunn and JA Robinson, Introduction: *Africa – the historical roots of its underdevelopment*, in E Akyeampong, RH Bates, N Nunn and JA Robinson (eds), Africa's Development in Historical Perspective, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 15–16; J-F Bayart, S Ellis and B Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, Oxford: James Currey, 1999; N van de Walle et al, Extractive colonial economies and legacies of spatial inequality: Evidence from Africa, Centre for Economic Policy Research, 6 December 2020, https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/extractive-colonial-economies-and-legacies-spatial-inequality-evidence-africa; S J Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Moral evil, economic good': Whitewashing the sins of colonialism, *Al Jazeera*, 26 February 2021, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/2/26/colonialism-in-africa-empire-was-not-ethical.

11 E Akyeampong, RH Bates, N Nunn and JA Robinson, Introduction: Africa – the historical roots of its underdevelopment, in E Akyeampong, RH Bates, N Nunn and JA Robinson (eds), *Africa's Development in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 19.

12 The colonial inheritance dramatically complicated the state-building process for many independent African states in the twentieth century, with 'the myriad diversity of ethnic, linguistic and religious ties within often arbitrarily constructed borders … rendering the postcolonial nation unstable' and prone to conflict and struggles in establishing self-identity.' M Collins, Britain, France and the decolonization of Africa, in AWM Smith and C Jeppesen (eds), *Future Imperfect*, London: UCL Press, 2017, 26, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1mtz521.6.

13 The business-as-usual style of many independent African states was understood by Franz Fanon as 'false decolonization', in which '[s]poilt children of yesterday's colonialism and of today's national governments, they organize the loot of whatever national resources exist. Without pity, they use today's national distress as a means of getting on through scheming and legal robbery, by import-export combines, limited liability companies, gambling on the stock exchange, or unfair promotion. They are insistent in their demands for the nationalization of commerce, that is to say the reservation of markets and advantageous bargains for nationals only. As far as doctrine is concerned, they proclaim the pressing necessity of nationalizing the robbery of the nation.' F Fanon, 'Concerning Violence', in *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Atlantic, 1963, 35–106.

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About ENACT

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