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NEW REPORT WARNS THAT DRONE WARFARE IN UKRAINE COULD INSPIRE ORGANIZED CRIME

Key points

- The Russo-Ukrainian War may be a game-changer in terms of sophistication, scale and cost of drone use by criminal groups – already a Mexican cartel member has come to Ukraine to learn how to fly FPV drones.
- Based on in-depth consultations with Ukrainian drone pilots, this report assesses how organized criminal groups may use drones in the three major domains – land, sea and air.
- In the air, smuggling low-weight, high-profit commodities such as drugs and tobacco will be the most natural fit.
- Land drones offer a novel tool. As smuggling vehicles, they have larger payloads but are limited by communication and terrain requirements and their short range. They may however be effective offensive tools for crime if mounted with shotguns or machine guns, as has been seen in Ukraine.
- Sea drones offer long range and big payloads, though at a high cost – probably most useful to drug traffickers moving drugs around a region, or arms traffickers looking to send bulk shipments discreetly.
- The human factor is critical to remember – drones need to be piloted, assembled, transported and met. Expertise in communications technology, navigation, covert operations and avoiding counter-measures will turn a useful tool into a transformational one.

War has often been an innovator, bringing new technologies to the civilian sphere, but in the Russo-Ukraine War both sides have turned to a civilian technology and weaponised it to devastating effect. Over the past three years, drones have become an integral part of the conflict, used for everything from reconnaissance to resupply, but their biggest impact has been lethality. By some estimates, drones now account for 70% of all front-line casualties.

Criminal groups had already been using drones before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. For example, Mexican cartels have used them for over a decade to smuggle drugs, conduct reconnaissance and drop improvised explosives on their enemies. But the Russo-Ukrainian war has vastly increased the sophistication and range of the drone arsenal, while the demands of war have expanded their operational capacity to include complex and challenging tasks.

In the face of this twin evolution of hardware and expertise, criminal use of drones may therefore be on the brink of an evolutionary step change. In October 2025, reports emerged of a Mexican cartel member who had been sent to Ukraine to learn how to pilot FPVs as part of the International Legion – skills he planned to transfer to his criminal career afterwards. Fibre-optic drones – a relatively recent battlefield innovation – have also already found their way

into Mexican criminal hands.

To map these risks in a systematic way, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has issued a report to map how the skills, experiences, techniques, tactics, and technological advances in drones as a consequence of the Russo-Ukrainian war could be transferred to organised criminal groups.

This report assesses how different drone platforms across the three main domains – air, land and sea – could be adapted to perform certain criminal tasks. Drawing on the experience of Ukrainian drone pilots, the report reveals the opportunities and limitations of drones to criminal groups, providing an in-depth strategic assessment of their applicability and utility to different spheres of the underworld.

Beyond simply providing another criminal tool, drones may fundamentally alter the composition of criminal groups in the future. “Drones have the potential to revolutionise how organized crime works. If integrated into criminal operations, they may help drive an industrialisation of criminal activity, where illicit goods can be moved anonymously and at scale, particularly with the help of AI. Drones may also significantly extend the capacity for criminal groups to use violence at scale and by diverse and innovative means. Our report shows how this is happening and offers recommendations to pre-empt and prepare for this dangerous trend”, explains Paddy Ginn, senior expert at the GI-TOC.

To tackle this escalating threat, the report recommends a coordinated response based on three timed phases:

- Immediate responses: Conduct threat triage and hotspot mapping to produce a geo-tagged risk map identifying high-frequency corridors. Implement low-cost detection and hardening measures, including human observation, raised vantage points, visual/night cameras, nets, and physical barriers around high-value drop zones. Standardise incident reporting and forensic collection protocols for downed drones, ensuring rapid evidence capture and consistent reporting.
- Short term: Pilot-layered sensor deployments combining acoustic, radio frequency, and electro-optical detection at representative sites, assessing fidelity, false alarm rates, and operational burden. Establish a legal clearance roadmap with aviation authorities, communications regulators, and prosecutors to enable rapid, lawful active mitigation. Target enablers through intelligence operations to identify drone fabricators, component suppliers, and local coordinators, prioritising disruption of workshops and logistics hubs over low-level couriers. Form cross-agency task forces integrating border guard, military, narcotics, customs, and prosecutorial resources for rapid interdiction and evidence handling.
- Long term: Enhance regional cooperation with joint interdiction efforts, sharing telemetry, imagery, and forensics, and establishing joint investigative teams for known transnational routes. Regulate critical drone components and commercial sales through licensing, export controls, or audits. Develop a technology roadmap and procurement strategy that focus on scalable, upgradable countermeasure sensors and integrated data-fusion platforms rather than single-purpose devices. Enhance demand-side interventions to reduce uptake.

The report is available at the following address: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/crime-by-drone-a-new-paradigm-for-organized-crime/>

For more information or to interview the report's authors, please write to: newsroom@globalinitiative.net

ABOUT THE GI-TOC

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a network of professionals working on the front lines of the fight against the illicit economy and criminal actors. Through a network of global civil society observatories on the illicit economy, we monitor evolving trends and work to build the evidence basis for policy action, disseminate the expertise of our Network, and catalyze multisectoral and holistic responses across a range of crime types. With the Global Initiative's Resilience Fund, we support community activists and local non-governmental organizations working in areas where crime governance critically undermines people's safety, security and life chances.