

## ORGANISED CRIME, DRUG TRAFFICKING AND THE DIGITAL WORLD: A CONCISE PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*Exploring the interaction between organised crime and cyberspace, particularly the use of the dark net for drug trafficking, provides essential insights into the evolution and challenges of crime in the digital age. This article details how criminal organisations exploit the anonymity and advanced technological resources of the dark net to operate global drug trafficking networks.*

*The complex methods of shipping and encrypted communication are also examined, illustrating the difficulties faced by law enforcement agencies in tracking and combating this type of crime.*

*This article highlights the importance of studying the interaction between cyberspace and organised crime, showing how they influence the global dynamics of drug trafficking.*

**KEYWORDS** *Organised crime, drug trafficking, cyberspace, dark net, globalisation*

**J.E.L Classification:** K1, K14, K15, K19

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Globalisation, an economic, social, political, and cultural process of interconnecting all these fields internationally, has gained significant momentum in recent decades. Alongside its positive effects on socio-economic and political realities, it has also brought with it a dark, negative side: the proliferation of cross-border crime and the interconnection of organised crime groups. In the past, these groups were isolated and exerted influence over a limited geographical area. The emergence and development of the Internet, which has been the primary fuel for globalisation, has led to the virtual interconnection of various organised crime networks from different regions of the world. These networks, geographically isolated in terms of their sphere of influence, are now just a click away in cyberspace. Thus, the supply of illegal products, goods, and services has become directly connected to demand, in a virtual space that, in addition to the obvious benefits of interconnection and the elimination of physical distances, also ensures security, discretion, and confidentiality, both regarding the identities of the parties involved and the details of the illicit operations (Amza T.,1998). In this context, international drug trafficking has seen exponential growth, becoming today one of the most prolific criminal phenomena worldwide. For example, the 2023 Global Cocaine Report shows that in 2020, around 2,000 tonnes of cocaine were produced globally, with a market value of approximately 200 billion USD, against the backdrop of growing demand for this type of drug on the illegal drug market. Communication, transport, and trade networks, developed in the context of globalisation, are being fully exploited by organised crime groups to transfer drugs from production

areas to illicit markets and, ultimately, to consumers. The same vast global logistical platform is also extensively used for money laundering derived from criminal activity, which, when reintegrated into the economy, endangers the economic and social stability of states through the corruption and high levels of criminality it generates.

From the above, three main terms stand out, which are the focus of this article: organised crime, drug trafficking, and the virtual world, cyberspace. In the following chapters, we will attempt to briefly analyse each term individually, followed by an examination of how they intertwine, interconnect, adapt, and reconfigure, thus giving rise to a global criminal enterprise. In the past, this was typically represented as an "octopus," but now it also includes a digital component (Amza T., 2007).

## **2. ORGANISED CRIME**

From the outset, the attempt to define organised crime is problematic, with a wide range of definitions, some of which are even contradictory. The German criminologist Klaus von Lampe published on his website "Klaus von Lampe (organized-crime.de)" around 200 definitions taken from academic sources, official documents, and various dictionaries. At present, we cannot assert that there is a universally accepted definition of the term "organised crime." The issue arises from the fact that the term did not emerge and establish itself through scientific research in the field of social sciences, but rather through extensive use in the media, literature, politics, and legal language.

The term "organised crime" was first used by members of the "Chicago Crime Commission," an institution created in 1919 in the USA, in Chicago, to combat crime in the city. The term was used to refer to professional criminals who engaged in committing crimes as a business model. Later, the concept was adopted and used to highlight gangsters, bandits, and swindlers, who gathered in organised gangs or groups, under the leadership of certain leaders, thus implying a hierarchical structure within these criminal groups.

The main problem in the multiple attempts to define organised crime does not stem from the term "crime," but from the term "organised," a qualifier that causes significant confusion, being used to refer both to the organisation of complex criminal activities and to the organisational structure of the criminal groups engaged in such activities. Thus, within the concept of organised crime, two components emerge: the criminal activity, which is organised, and the organised criminal group that commits such crimes.

Some definitions focus on the criminal activities, mentioning tangentially that these activities must be committed by a group of people, without emphasising the characteristics of the group. According to the Canadian sociologist Margaret E. Beare, "organised crime is a process or method of committing crimes, not a distinct type of crime in itself. Organised crime is an ongoing activity, which involves continuous criminal complicity, with a structure larger than a single member, with the potential for corruption and/or violence to ease the consequences of criminal prosecution." In the Netherlands, the Van Traa Parliamentary Commission report from 1996 states that: "organised crime is discussed when groups of people primarily focused on illegal gains systematically commit crimes that have serious consequences for society and are capable of successfully protecting their interests, especially by being prepared to use violence or corruption to control or eliminate individuals."

In the UK, the National Crime Agency, the main public institution for combating organised crime, states that "organised crime can be defined as serious crime that is planned, coordinated, and conducted by people working together on a continuing basis. Their motivation is often, but not always, financial gain.

The above definitions, like many others, focus primarily on describing organised crime from the perspective of the crimes committed, without emphasising the characteristics of the organised criminal group that commits them.

On the other hand, several definitions of the concept of organised crime focus on the structure and characteristics of the organised criminal group. In the USA, the main public institution for combating organised crime, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), defines the concept as “a group of individuals with an identified hierarchy or similar structure, engaged in significant criminal activities. These organisations often engage in multiple criminal activities and benefit from extensive support networks.” In the same vein, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) states that “organised crime refers to those associations of individuals or groups that are self-perpetuating, structured, and disciplined, associated for the purpose of obtaining financial or commercial gains, entirely or partially through illegal means, while at the same time protecting their activities through a pattern of bribery and corruption.”

A comprehensive definition should include references both to the organisation of criminal activities and to the organisational structure of the criminal groups that carry out such activities. One of the most widely accepted and used definitions is provided by the 2000 UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime in Palermo. In Article 2, the focus is mainly on the organised criminal group, rather than on organised criminal activity: “Organised criminal group means a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes established in accordance with this Convention, to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.” This is one of the most widely accepted definitions, and its influence can be seen in the text of Article 367, paragraph 6 of the Romanian Penal Code: “An organised criminal group means a structured group, consisting of three or more persons, constituted for a certain period of time and acting in a coordinated manner, with the aim of committing one or more crimes.”

(Finckenauer) The main characteristics of the concept of organised crime, analysed from the perspective of multiple definitions, are: it presents a hierarchical structure, access to the group is restricted and exclusive, criminal activities are continuous, characterised by the use or threat of violence, it manifests as illegal entrepreneurship, often penetrates legal business environments, lacks an ideology (this being the main difference between organised crime and terrorism), and uses corruption as a subtle means of penetrating social, political, and administrative environments. These characteristics combine elements specific to the organisation of criminal activities with those specific to the organisation of group members.

German criminologist Klaus von Lampe proposes analysing organised crime through three fundamental aspects, which in his view are: criminal activities, the structure of organised criminal groups, and illicit governance. Criminal activities include market-based crimes where illegal goods or services are traded, property-related crimes such as thefts and robberies, and regulatory and governance crimes that involve imposing rules of behaviour and resolving conflicts in an illegal context. The structure of organised criminal groups involves describing how criminals associate and cooperate, especially in the uncertain conditions characteristic of illegal markets. Illicit governance manifests as self-regulation in an illegal context, where organised criminal groups establish and enforce rules and resolve disputes regarding payments and profits. Furthermore, the author notes that for these groups to be effective, they must have at least a rudimentary hierarchy, a system for issuing orders, and continuity over time.

Thus, we can divide the concept of organised crime into two constituent elements: organised crime, meaning serious crimes of great complexity, requiring a certain rigour and organisation in planning and execution, such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, etc.; and the organised criminal group, meaning a group constituted on certain principles of functioning and interaction, with the aim of committing the types of crimes previously described.

As the multitude of definitions suggests, the organised criminal group exhibits certain fundamental characteristics, which are found in most such groups, regardless of the geographical area in which they operate, the way they are organised, or the types of crimes they commit.

- (a) From a numerical perspective, organised criminal groups consist of three or more people, as we have seen above from the definitions provided by the 2000 UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime in Palermo, in Article 2, and Article 367, paragraph 6 of the Romanian Penal Code. These groups exhibit a hierarchical command structure organised vertically, typical of organised crime groups in Sicily, or a horizontally organised command structure, in a network-like format, with power distributed between clans ('Ndrangheta). Both organisational structures share the common feature of having a supreme leader, with subordinates having clearly defined roles, a chain of command, and a code of conduct unique to each group.
- (b) They are constituted for the purpose of committing serious crimes, through which they seek to obtain financial, material, or other types of benefits within the territory they control. Criminal proceeds are generally invested to maintain power within the controlled territory and to expand it, with the ultimate result being even greater power, which could, in fact, be defined as the true goal of the organised criminal group. One of these serious crimes, which will be analysed in detail in the next chapter, is drug trafficking.
- (c) These groups demonstrate continuity over time, both in terms of the organisation of the group and in terms of committing serious crimes. This characteristic ensures that organised crime groups can accumulate material, financial, and logistical resources, which are consolidated over time and reintegrated into the legal circuit through complex money laundering operations, thereby reintegrating the resources obtained in this way into the regular economic flow of society. Thus, over time, there is an accumulation of financial power, which later translates into political, social, and economic influence. The organised crime group then exerts a strong influence on society, through acts of corruption and, where this fails, through strategic violence. Furthermore, by repeatedly committing a specific type of crime, the organised group becomes highly specialised in committing that type of crime (complex modus operandi, distribution networks for illegal products and services, access to markets). Therefore, we will encounter groups specialised in committing various types of crimes: drug trafficking, arms trafficking, smuggling, human trafficking, extortion, loan sharking, money laundering, etc.
- (d) The group achieves its objectives through corruption and/or strategic violence. Corruption, especially in recent times, represents one of the main ways in which organised crime groups exert their influence on society, forming so-called "monstrous strategic alliances" with authorities and state representatives at the political, judicial, and police levels, benefiting both parties. As mentioned earlier, where corruption does not succeed, violence is used to intimidate, blackmail, or even eliminate adversaries. Thus, violence is not used randomly or impulsively, but rather after a strategic calculation that benefits the entire group and maintains a certain level of reputation and the ability to exercise violence against any external element that might harm the group.
- (e) Generally, members of organised criminal groups take an oath of loyalty, both to the group's members and its leadership, as well as to a set of rules and principles that regulate the organisation and functioning of the group, conduct, and sanctions applicable to any breach. Thus, loyalty to the group represents one of the main values embraced by each member, and the internal regulations, which directly conflict with the legislative system adopted by society, form the framework of action and movement for each member.
- (f) The organised criminal group exerts its influence and power over a certain territory. Moreover, influence over a territory and its expansion represent the dynamic element of the group's criminal activities. Control over a territory generates power, which in turn generates financial resources, money, which translates into even more power, creating a vicious circle. This dynamic ultimately leads to the group's ultimate goal: even more power.
- (g) Organised crime groups are non-ideological, which essentially differentiates them from terrorist groups that unite under various social, political, or religious ideologies. There are certain structural similarities, but the lack of ideology is the main difference. The objectives of organised crime groups, as previously mentioned, are power and money.

### 3. DRUG TRAFFICKING

Drug trafficking represents one of the most severe global challenges of the 21st century, affecting public health, economic stability, and national security. In the following lines, we will briefly explore the dimensions of drug trafficking, the actors involved, its impact on society, and the strategic measures that need to be adopted to combat this phenomenon. Drug trafficking is a complex global business, involving the production, distribution, and sale of illegal substances. The main drugs trafficked include cocaine, heroin, amphetamines, methamphetamines, cannabis, and more recently, new psychoactive substances (NPS)—referred to in Romania as ethnobotanicals, legal highs, etc.—and fentanyl and its derivatives (Koob, George F, and Nora D Volkow.2016).

#### **Routes and Origin of Drugs**

The trafficking routes vary depending on the origin of the drugs. Cocaine is predominantly produced in Latin America, heroin in Southwest and Southeast Asia, cannabis mainly in Morocco, the Netherlands, Spain, and Albania, while amphetamines, methamphetamines, and NPS are primarily produced in the Netherlands, Poland, and China. Fentanyl is mainly produced in China.

#### **Actors Involved in Drug Trafficking**

The primary actors involved in drug trafficking are organised crime groups specializing in the drug trade, controlling large-scale drug production and distribution. These groups use violence and corruption strategically to maintain control and power over territories (e.g., South American cartels). Some of these groups are involved in drug production, controlling, through violence or financial leverage, poor farmers in economically and socially underdeveloped regions who are often forced into growing drug plants like coca, opium, and cannabis due to a lack of alternative economic opportunities.

In the case of synthetic drugs, some groups organise fully equipped illegal chemical laboratories, often well-hidden or mobile (in trucks, yachts, RVs), benefiting from collaboration with other criminal groups specializing in trafficking drug precursors and pre-precursors.

#### **The Importance of Drug Transportation**

Another critical segment in the drug distribution chain is wholesale transportation, both nationally and internationally. This segment bears the highest risk of detection of large quantities of drugs, potentially leading to massive financial and human resource losses for organised crime groups. To avoid such situations, organised groups create sophisticated operating methods involving a combination of corruption, violence, and a wide range of criminal activities (such as cybercrime, forgery, blackmail) to support their illicit operations.

In drug traffickers' economic calculations, the priority is not the cost-to-distance efficiency ratio but the cost-to-safety ratio of the transport. In documenting the criminal activities of organised groups specializing in drug trafficking, it was found that they used atypical routes and methods, passing through territories where transport safety was ensured through corruption or cooperation with other organised crime groups or even terrorist organisations (Koob, George F, and Nora D Volkow.,2016).

#### **The negative effects of drug trafficking on society:**

1. **Public Health:** Drug use causes addiction, chronic diseases, overdoses, and deaths, overburdening healthcare systems. Additionally, conditions associated with drug use, such as HIV and hepatitis, spread quickly through shared needles.
2. **Economy:** Economies are affected by the loss of productivity, increased spending on healthcare and security, and the corruption associated with drug trafficking.
3. **National Security:** Drug trafficking is often accompanied by violence and organized crime, destabilizing communities and entire nations.
4. **Society:** Drug trafficking contributes to the degradation of social values, increased crime rates, and the fragmentation of communities.

To effectively combat drug trafficking, an integrated and multidimensional approach is needed through:

1. **Law Enforcement Strategies:** International collaboration between law enforcement agencies is essential to dismantle trafficking networks. These strategies include operations to intercept, track, and seize drugs and the vast sums of money generated from this illicit activity, as well as actions against the leaders of criminal organizations. Special attention should be given to money laundering activities, where funds from drug trafficking are reintroduced into the legal economy through complex financial schemes. If drug trafficking generates hundreds of billions of dollars annually, a legitimate question arises: where is this money, and how does it enter the legal economy, avoiding authorities' scrutiny? It is unlikely that it is buried underground, as in the case of the notorious Pablo Escobar. The fight against drug trafficking is fierce, but the battle to confiscate the material, financial, and logistical resources of organized crime groups can be significantly improved. This is the vulnerable spot of organized crime groups, which can lead to their effective dismantling. Without these resources, it is unlikely that a criminal group hit by law enforcement action will regenerate quickly and regain its former power.
2. **Prevention and Education:** Education and prevention programs are crucial for reducing the demand for drugs. These should target youth, especially through awareness campaigns on the risks associated with drug use.
3. **Treatment of Addiction:** Healthcare systems must provide adequate treatment and rehabilitation services for drug addicts. This includes access to medication-assisted therapies, psychological counseling, and social support.
4. **Economic Development:** Offering economic alternatives for drug growers and developing impoverished communities can reduce their dependency on drug trafficking. Investments in sustainable agriculture, infrastructure, and education are essential.
5. **Political and Legal Reforms:** Reforms that strengthen the rule of law, reduce corruption, and improve the efficiency of the justice system are necessary to support efforts to combat drug trafficking.

Drug trafficking remains a major global challenge that requires a complex and coordinated response. Successful approaches involve a combination of law enforcement, prevention, treatment, economic development, and political reforms. Only through international collaboration and a comprehensive strategy can we reduce the devastating effects of this phenomenon on society. This paper has emphasized the importance of a holistic response to address all aspects of drug trafficking and to protect the health, security, and prosperity of communities worldwide.

#### 4. CYBERSPACE

Cyberspace is a vast and complex realm that includes multiple layers, each with its own characteristics and accessibility. In this paper, we will explore the three main layers of cyberspace: the surface web, the deep web, and the dark net, to better understand the structure and dynamics of this digital environment.

The **surface web** represents the part of the internet accessible through standard search engines like Google, Bing, or Yahoo. It includes websites that are indexed and can be accessed directly via links or searches. The surface web is frequently used for daily activities such as reading news, watching videos, and using social networks. It is the most visible and accessible layer of the internet but represents only a small fraction of the entire cyberspace.

The **deep web** contains web pages that are not indexed by standard search engines. This includes resources such as databases, digital archives, government reports, medical records, and other types of information protected by authentication systems or behind paywalls (a method used by some websites, particularly news sites and digital publications, to restrict access to their content, allowing

only paying users to access complete articles, videos, or other materials). The deep web is much larger than the surface web and is essential for the protection of sensitive data and information.

The **dark net** represents a small section of the deep web, accessible only through special software such as TOR (The Onion Router) or I2P (Invisible Internet Project), which anonymize users' identities. The dark net is often associated with illegal activities, such as drug trafficking, arms dealing, human trafficking, child pornography, and other illegal goods, but it is also a space for terrorists, activists, and others who need anonymity to avoid detection, persecution, or censorship.

Understanding the structure of cyberspace and its different layers is essential for navigating this digital environment effectively and safely. Each layer of the internet has its role and importance, from the accessibility and transparency of the surface web to the privacy and anonymity offered by the deep web and dark net.

Cyberspace, by its omnipresent nature, has facilitated globalization on an unprecedented scale. The internet has allowed companies to operate and collaborate globally, eliminating geographical and temporal barriers. E-commerce platforms like Amazon and Alibaba are clear examples of how cyberspace has transformed global commerce, allowing sellers and buyers from different corners of the world to interact almost instantly. Cyberspace has accelerated the exchange of information, ideas, and cultural influences, central features of globalization. Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram enable individuals to instantly share aspects of their daily lives, politics, and cultural events, contributing to greater global awareness and the formation of a globally interconnected culture. Globalization and cyberspace have transformed education, making it more accessible to people around the world. Online learning platforms offer courses from top universities without the physical necessity of being present on campus. This phenomenon not only democratizes education but also fosters a more educated and diverse global workforce.

Globalization facilitated by cyberspace also brings significant challenges. Issues such as cybersecurity, control and censorship of information, and impacts on the labor market and economic disparities are increasingly prominent. Moreover, while some regions benefit from access to information and technology, other areas remain isolated, exacerbating global inequalities.

Globalization and the expansion of cyberspace have also created significant opportunities for cybercriminals. Cybercrime transcends national borders, making monitoring and legal jurisdiction challenging. For example, ransomware attacks can be launched from anywhere in the world, locking access to critical systems and demanding substantial ransoms for their release. Globalization has also facilitated illegal trade through the dark net, where goods range from drugs and weapons to stolen personal data. Differences in cybersecurity regulations and law enforcement between countries provide cybercriminals with the opportunity to operate in regions with less stringent laws, allowing them to evade prosecution and continue illegal activities with relatively low risk. A notable example is the use of offshore jurisdictions for laundering money obtained through cyber fraud.

To combat global cybercrime, closer international cooperation is essential in terms of information sharing and law enforcement coordination. Initiatives such as the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime are crucial, providing a framework for international cooperation. Cybercrime affects not only individuals but also businesses and governments, causing significant economic losses and undermining trust in digital systems. The effects can spread beyond immediate victims, impacting financial stability and national security.

As technology continues to advance, it is crucial for legislation and international collaborations to evolve accordingly to protect society against emerging threats. The relationship between cyberspace and globalization is profound and complex. As these two forces continue to evolve, they will further reshape the socio-economic and cultural structure of societies globally. It is essential to recognize and address both the opportunities and challenges presented by this interaction to ensure a fair and secure future for all global citizens.

## **5. INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN ORGANIZED CRIME, DRUG TRAFFICKING, AND CYBERSPACE**

Organized crime has adopted cyberspace as an effective tool for expanding its activities, including drug trafficking. Cyberspace offers anonymity and a vast network of rapid communications, essential for global coordination and distribution. For example, the dark net, accessible through special networks that ensure anonymity, has become a predominant place for the sale and distribution of illegal drugs. Platforms on the dark net allow users to purchase drugs using virtual currencies like Bitcoin, complicating the tracking of transactions by legal authorities. Markets on the dark net, such as the former Silk Road, AlphaBay, and Hansa, have provided interfaces similar to those of major online retailers, including seller rating systems and product reviews. These platforms facilitate transactions between anonymous sellers and buyers worldwide, making it extremely difficult for authorities to track illegal activities.

Organized crime leverages anonymity technologies to mask its activities. The use of cryptocurrencies in transactions makes it challenging to trace financial flows. These virtual currencies offer a high degree of anonymity and are often preferred for illegal transactions. Regulating these currencies is difficult since they are not part of the traditional banking system and do not adhere to standard monitoring and reporting rules. They use advanced encryption technologies to conceal the identities of those involved in transactions.

Delivery and concealment methods are innovative and varied, from using anonymous mailboxes to "dead drops," where drugs are hidden in secure locations to be later picked up by buyers. Organized crime often employs complex logistics and concealment methods to cross international borders, such as incorporating drugs into ordinary objects to avoid detection by traditional border security measures.

Communication between participants in the dark net market is encrypted, using secure emails, encrypted instant messaging, and other forms of digital communication to prevent interception. These measures are crucial for protecting identities and maintaining operational secrecy.

Law enforcement faces significant challenges in combating drug trafficking facilitated by cyberspace. Different jurisdictions and the lack of clear international agreements complicate efforts to combat this type of crime. Additionally, the limited ability to intercept encrypted communications and track anonymous transactions delays authorities' responses. This requires closer cooperation between national and international agencies and the development of advanced tracking and analysis technologies. Authorities' ability to track and stop drug trafficking on the dark net is severely limited by the anonymity provided by cyberspace technologies. Despite notable successes, such as the takedown of the Silk Road and AlphaBay markets, the reactive nature of the law makes it difficult to anticipate and swiftly neutralize new markets that are constantly emerging.

The social impact of online drug trafficking is profound and multidimensional. Beyond the public health issues associated with easy access to drugs, there are also secondary effects related to the criminality associated with drug trafficking, such as violence, corruption, and community destabilization. Cyberspace not only facilitates drug distribution but also disseminates information about drug use and production, creating new challenges for health education and prevention.

The interconnection between organized crime, cyberspace, and drug trafficking highlights the urgent need for adaptive cybersecurity strategies and laws that can effectively respond to these modern threats. A proactive and innovative approach is crucial to combat these illegal networks and protect society from their harmful effects.



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