

Europe's Criminal Blind Spot

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Europe is facing a strategic threat that extends far beyond cocaine trafficking. While Latin American criminal organizations expand their networks across European borders, a parallel battle is unfolding over their public image: the attempt to portray powerful criminal structures as victims of poverty, exclusion, and human rights abuses, while downplaying the violence, corruption, and institutional penetration that sustain their power. The danger is not only the expansion of organized crime, but also the normalization of its influence.

360° Geopolítica has extensively examined the growing power of criminal organizations in Latin America, including allegations of criminal co-governance, the penetration of state institutions, and the use of international advocacy to shape public perceptions. These developments raise a fundamental question: what happens when criminal organizations acquire not only economic and territorial power, but also political protection, international visibility, and a narrative capable of disguising their true nature?

In Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro and in Colombia under Gustavo Petro, allegations concerning the relationship between political power and criminal networks deserve rigorous investigation and public scrutiny. The distinction between legitimate social grievances and the activities of violent criminal organizations must never be blurred for political convenience. Poverty does not justify extortion. Marginalization does not excuse murder. Human rights cannot become a shield behind which criminal responsibility disappears.

Yet, for years, international narratives surrounding Latin American organized crime have frequently emphasized the social conditions in which these groups emerge, sometimes at the expense of examining the coercion, violence, and economic exploitation they impose on the very communities they claim to represent. European media outlets, international human rights figures, and nongovernmental organizations must therefore be held to the same standards of evidence, transparency, and accountability as any other influential institution. Criticism must be grounded in verifiable facts, but no institution should be exempt from scrutiny because it operates under the banner of human rights, development, or social justice.

The use of films, documentaries, books, magazines, and advocacy campaigns to shape perceptions of criminal organizations raises particularly serious questions when public development funds are involved. European taxpayers have a legitimate right to know how their money is spent, which organizations receive it, what objectives their projects pursue, and whether independent oversight exists to prevent the misuse of public resources. Where credible evidence suggests that publicly financed initiatives may contribute to the glorification or legitimization of violent criminal actors, the appropriate response is transparent investigation and accountability—not ideological protection or automatic condemnation.

The stakes become even clearer considering *The Guardian's* investigative report, published on 13 October 2026 under the title "Latin American organized crime 'may operate in 16 European countries'," by Andrei Netto. Based on four months of reporting involving police records, intelligence sources, prosecutors, and experts in eight countries, the investigation describes the expanding reach of Latin American criminal

organizations across Europe. The groups identified include Brazil's Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and Comando Vermelho, Colombia's Clan del Golfo and National Liberation Army (ELN), Mexico's Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation cartels, and Venezuela's Tren de Aragua.

According to the investigation, these organizations have established connections or operational networks across multiple European countries, cooperating with local criminal groups and established mafias to facilitate cocaine trafficking and distribution. The reported 471% increase in cocaine seizures in Europe between 2014 and 2024 illustrates the magnitude of the challenge facing European authorities. Seizures alone do not establish the full scale of the market, but they underscore the pressure on law enforcement and the need to understand the networks behind the trade.

The most significant development is the potential transformation of Latin American organized crime from an export-driven enterprise into a more embedded presence within European criminal markets. These organizations do not necessarily need to reproduce their entire structures abroad to extend their influence. Partnerships with established criminal groups, access to trafficking corridors, local intermediaries, and financial networks can provide the infrastructure required to operate across borders while limiting direct exposure. The reported possibility of activity in as many as 16 European countries points to a transnational landscape that demands a coordinated response, although the depth and nature of each organization's presence must be established individually.

This is where Europe's strategic vulnerability becomes apparent. Criminal organizations rarely operate in isolation. They exploit institutional weaknesses, corruption, financial opacity, fragmented intelligence, and differences between national legal systems. Their activities extend beyond drug distribution into money laundering, intimidation, illicit financial flows, and the potential penetration of legitimate economic structures. The resulting threat concerns not only public security but also institutional integrity, democratic governance, and the rule of law.

Europe cannot afford to approach this challenge solely as a problem of customs enforcement or drug interdiction. Intercepting cocaine shipments is essential, but it is insufficient if the financial networks, logistical intermediaries, local partnerships, and corrupt facilitators behind them remain intact. Intelligence-sharing, joint cross-border investigations, financial disruption, and sustained cooperation with Latin American authorities must become central components of a comprehensive strategy.

Equally important is the need to confront the political and reputational dimensions of criminal power. Organized crime can benefit when its violence is minimized, its leaders are romanticized, or its activities are framed exclusively through narratives of social victimhood. This does not mean that every journalist, human rights organization, cultural project, or development initiative serves criminal interests. Such allegations require evidence. It means that no narrative, institution, or funding mechanism should be immune from scrutiny when credible questions arise about transparency, independence, or the consequences of its activities.

Human rights and the fight against organized crime are not opposing objectives. They are complementary pillars of the rule of law. Defending vulnerable populations requires confronting the criminal structures that exploit them, while protecting democratic freedoms requires ensuring that

accusations are supported by evidence and that accountability applies without political favoritism.

Europe's blind spot lies in failing to recognize that organized crime is not merely an illicit business. It is a system of power capable of exploiting economic markets, political vulnerabilities, social grievances, and institutional fragmentation. Its expansion can be facilitated by violence and money, but also by the failure of governments, media organizations, international institutions, and civil society to distinguish between understanding criminal behavior and legitimizing criminal power.

The lesson is clear: Europe must investigate criminal networks with the same determination with which it examines the political, financial, and institutional environments that allow them to flourish. Public funds require transparency. Human rights require consistency. Journalism requires evidence. Governments require accountability. And organized crime must be confronted regardless of its political connections, ideological justifications, or carefully constructed public image.

Europe is no longer simply a destination for Latin American cocaine. It faces the risk of becoming an increasingly integrated arena for transnational criminal activity. Ignoring the political, financial, and reputational mechanisms that may facilitate this expansion will leave European institutions fighting the symptoms while the underlying networks grow stronger.

European media outlets, including Switzerland's *Le Temps*, have at times portrayed Latin American criminal organizations primarily through the lens of poverty, social exclusion, and victimhood. While these factors may help explain the environments in which organized crime develops, they cannot justify its violence, excuse its victims' suffering, or obscure the power these groups exercise through intimidation, corruption, and territorial control.

Explaining criminality is not the same as legitimizing it—and human rights must never become a substitute for criminal accountability—even if a Human Rights Rapporteur has decided to advocate for the protection of such groups, Hamas and Hezbollah included.

The political consequences of this narrative become particularly significant when governments confront illegal armed groups and organized crime. When security policies are debated primarily through ideological labels such as "extreme right," the substance of the challenge risks being displaced by a political classification. The question ceases to be whether a government is dismantling criminal networks, protecting civilians, restoring state authority, and respecting the rule of law, and becomes whether its actions conform to a preferred ideological narrative.

The danger is that the label extends beyond the government itself to the citizens who elected it. By framing a government's campaign against criminal organizations as evidence of extremism, public debate risks portraying its voters as politically suspect simply for supporting a tougher response to violence and insecurity. Yet combating organized crime is not, in itself, a right-wing or left-wing undertaking. It is a fundamental responsibility of the state, subject to democratic oversight, legal constraints, and respect for human rights.

European commentators should therefore apply the same standards consistently, regardless of the political identity of the government concerned. A government's security policies must be judged by their methods, legality, effectiveness, and consequences—not dismissed through ideological shorthand. Equally, the fight against organized crime must not be used to excuse abuses of state power. Both criminal violence and unlawful state conduct demand scrutiny.

This is precisely where Europe's blind spot becomes consequential. If criminal organizations are primarily portrayed as victims, while governments seeking to dismantle their networks are primarily portrayed through ideological labels, the public debate risks losing sight of the central issue: the power of criminal structures and the harm they inflict on societies.

The real danger is not only that organized crime is crossing Europe's borders. It is that Europe may continue to underestimate the full architecture of its power—while allowing political narratives to obscure the difference between understanding criminality, excusing it, and confronting it.

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