



*Debate*

## **Italian mafias in Europe: An Information Gap?**

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**Abstract:** In 2015, an Italian mafia boss condemned for “mafia association” in Italy was allowed to remain in the UK. What does this mean? In this debate piece, we try to analyse what we know about the presence in the UK of transnational organised crime groups and Italian mafias in particular. Are the British authorities aware of the presence and activities of Italian mafias? What do they really know about Italian mafias in Europe? As for researchers, how can we study this phenomenon?

**Keywords:** Italian mafias – criminal mobility – information gap – international police cooperation.

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## Introduction

Over the last twenty years, there has been an increased academic interest and awareness in the movements of Italian mafias, in particular from the South to the North of Italy (see Varese, 2011; Sciarrone 2014). Interest in their movement across Western Europe, Eastern Europe, North and South America, and Australia has, however, remained somewhat limited (Campana 2011, Transcrime 2013, Savona and Ricciardi 2015). Yet, walking around London on a Saturday afternoon, one cannot help but notice the extensive number of new Italian pizzerias and restaurants. Compared to twenty years ago, the number is impressive. London is clearly a busy economic centre with flourishing businesses, not only for Italian, American, Russian and Asian food outlets but also generally as a place where companies can be established relatively easily for those who need to set up a new business quickly. So, for researchers interested in organised crime, the question that comes to mind is whether Italian mafias seek to invest or recycle their illegal profits made in Italy here in London or in other small provincial towns scattered around the United Kingdom.

By asking this question, we do not wish to create “a moral panic” (Cohen, 1972), fall into an “ethnic trap” (see Nicaso and Lamothe, 2005:4) or agree with the alien conspiracy theories; neither do we want to give ammunition to the likes of UK Independent Party who make the racist argument that with European Union (EU) enlargement 'we have opened up the doors to countries that have not recovered from communism and I'm afraid it has become a gateway for organised crime' (*The Guardian*, 4/5/15<sup>1</sup>). But at the same time, we do not want to ignore the fact that in our global age money and capital can easily be moved across borders without many controls. And thus that there exists a great potential for organised crime groups based in one country to launder money in another. The Italian mafias are a good example among others.

In this debate piece, we would like to raise some questions about our knowledge of transnational organised crime groups and what we know about them exactly. In particular, Italian mafias and their criminal and economic activities across borders. What do we know? How can we effectively measure their presence and activities? What impact do they have on European economies?

## What do we know ?

We would appear to know substantially very little about Italian mafias in Europe, both in terms of physical presence and concrete financial activities. This remains an unknown quantity, especially if we take a closer look at the different levels of law enforcement intelligence.

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<sup>1</sup> *Nigel Farage: enlargement of EU creates gateway for organised crime*, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/may/04/nigel-farage-eu-organised-crime> (accessed 6/2/15).

From a British perspective, very little information and data about Italian mafias active in the UK is available. The recent case of a condemned mafia boss living in London who managed to avoid extradition back to Italy is a clear sign of vulnerability in the UK and how the lack of understanding of can embolden this phenomenon. Indeed, there have been very few British or European initiated investigations into Italian Mafia activities. This may be because the crime of “mafia association” does not exist in the UK<sup>2</sup> nor are crimes registered by ethnicity as they are in Germany. This means that it becomes difficult to identify crimes by ethnicity and one could argue that this is as it should be. This phenomenon is not about ethnicity or race.

However, it does mean that we do not have a good overview of the different possible foreign mafia type groups active in the UK. It is not clear what kind of criminal activities they are involved in the UK, as access to data from British police forces or the courts makes no mention of their ethnicity or their possible links to Italian mafias. Even if we look at money-laundering activities into the UK, there is, as yet, no joined-up intelligence approach. Thus, accountants, solicitors, or lawyers in London might have clients based in Italy, for whom they invest in the city or establish companies. But identifying the link to this mafia money into the UK is almost impossible, unless there is more collaboration<sup>3</sup>.

From an Italian perspective, the annual reports of the National Antimafia Directorate (*Direzione Nazionale Antimafia*, DNA) and National Antimafia Police (*Direzione Investigativa Antimafia*, DIA) provide some information that help to build up a picture of the situation because they give indications of the different Italian investigations that lead to the UK. They describe possible activities and protagonists present in the UK. However, it is then unclear how these Italian initiated investigations develop and whether anything comes of them at the British end.

What we can note is the nature of collaboration between the British and the Italian authorities in terms of request for help. In the DNA *Annual Report 2014*, the National Antimafia Prosecutor Franco Roberti, stated that while in 2013 there were 19 active requests for collaboration (from Italy to the UK) and two passive requests (from the UK to Italy), in 2014 there were two active requests and no passive one. Indeed, he was “struck” by the lack of requests from the UK (2015: 185) and underlined the constant

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<sup>2</sup> The recent Serious Crime Act 2015 seeks to improve the UK's fight against serious and organised crime because it is “a threat to national security and costs the UK more than £24 billion a year”

([https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/370943/Serious\\_Crime\\_Bill\\_-\\_Overarching\\_Impact\\_Assessment\\_-\\_Commons\\_Intro.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/370943/Serious_Crime_Bill_-_Overarching_Impact_Assessment_-_Commons_Intro.pdf), p.1). To a certain extent, this is a major step forward because for example, “creates a new offence targeting people who knowingly participate in an organised crime group” ([https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/370943/Serious\\_Crime\\_Bill\\_-\\_Overarching\\_Impact\\_Assessment\\_-\\_Commons\\_Intro.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/370943/Serious_Crime_Bill_-_Overarching_Impact_Assessment_-_Commons_Intro.pdf)). But, it does not improve international cooperation or the legal gaps that exist between different national legislations (such as “mafia association”) which allow some groups to actively move around.

<sup>3</sup> In addition, we must not forget that Italian liaison magistrates have been withdrawn from Spain, Romania, France, Germany, and the UK.

work and collaboration his team of prosecutors undertakes to raise awareness among certain EU countries, in particular, the UK, Netherlands, Belgium and Spain (*ibid.*: 280).

At the European level, there exist a few institutions that could provide information about Italian mafias in Europe: for example, Europol and Eurojust. In 2013, the European police force, Europol, published its first *Italian Organised Crime Threat Assessment* (2013). This should have been a first landmark document produced by the EU law enforcement agency as it sought to qualify and quantify the presence and activities of the four main Italian mafias<sup>4</sup> in non-traditional territories, in EU member states. But, it was not because of “the extreme difficulty in collecting information of the required quality” which “confirmed the particular nature of Italian OC” in that it operate[s] “under the radar” whenever it acts outside its territory” (Europol website<sup>5</sup>).

Instead of analysing the true nature of the Italian mafias presence in Europe, the report ended up presenting limited information from those countries that were willing to participate in such a project. We must remember that apart from Germany, no other EU member state records or identifies systematically in a single document the presence and activities of Italian mafias. As a consequence, this document does not give a true sense of the presence and activities of Italian mafias in Europe because national law enforcement agencies just do not know.

Eurojust<sup>6</sup> now publishes an annual report of its activities. It gives an overview of the different transnational criminal activities that it deals with: from drug trafficking, illegal immigration, trafficking in human beings, fraud, corruption, to cybercrime, money laundering, terrorism and (mobile) organised crime groups. In the 2012-2013 reports, there is no particular reference to Italian organised crime groups and their activities in Europe. If anything, there is a special attention to (mobile) East European organised crime groups but Italians are not seen as a particular threat.

However, in the last twenty years there have been some serious attempts by the Italian academic community to analyse this question and more generally, an increased academic interest in understanding the mobility of criminal groups (see Morselli et al., 2011; Varese, 2011). In particular, to understand the type of behaviour and activities they can undertake in new territories in order to gauge whether all types of civil societies, economies and political systems are open terrain for these criminal groups. This research is important because it greatly influences and shapes policy-making narratives and, thus, they need to be theoretically sound but also be evidence based.

Some researchers suggest that ‘globalisation’ has enabled criminal groups to become international fluid networks engaging in criminal alliances (see Castells, 2000;

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<sup>4</sup> The Sicilian *Cosa Nostra*, the Calabrian *Ndrangheta*, the Neapolitan *Camorra* and the Pugliese *Sacra Corona Unità*).

<sup>5</sup> Available at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/content/threat-assessment-italian-organised-crime> (accessed 6/2/15).

<sup>6</sup> Eurojust is a body that “stimulates and improves the coordination of investigations and prosecutions between the competent authorities in the Member States” (see its website: <http://www.eurojust.europa.eu/about/background/Pages/mission-tasks.aspx> (accessed 30/5/15)).

Shelley, 2006), while others have suggested that criminal groups, in particular mafias, remain local and have difficulty ‘transplanting’ themselves to new territories where the conditions in civil society and the local economy are not favourable (see Campana, 2011; Varese, 2011). This last approach is predominately based on the notion that mafias provide private protection to businesses even outside of their territory of origin.

Researchers studying the movement of Italian mafias from the South to the North of Italy and from Italy to Europe have adopted a more flexible and versatile approach, which highlights the importance of analysing both the context and the agents (see Sciarrone 1998, 2011, 2014; Sciarrone and Storti, 2014). Using these parameters, Sciarrone was able to identify four different possible typologies of movement: colonisation-imitation-settlement-infiltration.

This approach is less rigid but requires a lot of varied material to help un-package the different dynamics at play between the criminal group and the new territory. It is an important and relevant contribution because it has helped to explain what has been happening in the North and Centre of Italy (see Sciarrone, 2014). Indeed, the recent experience of Northern Italy, once defined as more ‘democratic’ and ‘civic’ than the South by Putnam (1994) should be a warning to the world that Italian mafias can slowly, over time, become embedded in civil society, the economy and local political systems where they do not originate.

Another Italian research institute, Transcrime based in Trento-Milan also tackled this research question (funded by Progetto PON Sicurezza 2007-2013<sup>7</sup>). In 2013, they published their results in a report, *Italian mafias Investments* in which they tried to identify the activities and investments of Italian mafias in Italy and Europe between 2000-2011. As it was practically impossible to trace their presence and activities in Europe for the same reasons that Europol had had difficulties, they resorted to using Italian sources. In particular, they consulted the Annual Reports of the DNA and the DIA and followed up any mention of Italian investigations into European countries. This produced a one-sided Italian picture of Mafias in Europe. For example, in their map of the Calabrian ‘*Ndrangheta*, there was no mention of Italian investigations in the UK; the *Ndrangheta*’s presence in the UK was neither traced nor identified when it would be logical to assume that the ‘*Ndrangheta* and its money are present here. In 2013 for example, a link between a Northern Irish businessman and the Calabrian ‘*Ndrangheta* was made (*The Daily Mail*, 5/3/2013<sup>8</sup>).

In 2014, Transcrime led an EU funded project (Organised crime portfolio<sup>9</sup>) called “*Organised crime investments in Europe*”. With eight European partners<sup>10</sup> they focused on

<sup>7</sup> Available at <http://www.transcrime.it/en/publicazioni/progetto-pon-sicurezza-2007-2013/> (accessed 12/2/15).

<sup>8</sup> “IRA militant on run from Italian police for alleged involvement in mafia money laundering scheme as luxury properties worth £390 million are seized”, *The Daily Mail*, 5/3/2013, available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2288630/Police-seize-resorts-Italy-IRA-militant-run-alleged-involvement-mafia-money-laundering-scheme.html> (accessed 30/5/2015).

<sup>9</sup> Available at <http://www.ocportfolio.eu/project.php> (accessed 12/2/15).

<sup>10</sup> From Italy, UK, France, Spain, Ireland, Finland, and the Netherlands.

three main research questions: (1) where does the criminal money come from? (2) From which illicit markets? And (3) where does the criminal money go? Where (in which regions, assets, sectors) is it invested? Which of these assets are confiscated? Again, this was an excellent research initiative because it sought to “provide a first exploration of the economics of organised crime in Europe”, but unluckily suffered from some serious limitations because of the data available.

Researchers looked at (1) the availability of data of OC investments in EU member states with particular regard to statistics on confiscated assets; and (2) to give an exploratory assessment of the investments of OC, using the available data. They attempted to measure the scale of illicit markets in Europe and the actors involved (Italian mafias, Chinese OCGs, Russian/Georgian OCGs, motorcycle gangs and other European OCGs) by looking at confiscation of assets; in other words, what law enforcement agencies had managed to confiscate from criminals. This would seem to be an intelligent way of trying to understand where the money ends up. But, because of the limited use of confiscation legislation in other European States, it might be only a partial picture. Indeed, this type of research can only really have true value if the quality of the data being analysed is reliable and relevant, otherwise, we risk having a blurred picture. But, this is a very important first step.

The data collected was extensive: judicial files, LEA reports and police operation files, institutional reports, academic studies and media reports, all collected with a solid methodology. But, the use of academic and media sources could be seen as very subjective and the use of direct police reports limited (see Savona and Riccardi, 2015: 30). For example, in the UK it was acknowledged that confiscation recovery is still poorly done. Chistyakova and Wall (2014<sup>11</sup>) point out in their presentation on *Frauds, Organised Theft and Other Emerging Criminal Markets in the UK*, that there exists a “bias in the data: insufficient data to make reliable quantitative estimates of the presence of OCGs investments”. For the presence of Italian mafias similar inconsistencies appear. For example, according to this research, the Sicilian Mafia is not present in the UK nor are Italian mafias present in France, apart from in construction, hotels and other tourist accommodation, when we believe that this cannot be the case.

The nature of this research is nonetheless very important but the fact that the data is still limited means that we know little. And as the researchers themselves point out, “this is the first attempt to collect cases and evidence from different European countries in a single dataset [...]” that seeks “to provide not an in-depth analysis of a few cases but a broader exploration of the 'macro patterns' and 'macro trends' of the economics of the organised crime groups in Europe” (*ibid*, 30). This is a commendable exercise but one that still remains limited.

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[http://www.ocportfolio.eu/\\_File%20originali/Presentation/3\\_OCP%20Final%20Conference\\_Durham\\_UK\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ocportfolio.eu/_File%20originali/Presentation/3_OCP%20Final%20Conference_Durham_UK_FINAL.pdf) (accessed 6/2/15).

Thus, all in all, both from practitioner information and academics discourses, our picture of Italian mafias in Europe is blurred and so as a result is our understanding of their presence and activities abroad. We will never have a clear picture of Italian mafias abroad or other criminal groups until there exists greater international cooperation and a better way of identifying them and moving away from cultural stereotypes and simple academic categories. As these organisations are constantly adapting, so must our understanding and methods.

### What do they do?

There is now a general consensus that Italian mafias abroad do not behave in the same way as they do in Italy (Campana, 2011). They appear more as economic businesses rather than criminal associations controlling a set territory. However, a comparative analysis of different forms of mobility of criminal groups shows two main forms of presence abroad (which all groups can manifest/undertake): (1) a physical presence (visible or invisible); and (2) an economic presence. Both are forms which foreign authorities have difficulty in identifying and, in particular, in conceiving them as part of a bigger criminal project undertaken by Mafias based in other countries.

As a physical presence, the North of Italy is a good example of what could perhaps take place (or has already taken) place elsewhere. Mafia groups, thanks to migration flows or internal banishments<sup>12</sup>, have slowly been able to put down roots, make their own space in civil society, and with their front companies take hold of sectors of the legal economy and strike partnerships with local partners (see Sciarrone, 2014). Northern Italian society, that was once believed to be a stronghold of civic social capital (see Putnam, 1994), has been unable to systematically resist the power of these criminal groups. Initially, they did not engage with civil society nor impose themselves on natives but only seemed to target their own immigrant community because it recognised their values, threats, and projects. But, over time and as immigrant communities become assimilated into local society, becoming first generation natives, dynamics change and mafia behaviour and norms, that were once external and foreign, now become internalised and part of local normal culture.

In Europe, this process has not yet taken place consistently although there may be signs, according to various unofficial police sources, that in places like Germany and Spain this might be starting to happen. In countries like the UK and France, it would appear that natives have not directly encountered these groups. We clearly need to understand more about how different groups behave towards local civil societies and whether they are interested in putting down roots as they have in the South of Italy. So far, *Mafiosi* have targeted their fellow immigrants as the Calabrians have done in Milan and Germany or their rivals, as the Neapolitan Di Lauro clan planned to murder some fellow

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<sup>12</sup> “Internal banishment” is an Italian law, which placed mafia bosses in new locations other than their home regions. This has been seen as a factor that has encouraged the spread of mafias and their values in the North of Italy (see Sciarrone, 1998; Varese, 2011).

countrymen at the Barcelona Formula Grand Prix in 2008 (*Il Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, 21/4/15<sup>13</sup>). But, up until now, they have not been violent towards the local native community. This is because they do not act as a cultural fraternity but as an economic business.

An economic presence is clearly more subtle and difficult to identify than violent behaviour; it is more abstract and insidious like bank transfers that can go anywhere. But, what shape does this economic presence take? In order to place mafia money, these organisations are employing more and more professional enabler-facilitators who act on their behalf. They can be solicitors, accountants, lawyers, or businessmen who (knowingly or not) will invest money, open accounts and establish businesses. For the moment, while in Italy there are the tools to identify these relationships and flows, this is not the case elsewhere. This, therefore, means that many countries have become attractive destinations as financial centres where 'hot' money can be invested and laundered but without the proper instruments this cannot be measured or fully evaluated. These enablers and facilitators are key accomplices in the Mafias' presence abroad and we still know very little about them.

### **Are European Economies in danger?**

The Governor of the Bank of Italy, Ignazio Visco, gave a speech in November 2014 (*“Constrasto all'economia criminale: precondizionale per la crescita economica”*<sup>14</sup>) in which he highlighted the impact and effect of organised crime activities on the Italian economy. He suggested that the criminal economy could be worth 10 percent of the Italian GNP but he also explained how the presence of organised crime groups affects the economic sector. He highlighted how Italy is 106 out of 144 in the Global Competitiveness Index and how in terms of organised crime perception Italy ranks fourth after Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland.

The presence of organised crime distorts the allocation of public funds; it increases the cost of credit for companies and insurance costs. It also has a negative effect on foreign investments. Using all this varied data and questionnaires the picture for Italy is quite bleak as evidence clearly suggests that “the costs—direct and indirect—are very high for Italy”.

But, what does this mean for other countries? Does the presence of businesses that act as fronts for money laundering activities have an impact? Do they harm the economy and how can we really measure this? In 2013, the Home Office published a report,

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<sup>13</sup> Available at [http://corrieredelmezzogiorno.corriere.it/napoli/cronaca/15\\_aprile\\_21/blitz-contro-clan-lauro-sventato-omicidio-all-estero-27-arresti-b1e1f556-e7ed-11e4-a298-5bf537ea878f.shtml](http://corrieredelmezzogiorno.corriere.it/napoli/cronaca/15_aprile_21/blitz-contro-clan-lauro-sventato-omicidio-all-estero-27-arresti-b1e1f556-e7ed-11e4-a298-5bf537ea878f.shtml) (accessed 21/4/15).

<sup>14</sup> *Fighting the criminal economy: preconditions for economic growth*; available at <http://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/interventigovernatore/integov2014/visco-071114.pdf> (accessed 12/2/15).

*Understanding organised crime: Estimating the scale and the social and economic costs* (2013<sup>15</sup>) that sought to identify the social and economic costs of organised crime and its scale. The conclusions highlight some of the important social and economic costs to the UK: for example, £10.7 billion social and economic costs associated with drugs' supply (and all other related knock-on implications), counterfeit currency (£7 million), organised intellectual property crime (£0.4 billion), human trafficking for sexual exploitation (£890 million), firearms supply (£160 million). In sum, it is calculated that “the total social and economic costs of organised crime are at least £24 billion per year”. But we have to be careful with these figures because as the document points out

The report takes a cautious approach and applies high standards to the data. It is only included where there is a strong degree of confidence in accuracy. This means that the figures will often inevitably underestimate the full extent of the scale and costs of organised crime in the UK. For policy makers and law enforcement partners it is therefore important to consider this report alongside other sources of information; law enforcement intelligence and in-depth professional subject knowledge provide an important context for understanding the implications of this report (Home Office, 2013<sup>16</sup>).

What this kind of reflection does not take into account is the notion that many criminal groups might launder money into the UK and thus they might not be actually inflicting a social or economic cost, if anything they are improving the UK economy. The example of the La Torre Camorra clan comes to mind. The clan through two of its representatives opened up an Italian restaurant in Aberdeen (see Allum, 2012; Campana, 2011). From a British perspective, this was creating jobs and was a clear investment in the local economy. However, from an Italian perspective, the economic and social cost was considerable as the money came from selling drugs to the local drug addiction community, the lost souls. There is an old Latin aphorism fit for this purpose: *pecunia non olet* (“money does not stink”).

### Which way forward?

It is clear that in order to fully understand the Italian mafias' activities abroad it is necessary to adopt an international perspective to study and fight this phenomenon, not only a national one. Economies to be more efficient cross border and have become globalised and integrated leaving police and judicial systems way behind as archaic and redundant (Cavallaro, 2004). In the last couple of years, European states have realised that the economic activities of mafias have become international while anti-organised crime policies have not kept up and have had difficulty in elaborating a uniformed international approach (Ciconte, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Available at <http://www.no-offence.org/pdfs/55.pdf> (accessed 12/2/15).

<sup>16</sup> Available at <http://www.no-offence.org/pdfs/55.pdf> (accessed 12/2/15).

The recent Italian experience has demonstrated that mafias have expanded out of their territory of origin and are now mixing with productive and financial economies across Europe. This has not taken place over night and only in Northern Italy but also across Europe. It is for this reason, that Italy, during its European Presidency in 2014, promoted the creation of an operational network (@ON) to counter mafia-style serious and organised crime groups. This is a kind of investigative network set up to strengthen cooperation and communication between EU Member States and aimed at preventing mafia infiltration at European level, by enhancing the actions of Europol also in economic areas (Council of the European Union, 2014). This is another useful step led by the Italians. But, as long as member states can choose not to cooperate and participate, this operational network may never get off the ground and let Italian mafias make the most of the different opportunities that exist in Europe.

Thus, what general approach should be adopted to understand more fully the international economy of transnational organised crime groups? First of all, it is a problem of observing what is actually there. An evidence-based approach from different countries should focus on three aspects:

1. Every country must recognise and distinguish the different typologies of criminal organisations (mafia, temporary) and their main activities in different socio-economical contexts. If the problem is not de-constructed in its complexity using different points of view and approaches, how can we recognise a phenomenon and study it in its different forms?
2. The question of the internationalisation of the mafia's economic activities can be analysed from at least two points of view, different but not exclusive. Illegal activities that by their very nature are international (traffic of drugs and arms) are used to access the legal economy through the recycling of money. On the opposite side, the recycling and reinvesting of “dirty” funds into the legal economy that reinforced international criminal networks.
3. Seeing as all Italian mafias behave differently in different social, economic and political systems, it is important to identify the factors, variables and vulnerabilities that may attract criminals groups to different geographical locations.

In this sense, the exchange of information and approaches between European countries can only help increase the understanding of the complex and transnational natures of Italian mafias. This applies to those who study these social phenomena as well as law enforcement agencies and anti-mafia organisations. Until there does not exist a more systematic way of recording the presence and activities of Italian mafias in Europe, we will only have a one sided Italian perspective and thus, the risk that we do not really understand what is going on.

For this reason, it is important to have different national perspectives that, however, speak, interact and share information with each other. If every mafia behaves differently in different geographical locations it is useful and necessary to understand their organisational and economic aspects and not only the motivations that led them to migrate, but also the concrete modalities they use in new territories. A more European

approach in this research area, which would take into account the different national dimensions, is fundamental but remains unrealistic as there does not exist either a common European approach towards mafias and organised crime nor a harmonisation of approaches which accepts the legitimacy of crimes in other countries. This at least would be a solid starting point.

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