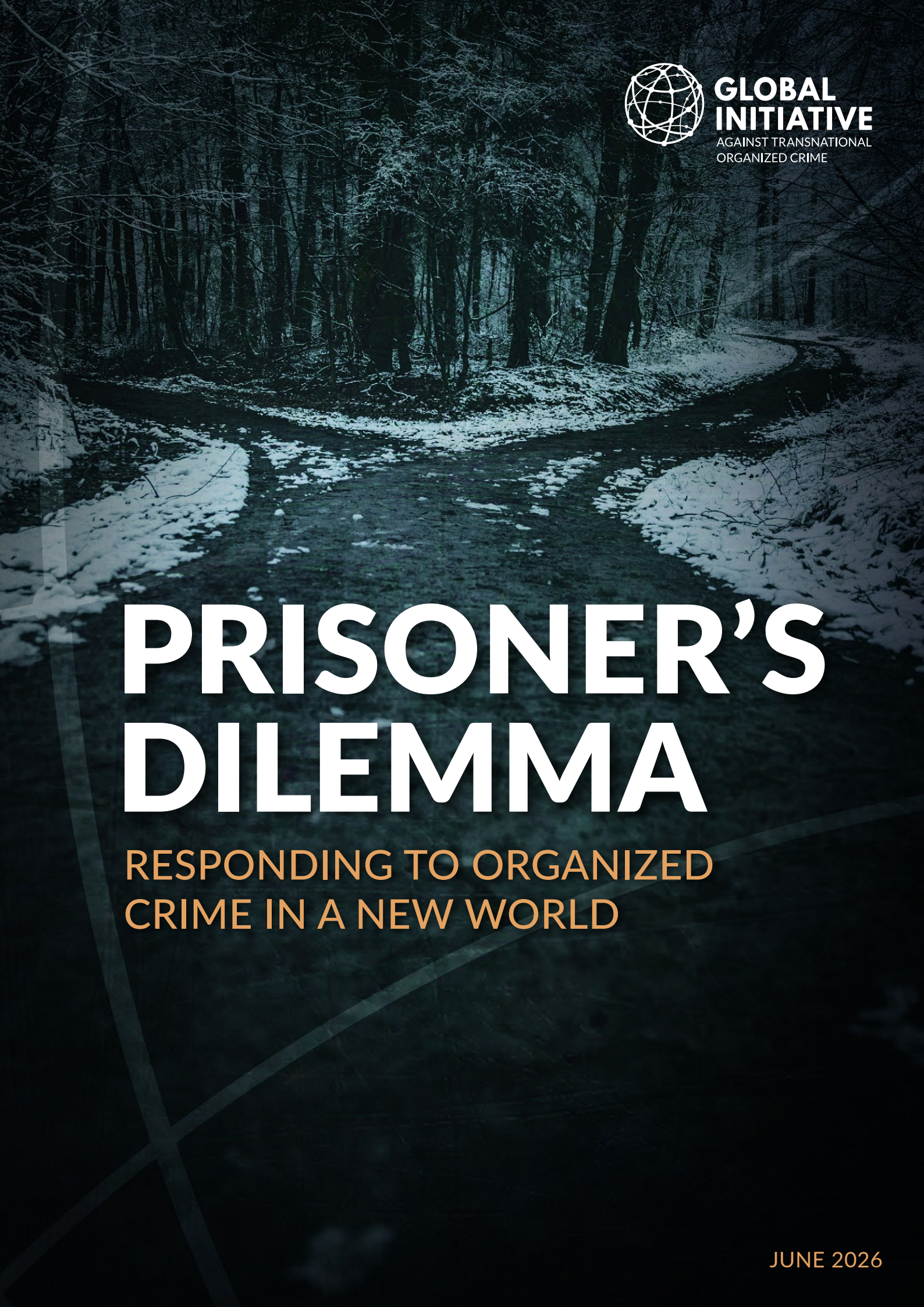

GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

PRISONER'S DILEMMA

RESPONDING TO ORGANIZED CRIME IN A NEW WORLD

JUNE 2026

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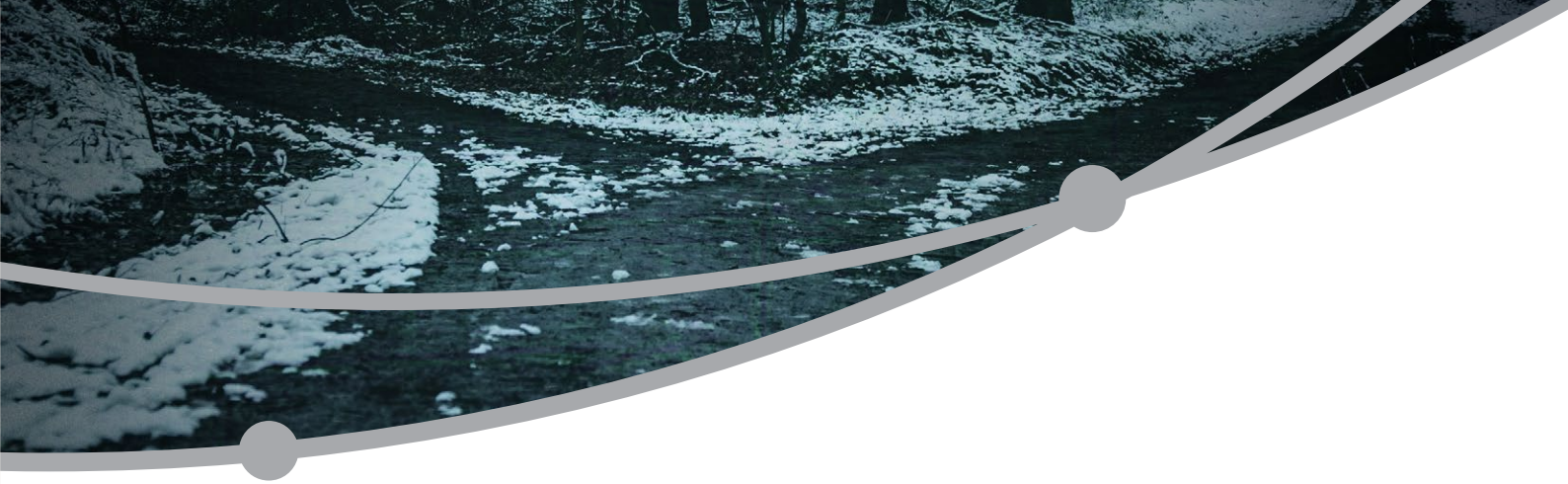
CONTENTS

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial intelligence
AML	Anti-money laundering
CFT	Countering the financing of terrorism
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
IMO	International Maritime Organization
UNCAC	United Nations Convention against Corruption
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNTOC	United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
WCO	World Customs Organization



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past three decades, the world has constructed a set of norms that provide a comprehensive framework for combating organized crime. There has been a harmonization of national legislation, increased focus on money laundering and other mechanisms of organized crime, and a flourishing of research and understanding about how illicit markets and organized criminal actors work. The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), adopted in 2000, became the pinnacle of strategic decision-making around organized crime, bringing together the many debates and communities of interest across multiple illicit markets.

In theory, this normative baseline would have been followed by a wave of unified implementation. Organized crime would have been tackled in a strategic, cooperative and systematic way around the world.

But it has not worked out like that. Instead, organized crime, illicit markets and the geopolitical environment have changed beyond recognition: we are living in a new world. The global consensus forged around the UNTOC in 2000 is under strain amid a broader climate of growing unilateralism and nationalism, and higher levels of geopolitical friction than at any time since the Cold War. States are increasingly instrumentalizing criminal actors and acting more criminally; along with diplomacy, intelligence and economics, crime has become a recognized lever of state power. This is not an entirely new situation – states have worked with criminals throughout history – but the increasing capabilities and varieties of organized crime today offer states more options, more reach and more potential benefit.

Organized crime has also changed beyond recognition – and the response has not kept pace. Drugs and thugs remain present, but elsewhere the world is facing an entirely new order of threat. Today, organized crime is no longer just a concern of the dark street corner – it is woven into every facet of daily lives. Supply chains are corrupted; governance is compromised; legal systems are warped. We carry organized crime in our pockets every day, in the smartphones that act as potential portals to a world of drugs, scams, sex trafficking, weapons and more.

Responses to organized crime have fractured into a duopoly, mirroring the political schisms that have opened up in recent years. On one side is what might be termed a liberal consensus, which emerged in the 1990s, advocating holistic solutions, greater cooperation and a focus on reducing harms. The other, which has gained more prominence in recent years, is more kinetic. It favours militarized

interventions, *mano dura* policies, unilateral action and hard-line prohibition. And as economic strains grow and political and policy attention is diverted to crises such as the wars in Ukraine, Palestine and Iran, resources are also being redirected from systemic responses that address the root causes of organized crime, such as equitable and broad-based economic growth, climate change, social cohesion, conflict and corruption.

So, what do we do? First, we need to recognize the uniqueness of the moment and the challenge of planning in arguably the most unpredictable situation in living memory. We need to take stock of the current set of approaches to global organized crime, acknowledge the limitations of what we have tried to date and be realistic about what we can achieve in the future. We need to ask the uncomfortable, difficult questions. Is global cooperation on organized crime still possible? Is there a place for short-term militarized responses? Is the criminal justice system adequate for the current situation? How do we measure success?

But this is also not the moment for defeatism. The world has shown that it can react to a crisis – and fast. The development and rollout of COVID-19 vaccines or the response to global terrorism are but two examples. Today, we need to bring that same sense of urgency, imagination and ambition to the global crisis of organized crime.

Most of all, we need to believe that change is possible. In the past, states have changed tactics and passed legislation that have had a real impact on organized crime, such as the US RICO Act, the Italian 416-bis law and Japan's Anti-Boryokudan law and local exclusion ordinances.[1] Such responses invariably have their faults as well as strengths, but inertia is also not an option. We need a reimagining of what is possible and necessary to fight organized crime in the world today, acknowledging that real change may require radical change, all the while ensuring the rule of law and human rights remain at the heart of our responses.

But we also need to recognize that real impact can only be achieved collectively. In the game theory concept of the prisoner's dilemma, the greatest rewards come through cooperation, even if individuals are tempted to act selfishly due to the prospect of personal advantage. Responses to global organized crime face a similar dilemma today: the temptation to act unilaterally may seem the quickest route to success, but ultimately it will not produce the best overall outcome.

Many of the developments in the world today may appear to be for the worse, but with the right engagement we can also harness this time of change for positive action. This report identifies six action steps that can help us steer through the cross-currents currently reshaping the world towards a new concept of how to combat organized crime.

Six action steps

1. **Make the multilateral system fit for purpose.** The UNTOC is a beacon for the potential of strategic policymaking on organized crime on a global level, but in practice aspects of the multilateral system have become sclerotic, performative and dysfunctional. Reform is urgently required to ensure the system – both at the UN and other global bodies – is fit to tackle the modern challenge. We also need new independent platforms where strategic assessments of organized crime can be made, and coalitions of like-minded partners can convene and share lessons learned about how to respond to organized crime without political 'editing'.

2. **Focus on responses, not reactions.** Crime has become a hot-button political topic and quick solutions are demanded for the visible signs of organized crime. Sometimes these are required – there is a place for constitutional states of emergency – but the enablers and root causes of crime are going unaddressed. Dwelling on the past will not bring results in this new era of transactionalism: we need to make the case that a strategic response to organized crime is worthwhile, using hard data, public awareness and increased research.

3. **Tackle the enablers in the room.** We need new momentum on the perennial enablers of organized crime: technology, financial secrecy, compliance weaknesses and fintech, and trade vulnerabilities including special economic zones and flags of convenience. Changing the risk calculus for such activities is essential, but we also need to recapture a sense of innovation, ambition and belief that real change is possible.

4. **Counter the rule breakers.** Crime is increasingly being used as a tool of statecraft: in today's world, it has become a powerful instrument that offers states transnational reach, deniability and a host of potential applications. We need to exploit the vulnerabilities in such approaches and raise the political, economic and reputational costs for states engaging in or benefiting from criminal activity. It is also imperative that states do not respond in kind, but preserve the idea – and ideal – of the rule of law.

5. **Expose and assess.** Amid huge challenges to independent media and civil society, we need to keep talking. In the current climate, it is easy for silence to spread, but we must keep empowering these voices to bring accountability, foster resilience and inform responses. Alongside those exposing criminal dynamics on the ground – the investigative journalists and ordinary citizens – we require independent strategic analyses of the criminal situation to inform and shape the public and policy debate.

6. **Plan for the future.** Planning for 2026 is planning for redundancy. We need to extend the lens to see what organized crime will look like in 2036. We need to undertake serious forecasting with experts in every field in which organized crime is present in order to anticipate future challenges.

INTRODUCTION: CHANGING CRIME IN A CHANGING WORLD

Analysts are fond of proclaiming the dawn of a new era, but such declarations no longer feel premature. The change has not happened overnight – there are a number of geopolitical milestones that have marked the journey – but in 2026, it is hard to avoid the sense of an acceleration towards a new state of affairs, a new order emerging.[2]

If the 1990s were the peak of globalization, multilateralism and democracy, the 2020s have been characterized by the rise in geopolitical friction, nationalism and authoritarianism. Many feel that the so-called 'rules-based international order' is under threat; some argue it has already broken. The interests of some states are increasingly challenging and redefining the norms we live by.[3] The 'non-defensive war' prohibited by the UN Charter is back in vogue, resulting in 'the world … experiencing a surge in violence not seen since the post-World War II era', according to the Peace Research Institute Oslo.[4]

Looking ahead, there are several geopolitical flashpoints that may cause unforeseen change, such as China's intentions for Taiwan, and the long-term consequences of conflicts in places such as Iran, Ukraine, Myanmar, Sudan and Palestine.

If the world has changed enormously in the past three decades, then so has organized crime. Back in the 1990s, the core concern that fed into the development of the UNTOC was mafia-style groups – 'rigid structures operating in defiance of the state, motivated by material gain and largely detached from formal governance systems' – but that focus is now severely outdated.[5] The diverse and sophisticated criminal ecosystem that arose after the end of the Cold War and the advent of globalization and the internet has continued to develop.

Some of this has been driven by internal pressures, as organized crime continues to devise more sophisticated, efficient and lucrative business models and schemes. Illicit practices have percolated around the world, such as the spread of scam centres, the use of young people as hitmen or the local production of synthetic drugs. Migrant smuggling has industrialized, feeding off the economic desperation of conflict-related instability.[6]

The internet and associated technologies have provided new turf and tools for organized crime. Compared to the crude spam campaigns of the 1990s, cybercrime today has matured into a vast and sophisticated ecosystem – one that can reach more than 6 billion potential victims, or almost

three-quarters of the world's population.[7] More and more, organized crime is adopting digital tools and assets to conduct its business, from social media applications to cryptocurrency. Crime-as-a-service is lowering the threshold of entry: today, a criminal entrepreneur in the world of synthetic drugs, scams or cybercrime does not need to serve a long apprenticeship or establish complicated logistics chains; they can simply buy the tools, data and service providers they need. And the arc of change is accelerating even faster with artificial intelligence (AI). New forms of hardware, such as drones and 3D-printed weapons, are also generating new forms of criminal capability, although traditional tools are still in plentiful supply.

But organized crime has also kept a weather eye on current affairs. We have seen criminal step-changes taking place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts and climate change – all of which have been grist to the criminal mill. Scam compounds, for example, have boomed since the pandemic, turning scams and fraud into a globalized trillion-dollar economy off the back of AI, trafficked labour and the increasing post-pandemic integration with the online realm.[8]

It is also true that the world today is arguably a more amendable place for organized crime than ever. There has been a proliferation of 'safe havens' – places of corruption and complicity where criminals can operate without fear of sanction, hiding behind borders and exploiting ruptures in international law enforcement cooperation. On top of a general increase in breaches in international law, some states are also making more use of criminals for political ends, from sanctions evasion and cybercrime to sabotage and assassination – a phenomenon the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) has termed 'geocriminality'.[9]

In that light, the failure of the states parties to the UNTOC to define 'organized crime' appears almost prescient: organized crime manifests in so many ways, and with such a range of actors, that a single unified idea of what it constitutes was bound to be elusive. In the 1990s, nobody would class a single person as an 'organized criminal' – but armed with the right tools, a single cybercriminal today can make more money than an entire drug gang. In some places, organized crime is as sophisticated as some of the most advanced practices in the licit sphere, using technology, cryptocurrencies, the financial system and AI to create extremely complex schemes. In others, it is purely analogue, relying on the tried and trusted practices of drug trafficking, turf wars, extortion and use of weapons – often with devastating effects, as seen recently in Haiti.[10]

US airstrikes in Tehran, Iran, March 2026. The conflict is the latest in a string of wars that have broken out in recent years. *© Fatemeh Bahrami/Anadolu via Getty Images*

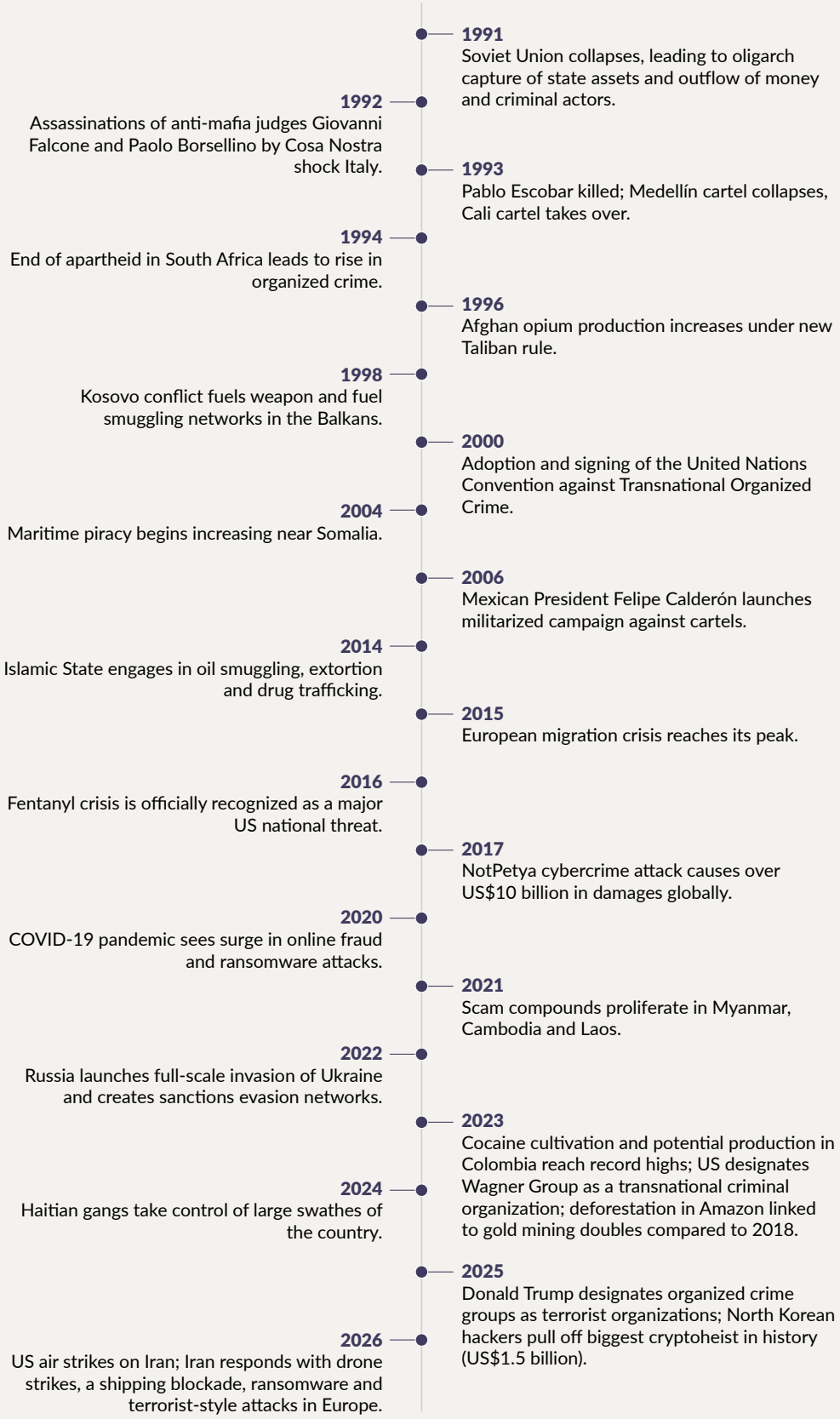


FIGURE 1 Major geopolitical events linked to organized crime since the end of the Cold War.

Even the idea of illegality as a core component of organized crime is up for question. Perhaps one of the most startling findings of the 2025 Global Organized Crime Index is that mafia-style actors are the least influential actor category when it comes to criminality. Instead, it is state-embedded actors – ministers, bureaucrats, local politicians, council members, law enforcement agents and the like – who are the most influential.[11] This essentially inverts the UNTOC focus from 2000, with serious implications for fundamental notions such as the rule of law and governance.

Beyond those directly engaged in criminality, there is a sprawling apparatus of enablers in tandem with the global illicit economy: the intermediaries and mechanisms that help launder dirty money, provide legitimate or fake documentation, and move and buy illicit cargoes, among other tasks. Some of these enablers are unwitting and unwilling participants, such as postal and fast parcel services used to move drugs and weapon components. Others occupy a grey area, where formal policies prohibiting illicit activity sit alongside business models that promote and profit from that same activity, as is the case with some social media giants.

Today, it is possible to detect the visible and invisible traces of organized crime in almost every aspect of our lives. It can be found in the illegally mined sand used for the concrete that built your team's new football stadium; the counterfeit football shirt you bought from the market, made with trafficked labour; the delivery of food handed over by a young man who hired human smugglers to escape poverty and conflict, but now finds himself trapped in a netherworld of informal work. It can be found in our FSC-certified wooden furniture where the label has been faked; the message that pops up on your social media from an attractive person who says they'd like to get to know you, except they're a scammer in a compound half the world away.

In some ways, the term 'organized crime' has become something of a Frankenstein's monster – an assemblage of disparate illicit markets and actors that work together, yet each with a life of its own. And it is this complexity, variety and volume that makes it so challenging to respond to.

Looking ahead, organized crime will continue to adapt. Conflict, international relations and the spread of AI, among other factors, will all change, extend and qualify criminal reach and power in novel ways. The diagnosis we have made in the past about organized crime will become increasingly anachronistic. As such, we need to recognize and respond to the challenges as they exist today, and forecast the new paradigm.

HOW TO RESPOND TO ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE WORLD TODAY

There is no shortage of ideas about how to improve the current response to organized crime; every report on organized crime and the illicit economy always comes with a sizeable list of recommendations.[12] This report focuses on the challenges these recommendations face in today's geopolitical climate, where calls for increased cooperation and resources must make themselves heard against strong countervailing winds. It points up the difficulties and the limitations, the arguments and counterarguments, to highlight that responses to organized crime are invariably shaped by a host of factors outside the pure enforcement of the letter of the law.

Make the multilateral system fit for purpose

On paper, the multilateral system offers a comprehensive response to organized crime. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), INTERPOL, the Egmont Group, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the World Customs Organization (WCO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), alongside a host of regional bodies, represent a powerful cluster of capabilities. The UNTOC and the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) have led the way in setting global norms and promoting legislative harmonization around the areas of organized crime and corruption. There are even overarching bodies that harmonize these platforms on specific themes, such as the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime, which brings together the CITES Secretariat, INTERPOL, UNODC, the World Bank and the WCO.

Yet the promise of multilateralism is struggling to deliver in the sphere of combating organized crime. There are several reasons for this.

The first is a failure to adapt. Many of the approaches developed have not kept pace with the rate of change, where the volume and complexity of organized crime have increased. As mentioned above, the UNTOC was created to address mafia-style groups and not the diffuse, multi-layered and multi-polar criminal world we see today. The WCO was already struggling to cope with the volume of container shipping, and now faces a new challenge in the use of express courier services and the postal system

for drug, wildlife and weapon trafficking.[13] Similarly, the IMO is facing the rise of the 'shadow fleet' for sanctions busting, while cryptocurrencies and the *hawala* system have complicated traditional anti-money laundering (AML) efforts.

The second is a lack of effectiveness. The UNTOC and UNCAC may have helped set the rules of the game, but few appear to be following them. Interpretation and implementation of domestic jurisprudence varies widely, as does enforcement, and there is a general lack of data of the impact of capacity building and improving cooperation.[14] Aspects of the UNTOC remain critically underutilized: in 2010, then head of the UNODC Yury Fedotov said that only 19 of the 157 states parties were using the convention to facilitate international cooperation to fight organized crime.[15] In 2021, the UNODC estimated that there had been more than 1 000 cases in which the UNTOC was used, or attempted to be used, for international cooperation, but 'reliable information to establish or even estimate that number is not available'.[16] The UNODC's leadership has also at times been complicit in this drift towards ineffectiveness, with several executive directors preferring to keep member states onside, and civil society outside, rather than engage in critical debates about the efficacy of approaches, resulting in lowest-common denominator outcomes.[17]

Headquarters of the UNODC in Vienna, part of the architecture against organized crime that was constructed during the golden age of multilateralism. *© Eric Lalmand/Belga Mag/AFP via Getty Images*

The FATF, which has done much to set and disseminate AML and countering the financing of terrorism (CFT) standards, has also faced criticism that money laundering continues to flourish despite the increasing burden of AML compliance.[18] (The FATF has introduced a 'results-orientated follow-up assessment process' to address this.)[19] The body has also been criticized for awarding certain countries clean bills of financial health despite the fact such countries are widely considered to be integral components of the global money-laundering landscape.[20] Regulation over fast-moving technology has often been slow, and the AML/CFT sector has also struggled with the fact that regulation capacity is now often needed across a wider set of sectors.

The final reason is dysfunction. The UN system has become slow moving, internally fractured and underfunded, with member states' consensus increasingly difficult to achieve. This was seen, for instance, at the March 2026 sessions of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs, where no resolutions achieved consensus and there were growing signs of political divergence.[21] Elsewhere, the fledgling UN Convention against Cybercrime has already hit a procedural deadlock.[22] Following a generation of zero-based budgets, in recent years money is increasingly leaking out of the system amid a donor crisis, with dire consequences for its operations and staffing.[23] INTERPOL's budget remains strained, despite increasing marginally.[24] Outside the UN, international conventions such as CITES are facing the threat of member withdrawals, with CITES' role in regulating the wildlife trade becoming undermined as a result.[25] Accountability is also lacking within the multilateral system, and the much-delayed UNTOC review mechanism has failed to produce results.

There are also worrying signs that the multilateral system itself is being politicized. INTERPOL's Red Notice system, for instance, has become a means for states to target political undesirables under the label of criminals. Similar allegations were reported in 2021 at the Egmont Group – designed to foster

cooperation between financial intelligence units – where these were 'allegedly misusing the powers conferred to them under their national AML/CFT frameworks … limiting or coercing civil society actors for their work and critiques of current governments in their jurisdictions'.[26]

Given the many criticisms, it is worth asking whether the multilateral system is still fit for purpose and, if not, what its absence might look like in terms of fighting organized crime.

It is already clear that many states are in effect working without much regard for it. Alongside unilateral actions, the notion of 'mini-' or 'flexi-lateralism' has gained currency since Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney mooted the idea of 'different coalitions for different issues based on common values and interests' at the World Economic Forum in January 2026.[27] Some ideas about how this might work in practice for organized crime have already been put forward, including a Five Eyes-style alliance focused on disrupting the enablers of organized crime (although this particular concept risks leaving valuable partners out, and recent political divergences between the partners point to the potential instability inherent in such coalitions).[28] In April 2026, the EU provided a practical demonstration of the principle, announcing a partnership with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to respond to scam centres.[29]

Such coalitions offer a more agile and focused way of responding to specific concerns, especially in comparison to the multilateral system. They have been tried in the past, and have worked. The outbreak of piracy off the Horn of Africa in the mid-2000s, for example, led to a range of international efforts, including the EU's Operation Atalanta, NATO's Ocean Shield and the US-led Combined Task Force 151, that effectively dealt with the issue at the time.[30]

On the other hand, such approaches also increase politicizing the response to illicit markets, risking that law enforcement may become a stalking horse for projections of power, geopolitical competition and economic gain. Whose values will matter most in a multipolar world, and what will happen when different values come into conflict? This may be particularly concerning when states have a high tolerance of working with organized crime groups that help further their objectives and interests abroad – and create crime-fighting frameworks that tacitly accept such actors (see 'Counter the rule breakers' below).[31]

Now more than ever, global norms and a global forum are desperately needed. Compromised and conflicted as it is, the UNTOC remains a beacon of consensus about the urgent need to tackle crime and the only place where all the various discussions come together on a global level, creating a truly strategic level of decision-making. Because of the UNTOC, we have common definitions, standardized domestic laws, extradition frameworks and law enforcement cooperation tools. There is little to be gained and much to be lost in a world without a vision of how we can all cooperate to solve the most pressing issues of our time.

Multilateral instruments may be judged to have fallen short, but dysfunction should not be a pretext for dismantlement. The UN has gone through such periods before: the UN Security Council during the Cold War, for instance, was a model of diplomatic deadlock between the Soviet Union and the West.[32] It is also worth noting that positive results generally speak more quietly than failures: the UN system has brought much good to the world since its inception, and those achievements should also be remembered in the current conversation.[33] Most of all, a multilateral approach is essential in addressing what is fundamentally a transnational problem. Contemporary organized crime has thrived in the grey spaces of international regulation – today we require stronger alignment and a united front against priority crimes, not more division.

Ultimately, three measures are needed to revive the multilateral system.

The first is serious reform. If the UN's approach to organized crime is to have genuine impact, changes must be made, although a wholesale reinvention is arguably not desirable in today's current political climate. A 'new' UNTOC designed to reflect and combat the state of organized crime today would not garner the same consensus as its predecessor in 2000, and arguably would fail in its purpose, being diluted and more politicized. But smaller-scale reform may help improve performance. The upcoming Crime Congress and appointment of the new executive director at the UNODC are opportunities for a system reboot. Budgets may be tight, but work can be done. Meaningful cooperation in the legislative and operational realms must replace bureaucratic busywork that eats up working hours for little tangible result. Already there are signs of progress in improving policy coherence, such as the UN System Common Approach to Prevent and Address Transnational Organized Crime.[34]

The second is a mechanism by which the increasing tendency of states to form coalitions to deal with issues of organized crime can be brought under the umbrella of the multilateral system. This should not be in an effort to control them, but to harmonize their impact and harness the energy and direction that such coalitions will bring to the response against organized crime. If incorporated into the system, innovation, flexibility and manoeuvrability may persuade more member states to use it.

The third is an independent platform that can strategically assess the current state and trends of organized crime and illicit economies. This platform, open to all who are genuinely incentivized to work together on issues of transnational organized crime, could be truly cross-sectoral, involving coalitions of states, law enforcement agencies, the private sector, government, academics, civil society, researchers and others. This would not aim to replace the role of the UNODC, but to complement it by providing another lens of analysis and a place to formulate responses that is less subject to political scrutiny and review.[35]

Focus on responses, not reactions

In recent years, certain forms of organized crime have moved to the centre of the political discussion in many countries, leading many states to adopt a harder line. Human smuggling has become a highly charged and politically resonant topic in many places, especially in Europe, South Africa, Türkiye and the US.[36] US President Donald Trump has massively increased the resources of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, up from less than US$6 billion in 2016 to US$85 billion in 2026 – higher than 'all other federal law enforcement agencies combined', as one analyst noted.[37] Hard-line border responses are also gaining traction in Latin America. In March 2026, José Antonio Kast, the newly inaugurated Chilean president who had won on a platform of combating illegal migration and organized crime, pledged to deport over 330 000 irregular migrants and build a border barrier across three of Chile's northern regions.[38] In Europe, the UK has pledged to 'smash the gangs' behind small boat crossings over the Channel, ramping up funding for law enforcement focused on organized immigration crime and other border security measures, including cooperation with France.[39] The EU's 2028–2034 proposed budget includes significantly increased funding for FRONTEX, the European border and coast guard agency.[40]

Gangs and cartels are also increasingly in the policy spotlight. One of the most notable policy shifts occured in January 2025, when the US designated certain organized crime groups as terrorist organizations. This provided law enforcement agencies with more resources and a 'freer hand', although

Mass court hearing for MS-13 gang members in El Salvador, where President Nayib Bukele has led a sweeping crackdown in recent years. *© Alex Pena/Anadolu via Getty Images*

many analysts have highlighted the risks of such an approach, including the potential for unwitting businesses to be implicated in providing 'material support' to terrorists.[41] Some Latin American countries suffering from high levels of gang-related violence and where concerns about crime are foremost in citizens' priorities, such as Costa Rica, Chile, El Salvador and Mexico, are also pivoting to more hard-line responses.[42]

These militarized interventions may bring short-term benefits in terms of decreasing violence, and there is a strong case for states of emergencies and special powers when the criminal situation has become critical. But it is essential that such measures are put in place constitutionally, are of limited duration and are subject to independent review. Such measures should ultimately serve to strengthen the rule of law, not abuse it. Other countries, such as Sweden and France, have ratcheted up their responses to acute crime problems without a fundamental compromise of their rights-based frameworks, although some have voiced concerns.[43]

It is also essential that we remain clear-eyed about the benefits, costs and limitations of such interventions when it comes to the long-term response to organized crime. Salvadorean President Nayib Bukele's approach to the gangs has been cited as being effective in curtailing their power,[44] but not only is its constitutional basis highly contested,[45] it is also doubtful how it could be applied elsewhere. El Salvador is a small country with a strong military presence, and almost 1.7% of the country's population has been incarcerated – the highest rate in the world.[46] The lengthy sentences handed down to gang members (considered terrorists under national law) mean that many will never see freedom again – a huge strain on prison services.[47]

It also remains to be seen what the long-term consequences will be: in other countries that have attempted *mano dura* policies, like Mexico, Honduras and Brazil, organized crime has always sprung back. It is conceivable that in El Salvador a highly securitized approach may indeed suppress organized

crime, albeit at a high cost to human rights. This is a price many citizens weary of being held hostage to crime may be willing to pay for now, but as the power of the state grows and accountability decreases, the cost of this approach will rise, and there is no obvious off-ramp.

As hard-line responses increase, efforts to address the root causes of organized crime have been downgraded in many places due to a variety of reasons. Broad-based socio-economic development interventions are being crowded out as the cost-of-living crisis deepens, while political attention – and budgets – are focusing increasingly on security issues amid the rise in conflicts and geopolitical friction. In its 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index, Transparency International identified 'a concerning picture of long-term decline in leadership to tackle corruption'.[48]

One way of looking at this situation may be that we have grown more sensitive to the visible manifestations of crime – migrants, violence, gangs – and less focused on the invisible aspects that drive and protect it. Compelling simple messaging – 'lock them up', 'stop the boats', 'build the wall' – is trumping detailed analysis of the problem and short-circuiting the space for real solutions. And this is understandable. Ordinary people respond positively to measures that they see as directly addressing issues of concern, rather than technocratic explanations of drivers and trends, and the long-term sustainable interventions that will progressively reduce vulnerability.

There is little point bemoaning the shift in mood: the times have changed and our way of selling the public message about the best way to respond to organized crime must change too. In a world increasingly defined by nationalism and transactionalism – where states are looking for tangible returns on their dollar, euro, pound or peso[49] – we need to find data and messages that speak to the current zeitgeist. We need to bring to the surface the invisible, ongoing crisis that is organized crime in the world today – and convert that broad picture into quantifiable areas of harm that states and citizens recognize as being in their interests to address. We need to prove that addressing organized crime in a strategic way with international partners will bring better results than building walls or going after easy statistics. Within the short-term election mindset, we must sell the benefits of a sustained commitment.

Part of that may require a searching examination of our own criminal justice systems and law enforcement agencies in order to restore public confidence. In many places, populist hard-line responses have emerged due to the sentiment that the current systems were either unwilling or incapable of responding to the new challenge, happy to hide behind well-rehearsed speeches while failing to get a grip on the issue. If we are to truly tackle organized crime, we need to ensure that our own tools are fit for purpose. How can we speed up the passing of legislation and ensure that it has genuine bite? Can we balance aspects of a hard-line approach with respect for human rights and the rule of law? Does the punishment still fit the crime, or are adjustments needed? How can we address the chronic shortfall in law enforcement capacity, which is becoming acute in several places?

A key part of that argument must be had at the level of statistics, where we need to expand the idea of what kinds of data we are gathering and where we are getting it from. Incidents of theft, violence, murder and the like will always form the backbone of criminal statistics, as they correlate with the workings of the criminal justice system. But data should also reflect a set of harms generated by organized crime, not simply to provide a greater sense of impact, but to help policymakers understand the true cost of forms of organized crime that may be less visible, and help develop and improve legislation. Sources for such data should include civil society and the private sector, with data processing to ensure comparability, compatibility and coherence. The more informed the debate, the better the response.

Tackle the enablers in the room

One of the many frustrations about the responses to organized crime is that we have been unable to do anything about certain long-standing and well-known vulnerabilities in our legal and regulatory systems that enable it. One of the most obvious of these is the global financial system, where tax havens, offshore trusts, shell companies and other tools have been used for decades to move and hide dirty money.[50] Steps have been made, but once again, effectiveness is lacking or lagging: as Oxfam commented on the EU's tax haven list, there has been much process but little progress.[51]

Other long-standing loopholes also need urgent attention, including special economic zones, which have in some cases become lawless spaces where cybercrime, scam centres, human trafficking, tax evasion, financial fraud, trade-based money laundering and the smuggling and production of counterfeit goods, illicit goods and wildlife take place.[52] Campaigns against flags of convenience – which are used as cover for everything from illegal fishing and human trafficking to smuggling drugs, weapons, cash and sanctioned goods – have been ongoing since at least 1948.[53] Flags of convenience have also given rise to the so-called 'shadow fleet', which operates outside conventional regulator and insurance frameworks, and is a key means by which states can evade sanctions, as has been seen during the Russo-Ukrainian war by Russia-linked firms moving oil.[54]

More recent challenges have emerged in the online sphere, where increasing attention has been paid to the enabling role played by tech giants and their platforms, such as Meta (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram), Alphabet (YouTube), ByteDance (TikTok) and Tencent (WeChat), along with smaller outfits like Telegram. Despite the profusion of illicit content found on such platforms, efforts to bring greater accountability have been resisted until very recently. In the US, social media companies are not liable for the content they host under the infamous Section 230, although most of the major ones commit to self-policing. Meta, for example, says it responds to local legal demands, and has a process to review and assess material flagged by local authorities, which generally results in the material being removed in that jurisdiction.[55] Such efforts have received significant criticism, however, given the amount of illegal content still available, and the sense that they are reactive rather than proactive in preventing harms.[56]

Mozambican-flagged oil tanker the *Deyna*, suspected of belonging to the Russian's shadow fleet, is seen off the coast of France, March 2026. *© Alex Pena/Anadolu via Getty Images*

The enabling qualities of AI in the criminal sphere have also become starkly apparent in recent years through the criminal harnessing of large language models, deepfakes, voice cloning and auto-translation in scam centres;[57] 'vibe coded' ransomware created with the help of AI;[58] child sexual abuse material and financial crime,[59] among other areas. However, discussions to address the risks posed by AI have increasingly resembled a parlour debate, while tech companies push the technology's capabilities further and governments and corporations race to adopt it for fear of being left behind. Anthropic's recent decision not to release its Claude Mythos model (due to concerns over its capability to find and exploit cyber-security weaknesses) was a rare show of self-restraint.[60]

Crypto is another well-known enabler of money laundering that has lurked in the unregulated shadows of the financial world until recently, although advances in tracing and crypto asset seizure have developed rapidly. States are increasingly sanctioning non-traditional entities, such as websites and crypto exchanges, for enabling illicit activity.[61] Moves are already being made by the US and UK to bring crypto firms into the regulatory fold.[62] But the appeal of cryptocurrencies, particularly Tether,[63] appears to be growing regardless, in part fuelled by sanctions evasion. In 2025, TRM Labs identified a record US$158 billion in illicit crypto volume, up 145% compared to 2024.[64] And even while the possibilities offered by the blockchain to track and seize assets are considerable, the lack of effective legislative frameworks, law enforcement capacity and both corporate and political safe havens make the benefits of the technology more theoretical than realistic.[65]

Gold is also becoming increasingly important as a money laundering and sanctions evasion vehicle, as well as a profitable illicit commodity in its own right, generating more profit for organized crime in Colombia than cocaine, and fuelling insecurity and environmental damage.[66] Recent research has highlighted how gold 'intersects with a broad range of criminal markets – including drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms dealing and financial crime', with criminals 'increasingly controlling entire supply chains – not just mines – through financing arrangements, processing facilities, logistics networks and trading companies'.[67]

Arguably the most significant enablers of organized crime are state-embedded actors. As mentioned above, these are the most influential type of criminal actor, according to the Global Organized Crime Index. National laws are theoretically harmonized with the UNCAC's guidelines, but as with the UNTOC, implementation varies widely. Even states with strong anti-corruption systems, such as the Scandinavian countries, still face significant challenges.

To improve this situation, we need to find a way to change the risk calculus for the enablers of organized crime. This can be done in various ways. Increasing costs and targeting supporting entities, for instance, can make it challenging for enablers to function. For vessels flying flags of convenience, this might translate to greater insurance costs, port-access restrictions and greater liability for the real beneficial owners of ships found to be associated with illegal activity, as well as putting pressure on ancillary supporting nodes such as registries, brokers and bunker providers.[68] The Thai government cut the supply of electricity, internet and fuel supplies in February 2025 as a response to the proliferation of scam compounds.[69]

One of the most productive ways to change the risk calculus of enablers (and organized crime in general) is by interdicting the benefits they receive for facilitating and perpetrating criminal activity. This may have a much more immediate and lasting effect than pursuing such cases through the courts, where allegations of participation in a criminal act are often challenging to prove.

Seizures of assets linked to the proceeds of crime or intended for use in criminal activities, by contrast, require a much lower burden of proof than a criminal case. The UK's Proceeds of Crime Act (2002) and the EU Directive on Asset Recovery and Confiscation (2024) provide examples of unified approaches to asset seizures, while Italy has led the way since the 1980s.[70] Expanding the use of such powers would hit enablers where it hurts the most. And if such assets are reinvested in the areas of society most affected by organized crime, resilience can be improved.[71]

Of course, law enforcement cannot solely focus on the money – at the very heart of criminal law is the principle of punishment for the guilty party, and this must still be served. But from a systems point of view, a greater emphasis on tackling the money will pay dividends – and much more can be done. According to Europol, the confiscation of criminal proceeds 'has stagnated at around an estimated 2% of illicit proceeds' (although this figure is at the same time an indicator of how difficult it is to seize such funds).[72] For corrupt officials, companies and professionals, having money seized due to association with criminal activity would not only bring a serious financial cost, but would also in many cases inflict reputational damage, especially if such seizures were publicized.

Efforts to deter enablers may also benefit from an elevation of the seriousness of organized crime offences. Since President Trump's designation of organized crime groups as terrorist groups, actors in the financial sector are increasingly concerned that their activities could expose them to charges of providing material assistance.[73] Among these actors, the perception of risk of engagement with crime has markedly increased. The designation may also be opening the way for progress to be made on long-running issues such as arms trafficking. In April 2026, the first such case was launched against an Arizona gun shop owner who had allegedly sold weapons to an undercover agent posing as a gun runner for a Mexican cartel.[74]

There are a large number of issues with the designation of criminal groups as terrorists, not least because, under the current construction of 'material support', migrants, people who use drugs and even charitable organizations may be targeted as aiding 'terrorism'.[75] But if the sanctions on involvement with organized crime are increased in a fair, proportional and legally justifiable manner, then compliance efforts may increase.

Changes in legal approach are also underway to bring more transparency to the financial system. The FATF introduced stricter standards and guidance on beneficial ownership in 2022, 'requir[ing] countries to follow a risk-based approach and consider the risks of legal persons in their countries'.[76] Many countries have followed suit, passing legislation aimed at creating beneficial ownership registers, but there remains a whole panoply of legal finance vehicles, jurisdictions and real estate professionals who are still enabling the movement of dirty money. These 'gatekeepers' are obliged to act under the FAFT's AML/CFT rules, but in many places the national framework is weak or missing, and many gatekeepers and enablers remain un(der)regulated.[77] In many countries, real estate falls entirely outside AML regulations, and in most jurisdictions, so do many other high-value luxury goods.[78] But there are movements in the right direction. In March 2026, the US passed a rule requiring some real estate professions to submit reports to the US Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network for cash-only sales of property to legal entities or trusts.[79]

Legal pressure may also be building on social media giants. Recent rulings against Meta and Google have been predicated on the basis of design, not content, claiming that the design of social media platforms was fuelling social media addiction. (Both companies have denied any wrongdoing.) While social media addiction is not a crime, the approach provides a possible model for responses to criminal

activity on the social media platforms. For example recent research found that, despite Meta's policies on banning illicit activity, the illegal trade in wildlife was not only prevalent on Facebook, but illicit wildlife listings were being promoted by the platform's design features.[80] Money also offers another potential avenue: Meta's leak in November 2025 that 10% of its revenues were generated through adverts for scams and banned goods brought about a lawsuit that the company was misleading users about platform safety.[81]

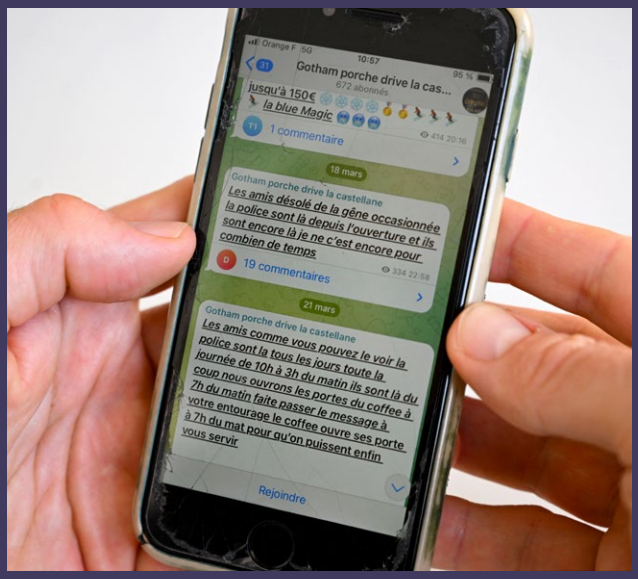
Should civil cases be joined by criminal ones, the impact may be significant. If social media revenue, digital assets or related property can be shown to constitute the proceeds of criminal activity, or if such assets or property were used as an instrument in the commission of a crime, those revenues, assets and property may, depending on the jurisdiction, be subject to seizure, forfeiture, confiscation or other asset-recovery measures. That said, the requirement to prove intention in many jurisdictions may represent a serious stumbling block.

Legislation is also beginning to move on the social media issue, albeit with limitations. The 2025 US Take It Down Act to reduce non-consensual intimate visual depictions of individuals (including AI-generated ones), which came into effect in May 2026, requires platforms to remove such material no later than 48 hours after receiving a request – a lifetime in the social media world.[82] Other measures to combat illicit activity may also carry potential risks. Instagram's removal of end-to-end encryption from its messages, which also came into effect in May 2026 (a move some analysts viewed to comply with the Take It Down Act), will expose all user messages to Meta.[83]

Telegram and the geopolitical crackdown

Of all the social media and messaging platforms, it is arguably Telegram – 'the dark web in your pocket' – that has become notorious for its hosting of illegal content and refusal to self-police the platform.[84] Since 2025, Russia has increasingly restricted access to Telegram, claiming that the platform is used by scammers and terrorists.[85] As of April 2026, the app was fully blocked in Russia, unless accessed with a VPN or similar.[86]

But critics have alleged that such reasons are a stalking horse for attempts at enhanced surveillance over Russia's population, with the state trying to push users to its own proprietary app, Max, modelled on China's WeChat. These efforts have gained momentum since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and are seen as part of a broader move by Russia to create a separate infosphere insulated from the West. ■



Message on Telegram allegedly sent by drug dealers to potential customers in France. © *Nicolas Tucat/AFP via Getty Images*

Incentives may also be appropriate in rebalancing the risk calculus for enablers. In the case of gold mining, it is critical to intervene as upstream as possible, given that illicit gold is easily laundered into legal flows once it has been smelted. Practically, this may mean helping broker arrangements between traditional mining firms and artisanal miners to put the sector under a legal umbrella, with greater pay and security offered – in effect squeezing organized crime out of the market.[87]

Ultimately, any attempt to rebalance the risk calculus will come down to political will. Many of the issues identified above have been present for decades, and there are strong vested interests and legal difficulties that must be overcome before any progress can be made. But there are also signs of a growing urgency to tackle these areas. For too long these issues have been allowed to moulder, increasing a sense of apathy and cynicism among the public that there will always be loopholes available for those unscrupulous and wealthy enough to use them. This situation has increased distrust in formal institutions and governments, who are seen as dragging their heels on cracking down on the enablers of organized crime while instead going after the low-hanging fruit.

Counter the rule breakers

One of the most concerning trends in recent years has been the increasing use of criminal actors and methods by some states, usually under heavy sanctions and political and economic pressure. The object of this tactic varies – it may be revenue generation, aggressive acts (such as sabotage and assassination) or intelligence gathering.

North Korea has been a market leader for this kind of activity for decades, with the state-run Office 39 responsible for raising foreign currency through a variety of means, including poaching, hacking, counterfeiting and methamphetamine production.[88] Iran has used a variety of criminal means and actors to evade sanctions and supply its network of proxies in the Middle East, including drug trafficking, arms smuggling, cybercrime, money laundering and acquiring foreign currency, and has used 'hit squads' to target exiles.[89] Russia's relationship with the Wagner Group, which was accused of industrial-scale smuggling of gold and diamonds, was a key vector by which the Kremlin sought to project its influence in Syria and Africa.[90] Since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has also mounted a campaign of sabotage and assassination attempts in Europe, and has (in tandem with Belarus) sought to incentivize irregular migrants to attempt to enter the EU.[91] According to Russian media, Ukraine has used scam call centres to defraud its citizens and socially engineer some people to commit violent attacks on Russian military assets, such as enlistment posts.[92] And according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, there was 'no doubt' that the Chinese Communist Party was using organized crime groups as agents of influence in the Pacific Island states.[93]

The entanglement of crime and state is not a new phenomenon – and Western liberal democracies have frequently been implicated in the past – but the new capabilities of organized crime in a globalized world represent a step-change in this toolbox. Terms such as 'hybrid' and 'grey' warfare speak to a time when such approaches were novel. Now, crime has become a recognized lever of state power, together with information operations, economic influence and diplomacy. Long term, the involvement of states with organized crime may have serious structural consequences for the constitution and functioning of both organized crime and the state.

Responding to this phenomenon is highly challenging, not least as international cooperation grows increasingly difficult. The emerging multipolar nature of the world is also reinvigorating the idea of spheres of influence, in which strong states may seek to project their own values above global

Russia's Wagner Group was sanctioned by the US as a transnational criminal organization and was also a vehicle for Russian state influence in Africa. *© Alex Pena/Anadolu via Getty Images*

governance norms, either unilaterally or through regional platforms. Terms such as 'the rule of law' can read very differently in different contexts. In liberal democracies, this term is taken to mean that no one is above the law. In China, by contrast, it means governing the country in accordance with the law – where the law is ultimately a 'tool to ensure stability and order, as well as being a means to justify and maintain Party rule'.[94]

Another challenge lies in where to situate responses to geocriminality within the state architecture. As one analysis notes, 'geocriminality's positioning between domestic policing matters and state threats leads to confusion around the correct response'.[95] Blurring the line between intelligence and law enforcement portfolios, geocriminality may end up receiving attention from only one. But law enforcement is not trained to respond to state threats, and intelligence operatives may be less concerned with contraventions of the law than building larger pictures of national security threats. The spectrum of geocriminality's manifestation – from states using criminal means to criminals acting on behalf of or with the sanction of the state – further challenges the conceptualization of accountability.

In future, it may be that the distinction between law enforcement and intelligence essentially collapses as criminal practices become increasingly integrated in states' toolboxes. This is being seen during the US war in Iran, where hacktivism, influence operations and ransomware have been in the forefront of Iran's response alongside the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, terrorist-style attacks in Europe carried out by criminal groups and drone strikes on Gulf states.[96]

But there is an argument to be made that organized crime may represent a weakness as well as a strength for states. Organized crime is a volatile partner, and money speaks to its heart. Much as with intelligence agents, organized crime actors could potentially be 'turned' into informers or even double agents, and such networks can also be penetrated by intelligence and law enforcement agencies in the same manner as regular non-aligned organized crime groups. Ensuring that intelligence services

and law enforcement are on the same page in how they perceive, manage and tackle these risks is also essential, and retraining both sides to deal with geocriminality may be required. The PREVENT and COIN frameworks of terrorism could also be retooled and reapplied to help prevent youths and criminals becoming embroiled in state-aligned attacks, including by monitoring recruitment spaces.

Finally, formulating an integrated response to geocriminality is crucial. States have been increasingly vocal at calling out such practices and sanctioning such actors, but stronger, more integrated measures are required. Proven state involvement with crime should bring reputational, economic and political costs for both state and criminal alike.

Expose and assess

One of the most powerful tools against organized crime is exposure. While organized crime thrives in secrecy, silence and fear, public discussion brings these activities to light, strengthens understanding and generates political pressure. Of course, the question of whether ordinary citizens should have to respond to crime at all is emotionally charged, underscoring a failure of the state to bring the rule of law to their communities. But it is inevitably the case that such protection deficits appear in societies – most of all those seriously affected by organized crime.

Investigative journalism has often led the way in exposing the inner workings of organized crime. The organizations, newsrooms and journalists are often tireless in their work, despite the mounting threat of legal action and a frequently challenging funding space that is slashing staff numbers and sometimes shuttering news outlets entirely.[97] Journalism and civil society in general are increasingly contending with greater state surveillance,[98] state repression and legal instruments (such as the so-called 'foreign agents' laws in Georgia, Russia and Kazakhstan), to the point where independent research into and action against organized crime is all but impossible in some countries. This is especially alarming in countries where militarized approaches to crime are used – without civil society oversight, the potential for state abuses to grow unchecked and undocumented grows enormously.[99] Journalists are also facing greater levels of physical risk: 39 were killed in non-conflict contexts in 2025.[100]

Amid decreasing financial resources and increasing state pressure, those exposing organized crime face an uncertain future. Ingenious approaches have emerged in recent years to circumvent such strictures: Bellingcat, for instance, has harnessed open-source intelligence (OSINT) to track and trace criminals and their activities, in part inspiring an OSINT golden age. Citizen documentation, which came of age during the unsuccessful Green Revolution in Iran in 2009,[101] is constantly increased, providing a real-time flow of data to researchers. With so many eyes, organized crime may find it harder than before to hide in the shadows – as was recently seen when convicted cocaine smuggler Jos Leijdekkers was spotted in a social media video filmed in a church in Sierra Leone, exposing his fugitive location.[102] AI is also emerging as a key tool to tackle the ever-greater tranches of data and complexity that are available for anti-corruption campaigners.[103] The rise of 'grey hat hackers' – who may use illegal means to expose corporate or government wrongdoing – is also notable, but illustrates the ethical complexities in this area.

The journalism ecosystem is arguably facing an existential crisis – personality-led news is becoming more prevalent, and a growing share of citizens are getting their information from social media, where mis- and disinformation narratives are rampant. However, while AI is widely expected to take over

general news, one 2026 survey heard that original investigations and on-the-ground reporting are judged by publishers to be more important.[104] The rise of Substack, where writers post content for paying subscribers, illustrates the enduring appeal of thoughtful, individual journalism, including that undertaken by investigative journalists. At the time of writing, Substack had 35 million subscribers; in April 2026, it was the twelfth-most visited English language news website in the world.[105] That said, such platforms cannot be a replacement for traditional media, lacking as they do any requirement to adhere to the core principles of journalism, such as truth, accuracy, fairness and impartiality.

Ordinary people also have a critical role to play, especially those living in the storm of organized crime. In such cases, they may not have the language to describe what they are living through, so interwoven is it with their lived experience. Skilled intermediaries may be helpful in assisting people to express themselves in terms that can be understood by policymakers and law enforcement. Critically, this chain of interpretation – from event to word, and word to audience – ensures that responses to organized crime are informed by what is happening at the local level, and not formulated in a void. With the right engagement, local groups can serve as panels of experts who can help devise their own solutions. Ultimately, enabling ordinary people to bear witness, speak of their experiences and share ideas will create reservoirs of resilience that will be deep rooted and sustainable.[106]

Beyond this, we also need to keep conducting the kind of analyses that converts these individual experiences into strategic overviews of the situation, piecing together disparate sources of information into coherent narratives that can expose the inner workings of illicit markets and organized crime. This work is a vital 'bridge' between street and policy, and provides insights that cannot be captured from police statistics or official reporting, particularly in places of rampant corruption.

Demonstrators in Mexico protesting against cartel violence and corruption in Mexico City, November 2025.
© Marian Carrasquero/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Plan for the future

'The pace of change has never been this fast, yet it will never be this slow again,' former Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau famously commented at the World Economic Forum in 2018.[107] It is hard to disagree. The intervening eight years have seen a revolution in many areas of life, including organized crime. The synthetic drug trade has become a global phenomenon, localizing production and shortening supply chains while devising an ever-expanding offering of new illicit substances that could potentially be formulated using AI.[108] So lucrative is the market that even state actors have become involved, most notoriously Syria under Bashar al-Assad, which produced as much as 80% of the world's Captagon supply, according to the UK government.[109] Social media platforms such as Telegram have made buying such drugs as easy as ordering takeout.

Scam centres, formerly a relatively niche concern for law enforcement, have globalized, with scams and fraud extracting an estimated US$1 trillion from victims in 2024 – approximately 1% of global GDP.[110] AI is bestowing greater sophistication, plausibility and reach to such operations, which often intersect with other illicit markets, especially human trafficking. It is also blurring the line between social engineering and cybercrime through the use of mass-generated spear phishing – essentially enabling the creation of countless individually tailored scam messages.

Money laundering has also revolutionized in the cryptocurrency sphere with the innovations of mixers and tumblers, decentralized exchanges, cross-chain bridging and chain hopping (notable used by North Korean actors),[111] and over-the-counter trades designed to keep launderers one step ahead of tracing efforts. Cybercrime has evolved at lighting pace as AI has lowered the technical hurdles of entry: it is now possible to create sophisticated cyberattacks with no knowledge of coding. According to CrowdStrike, AI-enabled attacks rose by 89% in 2025 compared to 2024, while the average breakout time of 'e-crimes' – the period between the initial attack and wider exploitation to other machines – fell to 29 minutes in 2025, a 65% increase in speed from the year before, with the fastest observed taking place in only 27 seconds.[112]

Police officers scan for drones during the evacuation of civilians from the city of Mykolaivka, Ukraine, June 2026. Drones have come of age during the Russo-Ukrainian war – and criminal groups are increasingly exploring their potential. *© Diego Herrera Carcedo/Anadolu via Getty Images*

In the sphere of weapons, drones have become a new tool of criminal choice, used to bomb police raids in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, to conduct criminal reconnaissance at the US–Mexico border, and to smuggle drugs from Morocco to Spain and guns from Egypt to Israel. The Russo-Ukrainian war has accelerated the technical capabilities of this technology and pushed the operation envelope in terms of how they can be used – and organized crime has taken note.[113]

Given this pace of change, planning responses for a 2026 world is essentially planning for redundancy. We need to ask what will organized crime look like in 2036 and begin to plan along those threat vectors accordingly.

To achieve this, we need to undertake a multi-stakeholder exercise in forecasting to go beyond the immediate risk horizon and develop the deep picture of future trends. Some key questions could include the future of the heroin and cocaine markets in the face of the rise of synthetics – if synthetic substitutes are created for those drugs, how will it change organized crime? Will we see a change or even collapse in the workings of the Latin American cartels? How will the traditional heroin hubs of Afghanistan and the Golden Triangle fare? What will the global map of drug routes look like in the future? Will the production and supply of precursors emerge as a new battleground for crime and law enforcement alike?

As climate change continues and global temperatures rise, will access to water and agricultural land become more criminally contested? Will rare earths and critical minerals see greater levels of criminal involvement? Will drones become the default tool of smuggling and assassination? Will crime-as-a-service fuel the rise of more criminal entrepreneurs, or lead to the development of 'cartel conglomerates' able to work across multiple illicit markets in multiple regions?

What may be the 'black swan' events that could fundamentally alter how organized crime functions? How might organized crime benefit from mass layoffs caused by AI? How might it exploit GenAI and virtual reality, or the next wave of technological revolution featuring quantum computing? How would be it be affected by, and potentially benefit from, a resurgence in global terrorism?

Several analyses have already provided the broad outlines of how organized crime may develop in the future,[114] but more granularity is required in terms of specific markets, routes and regions.[115] It is also important that such formulations do not take place in a vacuum but instead situate how organized crime may constitute itself across a range of different geopolitical scenarios, each of which will define not only its operations but the scope and coherence of the global response. While we are still trying to take stock of what organized crime means in a multipolar world, we already need to look forward at what its role might be in a world where China becomes the dominant power, where international cooperation and trust over organized crime issues no longer exists, where personal data becomes increasingly privatized or securitized. What will be the impact if new conflicts emerge, and those existing accelerate?

CONCLUSION: WHICH ROAD TO TAKE?

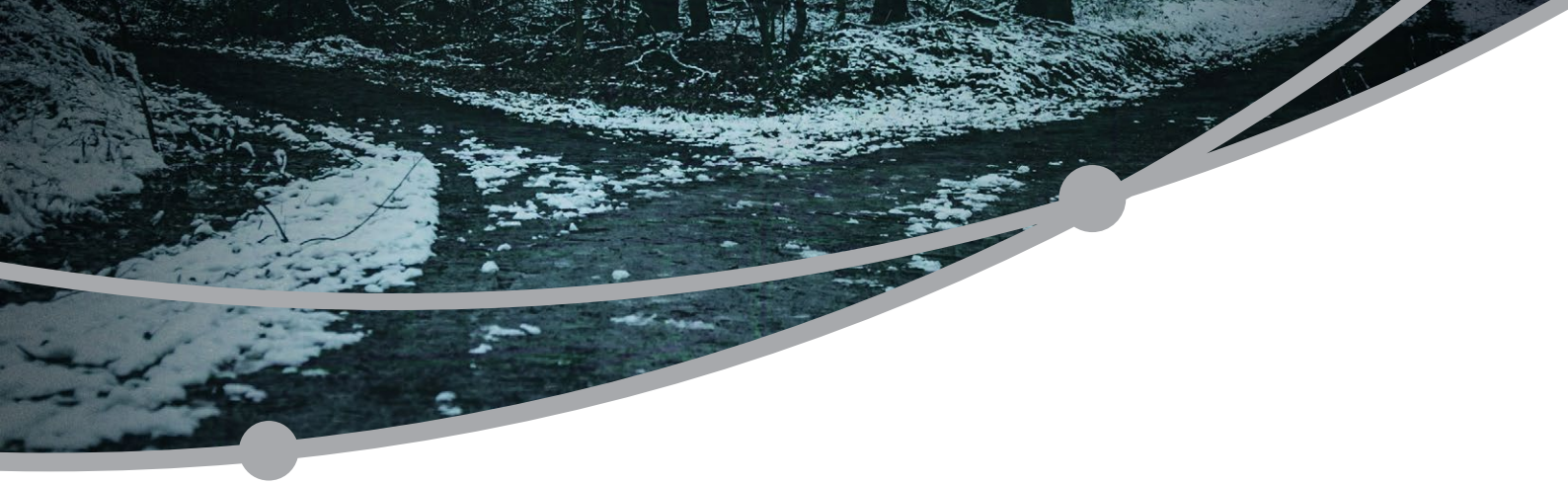
The new world is in the process of being built and there are no easy answers as to where it is going or how we should respond. The speed of change is such that whatever signposts we see are blurred and often quickly left behind.

In the midst of such transformations, the six ideas outlined above can be thought of as a set of rudders to guide us through the cross-currents, ensuring that we keep focus on the core ideas of a strategic response to illicit markets and organized crime, balancing idealism and pragmatism. We must find ways to work with various partners, dedicate ourselves to data gathering and analysis, and commit to improve the current system of responses. We need real ambition and imagination to reconceptualize how organized crime and its enablers should be addressed.

These principles can act as a bridge as we begin constructing the next set of ideas and strategies to combat organized crime in the future. It may be that some concepts and approaches from the past come back in fashion, while others may be gone forever. In any case, it is imperative that we learn to work within the new parameters, while preserving what was best of the period before.

But there are of course other voices in the room, and today we have reached a point where the question of what those ideas and strategies are is up for vociferous debate. Different models are working in parallel, and sometimes at cross-purposes. In many ways, this fragmented response is the ideal situation for organized crime, which will always find points of weakness and vulnerability to exploit. It is therefore up to us to determine – politically, publicly and operationally – what our metrics of success should look like.

But we cannot afford to do it in a disjointed, unconnected way. The development of organized crime over the past 30 years has shown us that addressing it requires cooperation across the board – between citizens, states, the private sector and civil society. Should this road not be taken, organized crime and illicit markets will simply adapt, displace and diffuse. Only equally adaptive and collective responses can hope to keep pace.



NOTES

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ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with 800 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

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