

Brexit and Internal Security: Anticipating Threats from Organised Crime

While historically, the organised crime (OC) was largely absent from political and law enforcement discourse in the United Kingdom (Hobbs, 2013), today, the UK authorities consider OC to be a national security threat that causes a significant harm to the UK and leads to more deaths than all other national security threats combined (Cabinet Office, 2018). The National Crime Agency estimates that the OC costs the UK economy more than £37 billion per year and in 2018, it mapped 4,542 OC groups operating in the UK (National Crime Agency, 2019). While it is necessary to treat official figures with caution (Savona, 2014), the presence of the OC in the UK has been well documented. There are multiple studies dealing with various aspects of OC activities and efforts to tackle them in the British context such as those on human trafficking (Middleton, Antonopoulos, & Papanicolaou, 2019; Sarkar, 2014) or drug markets (Hall & Antonopoulos, 2017)

Crime issues have also featured in the campaign leading up to the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum. During the referendum campaign, permeability of British borders became an issue as media outlets in the UK raised the alarm on the ease with which the EU nationals can cross borders and commit crimes on the British soil under the EU's freedom of movement (Martins, 2021), indicated that the EU membership hinders the UK's abilities to combat OC and suggested that the OC in the UK is operated by the foreigners (Perring, 2016).

However, dealing with the issue of OC solely through enforcement-based approaches grounded in stricter immigration rules and heightened border protection does not consider the role of environmental change in the creation of novel crime opportunities and therefore, will not address new vulnerabilities emanating from Brexit. Take the new points-based immigration system. While designed to attract high-skilled workers needed by the British economy, the points-based system and associated lower levels of immigration can lead to the rise of human smuggling, human trafficking and labour exploitation due to the squeeze on the labour market (2018). Moreover, as the UK leaves the EU, new rules and regulations adopted by the EU will no longer automatically apply in the UK and the systems between the EU and the UK will start to diverge. An example of the criminogenic influence of this divergence is provided by the application of different levels of tariff to goods from the third countries that could incentivise smuggling between the UK and the EU (Davies, 2021).

Therefore, instead of relying on reactive policing models to deal with the OC post-Brexit, proactive or future-oriented approach provides a better framework to deal with the activities of the OC in the UK and their development. Such approach shifts the perspective from responding to crimes to detecting and pre-empting crimes that may occur in the future. However, such approach is also fraught with uncertainty. To deal with such uncertainty, Verfaillie and Vander Beken (2008) believe that

anticipation of OC developments is best achieved by the study of socio-economic and other developments as well as systematic vulnerabilities from criminal perspective.

Building upon this approach, this research project is divided into three phases. The first phase, which is currently underway, consists of a systematic review that examines the state-of-the-art in knowledge concerning the impact of Brexit on serious and organised crime in the UK as well as the impact on the operational capacity of law enforcement. The systematic review aims to identify criminal opportunities created by Brexit and the vulnerabilities causing these opportunities. Gap analysis identifying avenues for further research will conclude the first phase of the research. This gap analysis will guide the second phase of the project but the preliminary expectation is that it will consist of targeted desk-based research and semi-structured expert interviews with relevant subject matter experts and regulatory authorities to fill the gaps in knowledge regarding Brexit and criminal opportunities. At the end of the second phase, a criminogenic profile of Brexit will be developed. This profile will then be used in the last stage of the project which will utilise foresight methods to anticipate medium- and long-term threats from organised crime emanating from Brexit. This can inform policy-makers about possible alternative developments of organised crime in the UK. Such approach allows strategic planners to design appropriate preventive action and provides intelligence that can reduce the impact of strategic surprise caused by evolution of criminal landscape.

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