



The Micro-Geopolitics of Organised Crime

Corresponding Author.

Fausto Carbajal-Glass, Consultant and Ph.D. researcher, Department of Security and Crime Science, University College London. Email: fausto.glass.18@ucl.ac.uk.

Abstract.

Organised crime groups (OCGs) are constantly evolving and adapting worldwide. So it is necessary to develop analytical tools aimed at understanding OCGs and, ultimately, anticipating their behaviour. Based on a research in progress (Carbajal-Glass, 2020; 2020a; 2021; 2021a), I propose the 'micro-geopolitics of organised crime' (MGPOC) framework to examine how and why OCGs are developing illicit economies associated to natural resources around the globe. The foundational premise underlying the MGPOC framework is that multiple OCGs vie for intensely contested territories, transport routes, and access to national and international markets in order to secure strategic corridors of wealth, influence and power, thus generating large-scale violence primordially at a local scale.¹ The analytical framework delves into the interconnection of five key components:

1. The existence of a profitable legal production process associated with a specific natural resource (e.g. iron ore, charcoal, avocados, lemons, or gold). This implies that a production process (e.g. the extraction, processing, transportation, and export of iron ore) is bound to local geographies and shaped by the laws of global supply and demand.
2. The criminal infiltration of infrastructure related to a particular production process, either by the means of collusion, intimidation or due to government's sheer inability. This component also reflects the influence of geography over politics insofar as infrastructure projects respond to geographic determinants in the first place (e.g. the convergence of ports, iron ore mines, and steel factories in a locality).
3. The incorporation of a legal production process into the dynamics of the organised crime economy. The revenues from a production process contribute to the criminal groups' 'war effort'. This income can be used to neutralise law enforcement

¹ The aspects of this present abstract are explained more in-depth in: Carbajal Glass, F. (2020). "Where the Metal Meets the Flesh: Organized Crime, Violence, and the Illicit Iron Ore Economy in Mexico's Michoacán". In *Illegal Mining: Organized Crime, Corruption, and Ecocide in a Resource-Scarce World*, Zabyelina, Y. & van Uhm, D. (Eds.). London: Palgrave-Macmillan. In this article, it is analysed how and why the Knights Templar tapped into the iron ore industry in Michoacán state, Mexico, through 2011-2013.



activities as well as accumulate manpower and resources (e.g. firearms), which can be used for confronting competing criminal organisations. In Mexico, for instance, iron ore mining became the primary source of revenue for the Knights Templar cartel through the period 2011-2013.

4. The appropriation of those production processes through coercive means –albeit not exclusively since it is common to find cases where OCGs have a robust popular support. Predominantly, the infiltration of legal production processes by criminal groups implicitly calls for the use of violence, thus adding and perpetuating armed violence at a local level (e.g. the rise of vigilante groups across the state of Michoacán, Southwest Mexico, in 2013). On the other hand, large-scale violence on a local level shapes the security environment at a national scale.
5. At the core of the MGPOC is the prevalence of institutional failure and/or government corruption. In this regard, due to the partial, belated, or at times non-existent presence of the state authority in a particular geographical space, criminal groups increasingly become politically influential, enabling the creation of complex social orders characterized by a symbiosis between legal and illegal actors.

Although empirical testing across countries is needed to refine this model, the MGPOC framework provides five working insights:

Firstly, the absence or weakness of the State's authority will cause different actors, legal and illegal, to adapt to an environment according to their particular needs, interests and objectives. The State's absence, for instance, opens up opportunities for corporate misconduct from companies (e.g. in the mining or oil sectors), especially if criminal groups can sell the product in question at a price significantly lower than of the legitimate market.

Secondly, the infiltration of a production process by a criminal group has an inherent international dimension. Although the micro-geopolitics of organised crime stresses the relevance of the local level, it is indeed mindful of the importance of national and international levels of analysis, insofar as apparently small, isolated spaces are potentially 'global spaces', where local political and economic processes are shaped by global forces, dynamics and actors.

Thirdly, it is worth asking if the conduct and, in some cases, wrongdoing of private companies is entirely detached from the geopolitical interests of their home country. It is not uncommon for multinational companies to receive support from their national governments in spite of accusations around their behaviour and integrity tainting their corporate reputation.

Fourth, the criminal infiltration of legal production processes associated with natural resources ends up generating alternative cycles of violence and counter-violence in a



community, beyond drug-related violence or violence related to other illegal activities. Moreover, different actors – e.g. multinational companies, rival criminal groups, government authorities, vigilante groups – contribute to the escalation of large-scale violence, political instability and social fragmentation locally.

Fifth, the MGPOC framework could also be used as a tool for strategic intelligence as it aims to anticipate organised criminal groups' economic diversification, and thereby mitigate their nefarious social, environmental, and political consequences. In this sense, lithium in Mexico, for instance, is a potential business in which criminal groups might be interested in infiltrating, especially as it becomes increasingly relevant in the energy sector worldwide.

To conclude, OCGs is one of the most tangible threats to democratic governance, environment sustainability and citizen security on a local scale. The MGPOC framework is an attempt to analyse the changing character of organised crime, political violence and conflict in the 21st century. This is even more salient since the 'Weberian nation-state' – traditionally referred to as government, population and territory– is currently going through a major reconfiguration and alternative sources of credibility, legitimacy, and authority are now more visible at a subnational level.

Keywords: criminal conflict; the crime-conflict compound; political violence; the conflict, security and development nexus; local geopolitics; natural resources and conflict.

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