



Organized crime and systemic corruption: comparative approaches and explanatory models in the european context

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the interaction between organized crime and systemic corruption in Europe, highlighting the mutual influence of these two phenomena on public institutions and the rule of law.

Organized crime encompasses structured criminal groups driven by profit and political influence through illegal practices, while systemic corruption involves the widespread infiltration of corruption into political and administrative mechanisms. Studying this relationship is essential for understanding how state institutions become vulnerable, allowing criminal groups to influence political and economic decisions. The paper adopts a comparative and multidimensional approach, exploring the historical, institutional, and cultural factors that differentiate European states in managing this issue. In this context, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What are the main mechanisms through which organized crime and systemic corruption reinforce each other in Europe?

RQ2: How do manifestations of organized crime and systemic corruption differ between Eastern and Western Europe?

RQ3: Which explanatory models (economic, institutional, cultural) best reflect the relationship between crime and corruption?

RQ4: In what ways do these phenomena affect the legitimacy and efficiency of European institutions?

RQ5: What European strategies and policies are most effective in simultaneously combating organized crime and systemic corruption?

In conclusion, the research provides an integrated perspective on the phenomenon, contributing to the formulation of tailored and effective solutions for strengthening the rule of law and restoring citizens' trust in institutions.

Keywords: comparative approach ,organized crime, explanatory models, european context, systemic corruption

1. Introduction

Organized crime refers to the totality of criminal activities carried out by structured groups with clear hierarchies and precise objectives, consistently seeking financial gain or political influence through illegal means. These groups operate systematically, using violence, extortion, or corruption to control illegal markets, influence state institutions, and secure protection from justice.

Systemic corruption, on the other hand, denotes a state in which corrupt practices are not merely isolated incidents but become integrated and widespread within the institutional and political structure of a society. In such cases, state institutions and decision-making processes are distorted by illegal practices that become unwritten norms of administrative and political functioning, ultimately weakening the rule of law.

Studying the relationship between organized crime and systemic corruption is essential for understanding how these two phenomena reinforce each other, generating major risks to the social and economic security of European states. Systemic corruption facilitates the infiltration and expansion of criminal networks within legitimate political and economic structures, amplifying their power and influence. In turn, organized crime provides financial resources and political leverage, perpetuating corruption and undermining the capacity of public institutions to effectively intervene and curb the phenomenon.

In the current European context, organized crime and systemic corruption represent major challenges to political stability, economic development, and public trust in institutions. Although the European Union is making significant efforts through common strategies and international cooperation, these phenomena remain deeply rooted in the political and economic realities of many member states. Europe's diverse historical, cultural, and institutional backgrounds lead to a wide range of manifestations of organized crime and corruption, making a comparative and multidisciplinary approach necessary for developing effective policies adapted to local and regional realities.

Thus, analyzing the interaction between these phenomena is essential not only from a theoretical perspective, but also for identifying pragmatic and innovative solutions at the European level, aimed at strengthening the rule of law, reducing crime, and increasing transparency and public trust in governmental authorities.

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

2.1 Typology of organized crime: theoretical approaches (structural, relational, economic)

Organized crime can be analyzed from multiple perspectives, the most common being the structural approach, which defines it through the lens of internal organizational characteristics such as hierarchy, role distribution, and the stability of the criminal group (Albini, 1971; Cressey, 1969). The relational approach, on the other hand, emphasizes the dynamics of networks and social relationships that facilitate criminal activities and the influence of criminal groups over institutional and social actors (Morselli, 2009; von Lampe, 2016). Finally, the economic approach views organized crime as the outcome of a rational cost-benefit analysis, in which criminal groups exploit illegal economic opportunities for maximum profit and minimal risk, reflecting strategic decisions guided by the logic of the illegal market (Fiorentini & Peltzman, 1997; Schelling, 1984).

2.2 Explanatory models of systemic corruption (cultural, institutional, economic models)

Systemic corruption can be explained through several models. The **cultural model** highlights the role of social norms and values in promoting and tolerating corrupt practices, defining corruption as a product of collective mentalities and increased social acceptability

(Uslaner, 2008; Sandholtz & Taagepera, 2005). The **institutional model** explains the phenomenon through the weakness and vulnerability of public and private institutions that facilitate and even encourage the systematic development of corrupt mechanisms (Rose-Ackerman, 1999; Buscaglia & Van Dijk, 2003). Lastly, the **economic model** sees corruption as the result of rational calculations made by the actors involved, driven by financial advantages, low costs of illegality, and market opportunities (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Shleifer & Vishny, 1993).

2.3 The interdependent relationship between organized crime and corruption

The literature emphasizes the interdependent nature of organized crime and corruption, which reinforce each other through a symbiotic relationship (Holmes, 2006; Shelley, 2014). Corruption facilitates and legitimizes the activities of criminal groups by providing protection, access to resources, and political influence, while criminal organizations in turn support and promote corruption through bribery, extortion, and the co-optation of public officials (Buscaglia & Van Dijk, 2003; Transparency International, 2021). This relationship generates a vicious cycle, weakening institutional capacity to respond and perpetuating illegality and socio-economic insecurity (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Shelley, 2014).

3. Comparative approaches in the European context

3.1 Eastern Europe vs. Western Europe: historical, political, and economic factors

A comparative analysis of organized crime and systemic corruption in Europe reveals significant differences between Eastern and Western European states, largely influenced by historical, political, and economic contexts. In Eastern Europe, the post-communist transition created favorable conditions for the development of corruption and the infiltration of mafia-type structures into public institutions, facilitated by a weakened rule of law and incomplete institutional reforms (Holmes, 2006; Shelley, 2014). In contrast, Western Europe features a stronger institutional tradition and more consolidated democratic systems. However, the phenomenon is not absent there either—criminal groups have exploited globalization, increased mobility, and economic integration to expand their operations (von Lampe, 2016; Allum & Gilmour, 2019).

3.2 Relevant case studies (Italy, Romania, Bulgaria, Germany, the Netherlands)

Case studies across different European countries reveal that organized crime and systemic corruption manifest in distinct ways, shaped by historical legacies, political culture, institutional development, and levels of integration within the European Union. Understanding these regional specificities is crucial for designing effective, context-sensitive strategies to combat such phenomena.

In Italy, the historical entrenchment of mafia-type organizations—such as Cosa Nostra in Sicily, the 'Ndrangheta in Calabria, and the Camorra in Campania—has produced a deeply rooted system of parallel power structures. These groups have evolved from primarily violent, territorial entities into sophisticated criminal enterprises with transnational reach and strong connections to political and economic elites (Paoli, 2003). Their ability to infiltrate public procurement, construction, waste management, and even the agricultural and health sectors has weakened institutional integrity at both local and national levels. The mafia's embeddedness in political structures is reinforced by clientelism, vote-buying, and systematic corruption, which have undermined the effectiveness of rule-of-law reforms and challenged the legitimacy of democratic governance in affected regions.

In contrast, Romania and Bulgaria present a different trajectory, shaped by their post-communist transitions and delayed institutional modernization. Following the collapse of authoritarian regimes, the rapid liberalization of markets, weak institutional controls, and opaque privatization processes created fertile ground for the emergence of criminal networks

and corruption in the 1990s. In these contexts, organized crime is often intertwined with political corruption, as former security services, oligarchic actors, and criminal groups have maintained influence over public institutions, especially in sectors such as customs, public procurement, and law enforcement (Holmes, 2006; Gounev & Bezlov, 2010). Although EU accession brought pressure for reform, incomplete and uneven implementation of judicial and anti-corruption measures continues to hinder progress, resulting in persistent vulnerabilities and external monitoring through mechanisms such as the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM).

Meanwhile, in Germany and the Netherlands, the manifestation of organized crime takes a predominantly transnational and economically driven form, with less direct entanglement in domestic political structures. These countries maintain relatively high standards of institutional integrity and low levels of public sector corruption, which limits the capacity of criminal groups to infiltrate the state apparatus. However, their strong infrastructure, open economies, and logistical centrality within Europe make them attractive operational hubs for international crime networks, particularly those involved in drug trafficking, synthetic drug production, money laundering, and VAT fraud (Kleemans, 2014; von Lampe, 2016). The port cities of Rotterdam and Hamburg, for example, have become key entry points for cocaine shipments from Latin America, managed by criminal groups operating across multiple jurisdictions. Authorities in these countries face the challenge of countering external infiltration while maintaining open economic systems and liberal legal frameworks, which criminal actors exploit through complex schemes that often involve shell companies, cryptocurrency, and cross-border financial flows.

These case studies underscore the need for differentiated, country-specific approaches to combating organized crime and corruption. While southern and eastern European countries grapple with domestic structural corruption and political collusion, northwestern states must strengthen their preventive and financial oversight capacities to address sophisticated forms of transnational crime. The European Union must therefore balance standard-setting and harmonization with flexible support mechanisms that account for these divergent risk profiles and institutional realities.

3.3 Similarities and differences in the manifestations of corruption and organized crime

There are both notable similarities and significant differences in how corruption and organized crime manifest across the European continent, shaped by divergent historical trajectories, institutional resilience, legal cultures, and levels of socioeconomic development. Understanding these patterns is essential for crafting differentiated, yet coherent, policy responses at both national and European levels.

Similarities across European states can be observed in the strategic interplay between organized crime and corruption. In almost all contexts, criminal networks rely on corruption as a critical enabler—whether to secure impunity, gain privileged access to markets, avoid regulatory oversight, or co-opt key decision-makers (Shelley, 2014). Corruption serves not only as a means of protection, but also as a mechanism for expansion and consolidation of criminal operations, particularly in sectors such as public procurement, infrastructure, real estate, and waste management. Additionally, there is a common trend of economic opportunism, whereby both organized crime groups and corrupt elites exploit gaps in enforcement, loopholes in legislation, and weak inter-institutional coordination to pursue illicit enrichment (Buscaglia & Van Dijk, 2003).

Despite these commonalities, important differences emerge in terms of the scope, intensity, and structural embeddedness of the phenomenon. In Eastern Europe, particularly in post-communist countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, and parts of the Western Balkans,

corruption is often systemic—penetrating multiple layers of governance, from local administrations to national parliaments and judicial institutions. This form of corruption is characterized by state capture, where private interests—often linked to criminal or oligarchic groups—exert substantial influence over public decision-making and regulatory processes. The legacy of authoritarian governance, underdeveloped civic oversight mechanisms, and politicized judiciaries has contributed to the institutionalization of corruption, turning it into a mode of governance rather than an exception (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016).

By contrast, in Western European countries—such as Germany, the Netherlands, France, and the Nordic states—corruption tends to be more contained, transactional, and economically motivated. It generally occurs at the margins of the system and is less likely to dominate institutional behavior. Here, corruption is often linked to private sector malfeasance, such as bribery in international business transactions, tax evasion schemes, or undue influence in public-private partnerships. Although political corruption exists, it is less systemic and more likely to be detected and sanctioned due to stronger rule-of-law institutions, independent media, and well-established civil society oversight (Transparency International, 2021).

Another notable difference lies in the types of corruption and the actors involved. In Eastern Europe, high-level political and administrative corruption is more prevalent, involving senior government officials, party elites, and high-ranking bureaucrats. This form of corruption often intersects with organized crime, especially in sectors vulnerable to rent-seeking behavior such as customs, energy, and infrastructure development. In Western Europe, however, corruption is more frequently associated with technical or bureaucratic corruption, as well as with corporate crime and transnational criminal enterprises that exploit global financial systems, offshore jurisdictions, and regulatory asymmetries to launder illicit proceeds and infiltrate legitimate markets.

These divergences underscore the necessity for tailored anti-corruption strategies. In Eastern Europe, structural reforms aimed at strengthening judicial independence, depoliticizing public administration, and empowering anti-corruption bodies are crucial. In Western Europe, efforts should focus on financial transparency, corporate accountability, and international cooperation to disrupt complex economic crime networks. Moreover, addressing these issues at the European level requires a dual approach: reinforcing legal harmonization and institutional convergence, while also respecting the contextual particularities that shape corruption and organized crime in each region.

4. Explanatory models of the organized crime–corruption interaction

4.1 The economic model (illegal market, supply and demand, profit and risk)

The economic model explains the relationship between organized crime and corruption through the dynamics of illegal markets and the mechanisms of supply and demand. Criminal groups emerge and thrive in an economic environment where illegal opportunities become attractive due to high profits, relatively low risks, and limited state enforcement capacity (Becker, 1968; Fiorentini & Peltzman, 1997). In this context, corruption serves as a key mechanism through which criminal groups ensure the stability, protection, and expansion of their operations, reducing the costs and risks associated with illegal activities (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). Thus, the crime–corruption relationship is conceptualized as an economic exchange, based on mutual benefits between corrupt officials and criminal actors.

4.2 The institutional model (vulnerability of public and private institutions, corrupt mechanisms)

The institutional model emphasizes the structural vulnerability of public and private institutions to corruption and the infiltration of organized criminal groups (Buscaglia & Van Dijk, 2003). Fragile institutions—characterized by low transparency, limited accountability,

and weak law enforcement—become susceptible to corrupt practices, facilitating the penetration and expansion of criminal networks (Transparency International, 2021). In this view, weak institutions contribute to the emergence of systemic corruption, indirectly supporting the growth of criminal activities and undermining public trust in control and justice mechanisms (Holmes, 2006).

4.3 The cultural and social model (social acceptability, mentalities, and informal norms)

The cultural and social model highlights the influence of informal norms and collective mentalities on the prevalence and social acceptance of corruption and organized crime. In certain European societies, illegal practices may become socially acceptable or even normative, generating a high level of tolerance toward corruption and involvement in unlawful activities (Sandholtz & Taagepera, 2005; Uslander, 2008). From this perspective, organized crime is reinforced through a "culture of complicity", in which corruption becomes an accepted social mechanism, embedded in everyday and institutional interactions (Rose-Ackerman, 2016). Therefore, changing mentalities and combating tolerant informal norms are essential components of strategies aimed at reducing the impact of organized crime and systemic corruption in the European context.

5. Societal consequences and impact

5.1 Effects on trust in institutions and the rule of law

The phenomenon of organized crime and systemic corruption generates profound negative effects on citizens' trust in public institutions and the rule of law. Such practices undermine the legitimacy of authorities and the efficiency of democratic mechanisms, leading to a sharp decline in public confidence in the judiciary, public administration, and political processes (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). Studies show that the widespread perception of corruption and crime reduces civic engagement and the legitimacy of the democratic system (Uslander, 2008; Transparency International, 2021).

5.2 Long-term economic and social consequences

Organized crime and corruption have long-term economic and social consequences, including economic stagnation, social inequalities, and political instability (Holmes, 2006). Foreign direct investment is negatively affected, economic competitiveness declines, and inequalities deepen, generating an unfavorable climate for sustainable development and social cohesion (Shelley, 2014; Shleifer & Vishny, 1993).

5.3 Threats to national and international security

In the current European context, organized crime and systemic corruption represent a significant and persistent threat to both national and international security. These phenomena are no longer confined to isolated illegal activities but have evolved into complex, adaptive networks capable of infiltrating key state institutions. The entanglement of organized criminal groups with elements of political and administrative power enables them to operate with a high degree of impunity, eroding the rule of law and undermining public trust in democratic governance (Shelley, 2014). Through strategic corruption, intimidation, and exploitation of legal loopholes, such groups secure influence over decision-making processes, including public procurement, judicial procedures, and electoral mechanisms (Buscaglia & Van Dijk, 2003).

Moreover, the cross-border dimension of organized crime amplifies its impact, transforming it into a transnational challenge that transcends the capacities of individual nation-states. Criminal organizations often exploit the freedoms associated with the European single market—such as the free movement of people, goods, capital, and services—to

facilitate illegal activities like drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, and arms smuggling. These illicit networks take advantage of disparities in regulatory frameworks and institutional resilience among EU member states, thereby exacerbating systemic vulnerabilities and fostering environments conducive to corruption and criminal enterprise (Allum & Gilmour, 2019).

The consequences are manifold: economic destabilization through the distortion of fair competition and capital flight; political destabilization via the co-optation or neutralization of democratic oversight mechanisms; and social destabilization through increased violence, fear, and inequality in affected communities. Furthermore, the entrenchment of criminality within state structures poses serious obstacles to effective internal security management, as it impairs the functioning of law enforcement, judicial independence, and public administration integrity.

Given these dynamics, organized crime and corruption are no longer isolated threats but structural phenomena with the capacity to destabilize the European security architecture as a whole. Addressing them requires not only enhanced cross-border cooperation and intelligence sharing among European law enforcement agencies, but also systemic reforms aimed at increasing transparency, accountability, and institutional robustness across all levels of governance.

6. European strategies for combating and preventing crime and corruption

6.1 European institutional mechanisms (Europol, Eurojust, OLAF, etc.)

The European Union employs a complex and evolving array of institutional mechanisms to combat the multifaceted threats posed by organized crime and systemic corruption. These mechanisms operate at the intersection of national sovereignty and supranational coordination, aiming to enhance both the operational effectiveness and legal coherence of responses across member states. Among the most significant instruments in this architecture are Europol, Eurojust, and the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), each with distinct mandates and complementary functions.

Europol, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, plays a central role in facilitating intelligence-led policing at the EU level. Through its secure communication infrastructure and specialized databases, Europol enables national law enforcement agencies to exchange operational information, identify criminal patterns, and coordinate joint investigations in real time. Its analytical capacities support the detection of emerging threats and the dismantling of transnational criminal networks, particularly those involved in drug trafficking, human smuggling, cybercrime, and money laundering (Europol, 2020). In recent years, Europol has also developed specialized task forces and strategic platforms, such as the European Serious and Organised Crime Centre (ESOCC), to target high-risk crime areas with increased precision and cross-border coordination.

Eurojust, the EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, complements these efforts by providing a platform for judicial authorities to coordinate complex cross-border prosecutions. It facilitates mutual legal assistance, streamlines the execution of European Arrest Warrants (EAW), and resolves conflicts of jurisdiction that often arise in multi-state investigations. By promoting a harmonized application of EU law and enhancing the interoperability of national legal systems, Eurojust strengthens the coherence and efficiency of judicial responses to organized criminal activities. Its involvement is particularly crucial in cases involving multiple legal frameworks, diverse evidentiary standards, and competing prosecutorial interests (Fijnaut & Paoli, 2004).

OLAF (Office européen de lutte antifraude) serves a unique function within this institutional framework, focusing on protecting the financial interests of the European Union.

It conducts independent investigations into fraud, corruption, and other illegal activities affecting the EU budget, including the misuse of structural and investment funds, customs fraud, and procurement-related corruption. OLAF collaborates with both EU institutions and national authorities, providing recommendations for disciplinary, administrative, or judicial follow-up. Its role is essential in ensuring that EU resources are not diverted by corrupt practices and that institutional integrity is preserved at all levels of implementation.

Together, these institutions reflect the EU's commitment to a multi-layered, integrative approach in addressing organized crime and corruption. However, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the willingness of member states to engage in sustained cooperation, to align national legislation with EU standards, and to strengthen their own institutional resilience. The complex interplay between EU-level agencies and national authorities underscores both the potential and the limitations of supranational governance in the fight against entrenched criminal structures.

6.2 Assessing the effectiveness of existing strategies (advantages and limitations)

Current strategies employed by the European Union and its member states offer significant advantages in terms of fostering transnational cooperation, enhancing information exchange, and promoting institutional coordination in the fight against organized crime and systemic corruption. The establishment of shared legal instruments—such as the European Arrest Warrant, the European Investigation Order, and frameworks for mutual legal assistance—has improved the procedural efficiency of cross-border investigations and prosecutions. Moreover, the development of specialized EU agencies, such as Europol, Eurojust, and OLAF, has institutionalized mechanisms for intelligence-sharing and joint operational planning, thereby reinforcing the EU's capacity to respond collectively to transnational criminal threats.

However, despite these advancements, the practical effectiveness of such strategies remains uneven across the Union. A central challenge lies in the disparity of institutional capacities among member states. Countries with robust legal systems, adequately resourced law enforcement bodies, and a tradition of judicial independence tend to implement EU directives and initiatives more effectively. In contrast, member states facing chronic underfunding, politicized institutions, or weak rule-of-law standards often struggle to operationalize these instruments fully (Gounev & Bezlov, 2010). This imbalance not only hampers coherent enforcement but also creates safe havens within the EU for criminal actors who exploit jurisdictional inconsistencies.

Furthermore, internal resistance to structural reforms—particularly those involving anti-corruption measures, judicial independence, and public administration transparency—undermines the long-term sustainability of European strategies. In some contexts, reform initiatives are met with political obstruction or bureaucratic inertia, limiting their transformative potential. This is especially problematic in environments where elements of the political or economic elite are themselves entangled in corrupt networks, thereby disincentivizing meaningful change.

One of the most pressing limitations is the lack of uniform implementation of EU legislation. Although common standards exist on paper, the transposition into national law is often delayed, incomplete, or inconsistent. As a result, there is a significant gap between formal alignment and actual enforcement. This legal fragmentation weakens judicial cooperation, complicates evidence-sharing, and hinders the development of trust between institutions—an essential component of effective cross-border collaboration (Kleemans, 2014).

In addition, insufficient cooperation at the national and local levels remains a critical vulnerability. While intergovernmental and supranational coordination has improved at the

strategic level, many operational challenges persist at the point of implementation. Local police forces, prosecutors, and administrative bodies may lack the necessary training, resources, or political support to engage effectively in cross-border operations or to investigate complex corruption schemes. This gap is particularly evident in rural or marginalized regions, where criminal groups often find fertile ground for recruitment, concealment, and illicit activity.

Overall, while current EU strategies constitute an important framework for action, their efficacy is contingent upon deeper structural convergence among member states, enhanced political will, and continuous investment in institutional capacity-building. Without addressing these internal asymmetries and implementation gaps, the Union's capacity to respond decisively to organized crime and systemic corruption will remain constrained.

6.3 Examples of best practices and lessons learned at the european level

Best practices in combating organized crime across Europe reflect the growing recognition that fragmented, reactive responses are insufficient in the face of increasingly adaptive and transnational criminal networks. Instead, a multi-dimensional strategy—grounded in inter-agency collaboration, institutional transparency, and the reinforcement of judicial and law enforcement capacities—has emerged as the most effective model for sustainable prevention and control.

One of the most cited examples of success in this domain is Italy's long-standing and evolving anti-mafia framework. Rooted in decades of experience confronting some of the world's most entrenched criminal organizations, Italy has developed an extensive legal and institutional arsenal that includes the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA) and the Direzione Nazionale Antimafia (DNA)—specialized bodies tasked with coordinating investigations and prosecutions of mafia-related activity (Paoli, 2003). These agencies work closely with both central and local law enforcement, as well as with financial authorities, ensuring a unified approach across jurisdictions. A key element of the Italian model is the use of preventive anti-mafia measures, such as asset seizure and confiscation without a prior criminal conviction, under civil law procedures—an approach that has proven effective in dismantling the economic foundations of criminal groups.

Equally important is the role of institutional transparency and public accountability in weakening the influence of organized crime. Italy's experience shows that transparency in public procurement, digitalization of administrative procedures, and rigorous oversight of political financing reduce opportunities for criminal infiltration. Furthermore, the witness protection program (*programma di protezione dei collaboratori di giustizia*) has played a vital role in enabling insiders to cooperate with authorities, thereby exposing the internal structure and operational methods of criminal networks.

In contrast yet complementary, countries such as Germany and the Netherlands have implemented integrated, preventive models that focus on disrupting the economic and social infrastructure that enables organized crime to flourish. In Germany, municipal-level programs involve close cooperation between local police, tax authorities, building inspectors, and immigration services to identify and disrupt illicit activities early. This “whole-of-government” approach aims to detect suspicious behavior—such as sudden wealth accumulation, irregular real estate transactions, or misuse of welfare benefits—before it escalates into entrenched organized criminal activity (Kleemans, 2014).

The Netherlands has adopted a similarly proactive strategy through its Administrative Approach to Organized Crime, which promotes collaboration between public and private actors. Under this framework, authorities work with banks, housing agencies, and civil society organizations to identify patterns of abuse and corruption in real estate, hospitality, and logistics sectors—industries particularly vulnerable to money laundering and front operations. Notably, Dutch municipalities have legal authority to revoke licenses or deny

permits when there are serious indications of criminal involvement, even without a final conviction. This preventive logic, known as the “Bibob law”, empowers local governments to act swiftly and decisively (von Lampe, 2016).

These best practices demonstrate that success in combating organized crime is not solely a function of repressive measures, but also of institutional coordination, early detection, and societal resilience. What Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands have in common is a recognition that organized crime does not only threaten security, but also democracy, market integrity, and social trust. Accordingly, their responses integrate security policy with social policy, economic regulation, and administrative reform.

For the broader European context, these models offer critical insights into designing context-sensitive, adaptive strategies. Tailoring these approaches to the institutional capacities, legal cultures, and specific vulnerabilities of each member state is essential. Moreover, the horizontal dissemination of such best practices through EU platforms—like the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT)—can enhance collective resilience and promote a shared strategic culture against organized crime.

7. Discussions and conclusions

The analysis of the interaction between organized crime and systemic corruption in the European context confirms the complex and reciprocal nature of these phenomena, illustrating how they reinforce each other and generate profound negative effects on society. The comparative study between Eastern and Western European states reveals that historical, institutional, and economic factors play a crucial role in determining each country’s level of vulnerability to these threats.

According to existing literature, Eastern Europe faces deeper political and institutional corruption, facilitated by the post-communist legacy and the weakness of democratic structures. In contrast, Western Europe is primarily affected by transactional corruption and the subtle infiltration of transnational criminal networks, though it benefits from stronger institutions and more effective preventive mechanisms (von Lampe, 2016; Kleemans, 2014).

The findings suggest that economic and institutional explanatory models provide a robust understanding of the reinforcing mechanisms between organized crime and corruption. Particularly, the institutional model underscores the importance of strengthening institutional capacity and transparency to reduce the risk of criminal infiltration, confirming the conclusions of earlier research (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Buscaglia & Van Dijk, 2003). The cultural model also highlights the need for shifting social attitudes and reducing the social acceptability of corruption as a long-term strategy (Uslaner, 2008).

Regarding European strategies for combating and preventing these phenomena, the analysis emphasizes the benefits of cross-border cooperation and the vital role of European agencies such as Europol, Eurojust, and OLAF. However, the identified limitations include the uneven implementation of anti-corruption policies and significant disparities in institutional capacities among member states. Thus, improving coordination between the European and national levels becomes essential for a more efficient and integrated approach to addressing these challenges (Fijnaut & Paoli, 2004; Shelley, 2014).

An important limitation of this study lies in the lack of extensive empirical regional data, suggesting opportunities for future research through the collection and analysis of detailed quantitative and qualitative data on the local manifestations of the studied phenomena. Future studies could also explore the role of emerging technologies and artificial intelligence in developing more effective mechanisms for preventing and combating corruption and organized crime.

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