

European Crime Prevention Award 2020

Berlin, 1 July 2020

Prevention of family-based organized crime

Background

In various European countries, organized crime as well as petty crime is often associated with distinct social groups which are often characterised by clan-like and/or family-based structures.

This paper particularly addresses distinct, insular groups whose members are related by family or family-like relations and whose income consists of proceeds from criminal activities in various areas. Such groups include Mafia groups, crime syndicates and cartel-like structures. In some cases, such groups of perpetrators share ethnic origins, a migration background or cultural affiliations, but that is not necessarily the case. Violence is a characteristic feature of these structures, also in relation towards competing criminal groups.

Individual members who wish to leave these structures often face the risk of severing all ties to their families and their social environment. At the same time, young persons growing up in such an environment are particularly vulnerable and at a high risk of learning to understand criminal activity as the normal way of life.

Causes

Typically, these groups seek to set themselves apart from other groups (ingroup-outgroup) and shut themselves off from mainstream society. This deviance poses a certain risk both for individuals and for law enforcement authorities.

Another characteristic is the incompatibility of the (state's) legal system and the norms of this secluded social environment. Individual members of such groups live in a constant state of (inner) conflict inevitably resulting either in a clash with the law or with the social norms of their milieu.

It is very difficult for law enforcement but also for prevention initiatives to penetrate these groups. This is a major challenge for criminal prosecution and prevention policies.

Preventive approaches also have to struggle with a lack of attractive, supposedly simple alternatives for earning money.

Preventive approaches

Traditional strategies of crime control and prevention often reach their limits when faced with family-based organized crime structures. This raises the fundamental question what measures and strategies would be appropriate to prevent and prosecute family-based organized crime.

The most affected federal states in Germany – Berlin, Bremen, Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia – have come to pursue a zero tolerance policy towards family-based organized crime (i.e. low intervention threshold in the case of petty crime, civil infraction and threat situations) and an administrative approach. An administrative approach to serious and organized crime involves preventing the facilitation of illegal activities by denying criminals the use of the legal administrative infrastructures. This approach comprises the application of all relevant types of administrative regulations in order to prevent and fight illegal activities, where national law allows. This integrated approach is based on the close cooperation between police, judicial and customs authorities, tax investigators, public order and administrative authorities.

It might also be feasible to have exit programmes, similar to programmes for people who wish to end their involvement with extremist groups. Such programmes could start at a biographical turning point, such as imminent imprisonment or change of living conditions (partnership, children), and could also be combined with other punitive measures. It would be desirable if other member states would share their experiences with such programmes.

Measures starting at an earlier point in a person's biography may also be considered to interrupt the criminal pathways of young people. This may include sports and cultural activities or improving the perception of alternative ways of life (e.g. mandatory participation in preschool, assistance in school, vocational training and higher education) among affected groups.

When designing prevention strategies, it may be useful to pay more attention to the role of women. Women in family-based organized crime structures are often victims of severe oppression. On the other hand, it is the women who bring up children and teach them values. We are very interested in learning whether other member states have implemented programmes aimed at women in family-based organized crime structures, and in learning about other member states' experience with such programmes.

BPC/ECPA 2020

In most countries, there are insular milieus conflicting with state authority and clashing with the legal system. These groups are often defined by their actual or perceived family structures and far-reaching disregard of state institutions and the law. Examples include Mafia groups and crime syndicates such as the 'Ndrangheta (Calabrian Mafia) or the organised crime groups subsumed under the umbrella term Russian-Eurasian Organized Crime (REOK in Germany). It also includes criminal groups which emerge in socio-economically deprived and socially marginalized groups.

For dealing with criminal members of such subcultures, both a wide repressive approach as well as a strong preventive approach (e.g. strengthening schools as a social space) would be a conceivable response from the government. Whether such approaches could be appropriate solutions for the various social groups and whether they are already being applied should be discussed within the BPC. In addition, we would like to examine whether preventive approaches from other areas of crime, such as exit programmes for politically motivated right-wing extremists or deradicalization programmes for Islamist terrorists, could be applied to family-based organized crime structures.