

# Domestic challenge or transcontinental threat?

## Africa-linked organised crime in Europe

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### Summary

Africa-linked organised crime is a growing threat for Europe. The phenomenon embraces a broad array of organised crime groups, criminal networks and criminal markets. Debate on the topic is highly polarised and marked by knowledge gaps. This paper seeks to shed light on the challenge, drawing on field research and case studies from Italy, France, Germany and the Netherlands.

### Key points

- Africa-linked organised crime is deeply intertwined with the social and economic marginalisation of African immigrant communities within Europe.
- Africa-based organised crime groups in Europe show high levels of adaptability to local conditions, resulting in different criminal patterns across countries.
- Nigerian organised crime groups maintain hierarchical, financial and operational links to Nigeria, often using legal covers in Europe.
- African diaspora networks in Europe maintain few ties to North Africa, are heavily involved in retail and wholesale drug markets and maintain operational flexibility.
- Effective countermeasures require improved evidence gathering, intelligence sharing and targeted disruption of financial flows.

## Introduction

The discussion about Africa-linked organised crime in Europe is driven by clichés and heated debates on immigration, xenophobia and 'reverse colonization,'<sup>1</sup> with ethnically defined organised crime often seen as an imported problem.

While some groups have received more attention than others, most research is limited to single-case studies, focusing mainly on Nigerian organised crime or the so-called 'Macro Mafia.' In the academic sphere, while there are a few case studies, no comparative study on Africa-linked organised crime in Europe could be identified.<sup>2</sup> It is far from fully understood how groups such as the Nigerian confraternities in Italy and Germany or North Africa-linked groups in the Netherlands or France have developed. Equally unclear is the extent of these threats to Europe and the ways the mutually reinforcing criminal linkages between Africa and Europe operate.

This paper seeks to provide a detailed assessment drawing on extensive field research to enhance the understanding of these issues, including key enabling factors for Africa-linked organised crime to proliferate in Europe, the criminal markets in which they thrive and the degree to which these are actually linked to Africa or pose rather a domestic threat.

The paper distinguishes between Africa-based organised crime and African diaspora-based organised crime. The term diaspora-based organised crime refers to groups from predominantly immigrant communities operating in European countries. Most members are European citizens with second- or third-generation ties to African immigration. This differs from Africa-based organised crime in Europe, predominantly Nigerian groups, which maintain organisational bases in both Europe and Africa.

Case studies focus on France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. Based on the research findings, the paper offers operational recommendations for ENACT members as well as for law enforcement authorities and policymakers across Africa and Europe to support a more coherent response to Africa-linked organised crime.

## Methodology

This paper is based on field research in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Morocco and Nigeria between September 2024 and February 2025. Dozens of interviews were conducted with law enforcement and intelligence officials, representatives of the criminal justice system, civil society representatives, former and current members of confraternities and academic and civil society experts. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and security concerns, all sources remain anonymous.

The paper also reviewed and analysed court documents, police and intelligence reports, existing literature, media reports, including content from social media, and, where available, official crime and police statistics.

## Considering links between migration and organised crime in Europe

Controversial debates about the links between migration, crime in general and organised crime in particular remain dominant in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Researching Africa-linked organised crime in Europe risks reinforcing narratives of 'imported' crime and negative stereotypes about Africa and Africans. This may partly explain the limited general research on ethnic African organised crime in Europe beyond case studies, in particular in the area of human trafficking.<sup>4</sup>

## Marginalisation and crime as a survival strategy

Evidence indicates that immigration from Africa is often accompanied by social marginalisation and economic exclusion in recipient countries. Many immigrants struggle to obtain legal residence, live in precarious conditions and lack access to formal banking and employment systems.<sup>5</sup> This is especially true for recently arrived and undocumented immigrants as well as asylum-seekers.<sup>6</sup> In the Netherlands as in France,

in the United Kingdom as in Germany, some migrant communities now in effect form a marginalised economic group, in which the relative poverty and dearth of opportunities are passed from one generation to the next.<sup>7</sup>

Economic necessity is a key driver of immigration, alongside factors such as political instability, authoritarian rule and climate change. Many immigrants arrive already in debt or needing to support family back home. Facing massive difficulties to enter the regular labour market or even legally banned from employment, criminal livelihoods can become a viable survival strategy.<sup>8</sup> Organised crime groups exploit these vulnerabilities to recruit new members, especially for high-risk activities, such as selling drugs on the street.<sup>9</sup>

## The social embeddedness of crime

The concept of social embeddedness can help explain why migrant communities can be attractive recruiting grounds for organised crime.<sup>10</sup> Organised crime relies on trust between the involved actors, given the constant risk of law enforcement interventions.<sup>11</sup> Trust is often built through kinship, shared ethnicity or common language or dialect, which can also act as protective 'code' against law enforcement. Shared migratory status and ethnic background may reduce cooperation with authorities and reinforce group loyalty.<sup>12</sup>

Embeddedness can occur geographically, professionally or socially, but social embeddedness is particularly important for understanding links between immigrant communities and organised crime groups. Van de Bunt, Siegel and Zeitch differentiate between three types of ethnic embeddedness: within one's own ethnic group, within native groups or within other immigrant groups.<sup>13</sup>

The first type, seen, for example, in Albanian, Kurdish, Italian and Nigerian groups is structured by kinship, regional or tribal ties or exclusive membership-based associations, such as Nigerian confraternities or outlaw motorcycle gangs. The second type involves embedding within native organised crime actors, such as Nigerian confraternities collaborating with the Cosa Nostra in Sicily. The third type involves embedding across immigrant groups, for example, Albanian networks collaborating with Colombian organised crime groups in Ecuador. Field research shows that all three forms play a role in Africa-linked organised crime in Europe.

Many immigrants arrive already in debt or needing to support family back home

## Africa-linked organised crime in Europe

The research identifies two key subcategories of Africa-linked organised crime. This section provides an overview of these subcategories before a more detailed outline of the groups, their modus operandi and the markets in which they operate.

The first is Africa-based organised crime, which refers to groups embedded in homogenous or ethnic networks, organisationally and institutionally rooted in Africa and partly run from African bases, with financial flows often returning to the continent. Nigerian groups, including confraternities or cults, dominate this subcategory.

The second is diaspora-based organised crime, which refers to groups operating in Europe, often within more heterogeneous communities. They may or may not maintain transactional or cultural links with Africa and are predominantly but not exclusively composed of North African members.

While the distinction oversimplifies the interplay of migration, legal status, marginalisation and crime, it provides critical insights that enable deeper analytical clarity. The two groups also differ markedly in organisational structure and operations across criminal markets.

## Terminological confusion

In Europe, Nigerian criminal organisations appear to be the only relevant organised crime groups that are rooted in Africa. All other criminal actors with links to Africa identified during this research have emerged within Europe, with some minor exceptions in the case of cybercrime and other West African actors who target European victims.

Since the early 1980s, the Nigerian diaspora in the European Union (EU) has grown massively, now numbering about 260 000 Nigerians with legal residence permits, with notable concentrations in Italy, Germany and Spain. In the United Kingdom (UK), the number is more than 200 000 alone.<sup>14</sup> While Nigerian offenders within the group of criminals of African origin do not necessarily rank highest in criminal justice statistics in the country cases studied here, nor do they necessarily have the biggest prison population as compared to other immigrant groups, they receive high visibility in the media and public attention. Nigerian confraternities, in particular, have received disproportionate public attention for their cult rituals, secrecy, violence and reported presence in up to 60 countries.<sup>15</sup>

Terms such as 'confraternity,' 'cult' and 'Nigerian mafia' are used to describe Nigerian criminal groups in Europe but lack consistent legal or analytical definitions. This ambiguity complicates classification and response. There is also little recognition of the wider character of confraternities as social phenomena, beyond their organised crime association.

Courts and law enforcement across Europe use the terms in a non-standardised and reportedly sometimes in a contradictory way.<sup>16</sup> Interpol, for example, calls the Black Axe a 'transnational organised crime syndicate'<sup>17</sup> while Europol refers to 'Nigerian crime syndicates' or 'criminal networks' or 'brotherhoods'.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the media and governments frequently use the terms 'Nigerian mafia,'<sup>19</sup> 'mafia-style organisations,'<sup>20</sup> 'Nigerian organised crime,'<sup>21</sup> 'Nigerian gangs'<sup>22</sup> or 'clans.'<sup>23</sup>

Non-standardised definitions of organised crime leads to the inconsistent application of the targeted legislation

In Italy, there have been several court sentences defining Black Axe, Maphite and Supreme Eiye confraternities as mafia-style organisations.<sup>24</sup> Also in Germany, Bavarian authorities are currently seeking to apply a similar approach in an ongoing process at a Munich court against members of the Black Axe and the German chapter of the Neo Black Movement of Africa (NBM).<sup>25</sup> While some officials, including former Interpol head, Jürgen Stock, characterise the Black Axe as following a 'classical' mafia model,<sup>26</sup> other observers describe it as a decentralised network lacking defining mafia traits such as a strict hierarchy, unified command and rules-based membership.<sup>27</sup> This view was not confirmed by this report's field research.

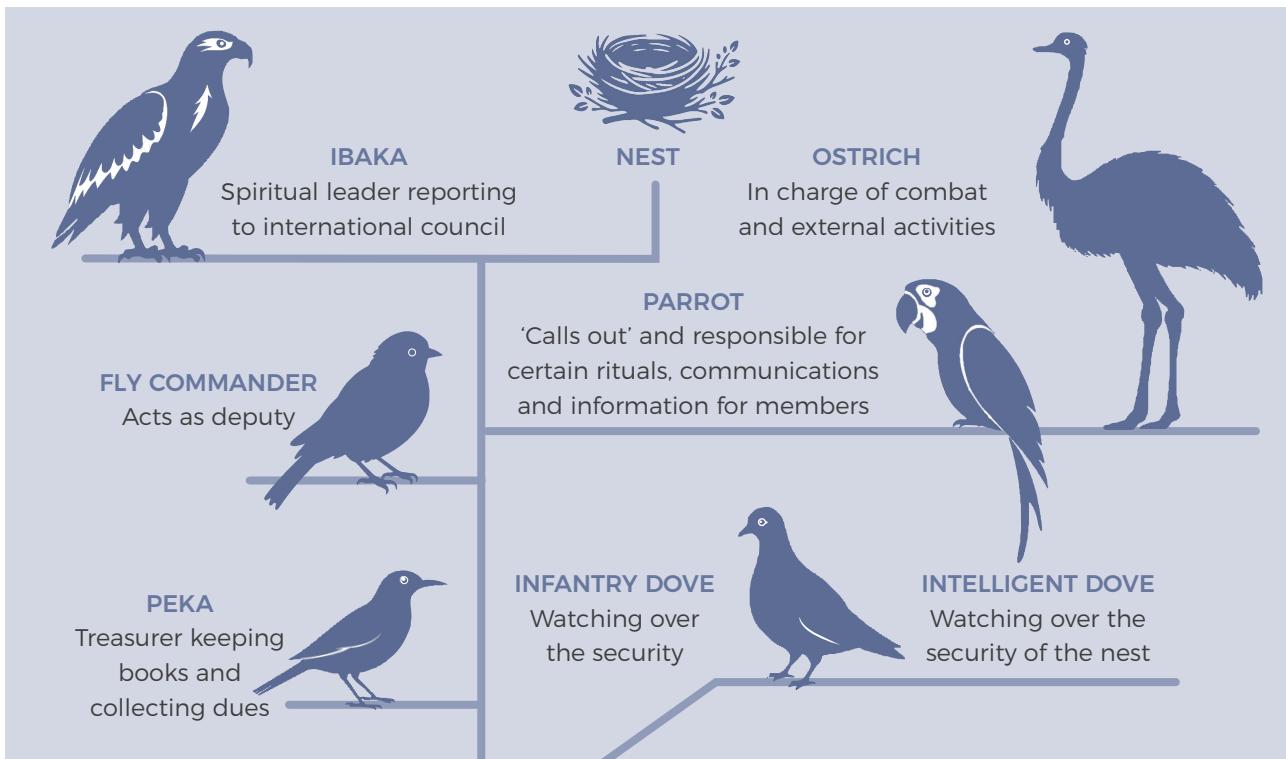
These terms reflect a limited understanding of these groups, their operations and transnational organisation. This leads to the inconsistent application of organised crime legislation, both across European countries and within individual national systems. In addition, Nigerian organised crime groups tend to adapt significantly to the ecosystems they operate in.

In this paper, the authors apply the terms 'organised crime groups' for hierarchically organised and centralised criminal groups and 'criminal network' for flat, local and decentralised criminal enterprises. The authors avoid the terms 'mafia-style organisation' or 'mafia' to describe Nigerian organised crime groups to avoid misconceptions as related to Italian organised crime actors and to properly reflect the distinct character of Nigerian groups within Europe.

## The origins of Nigerian confraternities

Originally founded during the national independence movement with an anti-colonial and Pan-African agenda, the confraternities, often called campus cults, were built on a history of secret societies.<sup>28</sup> Most of the confraternities active today, such as the NBM, the Maphites, the Supreme Eiye or the Supreme Vikings,

Chart 1: Supreme Eiye organogram



Source of information: C Cohen,<sup>29</sup> visual realisation by ENACT

emerged in the 1970s as student societies in the southwest, especially in Benin City.<sup>30</sup> When secret societies were banned at the end of that decade, some shifted partly into criminal activity,<sup>31</sup> supplying armed muscle to political actors, engaging in contract killings and contributing significantly to political violence, often in clashes between rival confraternities.<sup>32</sup>

Within Nigeria, these organisations thrived in an 'almost perfect environment for the growth of domestic organised crime'<sup>33</sup> with little resilience of society, a dysfunctional state and patterns of a deep embedding of criminal structures in political and economic life. The oil crisis of the 1980s triggered mass Nigerian emigration, and many young migrants, excluded from formal labour markets abroad, turned to illicit livelihoods. Drug trafficking – for example, cannabis to the UK, heroin to the United States (US) and cocaine to Germany<sup>34</sup> – emerged as a major channel for illicit activity, with Nigerians pioneering the drug-swallowing method still used today.<sup>35</sup>

This period also saw the emergence of the so-called '419' advance-fee fraud schemes, named after the relevant section of the Nigerian criminal code.<sup>36</sup> Both drug trafficking and fraud relied on strong tribal identities, shared language and dialect and cross-border diaspora networks as enablers of criminal enterprise.<sup>37</sup>

## Between legality and crime

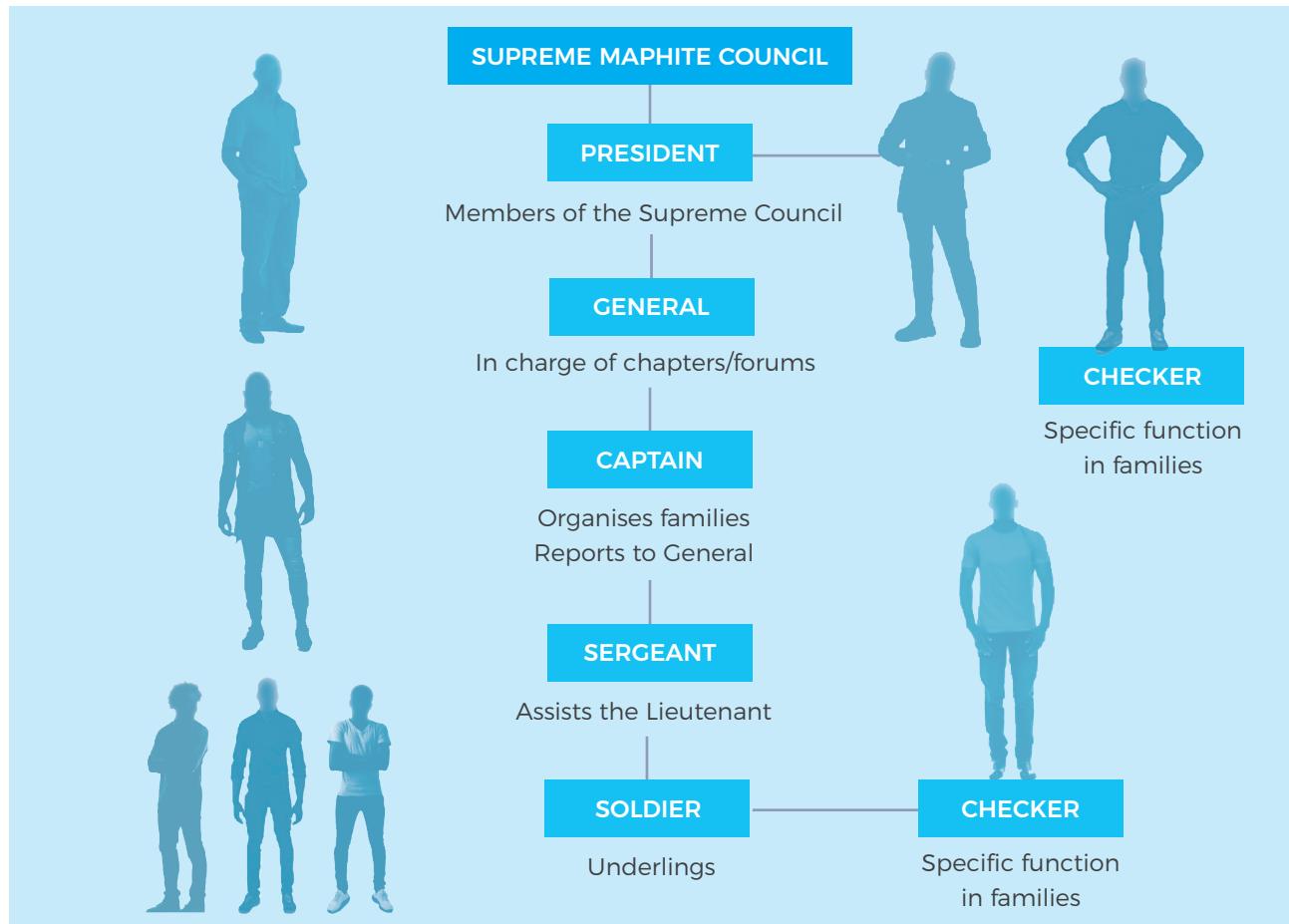
Nigerian cults engaging in criminal rent-seeking, still maintained their university society profile. The confraternities were not initially intended as vehicles of transnational organised crime, but the increased migration of their members led to global expansion and the parallel spread of the criminal enterprises they established.<sup>38</sup> Reportedly, around 70% of Nigerians emigrating originate from Edo State, with its capital Benin City, long the stronghold of the Black Axe and several other confraternities.<sup>39</sup>

The confraternities continue to have deep-rooted connections with Nigeria's political landscape, often serving as paid protectors for politicians and private sector actors.<sup>40</sup> Income from illicit activities in Europe is funnelled back to Nigeria to fund annual celebrations,<sup>41</sup> help imprisoned members pay fines or bail,<sup>42</sup> contribute to political campaigns and sustain violent conflicts.<sup>43</sup>

During clashes, often described as 'cult wars,' wealthy European members have allegedly financed the purchase of arms and ammunition, particularly for confrontations between the Black Axe and the Maphites in Benin City. Spain, Italy, the UK, the Netherlands and Belgium were identified as countries of origin of such financial flows.<sup>44</sup>

The 'Green Bible' police operation in Turin exposed Maphite ambitions to infiltrate government institutions in Nigeria and attain political dominance back home.<sup>45</sup> The Black Axe is reported to have close ties to political figures in Edo State with some members seeking official appointments. Confraternities play decisive roles in elections<sup>46</sup> and are involved in ongoing violence.<sup>47</sup> While their peers in Europe appear less violent, incidents linked to confraternities in cities such as Marseille, France and Siena and Cagliari, Italy have increased.<sup>48</sup>

**Chart 2: Maphite organogram**



Source of information: C Cohen,<sup>49</sup> visual realisation by ENACT

## Organisational coherence

The organisational coherence of the confraternities between Nigeria and their host countries abroad is a key feature of the cultist groups. These sustained associations justify their classification as Africa-based organised crime groups: they are not remote franchises, but remain connected to centralised hierarchies,<sup>50</sup> similar to the mafia organisations that operate in Europe.

However, analysing Nigerian cult groups in Europe is challenging, as their devolved structures abroad are moving targets. The expansion of local chapters is ongoing. Local chapters emerge within Nigerian diaspora communities and once established, may be integrated into the overarching organisation if authorised.

The first Maphite chapter in Europe reportedly appeared in London in 2009, followed by Italian 'families' in Rome in the 2010s. The Black Axe reportedly had three unconnected chapters in the Netherlands in 2001,<sup>51</sup> while in 2024, seven new Black Axe subzones were reported in the UK.<sup>52</sup>

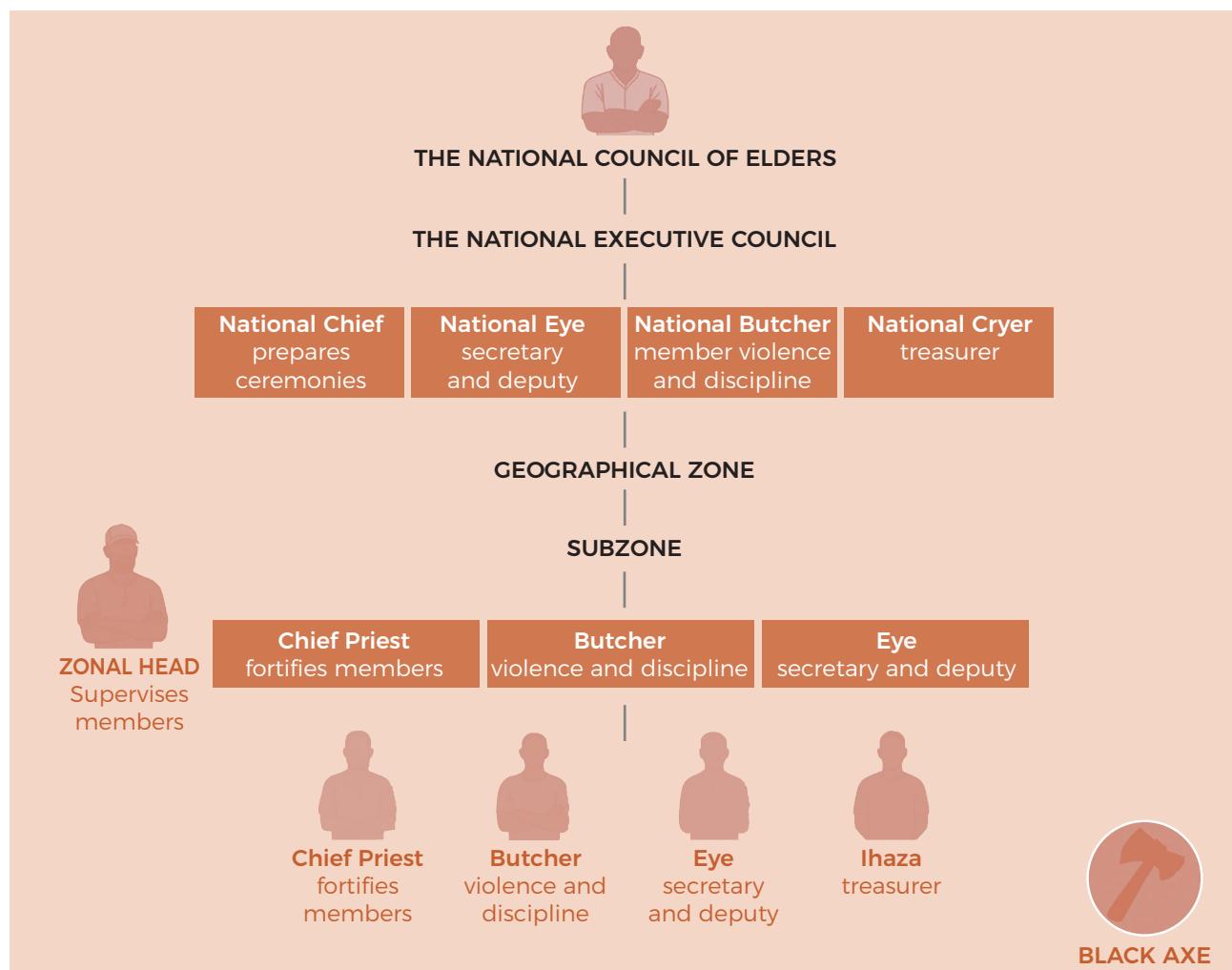
Although confraternities differ in their organisational and operational structures and procedures, all appear to share a hierarchical relation with headquarters in Nigeria, combined with decentralised operations abroad and consistent financial flows to the home country.

The Black Axe is structured into geographical zones, further divided into subzones. A zone may cover a country, such as the Germany zone, or parts of one, such as the London and Manchester zones in the UK.<sup>53</sup> Each zone follows a constitutionally defined structure, leaked by whistleblower Tobias Uche,<sup>54</sup> with a National Council of Elders and positions including Zonal Head (leader), Priest (ceremonial head), Butcher (disciplinary enforcer), Eyes (informants),<sup>55</sup> Eye (deputy or secretary), Ihaza (treasurer) and Cryer (communications).<sup>56</sup>

The Supreme Eiye confraternity has a similar structure, but uses ornithological terminology – local chapters are 'nests.' The Maphite confraternity, in contrast, reportedly follows a military-style model, defined in their 'Green Bible' with chapters referred to as 'families'.<sup>57</sup>

Confraternities appear to share a hierarchical relation with headquarters in Nigeria

**Chart 3: Black Axe organogram**



Source of information: C Cohen and Bemigho147watch,<sup>58</sup> visual realisation by ENACT

## Adaptability to maximise profit

These structures do show some flexibility, and local chapters sometimes undermine pre-established roles.<sup>59</sup> According to field research, European zones are authorised to recruit members, conduct initiation rituals and collect membership 'forms' and 'dues.' Most cult members in Europe – called 'Lords' in the case of the Black Axe – were nevertheless initiated in Nigeria.<sup>60</sup>

Involvement is, by contrast, highly adaptable. While Nigerian organised crime is often described as poly-criminal,<sup>61</sup> this research shows that activities are shaped by local conditions and social embedding in their host countries. One source in Nigeria explained: 'When it comes to doing business, they are independent and autonomous since the groups in Europe can engage in any criminal activity that they wish to engage in and the groups here in Nigeria control the criminal activities that the groups in Europe engage in.'<sup>62</sup> Several sources confirmed that European chapters of the Black Axe operate independently day-to-day, while still recognising leadership from Nigeria.<sup>63</sup>

In Italy, Nigerian groups are focused on local drug retail and increasingly in the wholesale business as well as in human trafficking and sexual exploitation. In Switzerland, activities include sexual exploitation, romance scams and cocaine smuggling through airports.<sup>64</sup> In Germany, the earlier focus on human trafficking has shifted to fraud and money laundering.

Recent court cases in France involving the Maphite cult in Paris and the Supreme Vikings in Marseille demonstrate a wide array of crimes, including human trafficking, illegal migration, sexual exploitation, drug possession and sexual violence. These examples highlight how confraternities adapt their criminal portfolios to the social environment of their host countries.<sup>65</sup>

## (Criminal) networks versus organisations

Observers struggle to distinguish between confraternities and their legal covers or to define them outright as criminal organisations. Their networking character and secrecy appear to have made them vehicles for organised crime, without necessarily transforming the entire organisation: 'These organisations could be understood as freemasonry or as privileged networks, which members activate and use but do not work for. They claim to offer support and facilitate relationships between members who act as entrepreneurs.'<sup>66</sup> A source in Nigeria similarly noted: 'Originally, cult groups were created to serve a noble cause. But they have since been derailed and now there is nothing positive about them. But I see them more like social platforms that provide people with the opportunity to network.'<sup>67</sup>

Confraternity networks appear to have been widely exploited for criminal purposes

While field research has shown that a relevant share of members engage in crime, there are also members who have legitimate jobs and use the confraternities primarily for socialising or networking.<sup>68</sup> Some confraternities even allow 'financial members' who pay fees without taking part in rituals or violence, another sign of the attractiveness of their network-like character. As one source in Nigeria confirmed: 'Many members of the group are engaged in legitimate businesses and jobs in Europe'.<sup>69</sup> While they support the confraternities, they do not participate in criminal activities.

In short, Nigerian confraternities and organised crime groups are not synonymous. Despite frequent conflation in European discourse, they have distinct origins, functions and cultural logics. Still, the case studies in this paper show that European authorities increasingly classify them as mafia-style organisations. Their success and adaptability seem to lie in the trust between members, who often interact remotely without ever meeting in person. They provide an array of services, including human trafficking from Africa to Europe, laundering criminal revenue and managing transnational drug logistics.<sup>70</sup> Membership grants access to these networks and potential income, though not necessarily with criminal intent; however, they appear to have been widely exploited for criminal purposes.

# Diaspora-based organised crime

## Spontaneous order

In contrast with Nigerian confraternities, other organised crime actors linked to Africa in Europe, particularly those associated with North African nationals or European citizens of North African descent, are less easy to identify.

The main difference between these groups lies in organisation. North Africa-related groups are not hierarchically structured but emerge spontaneously and are controlled from within Europe. They are smaller, flatter and lack the organisational features, culture or branding of confraternities. Connections to Morocco, Tunisia or Algeria are mostly cultural or transactional, not organisational.

While Nigerian groups are largely ethnically homogenous, North African organised crime networks are more diverse. Although often perceived as homogenous, they typically operate within multi-ethnic criminal environments in which they are socially embedded. Some may be predominantly run by individuals of North African origin, but ethnic belonging is not a requirement for membership.

## The ‘Mocro Mafia’ trap

The most striking example of the misperception of North African organised crime is the term ‘Mocro Mafia.’ Coined by Dutch media to describe criminal networks linked to the Dutch-Moroccan community,<sup>71</sup> it has become widespread despite being criticised as racist and reductive.<sup>72</sup> The label frames these groups as monolithic and portrays Moroccan-origin individuals as inherently criminal, misrepresenting the complexity of their networks and reinforcing ethnic stigmas.

In practice, the networks referred to as ‘Mocro Mafia’ are neither ethnically homogenous nor mafia-style organisations.<sup>73</sup> They do not obey to central command, as the use of the term implies. Yet the catchy label has shaped public debate leading, in countries such as the Netherlands, to the disproportionate targeting of Moroccan-origin individuals in criminal investigations and fuelling anti-immigration rhetoric. This narrative further isolates immigrant communities and deepens tensions with law enforcement.<sup>74</sup>

Unlike ethnically cohesive groups, such as the Italian mafia, Albanian networks or Nigerian confraternities, North African-linked networks in Europe tend to prioritise operational goals over ethnic identity, with membership often extending beyond Moroccan or North African origins. Their early involvement in cannabis smuggling, particularly from Morocco’s Rif Mountains, illustrates a cultural connection, but the later shift into cocaine trafficking shows a clear move towards profit-driven strategies, often severing ties with Africa altogether.

## Criminal threat perception

European governments have increasingly drawn attention to the ‘Mocro Mafia,’<sup>75</sup> particularly in response to high-profile cases that signify its capacity for violence and operational reach. In the Netherlands, Moroccan-Dutch crime boss Ridouan Taghi and 16 accomplices stand accused of orchestrating the assassination of journalists and lawyers, triggering the country’s largest ever trial and fuelling fears of a slide towards ‘narco state’ status.<sup>76</sup>

In Germany, law enforcement has reported rising drug-related violence in cities such as Cologne, Duisburg and Frankfurt, linked to trafficking from these networks. The Federal Police have warned of spillover effects from the Netherlands, pointing to the group’s expanding influence across borders.<sup>77</sup>

Belgium’s Port of Antwerp, with its vast infrastructure and international connections, has emerged as a central arena of competition. Groups labelled as part of the ‘Mocro Mafia’ have fought for control over Latin American drug shipments arriving in the port, while neighbouring countries, including Spain, have voiced concern about the broader transnational implications.<sup>78</sup>

In France, political and media narratives often depict the country as on the brink of becoming a 'state submerged by drug trafficking'.<sup>79</sup> Officials and journalists emphasise the rapid growth and increasing sophistication of organised crime, frequently linking it to actors of North African origin. Rising killings tied to drug markets, particularly in Marseille, have intensified concern and placed foreign criminal networks under heightened scrutiny. Public debate in France often conflates security, crime, marginalisation and migration.<sup>80</sup>

While governmental actions demonstrate that authorities recognise genuine security risks stemming from the 'Mocro Mafia' media framing continues to magnify the perception of threat. News reports, investigative investigations and television programmes have popularised the label, presenting it as the embodiment of escalating violence in the European drug trade. This coverage both fuels political urgency and entrenches a simplified image of the networks.

## Case studies

### Nigerian-based organised crime in Italy

#### Background

Over the past two decades, Nigerian confraternities have expanded across Italy, embedding themselves within Nigerian immigrant communities and, in some cases, local pre-existent criminal ecosystems.<sup>81</sup> They mirror Italian mafias through violent territorial control, codes of silence, initiation rites and strong national-transnational links. Their multilevel structure often places lower-tier members in street-level drug trafficking.<sup>82</sup>

Investigations, court cases and field research confirm the presence of several groups, including the Black Axe, the Maphites, the Supreme Eiye and the Supreme Vikings.<sup>83</sup> Unlike in other countries, these organisations have not established legal cover structures in Italy, such as registered associations.

#### Criminal actors and organisation

Nigerian confraternities initially adapted to the presence of local Italian mafias. Later, they expanded into areas where Italian organisations had no direct influence, such as the northern regions, where the 'Ndrangheta, Camorra and Cosa Nostra have avoided military-style territorial dominance.<sup>84</sup> Today, Nigerian criminal actors operate both independently and embedded within larger domestic or international networks, drawing on Nigerian diasporas across Europe.<sup>85</sup> While emphasising autonomy, they also collaborate horizontally and vertically with Italian and foreign criminal networks.<sup>86</sup>

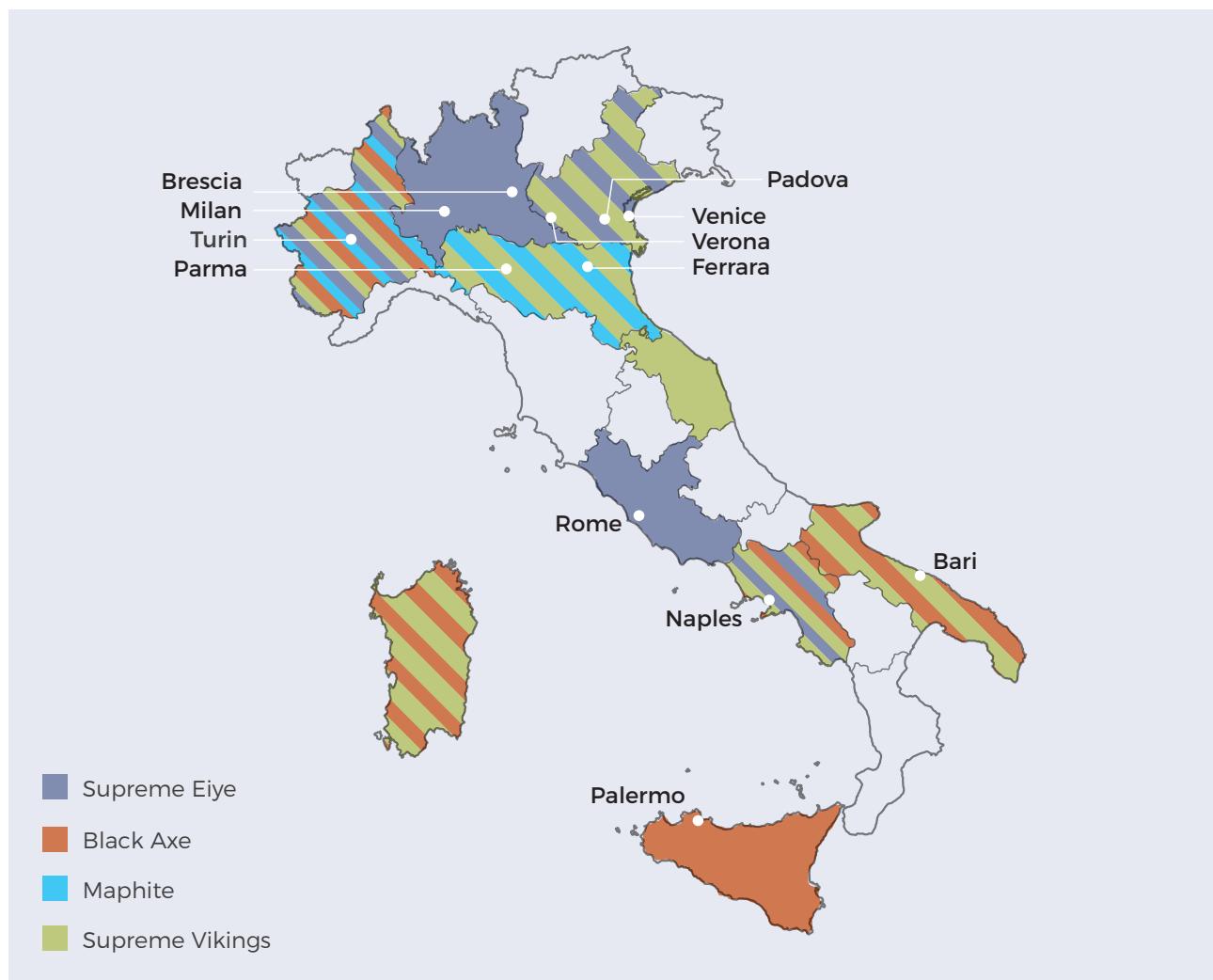
For example, in the north, confraternities have been linked to the circulation of low-quality heroin, while in the south, such as in Campania or Sicily, local mafia authorisation is required for such activities.<sup>87</sup> In Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Piedmont, they have formed 'joint ventures' with other organised crime groups, such as trading cannabis with Albanian-speaking criminal networks for heroin or collaborating with Chinese criminal groups. Links with Apulian clans and the 'Ndrangheta have also been observed.<sup>88</sup>

The four dominant confraternities maintain geographically defined areas of influence.<sup>89</sup> The Supreme Eiye controls the north (Turin, Brescia, Verona and Padua) and parts of central and southern Italy (Rome, Castel Volturno and Naples); the Black Axe, the south (Campania, Apulia and Sicily) and Piedmont; the Maphites, Emilia-Romagna and Piedmont; and the Supreme Vikings nationwide, especially in Piedmont, Marche, Emilia-Romagna (Ferrara and Reggio Emilia), Apulia (Bari), Sicily and Sardinia.<sup>90</sup>

According to the Italian Police, the Maphite confraternity exemplifies the organisational model, with a hierarchical structure divided into four families controlling different territories:

- The Latino Family oversees operations in Lombardy, Piedmont and Liguria
- The Vatican Family is active in Emilia-Romagna, with branches in Marche and Tuscany
- The Roma Empire Family is based in Lazio and extends its activities to Abruzzo, Campania and Calabria
- The Lighthouse of Sicily Family is anchored in Sicily, with a presence in Sardinia<sup>91</sup>

**Chart 4: Main areas of Nigerian confraternities in Italian regions**



Replicating Nigerian structures, the Maphites enforce territorial control through violence and intimidation, as well as strict initiation rituals and codes of conduct, leading Italian courts to classify them as a mafia-style organisation.<sup>93</sup> Unlike in Germany, violence remains central in Italy for enforcing rules, marking turf, maintaining internal discipline and competing with rivals. Their reliance on violence has drawn significant attention from Italian law enforcement.

Despite their hierarchy, confraternities adapt to local criminal ecosystems. A 2020 Palermo Court of Appeal verdict showed the Ballarò families of the Cosa Nostra had employed Nigerians as *picciotti* (foot soldiers) to handle drug retailing within certain areas of the *mandamento* (a mafia district). As an informant revealed, if Cosa Nostra's supply runs low, Nigerian groups prioritise their needs, even at the expense of other markets. This collaboration has allowed Nigerian organisations to dominate key drug markets in Palermo, including in Ballarò, while expanding into other important drug dealing neighbourhoods such as Vucciria, Falsomiele, Brancaccio and Piazza Marina.<sup>94</sup>

By embedding themselves in traditional organised crime structures, Nigerian organised crime actors can dominate local retail drug markets, filling the vacuum left by Cosa Nostra's reduced manpower after many of its members were arrested.<sup>95</sup> With the highly lucrative local crack market on the rise, Nigerian groups have massively increased their criminal revenue through retail sales. At the same time, the Cosa Nostra dominates the wholesale market – a win-win situation that has turned out to be a survival strategy for a weakened Cosa Nostra and a growth strategy for Nigerian confraternities.

Since 2021, however, Nigerian groups have shifted towards wholesale drug trafficking increasing their independence from Italian mafias, while also enhancing their margins significantly. In one intercepted meeting, a Maphite leader stated: 'We do not need Italian mafia groups to operate in Italy ... If needed in the future, we can reconsider joining forces.'<sup>96</sup>

As with all confraternities, allegiance remains with the Nigerian headquarters. Profits are typically routed back to Nigeria, as confirmed by multiple police operations and field research. In the 'Hello Bross' investigation, conducted by the *Procura Distrettuale Antimafia* of L'Aquila, criminal groups composed of Nigerian nationals exploited a wide range of illicit activities, including cybercrime, fraud and drug trafficking. The profits were often substantial and invested in real estate back home.<sup>97</sup> Key channels for moving and laundering profits included the hawala system, trade-based money laundering schemes or serial and small-scale bank transactions.<sup>98</sup> The group also used Bitcoin to buy cloned credit card details via the darknet, further obscuring financial trails.<sup>99</sup>

## Criminal markets

### Drug trafficking

Nigerian organised crime groups in Italy are poly-criminal, engaging in drug trafficking, human trafficking, migrant smuggling, online fraud and money laundering. Among these, drug trafficking appears to be their primary activity.<sup>100</sup>

Nigerian organisations have become dominant players in Italy's drug trade, particularly in heroin and crack cocaine

Nigerian organisations have in fact become dominant players in Italy's drug trade, particularly in heroin and crack cocaine distribution, establishing their own drug supply channels by leveraging global networks. Reportedly, they resort to small-scale wholesaling and stick to a method they originally pioneered: body-packing couriers, known as swallowers.<sup>101</sup> Swallowers typically depart from airports in Uganda and Tanzania and, after layovers in the Netherlands, Spain, France or Belgium, arrive in Naples, which functions as the main logistics hub for further distribution across Italy.<sup>102</sup> This aligns with research findings in France and Switzerland, where Nigerian networks also reportedly run drug trafficking through airports.<sup>103</sup>

Nigerian actors are most active in the north (Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia-Romagna) and the south (Campania and Sicily). While turf wars with local mafias, such as the 'massacre of Castel Volturno'<sup>104</sup> were once violent, evidence suggests clashes have decreased due to growing cooperation. A Nigerian collaborator of justice and former drug trafficker, serving a 14-year sentence in Palermo, noted: 'We Nigerians manage 80% of the heroin that enters Palermo, while cocaine only accounts for 20%.'<sup>105</sup> Within Nigeria, this cooperation between confraternities and Italian mafias is well-known and is unique in the European theatre.<sup>106</sup>

### Human trafficking

The trafficking of Nigerian nationals to Italy – particularly women and minors – is a highly adaptive, profit-driven system embedded in the Nigerian and Italian criminal landscape.<sup>107</sup> It exploits social vulnerability, spiritual coercion and systemic loopholes. Most victims are women aged 18–30, though concern is growing about the trafficking of minors.

Victims are typically recruited in Nigeria with false promises of jobs or education in Europe. Their journeys – through Niger, Libya and across the Mediterranean – are marked by violence, sexual abuse and exploitation. In Italy, traffickers or 'madams' reassert control in reception centres or informal settlements, demanding repayment of so-called travel debts of €20 000–€35 000.<sup>108</sup> These debts have been traditionally enforced not just through sexual exploitation and physical threats, but also via so-called juju rituals – spiritual oaths taken in Nigeria that psychologically bind victims to their traffickers and deter them from seeking help.<sup>109</sup> Although the oba (king) of Benin City declared such oaths void in 2018, cases are still reported.<sup>110</sup> Debt remains central

to forcing women into sex work and, more recently, some trafficking victims have also been coerced into transporting and selling drugs.<sup>111</sup>

The Black Axe and Supreme Eiye, with cells in Turin, Palermo, Naples and Castel Volturno, are particularly active in this criminal market. In the 2021 'Hello Bross' operation, police arrested 30 Nigerians affiliated with the Black Axe, who had generated over €1 million in just two years through nearly 100 single offences, including trafficking.<sup>112</sup> In 2023, Operation 'Bird Man' revealed the Eiye group's organised sexual exploitation of young Nigerian women in Turin.<sup>113</sup> Most recently, in March 2025, police arrested six Maphite members<sup>114</sup> accused of human trafficking for sexual exploitation, extortion, kidnapping, procuring abortion and money laundering in a multinational investigation.<sup>115</sup>

Human trafficking generates millions annually, with profits reinvested in Italy into other illicit markets, including drug smuggling and online fraud.<sup>116</sup> Money is laundered through small businesses, cryptocurrency and informal remittance systems. Judicial investigations have traced steady transfers to Benin City and Lagos.<sup>117</sup> A decentralised recruitment structure, often involving former victims turned madams or enforcers, ensures continuity and cohesion.<sup>118</sup>

Since peaking in 2016–2017, large-scale maritime arrivals of Nigerian women have declined, and today's trafficking routes are more fragmented. Traffickers increasingly exploit secondary EU movements, asylum systems and migration channels, while expanding into smaller towns and across borders, using a 'franchise' model to export structures, rituals and criminal tactics to other European countries.<sup>119</sup>

## Fraud

Nigerian organised crime increasingly engages in online fraud from phishing and business email compromise to money laundering.<sup>120</sup>

In 2015, Operation 'Triangle', led by the Italian Postal Police in cooperation with Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, resulted in 62 indictments across 45 countries, and 49 arrests including 20 in Italy.<sup>121</sup> The network, mainly Nigerian and Cameroonian, used advanced phishing – particularly 'man-in-the-middle' attacks<sup>122</sup> – to intercept corporate emails and redirect payments.<sup>123</sup> Online fraud has risen sharply since then with 2021 losses estimated at €40 million.<sup>124</sup> According to the director of the Italian Postal Police, Ivano Gabrielli, many schemes rely on phishing, smishing and vishing targeting both individuals and businesses.<sup>125</sup>

Beyond cyber scams, Nigerian criminal groups engage in more traditional fraud, often via social messenger apps.<sup>126</sup> In October 2023, six people in Alta Irpinia were reported for fake product sales and fraudulent money requests. Among them were three Nigerian women, illustrating the involvement of Nigerian nationals in various forms of low-level but widespread fraud.<sup>127</sup>

## Law enforcement and countermeasures

Given the high levels of violence and growing role within drug markets, since 2018, Italian authorities intensified their efforts against Nigerian criminal networks, leading to a series of high-profile operations:<sup>128</sup>

- In 2019, the Supreme Vikings saw 15 individuals arrested for mafia-type association, drug trafficking and sexual violence. This operation dismantled a transnational network connected to the Supreme Vikings confraternity with organised territorial divisions across Europe.
- Also in 2019, Italian authorities arrested 18 Maphite members in Emilia-Romagna following a two-year investigation supported by a former member's testimony. This operation exposed the group's hierarchy and activities, including drug and human trafficking.
- Operation 'Green Bible' in 2019 was Italy's largest operation targeting Nigerian organised crime, spanning 15 provinces and resulting in 40 arrests. Investigators seized the 'Green Bible,' the Maphite statute outlining roles and responsibilities and uncovered extensive drug trafficking, human trafficking and sex work exploitation.

- In 2021, Operation 'Hello Bross' led Italian police to arrest 30 Nigerian nationals linked to the Black Axe, for drug trafficking, human trafficking and online fraud. The 35-year-old leader based in L'Aquila, coordinated activities across 14 provinces. Authorities highlighted the group's increasing danger and establishment in major Italian cities.<sup>129</sup>
- Operation 'Bird Man' in 2023 resulted in 16 Nigerians linked to the Eiye group being arrested for mafia-type association, drug trafficking, extortion and violence, including 11 in Italy. The investigation, involving over 100 officers across multiple cities,<sup>130</sup> revealed the group's hierarchy and coordination with Nigerian contacts to control drug sales in Turin.

These operations disrupted key networks and provided insights into Nigerian organised crime. However, not all prosecutions succeeded; in 2023, the Palermo Court of Cassation upheld the acquittal of four of five Nigerian confraternity members originally charged with mafia-type association due to insufficient evidence of the group's hierarchical, mafia-like structure.<sup>131</sup>

## Nigerian-based organised crime in Germany

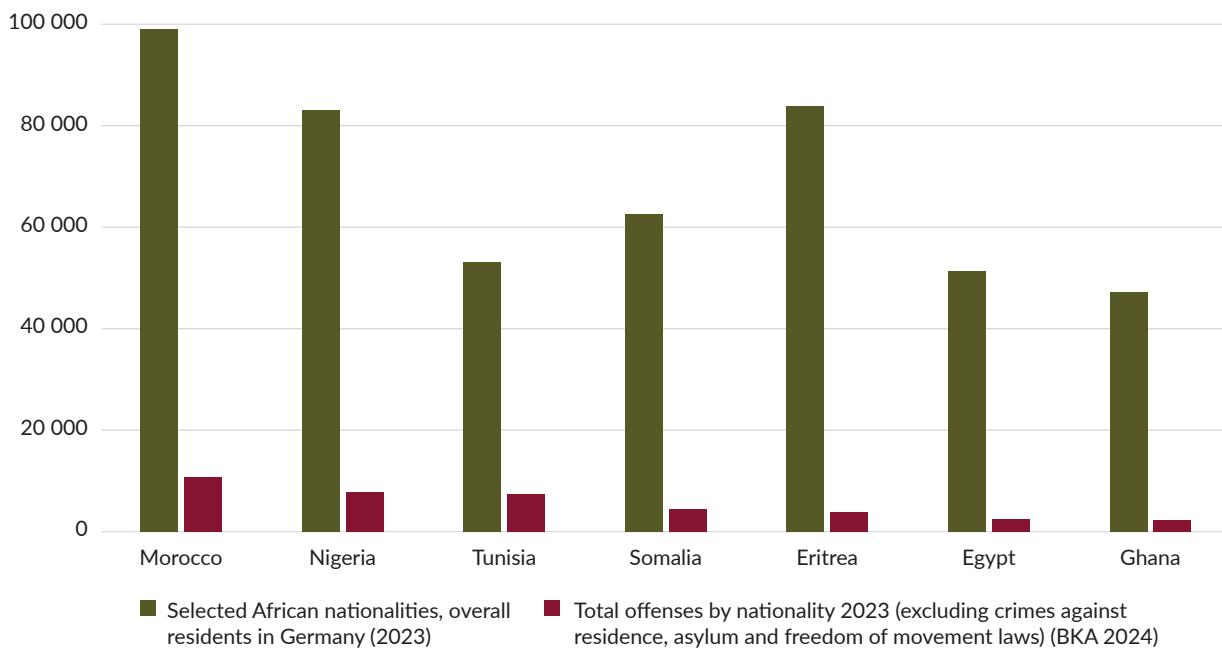
### Background

In Germany, Nigerian confraternities have largely remained under the authorities' radar, with few court cases directly related to Nigerian organised crime groups and their corporate structures – one in Bochum<sup>132</sup> in 2019 and one ongoing in Munich.<sup>133</sup>

Most prosecutions of suspects of Nigerian origin in Germany target individual offences, rather than the organised structures seen in Italy. According to official data provided by the German Federal Criminal Police (BKA), roughly 7 500 criminal offences in 2023 involved Nigerian nationals. Excluding violent crimes and migration- and residence-related offences, fraud, property and forging offences as well as money laundering are the most prevalent. Drug offences are far less significant compared with France and Italy.<sup>134</sup>

Sources indicate that Nigerian organised crime in Germany focuses on fraud and money laundering, especially online and romance scams.<sup>135</sup> Civil society organisations dedicated to support victims of human trafficking confirm a historical role in human trafficking and sexual exploitation, but cases have rarely been

**Chart 5: Diaspora population in Germany, selected African countries in relation to suspected criminal offenses**



Source: Selected African nationalities, residents in Germany (Federal Office for Migration and Asylum 2025)

prosecuted in Germany. Since most of the victims entered Europe through Italy and France, potential cases were handled there, explaining their limited appearance in recent German police statistics.<sup>136</sup>

## Criminal actors and organisation

In Germany, similar to the case of Italy, there are reportedly five active Nigerian confraternities: the Black Axe, Supreme Eiye, Supreme Vikings, Jurists and the Maphites. While territorial divisions as in Italy are unconfirmed, a similar pattern is suspected.<sup>137</sup> The Black Axe is believed to be the biggest confraternity with several hundred members. Estimates vary widely. Bavaria reportedly has the highest concentration presumably because of its proximity to Italy. The Bavarian intelligence report lists four active confraternities in the state: Supreme Eiye, the Black Axe, Supreme Vikings and the Maphites.<sup>138</sup>

In Germany, as in Italy, local chapters maintain close links to Nigeria through financial flows and member travel. These links are particularly traceable at an institutional level in the case of Black Axe, whereas experts confirm that the criminal activities in Germany operate in a more decentralised manner. This likely accounts for the stark differences in criminal markets between Italy – where confraternities dominate drug retail – and Germany, where fraud prevails. Confraternities in Germany display a low propensity for violence, which may be a sign that Germany is being used as a quiet backyard and operational base.<sup>139</sup>

## Criminal markets

### Human trafficking

Nigerian individuals have historically organised human trafficking from Nigeria through Libya into Europe, frequently via Italy as the first entry point to the Schengen area. The confraternities within Germany have served as a sort of remote control for Nigerian madams, in many cases based abroad, assuring not only safe passage to Europe and then from Italy to Germany, but also functioning as enforcers of the sexual exploitation business and the victims within Germany.<sup>140</sup> This remote-control approach, also observed in Switzerland,<sup>141</sup> uses *juju* oaths and debt to coerce victims into sexual exploitation.<sup>142</sup> The same patterns of *juju* oaths and indebtedness as in the case of Italy were instrumentalised to force victims into sexual exploitation.

Roughly 15 years ago, Nigerian women made up the largest group seeking help from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for human trafficking victims. Since then, these numbers have decreased significantly.<sup>143</sup> According to one account, of 288 African women supported by an anti-trafficking NGO in 2023 in Dortmund, only 39 were Nigerian, while 150 came from Guinea.<sup>144</sup>

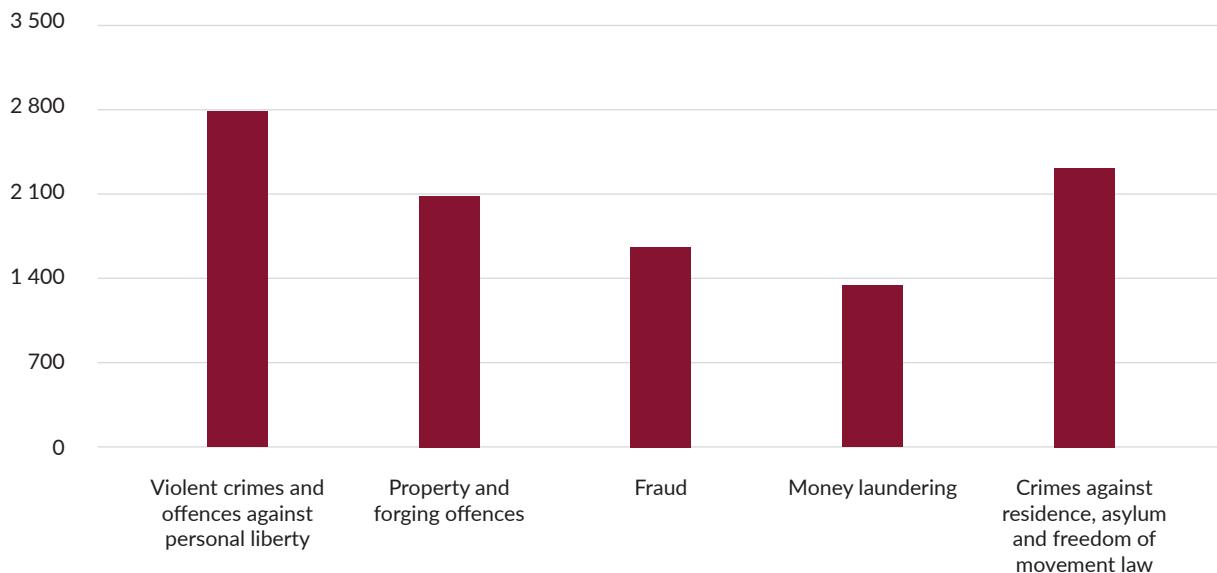
In Germany, Nigerian criminal activity has shifted away from the sex industry since the COVID-19 pandemic. At this time, sex work was temporarily prohibited in Germany, and enforcement efforts against sexual exploitation increased, seemingly pushing Nigerian criminals into less exposed criminal enterprises.<sup>145</sup> The ban on *juju* oaths may also be a contributing factor to this decrease. Furthermore, it is believed that the hardships along the migration routes, particularly through Libya, have likely contributed to the decline in the trafficking of Nigerian victims.<sup>146</sup>

Of 288 African women supported by an anti-trafficking NGO in 2023, only 39 were Nigerian, while 150 came from Guinea

### Fraud and cybercrime

Several sources confirmed a shift by Nigerian organised crime towards fraud and cybercrime, particularly romance scams, business email compromise schemes and associated money laundering operations. These activities are considered the main sources of income, as reflected in BKA crime statistics and intelligence reports.<sup>147</sup> Romance scams appear to be conducted from a range of locations, including from within Germany.

**Chart 6: Suspects of Nigerian nationality in Germany: most pervasive criminal offences**



Source: BKA 2024, selection

Sources in Nigeria confirm this trend: 'Cybercrime is on the increase in Benin City. I can tell you that most of the students of the higher institutions in Edo State are involved in cybercrime. It is so popular that many people have accepted it as a normal business.'<sup>148</sup> Several sources in Nigeria stated that cybercrime has become the primary criminal market for Nigerian confraternities operating in Europe, followed by drug and human trafficking.<sup>149</sup>

Romance scams, often perpetrated by Nigerian and Ghanaian nationals and gaining a certain level of notoriety under the branding of 'yahoo boys,' show similarities across countries and victims,<sup>150</sup> reflecting standardised fraud protocols among confraternity members.<sup>151</sup> As recent research shows, the typical yahoo boy is male, under 26 years old<sup>152</sup> and enrolled at a university, mirroring the profile of confraternity members in Nigeria and abroad. There are also a few cases involving women and, for example, German male victims<sup>153</sup> or sextortion of men, as a recent case in Spain shows.<sup>154</sup> These schemes, akin to early 419 scams, use strong emotional manipulation.<sup>155</sup> In Munich, 12 alleged Black Axe members currently face charges for dozens of romance scams in Germany and for money laundering.<sup>156</sup>

### Money laundering

The low(er) visibility of Nigerian organised crime in Germany goes hand in hand with highly professional money laundering capabilities,<sup>157</sup> particularly linked to the booming fraud business. The criminal proceeds are usually laundered quickly complicating recovery for authorities.<sup>158</sup> Within Nigerian confraternity networks, specialised experts organise money laundering activities for their peers<sup>159</sup> and sometimes act as service providers for other criminal groups - a pattern reported across Europe and North America.<sup>160</sup> Confraternity membership fosters trust enabling cross-border laundering schemes even between criminals who do not know each other, illustrating the competitive networking advantage of Nigerian organised crime groups acting under the confraternity structure.

Field research indicated a high level of flexibility in money laundering schemes. This includes money laundering as a service, trade-based money laundering and crypto transactions.<sup>161</sup> It also explains the comparatively high level of money laundering-related offences by Nigerian nationals in Germany surpassing other offenders of African origin.<sup>162</sup>

### Law enforcement and countermeasures

On 23 April 2024, under the lead of the Bavarian Criminal Police, authorities raided 19 properties in the states of Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Hesse and Hamburg and arrested 11 Black Axe members. The

arrests were made based on allegations of romance scams and money-laundering activities.<sup>163</sup> The suspects included the head of NBM Germany and other members of the senior leadership of the legal association. Evidence collected through the raids included Black Axe paraphernalia – including a real black axe.<sup>164</sup>

Bavarian authorities aim to prove that the NBM of Africa e.V., a legally registered non-profit organisation, serves as a cover for the Black Axe confraternity in Germany.<sup>165</sup> This allegation is denied by NBM Africa, as proven by the submission of a cease-and-desist declaration to several Bavarian authorities in April 2025. The motion was rejected by the Munich Administrative Court.<sup>166</sup> Also the government of neighboring Baden-Württemberg appears to believe that both organisations are identical,<sup>167</sup> a widespread assumption within consulted law enforcement and security agencies.<sup>168, 169</sup> If the Bavarian authorities succeed, the NBM's hundreds of members in Germany could potentially be prosecuted for the formation of, and membership in, a criminal organisation under German Criminal Code §129, a law that is rarely applied.

Historically, Nigerian confraternities in Germany have operated with relative impunity. While individual cases against Nigerian nationals number between 1 000 and 2 000 a year, with a visible dominance of fraud and money laundering, structural investigations into the organisations themselves have been rare. In most cases, authorities cannot confirm whether a Nigerian suspect is a confraternity member, allowing the criminal organisations to continue to operate.<sup>170</sup>

Countering Nigerian organised crime in Germany, particularly the growing yet largely invisible cybercrime economy, requires a structural approach and targeted investigations into these highly secretive operations. As a former confraternity member put it: 'Cybercrime brings in more money, and it is not as dangerous as drug trafficking or human trafficking. Cybercrime does not involve violence, and it does not attract the same level of public condemnation as human trafficking and drug trafficking. Many "men" that I know have abandoned trafficking for sexual exploitation and are focusing mainly on cybercrime – I think this is because human trafficking was attracting too much attention and with cybercrime, you can stay in your house without going anywhere that would make authorities notice you.'<sup>171</sup>

## African diaspora-based organised crime in the Netherlands and France

### Background

Organised crime within North African diaspora communities in Western Europe has developed gradually, emerging in the 1970s and 1980s alongside increasing labour migration. Initially, migration from the Maghreb helped establish networks of cheap labour and trade. As North African migrants settled in countries such as the Netherlands, France and Belgium, some

The NBM's hundreds of members in Germany could potentially be prosecuted

became involved in low-level illicit activities to secure their livelihoods, widely seen as a consequence of governments failing to provide adequate economic opportunities and social integration.<sup>172</sup>

Over time, petty crime evolved into more sophisticated criminal enterprises, particularly in the drug trade. In the 1990s, Moroccan-dominated groups began to control the trafficking of hashish from Morocco to the Netherlands, using established networks to move large quantities of drugs through European ports, particularly Belgium's Port of Antwerp and Spain's coastal areas. Their growth was fuelled by the extremely tolerant cannabis regime in the Netherlands, weak points in law enforcement, political instability in their home country and the growing demand for illicit drugs in Europe.<sup>173</sup>

Especially in the Netherlands, with the cannabis market as a key driver, these networks have become a widespread concern that has extended to other European countries.<sup>174</sup> In neighbouring Belgium, France and Spain, North African diaspora-based criminal groups have developed into a major security threat, mostly because of their ability to engage in violence, intimidation and corruption to protect their interests.<sup>175</sup>

### Crime as a narrative

The marginalisation of immigrant communities has often been fused with a narrative of crime in several European countries. In France, at the core of the debate on migration and crime are the *banlieues* (urban peripheries) and their violent youth gangs, many with members of African descent. Since the era of the so-called French Connection, once dominated by traditional Corsican and French criminal organisations, the criminal landscape has shifted. Ethnically French mafia-style groups have given way to more decentralised, opportunistic multiethnic networks, frequently embedded in diaspora communities in marginalised urban peripheries.

Media in Western Europe often portray immigrants as significant players in the narcotics trade

Media reports in Western Europe often highlight the foreign origin of criminals, portraying immigrants as significant players in the narcotics trade. In Germany, for example, before the term 'Mocro Mafia' became popular due to outbreaks of violence in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2024 allegedly linked to Dutch-Moroccans,<sup>176</sup> police and the media used the term 'Nafri' for criminals of North African descent. In 2017, this led to a major debate due to its racist connotations, racial profiling and the criminalisation of the broader migrant community originating in the region.<sup>177</sup>

Nonetheless, public debates differ across Western Europe, with France showing a certain level of exceptionalism. In France, the production and/or use of ethnically categorised crime statistics is contentious, reflecting the French republican universalist model, which rejects any official recognition of ethnic communities. While such statistics are not strictly prohibited, the collection of data on religion, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background or country of origin is tightly regulated under the 1978 *Informatique et Libertés* law. This legislation prohibits the processing of personal data that reveals an individual's racial or ethnic origins, except under specific legal conditions.<sup>178</sup> Therefore, studying diaspora-based organised crime across Europe is uneven: in some countries, ethnic categories of crime are widespread in public reporting and media, while in others, gaining access to official data is more challenging.

### Criminal actors and organisation

Unlike hierarchically structured groups such as Nigerian confraternities, diaspora-based networks in France and the Netherlands tend to be informal, flat and fluid. Their organisation is driven by opportunity and locality, rather than central command. Today, actors with links to the Moroccan, Algerian or Tunisian diaspora operate both independently and with larger international networks, leveraging sizable diasporas across Europe to build sophisticated criminal enterprises with strong footholds in key cities.

In France, the illicit drug economy is characterised by specialisation among interacting but rarely centralised groups. At its core are the *cités* (housing estate) networks embedded in marginalised urban neighbourhoods, which run both wholesale and retail operations. The *cités* networks include diverse youth

gangs and criminal networks in disadvantaged areas with high immigrant concentrations, particularly from North Africa. Typically, these neighbourhoods are dominated by large apartment blocks and social housing, disconnected from city centres and plagued by unemployment and a lack of opportunities. In Marseille, for example, immigrants accounted for 16.5% of the population in 2020, with ethnic Algerians forming the largest group.<sup>179</sup>

The criminal networks that have flourished within these socially and economically challenged settings are multiethnic but often dominated by second-generation Maghrebi or sub-Saharan Africans. Organisation varies: while some groups show a certain level of hierarchy, most are opportunistic, unstable and loosely structured. Groups adopting names such as DZ Mafia or Black Mafia Family (BMF) in Marseille display some leadership but resemble local gangs more than traditional mafias.

In the Netherlands, the term 'Mocro Mafia' was coined by the media rather than the actors themselves, serving as a label for North African diaspora-based organised crime. Unlike Nigerian confraternities or Italian mafias, which are defined by a rigid hierarchy and centralised control, these groups operate in loose networks or small cells, similar to the situation in France. They do not qualify as mafia or mafias in the traditional sense. While there may be individual leaders, there is no defined centralised command structure: links to North Africa are cultural and transactional, rather than organisational.

The Taghi organisation illustrates how terminology shapes perception. The Moroccan-born now convicted leader of a highly violent drug trafficking network in the Netherlands is often portrayed as the archetypal 'Mafia' boss. In reality, his network was flatter and more decentralised than traditional mafias or Nigerian confraternities. Even with Taghi at the helm, members had significant autonomy in their operations, making the group highly adaptable. His arrest in December 2019 did not immediately collapse the network, which showed resilience rooted in its flexible structure.

#### **Participation, not membership; opportunism, not identity**

North African diaspora-based networks across Western Europe are highly permeable, with participation rather than membership defining their structure. They lack rituals, payment schemes or rigid ethnic criteria; involvement is driven by opportunity and is, therefore, flexible. While participants often share a common North African background, this reflects shared socialisation in marginalised communities more than deliberate ethnic exclusivity.

While the DZ Mafia in Marseille explicitly references Algeria in its name, using DZ or *Dzaïr* meaning Algeria in Arabic, and the BMF gestures to sub-Saharan origins, most networks do not emphasise ethnicity in their communication or self-definition. This stands in stark contrast to Nigerian confraternities, which are characterised by a strong sense of ritualised identity.

Consequently, links to Maghreb origin in Dutch and French diaspora-based networks tend to be individual, not institutional. While DZ members are predominantly of North African descent and the rival Yoda group is largely sub-Saharan African, ethnicity does not seem to be the founding idea of these groups, but rather an ex-post attribution shaped by territorial rivalries. Although ethnicity is not the original principle of these groups, it can become a powerful amplifier of conflict. As one law enforcement source noted: 'Ethnic origins can intensify the conflict, as rival gangs often see themselves as representatives of their respective ethnic groups, further inflaming territorial disputes. These divisions can lead to the entrenchment of local rivalries, with ethnic identities becoming intertwined with criminal enterprises. This is the case with DZ and BMF, yet for different reasons.'<sup>180</sup> In this sense, ethnicity is rather regional and racial, functioning less as an organising principle than as a factor reinforcing neighbourhood-based antagonisms.

The networks based in the Netherlands, Belgium and France are deeply embedded in the social fabric of their communities, relying heavily on recruitment patterns that exploit the persistent marginalisation

Criminal networks that have flourished within socially and economically challenged settings are multiethnic

## Most networks do not emphasise ethnicity in their communication or self-definition

of North African immigrant groups. In the Netherlands and Belgium, for example, Moroccan-linked organised crime networks target youth in deprived areas to serve as *uithalers*, retrieving drugs from shipping containers in major ports such as Rotterdam and Antwerp. Recruits, often still teenagers, are lured by the promise of substantial payouts, despite the severe penalties if caught.<sup>181</sup> This tactic is particularly effective in areas where social mobility is limited, and legitimate employment prospects are scarce.<sup>182</sup> Recruitment relies increasingly on social media and encrypted apps, which glamorise the criminal lifestyle and its promised rewards to appeal to vulnerable individuals.<sup>183</sup> In Sweden, Moroccan-linked groups have extended their influence and operational reach by leveraging diaspora ties to recruit minors as couriers and enforcers.<sup>184</sup>

### Glamorised violence

The recruitment strategies of these networks are based on reputation, a dynamic seen in other major global organised crime groups, such as in Mexico. Violence plays a central role in building that reputation amplified by media visibility and community impact. The 'Mafia' is frequently associated with a readiness to use extreme violence to further their criminal enterprises. Unlike highly secretive mafias such as the Italian 'Ndrangheta that seek to avoid violence and public attention, North African diaspora-based groups in the Netherlands, Belgium and France exhibit a heightened willingness to commit acts of violence. These include high-profile assassinations, bomb attacks and street confrontations.<sup>185</sup> Violence is not only a means to settle conflicts with competitors, but also an investment in reputation, in intimidation and fear, similar to the logic of terrorism.

In the Netherlands and Belgium, these groups have also glamorised violence, especially among younger demographics. Social media platforms – such as Snapchat and TikTok – are used to curate images of criminality as aspirational. The phenomenon aligns with the rise of 'crimfluencers' – individuals who gain notoriety and social capital through the public display of crime, blending criminality with influencer culture. Through visually compelling content, including flashy lifestyles, designer clothing and drill music, they reframe violence as a pathway to recognition. For marginalised youth, it offers an alternative route to status in societies where legitimate avenues to success may appear limited or inaccessible.<sup>186</sup>

France has witnessed a similar pattern. Drug-related crime surged in 2023 as competition between criminal organisations and conflicts over turf intensified. Marseille became a battleground between the DZ Mafia and the Yoda gang with escalating violence marking a record of 49 fatalities and over 120 injuries from drug-related shootings.<sup>187</sup> These confrontations, marked by a high level of almost military discipline and the use of advanced weaponry, were similar to the extreme tactics in the Netherlands. Social media again played a role in amplifying reputation and notoriety. While

Marseille stands out for the intensity and frequency of these confrontations, rising drug-related clashes have been reported in Paris, Seine-Saint-Denis, Lyon, Lille, Roubaix on the Belgian border and in smaller cities such as Grenoble<sup>188</sup> and Dijon.<sup>189</sup>

## Criminal markets

### Fragmented supply chains as a strategic advantage

Criminal markets in France and the Netherlands, especially those involving drug trafficking and fraud, are dominated by fluid diaspora-based networks that adapt quickly to shifting market conditions and law enforcement pressures. These networks exploit both fragmentated supply chains and vulnerabilities in marginalised communities.

Historically, North Africa's geographical and cultural proximity to Europe has facilitated these connections, particularly in the case of cannabis. Morocco's Rif region, located in the mountainous north, remains the world's largest producer of cannabis resin, with cultivation heavily concentrated in this area. This entrenched supply base has traditionally presented a clear opportunity for emerging criminal diaspora networks in Western Europe. Large diaspora communities originating from northern Morocco have settled in Belgium and the Netherlands for decades.<sup>190</sup> Their kinship ties and sustained social links to cannabis-producing regions were a decisive factor in establishing and maintaining the hashish trafficking pipeline from Morocco to Europe.

Morocco's Rif region, located in the mountainous north, remains the world's largest producer of cannabis resin

Morocco's ambiguous legal stance on cannabis – historically marked by informal toleration and only recently regulated for medical and industrial use – has created a durable grey zone that traffickers have systematically exploited.<sup>191</sup> This environment of de facto permissiveness has ensured reliable large-scale supply, directly strengthening the operational reach of Moroccan diaspora-based criminal groups in Europe.

Combined with its strategic location just 14 km from Spain across the Strait of Gibraltar, 3 500 km of coastline and advanced port infrastructure such as Tangier Med, Morocco has become a pivotal hub for transcontinental smuggling.<sup>192</sup>

While originally the wholesale supply of cannabis to Europe was more centralised, law enforcement pressure has fragmented the trade, making the trans-Mediterranean cannabis market more resilient. Smugglers now use drones, submarines and other innovations to move shipments into Spain.<sup>193</sup>

Today, criminal networks involved in the cannabis supply chain rarely control the full value chain but buy from suppliers in Morocco and from groups that ship the drugs to Spanish shores. Rif-based groups typically organise maritime supply, but once the drugs reach the European mainland, localised networks in countries such as France, Germany and the Netherlands manage distribution. North African diaspora networks often take over operations at the point of entry.<sup>194</sup>

Today, a few criminal actors control the entire supply chain. While hashish trafficking organisations in Morocco and the Rif region are reported to be hierarchical and highly organised,<sup>195</sup> their European diaspora counterparts retain a flexible, decentralised structure. This adaptability allows them to function effectively in global supply chains, leveraging localised networks to facilitate cross-border movement.<sup>196</sup> This approach relies heavily on criminal service providers that are outsourced and do not belong to the criminal networks. Such services include shipments across the Mediterranean, port collection and terrestrial transportation within Europe.

### Learning from the cannabis market

The decentralised nature of these trafficking networks allows flexibility and adaptation in operations. Moroccan supply chains employ methods such as hidden compartments in vehicles and encrypted

communications to coordinate shipments. While some reports suggest collaboration with Latin American traffickers, the extent to which methods are adopted or inspired remains unclear. These operational practices increase the complexity of enforcement and make detection more challenging.<sup>197</sup>

However, while the connections between Western Europe and North Africa with regards to cannabis trafficking have remained stable for decades, diaspora-based criminal networks in Europe have diversified beyond dependency on Moroccan supply. The decentralised approach honed in the cannabis business was transferred to the cocaine business, multiplying revenue opportunities.

## Dutch and Belgian criminal organisations have become integral intermediaries in the global cocaine trade

Dutch and Belgian criminal organisations, dominated by members of the Moroccan diaspora, have become integral intermediaries in the global cocaine trade, connecting Latin American suppliers to European markets. Leveraging their expertise in hashish smuggling and port access, particularly at Tangier Med, Algeciras, Antwerp and Rotterdam, they organise cocaine shipments into Europe. Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands serve as critical entry points, where the Moroccan-dominated networks collaborate with domestic groups, Albanian and Italian mafias.<sup>198</sup>

Their success relies on flexible interaction with service providers and other criminal groups essential in the long and more fragmented cocaine supply chains. The Taghi organisation

exemplifies this strategy, giving rise to what has been dubbed a 'super cartel':<sup>199, 200</sup> a decentralised alliance of leading European organised crime actors. This network – including the Kinahan family from Ireland, the Camorra from Naples and the Dino & Tito Cartel from the Western Balkans – cooperates to import massive amounts of cocaine into Europe. Such networks are not controlled by any single local or national group but instead serve as hubs for various international players exploiting regional vulnerabilities.<sup>201</sup>

### Exploiting vulnerabilities as a strategy

The ability to navigate these shifting dynamics, without being tied down to a singular identity or geographic base, has enabled flat, decentralised North African diaspora-based groups to thrive in highly competitive and fragmented criminal markets, particularly in the Netherlands and Belgium. While such decentralised diaspora networks also exist in France and Germany, they focus on local drug markets. There they have not yet graduated to global wholesale trade, though this remains a potential threat.

Unlike Nigerian confraternities, which rely on extensive organisational structures and global networks of expertise, these groups have grown their income and market share by exploiting vulnerabilities along supply chains, for example, in North Africa,<sup>202</sup> a region characterised by corruption, weak territorial control and limited law enforcement capacity.<sup>203</sup>

However, the issue of corruption and infiltration by these networks has not been confined to source and transit countries. Within Europe, North African diaspora-based criminal networks have embedded themselves in key infrastructure, particularly ports, but also partly within authorities. Antwerp, Europe's primary cocaine import hub, has been infiltrated by the 'Mocro Mafia,' which has compromised port operations. Reports of corruption among customs officers include cases of bribery, in which drug-filled containers were allowed to pass through the port without inspection. In 2017, a customs officer was arrested for collaborating with a Dutch-Moroccan group. In Hamburg, a 2023 series of port intrusions, aimed at recovering a cocaine shipment led to several arrests – all Dutch nationals.<sup>204</sup> In Bonn, in 2024, a police officer was arrested for allegedly accepting bribes in exchange for passing information to the 'Mocro Mafia.'<sup>205</sup>

### Two-way criminal flows

In public perception, the links between North African criminal diaspora networks and Africa are dominated by upstream flows into Europe, in particular of cannabis, but also through human trafficking and smuggling. However, there is growing evidence that Europe-based diaspora networks have extended their operations downstream into North Africa, particularly Morocco, not only as a transit hub, but increasingly as a market.

Synthetic drugs such as ecstasy and prescription drugs such as Tramadol and Lyrica are now flowing southward. Europe-based criminals seek safe havens in countries such as Morocco. In October 2024, Moroccan authorities arrested Samir El Y., also known as 'Patatje' or 'Dragon.' He was wanted in Belgium and the Netherlands for his alleged role in smuggling ecstasy into Morocco.<sup>206</sup> In June 2024, Mohamed Amine Y., known as 'Coluche,' who had fled to Morocco after receiving a 20-year sentence in France for cannabis trafficking, was caught.<sup>207</sup>

At the same time, there is a conceivable flow of European illicit gains into Morocco through money laundering. Key areas of investment for money laundering purposes include the real estate sector, both residential and commercial, in major cities such as Casablanca, Tangier, Rabat and Marrakesh. Investments extend to agricultural land, either then converted into development projects or used in the equine industry.<sup>208</sup>

Morocco's integration into the international financial system, coupled with its substantial informal sector and significant remittances, heightens its vulnerability to laundering risks. In February 2021, the Financial Action Task Force grey-listed Morocco for deficiencies in its anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing measures, but by February 2023, it was removed from the list after making tangible improvements.<sup>209</sup>

## Law enforcement and countermeasures

Law enforcement in France, the Netherlands and Belgium has struggled to respond effectively to diaspora-based organised crime due to its lack of formal structures, weak ethnic identifiers and decentralised organisation. In France, successive governments since former president Nicolas Sarkozy's administration have prioritised combating organised crime and violence in urban peripheries. In 2024, a French Senate *Commission d'Enquête* described drug trafficking and related organised crime as a 'submersion' into every layer of society, fuelling violent gang rivalries and fostering a parallel economy marked by corruption and systemic inefficiencies.<sup>210</sup> As a response to the escalating violence and drug market, the government has intensified its countermeasures. Similarly, Dutch and Belgian governments have massively increased their efforts to curb organised crime, particularly around ports.

Despite these growing efforts, North African diaspora-based networks have proven highly resilient vis-à-vis partly racially profiled law enforcement efforts to disrupt them. Their decentralised structure, fragmentated supply chains and reliance on outsourced services make dismantling them difficult. While Italian authorities declared confraternities to be mafia-style organisations, a punishable offence, loose diaspora-based networks cannot be prosecuted collectively, but only through individual cases.

In the Netherlands and Belgium, dozens of trials have targeted members of these networks, including the Taghi case, the biggest trial in Dutch history. Yet policing remains challenging: the 'Mocro Mafia' is not a single organisation, but a label applied to many small-scale networks with fluid structures. While these groups are more permeable from a law enforcement perspective than highly secretive and closed confraternities or other ethnically embedded mafia organisations, their proliferation presents a significant challenge. This is due to their adaptability and deep embedding within local vulnerabilities and international supply chains.

Europe-based diaspora networks have extended their operations downstream into North Africa

## Conclusion

This paper identifies two distinct forms of Africa-linked organised crime in Europe: Africa-based groups, exemplified by Nigerian confraternities, and diaspora-based networks, particularly those rooted in North African communities in countries such as the Netherlands and France. Across all case studies – Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and France – several socio-economic drivers such as social marginalisation, exclusion from formal economic systems and weak integration limit legitimate pathways for social and economic advancement. Africa-linked organised crime in Europe is deeply embedded in these ecosystems

## Morocco serves as a hub for money laundering, a refuge from European arrest warrants and a strategic platform for channelling drugs

of exclusion, which facilitate the recruitment and radicalisation of vulnerable individuals.

Despite these similarities, field research has shown that there are major differences between the case studies investigated here. Nigerian confraternities appear to be the dominant form of Africa-based organised crime in Europe, whereas North African diaspora-based networks are the most common form of Africa-linked organised crime found in the case studies of this report.

Both subcategories differ significantly in their organisational nature, in their links to Africa and in the criminal markets they are involved in. Nigerian confraternities maintain an organisational framework that links their headquarters with outposts in Europe, operating within a flexible structure that allows them to adapt to local conditions. While they retain the ability to respond to the circumstances and criminal opportunity in their host countries, they remain subject to both locally enforced rules and a centralised transcontinental hierarchy. They predominantly engage in drug trafficking, scamming, money laundering and human trafficking, often acting under legal cover or philanthropic pretences.

By contrast, diaspora-based networks are largely European in nature, emerge from marginalised communities and operate through flat, loosely connected networks. Ethnicity does play a certain role for group identity, but the key factor underlying these groups is opportunistic. Their links to North Africa are mostly transactional, for example, Morocco serves as a hub for money laundering, a refuge from European arrest warrants and a strategic platform for channelling drugs both downstream into sub-Saharan Africa and upstream into Europe.

There are also remarkable differences between the case studies. In Germany, Nigerian organised crime has shifted towards cybercrime and fraud, while in Italy, the drug market remains the most lucrative area of criminal enterprise for Nigerian organised crime.<sup>211</sup> In Switzerland, human trafficking and sexual exploitation are major revenue sources, while in France, cases related to sexual exploitation have decreased, whereas their involvement in the drug market has been on the rise.

All Africa-linked organised crime actors studied here show remarkable levels of resilience to law enforcement. Nigerian confraternities in Italy have shown adaptability despite the quite unique law enforcement efforts to counter them, as compared to other European countries. While police operations have disrupted key networks, they have neither managed to suppress the groups outright, nor meaningfully disrupted their involvement in drug supply, human trafficking and fraud schemes. On the contrary, Nigerian organised crime appears to have expanded its role in drug trafficking, increasingly participating in the wholesale business.

In Germany, Nigerian organised crime groups have largely flown under the radar of authorities, gradually shifting from the more

visible activities of human trafficking and sex industry to fraud schemes conducted behind closed doors and in cyberspace. In the Netherlands and France, diaspora-based groups have survived despite growing law enforcement pressure, capitalising on flexible structures and flat hierarchies. At the same time, these groups have adapted successfully to criminal opportunities, such as the transition of Dutch criminal networks into the cocaine market, allowing them a massive surge in income and power. Adaptability is a key defining trait across all groups.

This paper advances understanding of the adaptability and resilience of Africa-linked organised crime in Europe, but it is also clear that more comparative and independent research is needed to fully comprehend this phenomenon. While there is a certain level of knowledge about the Black Axe, the organisation, criminal endeavours and operations of other confraternities and possibly other Africa-based organised crime actors in Europe are barely understood, in particular, those outside Italy. Furthermore, there is very little research into diaspora-based criminal networks within Europe and their organisational nature that goes beyond journalistic accounts and single case studies. Acknowledging the differences between Africa-rooted command structures and the crime ecosystems emerging in Europe is essential to avoid conflating distinct threats. This differentiation is key to developing targeted strategies for prevention, intelligence gathering and disruption. More field-based research is needed to bridge existing knowledge gaps.

## Recommendations

### To EU Member States and agencies

- Conduct independent research to improve understanding of Nigerian organised crime in Europe, including Nigerian confraternities, beyond court cases and official reports.
- Undertake comparative studies on diaspora-based organised crime groups to examine their emergence, social embedding, enabling conditions and persistence.
- Strengthen the flow of knowledge and intelligence-sharing on Africa-linked organised crime in Europe to raise awareness and support evidence-based interventions.
- Complement law enforcement efforts with stronger social and integration policies to address Africa-based and diaspora organised crime flourishing in Europe, particularly where marginalisation, limited legal opportunities and uncertain residency prevail.
- Prioritise structural investigations into Nigerian organised crime networks rather than prosecuting actors solely for individual offences, to uncover broader organisational hierarchies.
- Enhance understanding of illicit financial flows linking Africa and Europe from Africa-linked organised crime groups and promote cooperation with African authorities to support interregional 'follow-the-money' approaches.
- Target and investigate legal cover organisations used by Nigerian confraternities in Europe to reveal membership, structure and operations.
- Strengthen prevention and enforcement measures against fraud schemes perpetrated by Nigerian and other West African organised crime groups to mitigate financial losses and enhance European resilience.

### To African authorities

- Strengthen knowledge sharing with European counterparts, civil society and academia through Interpol, Afripol and the Economic Community of West African States to improve understanding of social and political embedding, headquarters operations, recruitment, criminal markets and ongoing conflicts.
- Cooperate with European authorities to disrupt transcontinental criminal structures, reduce illicit financial flows into Africa, counter safe havens in Europe and tackle markets such as drugs, cybercrime and scams affecting African countries.

- Establish specialised units targeting confraternity-related crime, combining expertise in cybercrime, narcotics, human trafficking and other illicit economies, and promote joint regional operations focused on the most pervasive criminal markets.
- Collaboratively train law enforcement and criminal justice authorities to combat confraternity-related transnational crime, including providing capacity-building support to European partner agencies.
- Invest in awareness and prevention efforts for youth at risk of confraternity recruitment, and share best practices and lessons learnt with African and European counterparts.
- Establish anonymous reporting channels and protect whistleblowers and informants in communities affected by confraternity violence or intimidation, extending these mechanisms to areas of Nigerian organised crime outside Africa.

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**72** See e.g. interview with Yaski Erin, *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*, 19 March 2025, [www.vu.nl/en/news/2025/the-term-mocromafia-is-problematic-and-racist](http://www.vu.nl/en/news/2025/the-term-mocromafia-is-problematic-and-racist).

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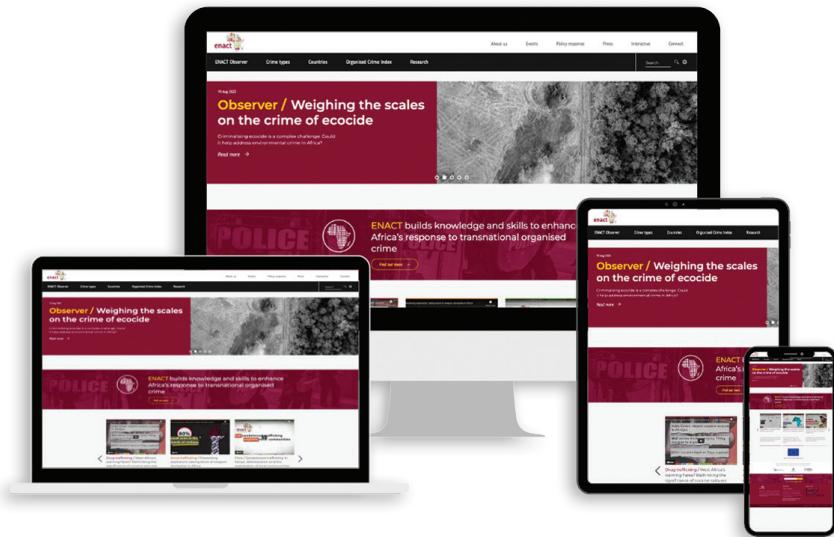
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## About ENACT

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