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Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Shadow orders: clandestine non-state power in the international system

Bastrup-Birk, J.T.N.

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### **Part III: Applying the framework – case study analysis**



## CHAPTER 6 – The ‘Ndrangheta

The ‘Ndrangheta is one of the least studied branches of the Italian Mafia, despite arguably having developed considerable power within the clandestine international criminal system. This underpins its value as a case study with respect to examining the thesis’ central research question, not least given its role in challenging the authority of the Italian state all the while demonstrating the ability to expand into new territories. The organisation also displays many of the characteristics of a political actor (hypothesis 1); demonstrates high levels of organisational agility (hypothesis 2); and draws on a reasonably wide spectrum of levers of influence in pursuit of its interests (hypothesis 3). In turn, this chapter, the first of three granular case studies, builds on the analytical framework described in Chapters 3-5 as the basis for investigation and is therefore organised around its levels and accompanying categories of analysis. The production of this case study adhered to the process described in the methodology (see Chapter 1), including with respect to collecting, cataloguing, grouping and synthesising relevant data drawn from a wide range of sources. Primary research drew on judicial sources, including court files and indictments; law enforcement wiretap logs and surveillance footage; financial and intelligence reporting, including from the Italian Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA), Europol, Eurojust, German Federal Police and Australian Federal Police; Italian chamber of commerce data; and parliamentary enquiry materials. This was bolstered by analysis of investigative journalism sources, media articles and academic publications in order to produce a holistic picture of the object of study. The analysis excluded sources that did not contain any form of empirical evidence supporting their claims or assessments (a number of media articles fell short in this respect). Through the above approach, the chapter sheds light on the Mafia organisation’s sprawling interests, wide-ranging relationships and highly structured financial investments, offering insights into the inner workings of a contemporary cross-border clandestine organisation. Furthermore, and returning to some of the notions introduced in Chapter 2, it offers a useful basis for exploring the concept of an alternative clandestine international ‘order’ within which protagonists are able to wield power at scale as well as reshape existing social and political systems from within.

### 6.1 Overview: historical evolution of the ‘Ndrangheta

The roots of the ‘Ndrangheta branch of the Italian Mafia run deep in Calabrian society. Its origins are the subject of some debate within the literature, but can be traced at least to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, where it was known under different names, including, *inter alia*, the *Piccotteria* (often used before the 1950s) and *Onorata Società*.<sup>505</sup> The organisation’s early activities are largely undocumented but it is likely that these included a combination of local self-protection, social services provision and extortion, resembling those of the Cosa Nostra (Sicilian Mafia), which received greater attention in the period following Italian Unification.<sup>506</sup> Unsurprisingly – and in a similar vein to other Mafia branches – the ‘Ndrangheta’s emergence and rise appears closely correlated with a lack of state presence, economic marginalisation and political exclusion. Corrado Alvaro, the mid-10<sup>th</sup> Century Calabrian novelist, screen writer and playwright highlighted its ascent as a product of a failure in Italian governance and statecraft in the region, including the state’s inability to maintain justice and order.<sup>507</sup> Letizia Paoli, meanwhile, argues that mafia associations developed post Italian state formation because “national systems of power expanded without fully subordinating local systems of

<sup>505</sup> See for example F. Truzzoli, *The ‘Ndrangheta: The current state of historical research*, Modern Italy, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 363-383.

<sup>506</sup> See also F. Benigno, *Rethinking the Origins of the Sicilian ‘Mafia’: A New Interpretation*, Crime, Histoire & Sociétés / Crime, History & Societies, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2018, pp. 107–30.

<sup>507</sup> A. Phillips, *Corrado Alvaro and the Calabrian mafia: a critical case study of the use of literary and journalistic texts in research on Italian organized crime*, in M. Neumann and C. Elsenbroich, Trends in Organized Crime, Vol. 20, Issues 1-2, June 2017, pp. 179- 195.

power” to the extent that the “central state had to rely on local landlords and mafia coalitions if it wanted to govern some areas at all.”<sup>508</sup> The organisation remained hidden throughout the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in no small part because of Benito Mussolini’s aversion to the mafia, which he saw as a direct threat to his fascist regime and the authority of the state, particularly in Sicily.<sup>509</sup> In what would become an established theme, the regime’s focus on Sicily benefitted the ‘Ndrangheta, who was less clearly in the crosshairs of state anti-mafia efforts. However, like other mafias, it cultivated an implicit rejection of the (formal) state, regardless of the regime of the day – a position that would culminate in internal discussions on fomenting a *coup d’état* in 1969.<sup>510</sup>

Slightly better documented is the rapid rise of the ‘Ndrangheta (as it was now increasingly referred to) from the 1950s onwards, when it expanded its activities and geographical reach aided by a wave of economic migration from Calabria to northern Italy and beyond.<sup>511</sup> Its involvement in more modern forms of transnational criminal activities began with the import of contraband tobacco and cigarettes, which were subsequently sold on the lucrative Italian market at prices that undercut those imposed by the state.<sup>512</sup> The Calabrian Mafia continued its growth over the subsequent three decades, increasingly tightening its hold over the local economic and political fabric in its ‘home’ territory all the while expanding its interests further afield, both in northern Italy and internationally. Official inquiry documents demonstrate how the leadership’s decision to establish links with Freemasonry in the mid-1970s offered a mechanism through which to forge connections with political and professional circles. Indeed, Masonic lodges were well represented by the sectors and professions that the Mafia sought to access: traders, lawyers, notaries, entrepreneurs, political representatives and magistrates.<sup>513</sup> Paradoxically, Italian policy initiatives aimed at encouraging economic stimulus in the southern Mezzogiorno region (of which Calabria is part), which started in the 1980s, created significant opportunities for the ‘Ndrangheta to leverage its new contacts and influence for the purposes of infiltrating public procurement processes and manoeuvring into the construction and infrastructure development business.<sup>514</sup> At play here was a hybrid, diversified dynamic in which the Mafia both operated as a major player within the formal economy while generating revenue from ‘conventional’ organised crime activity.

This dual, blended approach would become the blueprint for the Mafia’s operating model in the early 1990s and 2000s. With the Italian government distracted by a bloody war against the Cosa Nostra, the ‘Ndrangheta began expanding its trafficking activities into the drugs trade, particularly the cocaine distribution business, and reinvesting profits within (primarily) the construction and hospitality sectors. The 1990s witnessed a deepening of the organisation’s interests and holdings in northern Italy, particularly Milan and Lombardy – significant financial and industrial centres that further benefited from their geographical proximity to Swiss and Austrian money laundering centres.<sup>515</sup> Moreover, the tectonic shifts and strategic opportunities

<sup>508</sup> L. Paoli, *Crime, Italian Style*, Daedalus, Vol. 130, No. 3, Italy: Resilient and Vulnerable, Volume II: Politics and Society (Summer, 2001), p. 173

<sup>509</sup> A. Gigantino, *Il Duce and the Mafia: Mussolini’s Hatred for the Mafia and the American Alliance with Organized Crime*, The Histories, Vol. 4, Issue 1, Article 3, 2019, p. 2.

<sup>510</sup> E. Ciconte, *Origins and Development of the ‘Ndrangheta* in N. Serenate (ed.), *The ‘Ndrangheta and Sacra Corona Unita: The History, Organization and Operations of Two Unknown Mafia Groups*, Studies of Organized Crime, Vol. 12, 2014, p. 41.

<sup>511</sup> See for example P. Pinotti, *The Economic Costs of Organised Crime: Evidence from Southern Italy*, The Economic Journal, Vol. 125, No. 586, 2015, pp. 203–32.

<sup>512</sup> E. Ciconte, p. 38.

<sup>513</sup> *Commissione Parlamentare Di Inchiesta Sul Fenomeno Della Criminalita Organizzata Mafiosa O Similare*, Camera Dei Deputati, Doc. XXIII No. 5 October 2006, p. 32.

<sup>514</sup> E. Ciconte, p.42. For a detailed analysis of the wider issues, including clientelism, in the region see C. Trigilia, *Why the Italian Mezzogiorno did not Achieve a Sustainable Growth*, Social Capital and Political Constraints, Cambio, Anno 2, No. 10, January 2016, pp.137-148.

<sup>515</sup> E. Ciconte, pp. 42-43.

that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall did not go unnoticed to the organisation, who swooped-in to secure investments during the wave of privatisation that accompanied the reunification of Germany.<sup>516</sup> As well as diversification, such economic pursuits amounted to an industrial-scale money laundering operation – a bridge between criminal income and long-term business acquisitions. Since the early 2000s, the 'Ndrangheta has grown into one of the most formidable criminal organisations in the world, controlling a large segment of cocaine wholesale distribution in Europe. This includes a deep-rooted presence across Italy as well as external 'colonies' in Western Europe (particularly in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and the Iberian Peninsula), Australia, Canada and Latin America.

## 6.2 Policy choices and strategic direction

### Strategic aims and interests

Whilst the aims and interests of the 'Ndrangheta have evolved significantly since the organisation's relatively humble beginnings, its identity and, to a significant extent, powerbase remain rooted in rural Calabria. Its overarching *raison d'être* flows from the organisation's historical focus on establishing alternative governance systems within a region that has suffered from chronic underinvestment by the state. Although it has become deeply involved in criminal activities, its aims are therefore more nuanced than the simple accumulation of wealth. Instead, 'Ndrangheta criminal activities arguably constitute the mechanism through which to accumulate hegemonic power, *de facto* territorial control and (quasi) sovereign status – a phenomenon described by Umberto Santino as 'territorial domination'.<sup>517</sup> In this respect, such illicit activities perhaps simply constitute a Clausewitzian-style continuation of policy by other means, including a vehicle for securing as well as expanding its immediate sphere of political and social influence. This focus *inter alia* explains the attention devoted to establishing the organisation's 'domestic' fiefdom on its original territory.<sup>518</sup>

Power, governance and territorial control are therefore not so much pursued by establishing formal control over the institutions of the state (as might be the aim of insurgencies and other subversive groups) but rather, by exercising influence over key sectors of society and exhibiting a shadow form of governance.<sup>519</sup> An additional feature of this sort of neo-feudal, dominion-based calculus is the aim of positioning the organisation's bosses as the 'true' influencers, authorities, benefactors and decision-makers within centres of power. Perhaps most critically, the establishment of a 'home' powerbase offers the organisation with a platform through which to organise, orchestrate and coordinate the projection of power at scale further afield using proven formulas and methods. Thus, a growing body of evidence describes the 'colonial' nature of the organisation's evolution and expeditionary ventures, using its clan structure as the main vehicle for securing strategic entry points into new economic and political markets.<sup>520</sup> The organisation's expansionist policy is intertwined with its primary interests, namely the ability secure power, territory and influence as well as gradually expand its sphere of influence through new political and trade relations and control over economic supply chains. Its strategic approach to pursuing these interests has gravitated heavily around a logic of infiltration and co-option, weaving itself into the political, social and economic fabric of territories and securing the mantle of (actual) custodians of power (a theme that will be explored in more detail subsequently).

<sup>516</sup> See for example A. Montanari and S. Pignedoli, *Così La Mafia Ha Conquistato La Germania (Grazie Anche Alla Caduta Del Muro Di Berlino)*, L'Espresso Repubblica, 21 March 2019.

<sup>517</sup> U. Santino, *Studying Mafias in Sicily*, Sociologica, Fascicolo 2, Maggio-Agosto 2011, p. 6

<sup>518</sup> L. Paoli, p. 163

<sup>519</sup> R. Siebert, *Mafia and Daily Life: The Evolution of Gender and Generational Relationships*, in N. Serenata (ed.), p. 15.

<sup>520</sup> See for example *Italian Organised Crime Threat Assessment*, EUROPOL, June 2013, p. 11.

### Geographical spheres of influence and territorial control

The geographical centres within which 'Ndrangheta has secured influence and/or control can be placed in four broad categories. The first of these consists of its primary stronghold within Reggio Calabria in the Mezzogiorno, which spreads out from the historical town of San Luca, considered by many observers and the Italian intelligence services to be the organisation's capital, "cradle [...] and epicentre."<sup>521</sup> Similar local strongholds include the village of Polsi, reputed for hosting strategic leadership meetings and situated twenty kilometres west of San Luca, as well as Lamezia Terme, Plati, Taurianova and Rosarno and Ionian coastal towns such as Siderno (home to the so-called Siderno Group within the organisation), amongst other municipalities.<sup>522</sup> Illustratively, an Italian anti-Mafia law allowing the central government to 'strike off' municipalities with a strong mafia presence removed over thirty such dissolved municipal councils in Calabria alone, providing a sense of the scale of social embeddedness within the region.<sup>523</sup> Still in the region, and situated on Calabria's opposing maritime flank to Siderno, the strategic port of Gioia Tauro constitutes an important node for the organisation given its role as a trading and commodity import hub and, therefore, critical source of revenue – a pattern which it emulated in other trade centres further afield.

Coming closely behind Calabria are the organisation's footholds in northern Italy, within which it has invested and expanded heavily over the decades. Its presence in the northern territories reflects a combination of historical and strategic factors. Firstly, these were traditionally favoured by mafia bosses who had been banished from southern territories at a time of significant migration from southern Italy.<sup>524</sup> Secondly, their stronger economy and industry base represented a logical environment for the acquisition of assets and reinvestment of proceeds within the formal economy. Thirdly, their proximity to northern European countries, provided a logical bridge into markets situated within the 'near abroad.' Thus, the organisation's economic expansion began in Milan during the 1960s in the form of interest in the construction sector and public contracting and continued to the extent that it secured a near monopoly on the regions of Lombardy, Piedmont, Valle d'Aosta (on the French and Swiss borders) as well as Lazio.<sup>525</sup> Rome, meanwhile, constitutes another key node within the organisation's strategic plans, resulting in heavy investment within the capital city's sprawling hospitality and restauration sectors.

The third geographical category of territories within which the 'Ndrangheta projects influence consists of the 'near abroad,' or the many European territories in which the organisation has established a deep presence through a combination of partnerships, criminal activities and economic investment. Its footprint can be traced clearly across Western Europe, including to the Netherlands, where the organisation has secured a presence in strategic nodes such as the port city of Rotterdam as well as in Amsterdam. Belgium, a country deeply infiltrated by 'Ndrangheta clans, has witnessed a growing presence in the regions surrounding Mons,

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<sup>521</sup> J. Hopper, *Silence on the Street of Calabria's Mafia Capital as Deadly Feud Crosses Borders*, The Guardian, 17 August 2007. See also J. Dickie, *Mafia and Prostitution in Calabria, c.1880—c.1940, Past & Present*, no. 232, August 2016, pp. 203–36.

<sup>522</sup> C. Anesi and L. Bagnoli, *Bitter Beauty: A Pilgrimage to the Birthplace of the 'Ndrangheta, Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)*, 21 September 2018. Distances calculated via Google Maps.

<sup>523</sup> N.D. Coniglio et al, *Organized Crime, Migration and Human Capital Formation: Evidence from the South of Italy*, Southern Europe Research in Economic Studies, Working Paper No. 0028, January 2010, p. 10.

It is possible, in turn, that the dissolution of these councils has played into the 'Ndrangheta's narrative and, more specifically, the general neglect and absence of (formal) state governance across the region, although such a hypothesis would require further corroboration.

<sup>524</sup> E.G. Parini, 'Ndrangheta. Multilevel Criminal System of Power and Economic Accumulation, in N. Serenate (ed.), p. 58.

<sup>525</sup> E. Ciconte, p. 35

Charleroi and Liège.<sup>526</sup> Unsurprisingly, the organisation has sprung up across the Iberian Peninsula, with Spain constituting an important logistics and transshipment hub for the importation of narcotics as well as a popular destination alongside Portugal for senior members on the run.<sup>527</sup> The organisation's activities are also visible in the United Kingdom, whose company formation rules offer a relatively simple means of establishing front corporations, as well as in Switzerland, Malta and France (most visibly within the regions of Alpes, Provence and Côte d'Azur and the cities of Grenoble and Paris).<sup>528</sup>

The case of Germany, meanwhile, provides a particular vivid illustration of its reach and 'out of area' influence, including via bastions of economic control. The German Federal Police (Bundeskriminalamt or BKA), for example, highlights its position as the "strongest of the Italian Mafia Groups in Germany" with a footprint that spans across the German states of Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, North Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse as well as more locally within the cities of Leipzig, Erfurt, Berlin, Bremen, Frankfurt, Stuttgart and Hamburg.<sup>529</sup> As we have seen, and in a pattern that shares some characteristics with the rise of modern Russian kleptocrats and organised crime, the mafia branch adroitly exploited Germany's transition to a market economy in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union all the while cementing its influence over industrial and transport hubs.<sup>530</sup> In a logical continuation of this theme the organisation's territory in eastern Germany has provided it with a springboard from which to expand into Eastern European countries, including Slovenia and Romania.<sup>531</sup>

Fourthly, and as already alluded to, the 'Ndrangheta has established a sizeable 'forward' presence extending across the Atlantic and beyond. Unsurprisingly, this has involved clans operating in Latin American cocaine production and export countries, including Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Mexico, Brazil, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Ecuador, the intricacies of which will be returned to in subsequent sections.<sup>532</sup> Although the organisation has followed a different evolution to the well documented evolution of the Cosa Nostra within the United States harking back to the Italian migration wave in the late nineteenth century, it nevertheless laid down its own roots in North America, with an early focus on Canada. Illustratively, some sources suggest that the 'Ndrangheta may have been present in Hamilton, located south of Toronto on Lake Ontario, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>533</sup> Other sources, meanwhile, point to a more consolidated pattern of establishing gambling and extortion operations in Canada from the 1950s (a number of which appear to have been run out of a pasta factory in Toronto).<sup>534</sup>

<sup>526</sup> *Relazione Semestrale Al Parlamento*, Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA), Gennaio – Giugno 2021, pp. 355-357.

<sup>527</sup> A senior member of the Pelle Clan was captured in Lisbon in March 2021. Ibid. p. 44.

<sup>528</sup> See for example M. Castigliani, *France, From French Connection to Narco-Banditry. And the judge surrenders: "it's like fighting windmills"*, il Fatto Quotidiano, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/longform/mafia-and-organized-crime-in-europe/focus/france/>.

<sup>529</sup> 'Ndrangheta aus Kalabrien, Bundeskriminalamt (BKA), <https://www.bka.de/DE/UnsereAufgaben/Deliktsbereiche/OrganisierteKriminalitaet/ok.html>, and A. Ulrich, *Die 'Ndrangheta in Deutschland*, Bundeskriminalamt (BKA), December 2011.

<sup>530</sup> M. Bedetti, *L'espansione Della 'Ndrangheta In Germania: Lineamenti Di Un Modello Interpretativo*, Cross Vol.7 No.4, 2021, p.126. See also G. Dimore, *Mafia rushed through gap in the Berlin Wall*, Financial Times, 13 November 2009.

<sup>531</sup> A. Candito, *'Ndrangheta, smantellato l'impero degli imprenditori dei clan tra Italia e Europa dell'Est. Arrestate 12 persone, indagato ex calciatore*, la Repubblica, 26 July 2022. See also DIA 2021, p.361.

<sup>532</sup> See for example C. Anesi et al, *Armed and Dangerous: Inside the 'Ndrangheta's Intercontinental Cocaine Pipeline*, Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 5 August 2021, <https://www.occrp.org/en/ndrangheta/armed-and-dangerous-inside-the-ndranghetas-intercontinental-cocaine-pipeline>.

<sup>533</sup> See for example A. Humphreys, *Murdered Mob Boss Pat Musitano Symbolized Ontario's Mafia with his Gangster Chic – and the Mayhem the Shadowed Him*, The National Post 12 July 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/murdered-mob-boss-pat-musitano-symbolized-ontarios-mafia-with-his-gangster-chic-and-the-mayhem-that-shadowed-him>.

<sup>534</sup> E.G. Parini, p. 53.



A similar dynamic involving 'Ndrangheta families occurred in Australia from the 1970s onwards, with recent Australian Federal Police (AFP) intelligence pointing to the existence of fourteen confirmed clans across the country operating under a "cloak of secrecy" in close cooperation with other organised crime groups, including patched members of outlaw motorcycle gangs.<sup>535</sup> In turn, the character of the relationships forged within these different theatres of influence merits further examination.

### External relations and alliances

The 'Ndrangheta's geographical reach and expansion into clearly defined regions and markets reflects many of the characteristics of the traditional foreign policy calculations of state actors, including the means through which to project power and pursue interests beyond one's immediate sphere of control. Clearly however, such ventures would not be possible without securing strategic relationships with local partners within different operating contexts. Critically, this has involved forging agreements, alliances and trading partnerships with other non-state actors in what effectively amounts to power blocks of clandestine influence within the (shadow) international system. One of the most illustrative and important alliances brokered by the organisation has been its strategic relationship with Albanian organised crime groups, which, perhaps ironically, was arguably born out of more 'domestic' interactions. Indeed, commentators have pointed to Calabria's community of Albanians of ethnic origin born out of refugee and migrant flows dating back to the Ottoman invasion of Albania in the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>536</sup> Regardless of its origins, the 'Ndrangheta's partnership with Albanian organised crime groups today lies at the heart of the multi-billion European cocaine import business. Far beyond a simple 'pax mafiosa' involving tacit acceptance of each other's operations, the two actors actively cooperate as part of an allied power block that shares key functions along the supply chain.<sup>537</sup>

Similarly, the 'Ndrangheta appears to have collaborated with – and respected the sphere of influence of – other mafia branches, most notably the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, since at least the early 1990s.<sup>538</sup> Despite their geographical proximity, the two organisations have not only accepted each other's territorial claims but appear to have at the very least colluded and pooled resources via a policy of 'mutual aid',<sup>539</sup> including with respect to shared logistical enablers and access in *inter alia* Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain.<sup>540</sup> Paoli, meanwhile, argues that the relationship extends even deeper, to the point of involving shared cultural codes.<sup>541</sup> What is clear is that the 'Ndrangheta learned valuable lessons from observing the actions of the Cosa Nostra, including the latter's costly war waged against the Italian state, which gripped public attention in the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>542</sup> Critically, it

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<sup>535</sup> AFP to target Italian organised crime and money laundering a year on from Operation Ironside, Australian Federal Police (AFP), 7 June 2022, <https://www.afp.gov.au/news-media/media-releases/afp-target-italian-organised-crime-and-money-laundering-year-operation>.

<sup>536</sup> N. D. Coniglio *et al.*, p. 10.

<sup>537</sup> See also K. Lala, *Albanian Crime Story: Hostage to the Cocaine Supply Chain*, Balkan Insight, 1 July 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/01/albanian-crime-story-hostage-to-the-cocaine-supply-chain/>.

<sup>538</sup> E.G. Parini, p. 52.

<sup>539</sup> L. Paoli, *Mafia Brotherhoods: Organized Crime, Italian Style*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 19.

<sup>540</sup> *Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into Mafia-related and other criminal organizations*, Atti Parlamentari, Camera Deputati, 21 February 2018, p. 60.

<sup>541</sup> See L. Paoli, *Fratelli di Mafia: Cosa Nostra e 'Ndrangheta*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2000, pp. 19-76.

<sup>542</sup> In the mid-1990s the Sicilian Cosa Nostra opted to veer away from a disastrous campaign of war against the state which it waged from 1989 to 1993 to thwart the passing of draconian anti-Mafia legislation. The group's new leader, Bernardo Provenzano, considered the violent tactics employed by his predecessor, Totò Riina, to be bad for business. Indeed, state retaliation for high-profile bombings such as the assassination of anti-Mafia judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino had brought the

understood that remaining in the shadows and pursuing a quiet infiltration strategy constituted a more judicious approach than high-visibility acts such as assassinating judges and prosecutors.<sup>543</sup> Moreover, pressure exerted on the Cosa Nostra as a result of its violent campaign forced the organisation to reduce its presence in some territories to the benefit of the 'Ndrangheta.<sup>544</sup> The Cosa Nostra arguably drew its own lessons from the ordeal when its then-leader, Bernardo Provenzano, switched tracks and opted for a 'submersion' strategy that emphasised discretion and reinvesting the proceeds of criminal activity into legitimate businesses ventures such as real estate, tourism and private health companies.<sup>545</sup> Beyond the Cosa Nostra, the 'Ndrangheta has also cooperated with the Camorra, including through the shared control of nightclubs on Lake Garda.<sup>546</sup>

In Latin America, and as alluded to previously, localised, trade-based partnerships are also discernible. Thus, the organisation has over the years entered in direct bilateral business arrangements with Colombian cocaine producers, which started with deals struck with Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel and today includes a lucrative trade agreement with the Clan de Golfo centered around bulk-buying narcotic consignments at source. The Clan, a hybrid between a drug cartel and paramilitary group with a strength of six thousand members and enjoying de facto control over swaths of territory in the Urabá region of Antioquia, Colombia, exerts control within in its own sphere of influence in a way that an external actor – even one as adept at the 'Ndrangheta – could not.<sup>547</sup> The organisation struck a similar deal with the Brazilian Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), a major player in its own right with established ties to Bolivian cocaine paste producers, Paraguayan logisticians, ex-Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas and the Lebanese Hezbollah (the latter of whom have risen as global experts and service providers in money laundering activity).<sup>548</sup> Similarly, the 'Ndrangheta appear to have developed an effective business relationship with Las Zetas, one of the most powerful Mexican cartels, further consolidating its presence within narcotics supply chains.<sup>549</sup> In effect, such external relations therefore add scale and breadth to the organisation's operations by providing it the ability to leverage the access and resources of trusted actors. Reciprocally, an Italian parliamentary inquiry detailing the reach of the Italian

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group to the brink of annihilation. See for example L. Salvatore and D. McDonnell, *The Capture of Bernardo Provenzano*, Italian Politics, Vol. 22, 2006, pp. 249–262.

<sup>543</sup> R. Donadio, *Can Italy Defy Its Most Powerful Crime Syndicate?* The Atlantic, October 2020 Issue, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/10/italian-mafia-ndrangheta/615466/>.

<sup>544</sup> See also R. Catanzaro and J. Castagna, *'A Watershed Year for Both the Mafia and the State'*, Italian Politics, Vol. 8, 1993, pp. 134–50.

<sup>545</sup> Provenzano conformed to the letter of this approach, driving a battered old car and dressing as a peasant farmer to avoid attracting attention See C. Longrigg, *Bernardo Provenzano Obituary*, The Guardian, July 14, 2016.

<sup>546</sup> U. Savona Ernesto and M. Riccardi (Eds.), *From illegal markets to legitimate businesses: the portfolio of organised crime in Europe*, Organised Crime Portfolio, Trento: Transcrime – Università degli Studi di Trento, 2015, p. 185.

<sup>547</sup> See for example *Leader of the Violent 'Clan Del Golfo's Multi-Billion Dollar Drug Trafficking Organization Extradited from Colombia to Face Federal Indictment*, United States Attorney's Office, United States Department of Justice, 5 May 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/leader-violent-clan-del-golfo-multi-billion-dollar-drug-trafficking-organization>.

<sup>548</sup> See B. Harris, *How Brazil's Largest Crime Syndicate Built a Global Syndicate* Built a Global Drug Empire, Financial Times, 28 February 2022 and

United States Congressional testimony papers suggest a possible relationship between the 'Ndrangheta and Hezbollah, although this requires further corroboration. See D. Ottolenghi, *State Sponsors of Terrorism: An Examination of Iran's Global Terrorism Network*, House Homeland Security Committee, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 17 April 2018, p. 30.

<sup>549</sup> See for example S. Corrao and F. Realacci, *The Business Relationship Between Italy's Mafia and Mexico's Drug Cartels*, InSight Crime, 19 June 2014, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/the-business-relationship-between-italys-mafia-and-mexicos-drug-cartels>.

Mafia explains how Central and South American narco-traffickers “consider the ‘Ndrangheta a reliable partner flush with cash, and these characteristics have facilitated its globalisation.”<sup>550</sup>

Beyond the business and power dividends of such alliances, access to new markets also offers, as Eurojust (the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation) explains, a means of “exploiting legal differences between criminal jurisdictions [and] escaping attention, since each crime [...] may appear an isolated act rather than part of an international operation.”<sup>551</sup> At the same time, the relations of the ‘Ndrangheta with other clandestine non-state actors has also involved conflict as well as competition over both territory and resources. Illustratively, the organisation locked horns with the Camorra for a time before establishing a more cooperative relationship. To be sure, judicial material demonstrates the extent to which the organisation is aware of strategic positioning in relation to other organisations – a pattern illustrated by a wiretap involving a conversation between two senior ‘Ndrangheta members in which one conveys the need to expand operations in new markets “otherwise another group will take over.”<sup>552</sup>

### Strategic logic and sequencing

At a high level, commentators convincingly argue that the organisation’s ‘secret of success’ consists of a “peculiar mixture of modernity and antiquity, operating as an extremely modern criminal organization whose investment strategy is flexible and very aggressive.”<sup>553</sup> Accounts by the Italian Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA) support this assessment, highlighting the organisation’s “extraordinary speed in adapting archaic values to the needs of the present [and] knowing how to manage change with marked modernity.”<sup>554</sup> Enzo Ciconte adds further nuance to this dynamic when pointing to the intricate logic of replicating or “transplanting” its original, localised operating model within new territory.<sup>555</sup> Critically this behaviour points towards the actions of a highly rational and calculated actor capable of adapting basic formulas – including the targeted use of instruments such as bribery and corruption – to erode the political fabric of the state all the while retaining its own particular signature blueprint for securing and projecting power.<sup>556</sup> This same blueprint reflects the unique combination of infiltration, co-option, social embeddedness and economic penetration: an ‘art’ refined over time in Calabria and then repackaged for export.

Once again, it is perhaps easiest to identify some of the more granular components of this strategic logic within the context of the ‘Ndrangheta’s local business dealings. Indeed, the organisation has demonstrated an acute understanding of both emerging opportunities and the activities of local business actors, keeping a finger on the pulse of commercial entry-points within the licit and illicit economy. Italian parliamentary documents highlight the extent to which “the clans in Reggio Calabria Province interfere heavily with every sector of the legal economy, from construction to commerce; from restaurants to transportation; and from the import-export of food products to tourism,” all the while “taking on the direct management of various businesses.”<sup>557</sup> Interestingly, an economic study by Banca D’Italia points to a propensity for the ‘Ndrangheta to “enter firms in financial distress”, whilst concluding that overall, such

<sup>550</sup> Atti Parlamentari, Camera Deputati, 21 February 2018, p. 61.

<sup>551</sup> *Coordinated crackdown on ‘Ndrangheta mafia in Europe*, European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust), 05 September 2018, [www.eurojust.europa.eu/news/coordinated-crackdown-ndrangheta-mafia-europe](http://www.eurojust.europa.eu/news/coordinated-crackdown-ndrangheta-mafia-europe).

<sup>552</sup> F. Calderoni, *The structure of drug trafficking mafias: The ‘Ndrangheta and cocaine*, Crime, Law and Social Change, Vol. 58, Issue 3, December 2012, p. 13.

<sup>553</sup> N. D. Coniglio *et al.*, p. 5.

<sup>554</sup> *Mafie, ‘l’allarme della DIA Emergenza ‘ndrangheta’*, La Repubblica, 24 September 2003

<sup>555</sup> E.G. Parini, p. 58.

<sup>556</sup> See also G. Gilligan, *Organised Crime and Corrupting the Political System*, Journal of Financial Crime, Vol. 7 No. 2, April 1999, pp. 147-154.

<sup>557</sup> Camera Dei Deputati, Doc. XXIII No.5 (2006), p. 61.

infiltrations “improved firms’ performance [...] by significantly increasing their revenues.”<sup>558</sup> At the hyper-local (i.e., village) level, this infiltrative process likely involves a combination of exerting influence over local companies and business, including via a blend of financial incentives and coerced taxation such as so-called ‘pizzo’ taxes paid to avoid interference and retaliation. The organisation has also repeatedly undercut existing commerce by way of controlled entities or entrepreneurs trading below market rates, with the aim of driving out competition.<sup>559</sup>

One local entrepreneur who had worked under the control of a ‘Ndrangheta clan described how the organisation’s interference ranged from imposing specific conditions relating to managerial decisions and workforce planning to prohibiting bids on certain tenders.<sup>560</sup> Another Calabrian businessman described a familiar pattern where the assets (buildings, company vehicles and so on) of those that resisted the mafia were destroyed or burnt. “You can’t sell an apartment without paying them,” he explained. “You can’t open a business without their permission [and] the majority [of people] simply adapt to the system.”<sup>561</sup> This approach, which inevitably has a distortive economic effect, essentially consists of ‘suffocating’ market forces within local economies, ensuring that the mafia organisation emerges as the dominant player within (micro) commercial ecosystems. It thus effectively amounts to “altering the rules, destroying healthy companies [and] preventing the creation of new economic companies.”<sup>562</sup> *De facto* control over local enterprises also provides access to municipal public procurement contracts, and in-so-doing, a means through which to generate a track-record of delivering projects that can be leveraged to bid for tenders further afield.

Thus, from at least the 1970s onwards the organisation began to extend its infiltrative approach to larger projects across multiple sectors, including within northern Italy. As Europol explains, this process was aided in no small part by “increasing local or regional autonomy in crucial sectors such as the health system and public tenders” which, in turn, “facilitated the diversion of public funds” in a way that could be “immediately exploited by [the] deeply infiltrated ‘Ndrangheta.”<sup>563</sup> Cinconte adds that the organisation both began to extend its influence within larger national companies and, in the process, “deprovincialized” itself to the extent that it was no longer “locked in the narrow confines of its origins, in the recesses of rural society.”<sup>564</sup> This dynamic also supports Paoli’s wider treatise on mafia behaviour, which posits that groups evolve from “simply demanding tribute from activities in their territories” to “directly influencing the bidding process of large-scale public works for the benefit of firms controlled by mafia groups or their members.”<sup>565</sup> As already alluded to, this pattern began to be replicated in new markets outside of Italy, including in Western Europe and North America. In an approach akin to achieving scale, the organisation set about implanting “perfect copies of its essential structures in [new] territories” in line with its longer-term strategy.<sup>566</sup>

Such economic expansion could not be possible without an accompanying – or, perhaps more accurately, a fundamentally interconnected – political strategy. Indeed, the development of close ties with or, depending on the context, co-option of the local political elite has been a

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<sup>558</sup> L. Mirenda et al., *The real effects of ‘ndrangheta: firm-level evidence*, Temi di discussione (Working Papers) No. 1235, Banka D’Italia – Eurosystem, October 2019, p.30.

<sup>559</sup> E.G. Parini, p. 55.

<sup>560</sup> M. Guerri et al., *Organized Crime and Employment Relations: A Personal Story of ‘Ndrangheta Control on Employment Relations Management Practices in Southern Italy*, *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 36, Issue 4, July 2021, pp. 758-768.

<sup>561</sup> M. Johnson, *How the Mafia infiltrated Italy’s hospitals and laundered the profits globally*, *Financial Times*, 9 July 2022.

<sup>562</sup> E. Ciconte, p. 42.

<sup>563</sup> *Italian Organized Crime Threat Assessment*, EUROPOL, The Hague, June 2013, p. 11.

<sup>564</sup> E. Ciconte, p. 40.

<sup>565</sup> L. Paoli, p. 175.

<sup>566</sup> EUROPOL *Italian Organized Crime Threat Assessment*, p. 11.

key component of the 'Ndrangheta's 'success story'. Once again, the more detailed mechanics of the organisation's political approach are best understood through an examination of its local activities. Such an investigation demonstrates the extent to which the type of economic machinations described above are themselves political in so far as the control of public financial resources as well as local commerce provides a vehicle for influencing the daily management of municipal affairs. Locally, city councils represent the intersection of the everyday needs of the citizen and formal governance structures: the most direct interface between the political system and the people. The desired condition, Parini explains, is one in which mafia power is defined (and, therefore, accepted), where citizens in effect become subjects of that power and where the organisation's 'territorial domain' is confirmed.<sup>567</sup> Perhaps for this reason Anna Sergi suggests that the 'Ndrangheta's behaviour in Reggio Calabria goes further than infiltration, blurring the lines between criminality and politics and essentially amounting to what she refers to as a "concurrent governance capacity" that is "endemic and systematic, but also felt as ineluctable and rationally accepted, wanted and endured by both mafiosi and politicians."<sup>568</sup>

The 'Ndrangheta's process of co-opting or, to use a term favoured by some political scientists, 'capturing' the local political establishment has involved a combination of methods. The earlier cited example of gaining access to local politicians through affiliation with Calabrian Masonic lodges fits within a wider pattern of behaviour of developing ties with public officials that also includes what the Direzione Nazionale Antimafia (DNA) refers to as targeted attempts to enter in pre-electoral agreements with local authorities.<sup>569</sup> As might be expected, efforts to exert influence over municipal councils appear to be particularly acute in localities deemed to be of strategic value, such as Lamezia Terme, Calabria's third largest city and home to an international airport, and the port city of Gioia Tauro, which was subject to election tampering.<sup>570</sup> Indeed, Europol reporting points to a carefully blended cocktail of bribes and threats as the mechanism for swaying votes and determining the outcome of local administrative elections and placing strawmen in key positions with the ability to "divert public funds, rig public tenders and despoil the budget of the administration they run."<sup>571</sup> Paradoxically, such an approach also feeds into the organisation's narrative of public sector inefficiency and "cumbersome and distant bureaucracy" in contrast to the "far more brisk and efficient management of the ['Ndrangheta] clans."<sup>572</sup> It therefore has a vested interest in "keeping [the region] isolated and backwards."<sup>573</sup> Moreover, political patronage as well as the ability to secure the alliance of local politicians such as mayors or city council members has provided a means of projecting higher-level, proxy-influence over the Italian Parliament, including with respect to lobbying against laws relating to money-laundering and/or draconian incarceration arrangements for apprehended bosses.<sup>574</sup>

The export or, to be more accurate, replication of such locally forged methods into new territories, including overseas, has followed a logic of gradual and considered expansion that combined harnessing the significant Calabrian diaspora overseas and sending out 'starter' elements to new dominions.<sup>575</sup> For example, a report by the Italian DIA highlights the extent to which its practices, behaviours and activities in Germany largely mirror those found in

<sup>567</sup> Cited in E. G. Parini, p. 56.

<sup>568</sup> Anna Sergi, *Mafia and politics as concurrent governance actors. Revisiting politics and crime in Southern Italy* in P.C van Duyn et al (eds), *The relativity of wrongdoing: Corruption, organised crime, fraud and money laundering in perspective*, Oisterwijk: Wolf Legal Publishers, May 2014, p.65

<sup>569</sup> E.G. Parini, p. 55.

<sup>570</sup> A. Sergi, p. 55. See also M. Daly, *The Mafia Built A Port. Now It's a Global Cocaine Hub*, 1 July 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/88qa3a/calabrian-mafia-ndrangheta-port-cocaine>.

<sup>571</sup> EUROPOL *Italian Organized Crime Threat Assessment*, p. 7.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>573</sup> Camera Dei Deputati, Doc. XXIII No. 5 (2006), p. 62.

<sup>574</sup> E.G. Parini, p. 56.

<sup>575</sup> See for example DIA 2021, pp. 345-377.

Calabria,<sup>576</sup> with similar accounts describing the organisation's wider European footprint.<sup>577</sup> At the same time, the particular focus of the activities conducted within different geographical locations may differ depending on the specific purpose or value of those localities within the organisation's overall strategic calculus. Illustratively, activities on Latin American soil may gravitate primarily around the organisation's large-scale narco-trafficking operations in contrast to, say, activity in Switzerland, which is more akin to what wiretapped 'Ndrangheta members describe as the "perfect logistics base."<sup>578</sup> Critically, however, both of these territories fit within a larger inter-connected strategic system bringing together core functions such as the generation of (illicit) revenue trafficking, reinvestment of profit and power projection. In turn, the ability to exploit gaps and windows of opportunities within the international system in accordance with its strategic blueprint whilst retaining internal cohesion and security has proven to be an important feature of the organisation. This, as Rocco Sciarone explains, has involved a delicate combination of structural closedness and the type of external openness required for the "reproduction of [its] social networks, as well as facilitating extensions and diversification in [its] field of activity."<sup>579</sup> Accordingly, this chapter will now turn to the organisational model and structural mechanics underpinning this approach.

### 6.3 Organisational structure

The 'Ndrangheta's *modus operandi* and pursuit of strategic interests relies on a complex, highly effective and easily replicable organisational structure. Whilst accounts and descriptions of the organisation's inner workings vary significantly between sources (both in terms of terminology and detail), careful examination of existing materials allows the researcher to build a reasonably accurate picture of its constituent parts.<sup>580</sup> Clans, or to be more precise, *'ndrine* (or *'ndrina* in the singular form, also sometimes referred to as *cosca*), lie at the heart of its operating model. Estimates generally place the number of these *'ndrine* at possibly 150 (up from about 50 in the early 2000s), with a combined membership of around 10,000 individuals.<sup>581</sup> These organisational nodes form the backbone of the organisation's cell-based, horizontal structure.<sup>582</sup> They typically consist of around fifty individuals usually belonging to the same extended family and enjoy a degree of supremacy over the territory – or *Locale* (*Locali* in the plural form) – in which they operate.<sup>583</sup> These micro-spheres of influence are typically controlled by one *'ndrina*, although more powerful *'ndrine* may exert jurisdiction over more than one *Locale* whilst conversely, larger *Locali* may host more than one *'ndrina*.<sup>584</sup> The *'ndrina*'s ability to function as an easily exportable, self-sufficient and autonomous entity has been key to the 'Ndrangheta's external projection of power, whilst its family-centered character has promoted cohesion and the maintenance of secrecy.<sup>585</sup>

<sup>576</sup> *Relazione annual sulle attività svolte dal Procuratore Nazionale antimafia e dalla Direzione Nazionale antimafia*, Direzione Investigativa Antimafia (DIA), 2012. This pattern is also described in the DIA's most recent (available) parliamentary report (2021).

<sup>577</sup> See for example F. Allum et al. (eds), *Italian Mafias Today: Territory, Business and Politics*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019, p. 203.

<sup>578</sup> D. Gerny, *Today considered the most dangerous mafia group in Italy, the 'Ndrangheta is making inroads in Switzerland*, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 9 May 2022.

<sup>579</sup> R. Sciarone, 'Ndrangheta: A Reticular Organization, in N. Serenate (ed.), p. 87.

<sup>580</sup> Given the variations and discrepancies within the reporting, this section deliberately focuses on structural organs and characteristics that can be corroborated via multiple sources.

<sup>581</sup> See for example M. Baumann, *Operation Eureka: The 'Ndrangheta is the most dangerous mafia*, NZZ (CH), May 2023, <https://www.nzz.ch/international/operation-eureka-die-ndrangheta-ist-die-gefaehrlichste-mafia-ld.1737075?reduced=true&mktcval=Twitter&mktcid=sms>.

<sup>582</sup> B. Çayli, *Social networks of the Italian mafia: the strong and weak parts*, CEU Political Science Journal. Vol. 5, No. 3, 2010, p. 387.

<sup>583</sup> E.G. Parini, p. 53. See also EUROPOL Italian Organized Crime Threat Assessment, p. 3.

<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>585</sup> Camera Dei Deputati, Doc. XXIII (2006), p. 194.



*Locali*, meanwhile, serve a function that is very loosely akin to that of federal states, and these may in fact come together as even larger entities, known as '*mandamenti*' (three of these exist in Calabria).<sup>586</sup> *Locali* are represented by *capo locale* – alternatively referred to as *capobastone* or more simply as *capos* – who typically sit at the head of the '*ndrine*' operating in different *Locali*. The allocation of 'policy portfolios' may also be distributed between authoritative figures at the *Locale* level. For example one collaborator of justice describing roles within the *Locale* of Ventimiglia in northern Italy's region of Liguria explained how illicit trafficking and political engagement were managed by different *capos*.<sup>587</sup> *Locali* also usually include a *contabile* responsible for accountants and finances.<sup>588</sup> Traditionally, the 'mother' *Locale* of San Luca served as the supreme *Locale*, including with respect to recognising new '*ndrine*' as well as the territorial integrity of new *Locali*.

From the early 1990s onwards, the growing size and influence of *Locali* and their respective '*ndrine*' paved the way to an upper level, executive 'commission' or *Provincia* led by bosses referred to as *Crimine* (or *Capo Crimine*) and acting as a supreme council.<sup>589</sup> The commission built on the foundation of the exclusive *Santa*, which court documents suggest was a "semi-secret structure" introduced in the 1960s and comprising 'Ndrangheta members "authorized to join the freemasonry [and] establish contacts with senior public administration officials, physicians, engineers, and attorneys."<sup>590</sup> The collegial body is made up of the *capos* of the most important *Locali* (particularly those with jurisdiction over Reggio Calabria's strategic territories), and has the power to approve new '*ndrine*', shape the organisation's overall strategic direction and forge new alliances.<sup>591</sup> The body also appears to act as an overall stabilising force within the organisation, whilst holding a quasi-judicial function, including with respect to ruling on key edicts, disputes and the use of violence.<sup>592</sup> Indeed, the level of internal conflict and number of feuds within the 'Ndrangheta – particularly apparent within the context the of the so-called 'Ndrangheta wars' of 1974-1976 and 1985-1991 within which clans vied for power – appears to have decreased with the introduction of the body, thus also guarding against the risk of descent into an intra-mafia war.<sup>593</sup>

At the same time, the overall directive role of the upper body and supra-coordination structures remains a point of contention. On the one hand, judiciary investigations have revealed 'Ndrangheta attempts at 'institutionalising' an inter-organisational model by "creating a legitimate exercise of power, recognised by members of the groups" and "formalizing more precisely some leadership roles to be set up through election."<sup>594</sup> On the other, and perhaps as might be expected from such a diffused organisation, some commentators have expressed a degree of scepticism over the ability of higher command structures to exert firm control over

<sup>586</sup> *Discussioni Anti-Mafia*, Atti Paleamentari, Camera Deputati, Senato Repubblica, Doc. XVII (Legislatura), 21 February 2018, p. 57.

<sup>587</sup> '*Ndrangheta: per Cretarola è Palamara il boss della "locale" / La ricostruzione del delitto Delfino*, Riviera24.it, April 2014.

<sup>588</sup> R. Sciarone, p. 89.

<sup>589</sup> These include the Centre, Iconic Coast and the Gioia Tauro Plain. See E. G. Parini, p. 53.

<sup>590</sup> *Discussioni Anti-Mafia*, Doc. XVII (2018), p. 58.

<sup>591</sup> See for example *What is the 'Ndrangheta?*, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), 1 July 2001, [www.occrp.org/en/ndrangheta/what-is-the-ndrangheta](http://www.occrp.org/en/ndrangheta/what-is-the-ndrangheta); and L. Paoli (2003), pp. 51-58.

<sup>592</sup> C. Cordova, *Ecco come funziona il tribunale della 'ndrangheta*, Il Dispaccio, 06 July 2017; and E. Ciconte, p. 46. The organisation's most senior figures allegedly conduct meetings every September in the San Luca during the Festival of the Holy Mary of Polsi. See C. Anesi and L. Bagnoli, *Bitter Beauty: A Pilgrimage to the Birthplace of the 'Ndrangheta*, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 21 September 2018.

<sup>593</sup> M. Catino, *Mafia Organizations: The Visible Hand of Criminal Enterprise*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, p.211. See also G. Sorgonà, *Società e 'Ndrangheta, Il Caso Reggio Calabria*, Laboratoire Italien, No.22 (22), February 2019.

<sup>594</sup> R. Sciarone, p. 94.

the organisation beyond “decisions at the collective level.”<sup>595</sup> Whilst some important decisions were undoubtedly taken by the ‘Ndrangheta’s higher leadership over the years, including in relation to the assassination of prominent public figures, day to day operational decisions largely rest with the ‘ndrine.<sup>596</sup> To be sure, these entities appear to retain a significant degree of autonomy and influence, with the wider organisation thus amounting to more of a cooperative model rather than a “unified decision-making system.”<sup>597</sup> Critically, clans, and the families that run them, constitute largely self-contained structural entities to the extent that they may encompass all of the key functions necessary for a criminal network to operate and flourish.

Clear tasks and divisions of labour are thus discernible within the clans, including with respect to identifying new business partnerships, coordinating trafficking activities and book-keeping (i.e., overseeing accounts and money laundering operations). Meanwhile, ‘ndrina autonomy also extends to accessing public resources and influencing the management of municipal affairs (or similar level governance structures, depending on the territory).<sup>598</sup> An illustrative example of this dynamic is that of the Crea family, whose Rizziconi-based clan has demonstrated particular guile in acquiring control of public construction contracts and road haulage operations as well as developing close ties with other historical families such as the ‘Alvaro’ of Sinopoli and the ‘Mammoliti’ of Castellace.<sup>599</sup> Moreover, in his study of the ‘Ndrangheta’s internal social relations, Francesco Calderoni explains how kinship ties have increased trust amongst associates and therefore reduced the need for direct control and/or interventions by leaders as well as promoted an “opportunity-orientated modus operandi.”<sup>600</sup> The high level of cohesion within the ‘ndrina structure has also increased their resilience to disruption by law enforcement activity to the extent that apprehended individuals are (usually) rapidly replaced by trusted associates allowing the clans to resume criminal activities at previous levels.<sup>601</sup>

The wider operating model of the ‘Ndrangheta also relies on a cadre of individuals with more of an emissary role, including with respect to forging strategic relationships and assisting its entry into new markets. Indeed, the organisation draws on network of brokers who play an important role by acting, as Morselli explains, “neither [as] patrons nor clients” but instead, as representatives for multiple clans.<sup>602</sup> Such individuals therefore act a vanguard in securing partnerships between, for example, drug producers in Latin America and wholesale distribution networks in Europe, demonstrating what social network analysis refers to as a high degree of ‘betweenness.’<sup>603</sup> In this respect, brokers essentially act as commissioned, quasi-diplomatic trade envoys or, indeed, as ‘ambassadors’ within new markets.<sup>604</sup> Some of these individuals appear to have risen to positions of significant influence precisely because of their connections and deal-making qualities. Examples include the case of Roberto Pannunzi, who forged early links with the Medellín Cartel, and Rocco Morabito, once the second most-wanted

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<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>596</sup> R. Sciarone, p. 95. See also A. Sergi, *Meet the ‘Ndrangheta: It’s time to bust some myths about the Calabrian Mafia*, The Local (IT), 9 July 2019, <https://www.thelocal.it/20190709/meet-the-ndrangheta-its-time-to-bust-some-myths-about-the-calabrian-mafia/>

<sup>597</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>598</sup> For an illustrative example of infiltration into Lombardy see also Caterina Gozzoli et al., *‘Ndrangheta in Lombardy: Culture and Organizational Structure*, World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research, December 2014, pp. 404-405.

<sup>599</sup> Camera Dei Deputati, Doc. XXIII (2006), p. 56

<sup>600</sup> F. Calderoni, p. 21

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>602</sup> C. Morselli, *Inside Criminal Networks*, Studies of Organized Crime, New York: Springer, 2010, p. 17.

<sup>603</sup> F. Calderoni, p. 19.

<sup>604</sup> M. Johnson, *Latin American drug cartels in lucrative tie-up with the ‘Ndrangheta*, Financial Times, 28 April 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/3feb59c5-b8e1-4d90-8f22-eb8040883fb8>.



fugitive in Italy and described by the Italian anti-mafia commission as the “king of cocaine brokers.”<sup>605</sup> To be sure, Morabito’s many achievements included forging business opportunities for ‘Ndrangheta clans in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, whilst also acting as an envoy for powerful Calabrian families.<sup>606</sup> Similarly – and despite the high levels of internal cohesion within the ‘ndrine – the organisation has leaned on *external* professionals in a trend that mirrors the wider behaviour of modern organised crime groups (as will be explained later in this chapter).

### Identity, membership and recruitment

Affiliation with and recruitment into the organisation is guided by charters, pledges, codes and rituals. At the heart of these rituals lies the organisation’s ideological narrative, which combines symbols, meaning and historical accounts in constructing a particular culture and identity. The narrative traces the organisation’s genesis to Osso, Mastroso and Carcagnosso, three mythical Spanish knights of the early 15<sup>th</sup> Century who fled their native land after defending their honour in a family blood feud.<sup>607</sup> This tale provides many hooks for the organisation’s code, including an emphasis on secrecy, honour and the central importance of the family.<sup>608</sup> Interwoven within the narrative are religious symbols and an emphasis on the protection of Catholic saints, whilst initiation rites, particularly the all-important ‘baptism’ into the ‘Ndrangheta, resemble church ceremonies. New members need to adhere to specific requirements before being permitted to undergo initiation rites, including possessing ties to mafia families.<sup>609</sup>

Progression within the organisation starts at the junior rank of ‘honoured youth,’ before promotion to more senior and active roles within the organisation as ‘honoured men’.<sup>610</sup> Italian Carabinieri surveillance footage of a swearing-in ceremony to the upper-level *Santa* also highlights the extent to which the emphasis on adherence to codes and oaths transcends across the different levels of the organisation,<sup>611</sup> with senior members sworn-in to the rank of *Santista* amongst religious effigies.<sup>612</sup> Both the ideological narrative and accompanying rites and rituals contribute to the acquisition of status, identity and meaning, in what Parini describes as ‘ornaments’ that play a key role in attracting youths living in rural Calabria – a region with an employment rate of over twenty percent.<sup>613</sup> Moreover, DIA reporting explains the ways in which rituals and affiliations “constitute the link that ‘Ndrangheta factions from all around the world maintain with the parent company in Reggio [Calabria].”<sup>614</sup>

Whilst women are prevented from formally joining the organisation, they nevertheless play an important role in the private sphere in both maintaining the ‘Ndrangheta’s cohesion and

<sup>605</sup> ‘Ndrangheta Mafia Kingpin Return to Italy to Serve a 30-Year Sentence, Reuters, 6 July 2022.

<sup>606</sup> D. den Held, *Cocaine Brokers: The Flexible Backbone of the ‘Ndrangheta Trafficking Empire*, InSight Crime, November 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/cocaine-brokers-flexible-backbone-ndrangheta-trafficking-empire/>.

<sup>607</sup> J. Dickie, *Mob Mentality: Mafia History*, The Independent, 8 June 2011.

<sup>608</sup> E. Ciconte, pp. 36-38.

<sup>609</sup> This could be broadly described as a variation on the concept of ‘nationality’.

<sup>610</sup> R. Sciarone, p. 89.

<sup>611</sup> *Italian Police Catch Mafia Initiation Rites On Camera Leading To Arrests*, The Guardian, 18 November 2014.

<sup>612</sup> C. Anesi, *Italy’s Most Powerful Mafia Mingles with Devoted Christians at the Sanctuary of Polsi in Calabria*, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), 20 September 2022, <https://www.occrp.org/en/ndrangheta/italys-most-powerful-mafia-mingles-with-devoted-christians-at-the-sanctuary-of-polsi-in-calabria>.

<sup>613</sup> E.G. Parini, p. 54.

<sup>614</sup> DIA 2021, p. 18.

reproducing its cultural code as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters.<sup>615</sup> They also conduct specific activities, such as participating in criminal negotiations, overseeing finances, and bringing messages to prisoners, whilst acting as “guarantors of honorary men’s reputations.”<sup>616</sup> The transmission of mafia principles and values through women may also extend to encouraging male relatives to carry out their duties, including with respect to the carrying out acts of violence within the context of vendettas or as a means of regaining honour. Finally, arranged marriages offer a vehicle for cementing alliances between ‘ndrina families, thus offering a vehicle not only for the survival but also for the expansion of clans and their respective spheres of influence.<sup>617</sup> At the same time, some sources suggest that women have increasingly accepted to act as collaborators of justice, possibly reflecting a greater degree of independence and assertiveness in the modern context as well as a partial rejection of patriarchal systems and “miniature fiefdom[s] in which women are little more than vassals of family honour.”<sup>618</sup> Women, it has also been argued, have also at times been motivated by a desire to interrupt what they might consider as the fundamental risks associated with close family members becoming deeply involved in criminal activities.<sup>619</sup> To be sure, this gendered dimension deserves further examination by those seeking to understand potential sources of change within the organisation.

The existing literature on the ‘Ndrangheta paints a complex picture when describing levels of support for the organisation outside of its immediate structure. Theoretically at least, the extortionary methods employed within local communities ought to have resulted in a high degree of rejection and apprehension as well as contributed to anti-mafia sentiment within localities within which its presence could be felt most acutely. At the same time, and as previously noted, the Calabrian mafia’s powerbase is concentrated in a region in which the state has traditionally had limited reach and visibility. The ‘Ndrangheta has exploited this relative marginalisation both as part of its narrative and through its activities as a means of gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. Illustratively, and as was also the case with other mafia branches, the organisation stepped-in to provide welfare loans to struggling businesses during and immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>620</sup> Clearly, such support also provided the additional benefit of securing financial leverage over small enterprises, increasing dependency and thus further tightening its economic hold in key municipalities. Indeed, commentators point to the extent to which the Italian Mafia syndicates have turned a profit from emergencies ranging from earthquakes to cholera outbreaks throughout their 150-year history, both by placing themselves in the position of service providers and by “sourcing agricultural workers, fixing construction contracts [and] siphoning funds meant for city sanitation.”<sup>621</sup> A more nuanced analysis would therefore suggest that the local populace, rather than actively supporting the mafia, may have come to see it as an embedded and immoveable part of the social tapestry.

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<sup>615</sup> O. Ingrascì, ‘Ndrangheta Women in Contemporary Italy: Between Change and Continuity in N. Serenate (ed.), 2014, p. 70.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.* p. 63.

<sup>617</sup> E. Cicconte, p. 36.

<sup>618</sup> A. Perry, *The Women Who Took On the Mafia*, The New Yorker, January 2018 Issue, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/22/the-women-who-took-on-the-mafia>.

<sup>619</sup> See for example C. Longrigg, *The Good Mothers Review – Women Challenging the Mafia*, The Guardian, 13 February 2018.

<sup>620</sup> E. Amante, *Italian Mob Seeks to Profit from Coronavirus Crisis, Prosecutors Say*, Reuters, 16 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-italy-mobsters-idUSKCN21Y1AF>

<sup>621</sup> H. Roberts and J. Barigazzi, *Mafia plots Post-Coronavirus Pounce*, Politico, 7 April 2022.

## 6.4 Levers of power

As highlighted earlier in this chapter, the policy calculus of the 'Ndrangheta is calibrated around the pursuit of power and securing its strategic and territorial interests. However, and as in the case of state actors, the organisation has a range of levers of influence at its disposal, which it can apply in concert – albeit to varying degrees – in different contexts.

### Violence

Unsurprisingly, the 'Ndrangheta retains the means through which to apply violence in pursuit of its strategic objectives. From the 1970s, it turned to kidnapping and abductions, with ransom payments providing an important source of revenue.<sup>622</sup> As the organisation moved to lower-profile criminal activities, violence – which had previously been used also to settle internal disputes – became more of a targeted tool employed for the purposes of unlocking strategic opportunities, sending messages and warning-off potential competitors and/or adversaries. Illustrative of this pattern was the October 2005 killing of Francesco Fortugno, the President of the Regional Council of Calabria, which appeared to be sanctioned at a senior level of the organisation in an apparent attempt to intimidate Calabrian politicians and sway the outcome of regional elections.<sup>623</sup> However, as already alluded to earlier in this chapter, the 'Ndrangheta has learned from the Cosa Nostra and others about the risks involved in applying violence too liberally, with parliamentary documents suggesting that whilst remaining an essential resource, “it is used less and only in extreme cases, when no other form of pressure, intimidation or delegitimization will do.”<sup>624</sup> Exceptions to this rule, including the so-called ‘Duisburg Massacre’ in Germany where six Calabrians were killed outside a pizzeria in a violent feud between clans, proved harmful to the organisation, shining a light on their operations and level of infiltration within the country.<sup>625</sup> Such internal disputes in overseas territories also demonstrate a wider trend in which local conflicts that have their roots in territories of origin may spill over into new ‘colonies.’<sup>626</sup>

### Imports, exports, transport and logistics

Just as the revenue of states is predicated on their economic and trading activity, so too has the 'Ndrangheta carved out its own sources of profit through the provision of (illicit) goods of and services. The organisation's documented forays into smuggling activities date at least to the post-war years when 'ndrine began to import cigarettes from foreign countries and reselling these at lower prices than those sold legally through state-controlled tobacco shops.<sup>627</sup> The transnational connections as well as systems and processes established for the purposes of tobacco smuggling provided the basis for subsequent diversification, particularly into narcotics trafficking. With heroin importation being largely monopolised by the Cosa Nostra, the 'Ndrangheta turned increasingly to the cocaine trade from the 1980s onwards; a decision that soon started to generate considerable dividends.<sup>628</sup> Critically, the organisation's devolved structure proved to be the ideal recipe for expansion within the criminal underworld as well as for securing influence over different links of the transnational drugs supply chain. Some estimates place the Calabrian mafia's overall control over wholesale cocaine imports to Europe as high as eighty percent, although it is likely that the relative market share of Albanian

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<sup>622</sup> M. Catino, p. 96.

<sup>623</sup> E. Ciconte, pp. 45-46. This also demonstrates the role of the upper level of the organisation in dictating the terms under which violence can be utilised.

<sup>624</sup> *Discussioni Anti-Mafia*, Doc. XVII (2018), p. 59.

<sup>625</sup> *EUROPOL Italian Organized Crime Threat Assessment*, p. 11.

<sup>626</sup> F. N. Moro and S. Sberma, *Transferring Violence? Mafia Killings in Non-traditional Areas: Evidence from Italy*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol.62, No. 7, August 2018, pp. 1579-1601.

<sup>627</sup> E. Ciconte, p. 38.

<sup>628</sup> *EUROPOL Italian Organized Crime Threat Assessment* (2013), p. 11.

organised crime groups (who enjoy a strategic alliance with the 'Ndrangheta) has increased in recent years.<sup>629</sup> Still, the organisation differs from Albanian syndicates in that it appears to focus primarily on the bulk purchase and distribution of cocaine, rather than street level retail, which is outsourced to other organisations (including Albanian and Nigerian groups); an approach that may also decrease the mafia's exposure to routine arrests of street-level dealers.<sup>630</sup>

Footholds in (new) territories and strategic partnerships provide a key mechanism of securing access to and influence over the transport and logistics hubs and solutions which, together, form the backbone of 'Ndrangheta's cocaine trafficking operations. As already explained, this activity starts with striking deals with cocaine producers located in Latin America, with large consignments of cocaine subsequently dispatched to Europe (its biggest market), primarily via transatlantic container shipping.<sup>631</sup> In doing so, the organisation is able to draw on its intelligence-gathering capabilities, including with respect to identifying suitable and safe container-shipping companies and routes. Although preferred transshipment nodes have evolved over time, including in response to law enforcement seizures, these likely include the Brazilian port of Santos (at least partly controlled by the PCC), the Ecuadorian port of Guayaquil and the Colombian port of Cartagena, all of which constitute favoured departure points.<sup>632</sup> Infiltration within strategic hubs, including maritime ports typically involves the recruitment of highly efficient 'rip off' teams responsible for retrieving cocaine consignments in European ports, including the 'super ports' of Antwerp, Rotterdam, Hamburg and (of course) Gioia Tauro, assisted by complicit insiders such as dock workers and customs officials.<sup>633</sup> DIA reporting also highlights the extent to which smaller ports such as Bremen (Germany) have been increasingly targeted by the organisation following recent seizures at larger ports.<sup>634</sup> Moreover, the organisation also demonstrated the ability to infiltrate logistics and packaging companies more locally, such as in the illustrative case of TNT's (the multinational logistics group) Global Express branch in Lombardy, which was exploited for the purpose of drug trafficking.<sup>635</sup>

Building on a familiar theme, the 'Ndrangheta's ability to leverage 'ndrina influence and access has proven to be a critical logistical enabler, ensuring "increasingly solid reliability" and providing a basis "to develop criminal associations [...] with the most qualified organisations."<sup>636</sup> Moreover, its exploitation of established trade routes and connections to other actors demonstrates the attributes of a highly market-orientated criminal group in-so-far as it leverages existing (or 'external') logistics solutions rather than seeking to acquire its own transportation capabilities. Similarly, its ability to discretely 'piggyback' on legitimate commerce is such that many of the companies whose containers the organisation uses to smuggle cocaine (banana consignments always appear a favourite), are unaware of how their

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<sup>629</sup> OCCRP, 2001. This analysis also likely fails to capture the extent to which the organisation does not monopolise the market per se but act in partnership with a range of other actors.

<sup>630</sup> R. Donadio (The Atlantic/October 2020).

<sup>631</sup> Admittedly, the organisation also uses transport methods such as sailing boats in order to move cocaine within Europe, such as to Balearic Island of Ibiza. See 'Action against Italian mafia in Spain: 32 arrests', European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (EUROJUST), 20 September 2022.

<sup>632</sup> See for example Y. Nieves and M. Betancur, PCC-'Ndrangheta, *The International Criminal Alliance Flooding Europe with Cocaine*, InSight Crime, 8 August 2019, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/pcc-ndrangheta-criminal-alliance-flooding-europe-cocaine/>.

<sup>633</sup> Consignments are likely marked with stamps or other signs so that they can be distinguished and/or routed to the correct customer. See S. Bhavé, *Guayaquil Remains Ecuador's Busy Cocaine Gateway to Europe*, InSight Crime, 14 October 2019, <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/guayaquil-ecuador-cocaine-gateway-europe/>.

<sup>634</sup> DIA 2021, p. 360.

<sup>635</sup> 'TNT, Commissariate Per Mafia Le Filiali Milanesi Del Corriere', la Repubblica, 18 April 2011.

<sup>636</sup> DIA 2021, p. 16.

logistical platforms are being exploited.<sup>637</sup> This approach distinguishes its behaviour from vertically integrated organisations such as the Medellín and Sinaloa Cartels, both of whom opted to establish their own fleets of aircraft for the purposes of cocaine trafficking.<sup>638</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the organisation has in recent years applied the expertise and methods forged within the cocaine business to other criminal activities, including ecstasy and hashish trafficking, weapons and ammunition smuggling, illegal waste dumping, racketeering, fraud, illegal gambling and even reselling Serie A football tickets at inflated prices.<sup>639</sup>

### Finance and money laundering

The financial and money laundering activities of the 'Ndrangheta are complex, highly structured, and multifaceted, spanning across different economic sectors and international borders. As we have seen, these go further than simply concealing the origin of criminal profit and instead constitute a fundamental instrument of power in their own right: a means of ensuring sustainable growth, social embeddedness and territorial control. To this end, the organisation harnesses layers of complex corporate and offshore structures, business façades, shell and front companies, capitalising on an increasing globally connected financial system. It also draws on a sizeable legion of small, cash-rich businesses – typically shops, restaurants, bars, ice cream parlours, hotels, gyms and garages alongside tourism, catering, food delivery, funeral, transport and import-export services – spread across multiple jurisdictions. Trendy clubs on the French Riviera and in the Iberian Peninsula, supermarkets in the Baltics, pizzerias dotted across Germany and Belgium, cafés in Rome's historical Via dei Condotti and even London boutique restaurants known for their risotto all fit within this pattern.<sup>640</sup>

Some of these businesses also likely constitute effective fronts for trafficking operations. Examples here include cocaine-delivering pizzerias in New York; the 'Ndrangheta-controlled Fondi fruit and vegetable market in Rome (considered to act as a logistical 'revolving door' for trafficking); and an Aalsmeer (Netherlands)-based flower company used to dispatch cocaine concealed amongst tulip and hyacinth bunches.<sup>641</sup> As already noted, the 'Ndrangheta has also mastered the art of acquiring larger commercial holdings and companies, particularly within the construction, real estate, agricultural, health, utilities (electricity, gas and water) and waste-

<sup>637</sup> C. Anesi and G. Rubino, *Inside the Mafia-Run Cocaine Network Shattered By European Police*, InSight Crime, 17 December 2018, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/cocaine-network-european-police/>. A similar Modus Operandi was reported by EUROPOL - See 'Cocaine Lords Targeted in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands', EUROPOL, 21 April 2022, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/cocaine-lords-targeted-in-belgium-germany-and-netherlands>.

<sup>638</sup> Pablo Escobar evolved from transporting small consignments on a Piper PA-18 Super Cub single engine monoplane to acquiring much larger aircraft, which included the very vintage but durable Douglas DC-3 as well as DC-4 and DC-5 variants, 13 Boeing 727s bought from a bankrupt airline and a luxurious Learjet, which he used for the purpose of cash smuggling. Between 2006 and 2015, Mexican authorities seized close to 600 aircraft flown by Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzmán's Sinaloa cartel, dwarfing the country's largest airline in terms of aircraft numbers. See for example P. Catiang, *King of the sea and the sky: tracing Pablo Escobar's drug routes by the vehicles and tactics he used*, ABC-CBN, 18 November 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/ancx/culture/spotlight/11/18/18/the-king-of-sea-and-sky>, and C. Woody, 'El Chapo' Guzmán had more airplanes than the biggest airline in Mexico, Business Insider, May 2016.

<sup>639</sup> 'Italy Tribunal: Juve Supporters Infiltrated by Mafia', Chicago Tribune, 29 September 2017.

<sup>640</sup> See for example A. Perry, *Rise of the 'Ndrangheta: How the Feared Calabrian Mafia has Reached the UK*, The Times, 02 December 2018; 'A Bruxelles un intero quartiere comprato dalla 'ndrangheta', la Repubblica, 5 March 2004; and E.G. Parini, p. 55.

<sup>641</sup> See for example U. Savona Ernesto and M. Riccardi (Eds.), p. 192; and C. Anesi et al., *Maffia Nog Steeds Actief Op Bloemenveiling*, AD Nieuws, 27 March 2017, <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/maffia-nog-steeds-actief-op-bloemenveiling~a98fe749/>.

scrapping sectors, whilst tapping into public contracts and even bulk-purchasing Italian Treasury Bonds and Treasury Credit Certificates.<sup>642</sup> More widely, the German security services claimed as early as 2008 that 'ndrine in the country were able to influence the Frankfurt stock exchange through the bulk injection of capital.<sup>643</sup>

Investigations and court documents once again highlight the ways in which the organisation capitalises on readily accessible systems and specialised services, including by enlisting the help of white-collar professional 'enablers' such as tax advisors, lawyers, notaries and engineers who "put themselves at the service of the clans in a wide variety of contexts."<sup>644</sup> Parliamentary reports also acknowledge that "judges and law enforcement officials have not remained immune either."<sup>645</sup> This pattern of utilising external professional service providers further reinforces the trend in which the organisation aptly harnesses (external and systemic) market forces, services and expertise in pursuit of its strategic ends. In a further variation of this theme, the organisation is also able to call in on favours, including from those to whom it has given loans, as well as draw on a cadre of non-affiliated businesspeople that are turned into so-called *prestanome* (or 'front men') for purposes such as developing relationships with banks.<sup>646</sup> Similarly, and true to the organisation's code of loyalty, family relatives who are not directly involved in criminal activities and trusted affiliates without convictions may also be put to task as the official owners of mafia-controlled assets, including in new territories.<sup>647</sup>

Meanwhile, the growing emphasis on economic investments and money laundering activities outside of Italy fits within the 'Ndrangheta's strategy of taking advantage of more permissive legislative and regulatory frameworks. Thus, a joint Italian-Hungarian law enforcement operation conducted in January 2023 highlighted the ways in which the organisation had set up money laundering mechanisms, including a web of bank accounts, in Budapest.<sup>648</sup> Even in Italy, a country equipped with draconian anti-mafia laws, the sheer number of suspicious transaction reports (STRs) submitted by the private sector under existing compliance requirements significantly complicates the task of identifying 'Ndrangheta-related financial activity within the wider sea of reporting: over 110,000 such reports are submitted every year.<sup>649</sup> This is despite the fact that, although difficult to estimate, an often-cited study by the Demoskopika research institute placed the 'Ndrangheta revenue at around 3.5% of Italy's gross domestic product (GDP), with around 24 billion Euros earned from drug trafficking alone.<sup>650</sup>

#### (Counter) Intelligence and operational security

As might be expected from any organisation involved in criminal activities, the 'Ndrangheta has also developed strong operational and internal security protocols to prevent infiltration and disruption. As previously highlighted, the combination of a clan-based composition and code of honour that emphasises loyalty, secrecy and silence constitutes the bedrock of its internal

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<sup>642</sup> L. Mirenda *et al.*, *The boss on board: Mafia infiltrations, firm performance, and local economic growth*, Centre for Economic Policy Research, 26 October 2016, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/boss-board-mafia-infiltrations-firm-performance-and-local-economic-growth>.

<sup>643</sup> E.G. Parini, p. 60.

<sup>644</sup> Camera Dei Deputati, Doc. XXIII (2006), p. 62.

<sup>645</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>646</sup> Italy's 'Ndrangheta hit by major international bust, *The Local* (IT), 5 December 2018, <https://www.thelocal.it/20181205/italy-ndrangheta-mafia-suspects-bust/>.

<sup>647</sup> E. Ciconte, p. 44; See also A. Ulrich, *Inside the World of the 'Ndrangheta*, *Der Spiegel*, 4 January 2012.

<sup>648</sup> *New Action against 'Ndrangheta in Italy and Hungary*, Eurojust press release, January 2023, <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/news/new-action-against-ndrangheta-italy-and-hungary>

<sup>649</sup> DIA 2021, p. 12.

<sup>650</sup> *'Ndrangheta mafia 'made more last year than McDonald's and Deutsche Bank'*, *The Guardian*, 26 March 2014.



defence and resilience strategy.<sup>651</sup> This helps to explain the small number of state witnesses and collaborators of justice (so-called *pentiti*) willing to defect from – or testify against – the organisation, in comparison to other branches of the Italian Mafia. The significance of family ties within the organisation acts as a further bulwark against informers and infiltration by the state security services, not least because “a Calabrian Mafioso who decides to collaborate would have to denounce his father, children, siblings, uncles, grandchildren, cousins, and in-laws.”<sup>652</sup> Moreover, judicial documents highlight the fact that no head of a major ‘Ndrangheta locale has accepted to turn against the organisation.”<sup>653</sup> The ‘Ndrangheta has also adopted practical measures to protect its criminal operations, including the use of specially encrypted communications.<sup>654</sup>

## 6.5 Bringing it together

Describing the evolution of the ‘Ndrangheta in recent years, an Italian attorney involved in counter-mafia operations concluded that the organisation “shoots less but corrupts more, and always has relations with the world of business and politics.”<sup>655</sup> To a large extent, this aptly articulates both the strategic logic and *modus operandi* of what has become one of the most efficient clandestine organisations in the world. Often staying below the regulatory and law enforcement radar, the ‘Ndrangheta has, through a combination of infiltration, alliances with some of the most powerful organised groups in the world, co-option, judicious financial investments and a highly exportable and self-sufficient operating structure, succeeded in both retaining influence in its ‘domestic’ Calabrian fiefdom and securing access to new territories overseas. True, any claim that the organisation’s ‘colonising’ approach is carefully choreographed by what equates to a central ‘authority’ in San Luca would miss the extent to which the ‘Ndrangheta acts as a fluid, distributed network within which clans, the ‘*ndrine*, have significant autonomy. At the same time, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the ‘Ndrangheta demonstrates a high level of cohesion, allowing it to add up to more than the sum of its parts and act as a strategic, power-projecting entity. This is in no small way a product of its internal ethos, narrative and recruitment processes, all of which contribute to its identity, whilst emphasising a sense of belonging to a wider family and brotherhood. What is striking, moreover, is the extent to which the organisation, through a combination of trial and error, strategic guile and (inevitably) having to adapt to law enforcement disruptions, has if anything become more efficient. This is evidenced not only through its transnational business partnerships, but also through its exploitation of commercial systems, logistics processes, financial vehicles and professional networks in what amounts to a blurring of lines between the traditional criminal ‘underworld’ and the ‘legitimate’ as well as formal ‘upper-world’.

The above dynamics are directly relevant to the thesis’ central investigation, whilst at the same time reintroducing some of the challenges to the state-centric paradigm outlined earlier in the dissertation. Firstly, the case study supports the argument that even criminal organisations are fundamentally *political* in nature with significant agency with respect to formulating policy and strategy decisions aimed at challenging state authority, increasing territorial expansion and forging partnerships (hypothesis 1). Critically, the organisation’s *glocal* (global-local) characteristics reveal how clandestine non-state actors emerging from highly localised contexts and environments can spread tentacles further afield, including in different cultural

<sup>651</sup> L. Paoli, *Crime Italian Style*, p. 5.

<sup>652</sup> E. Ciconte, p. 36.

<sup>653</sup> Hearing of the Assistant Public Prosecutor at the Court of Reggio Calabria, Verbatim report No. 27, Sitting of 14 April 2014.

<sup>654</sup> This was the case when specially converted encrypted phones using the EncroChat and Sky ECC communication tool were cracked. See ‘Cocaine: Increasingly Attractive for a Wider Range of Criminal Networks’, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), 6 May 2022.

<sup>655</sup> *Emessa dal GIP del Tribunale di Catanzaro*, cited in DIA (2021), p. 14.

and political environments, as part of a networked power system. Secondly, the case study reveals what has proven to be a highly adaptive and resilient organisation (hypothesis 2) aided by its devolved, horizontal structure. This same morphology has meant that the core functions and activities of individual parts of the organisation could be easily replaced or reactivated by others or new clans in the event of disruption.<sup>656</sup> Thirdly, the case study shows how the 'Ndrangheta has effectively combined multiple approaches and instruments of power, including by establishing complex trading, logistics and financial systems (hypothesis 3). Clearly, the argument could be advanced that the organisation's devolved and decentralised character means that it cannot (even conceptually) be compared to a miniature state actor. Whilst there may be some grounds for this challenge, the counter-argument would be that states themselves need not be highly centralised or monolithic, such as in the case of highly federalised political systems and/or countries where local government entities enjoy a high-level of political autonomy (to include overseas territories). Still, addressing this thesis' overarching research question of whether different clandestine non-actors display similar or, indeed, recurring approaches to projecting power requires the investigation of additional groups as a basis for comparison – the precise focus of the two subsequent chapters.

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<sup>656</sup> Conceptually this might be compared to the military concept of 'reinforcement' within the traditional war-fighting doctrines of states.