Criminal Pandemic: A Critical Assessment of the Impact of Covid-19 on Italian Organized Crime Groups (OCGs)

August 2022

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Presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree:

International Master in Security, Intelligence and Strategic Studies

Word Count: 22,709

Supervisor: Dr. Caitriona Dowd

Date of Submission: 02/08/2022

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a lot of people that I want to thank for making me the man I am today and, subsequently, influencing and easing the writing of this dissertation. I will try to be as concise and precise as possible to avoid losing myself into words. Unfortunately, the people here mentioned know that these two features are hardly part of my character. As such, I do hope that both them and anyone else reading these acknowledgements will excuse my prolixity.

First of course, I want to thank the real day-ones. All of those people within my family that have most influenced me in my development as a person and as a professional and that have helped me, in one way or another, achieve my dreams. These are my parents, Monia and Stefano, who have always pushed me to become the best man I could. I will be always grateful to them for the means they have provided me with, which are arguably the single biggest factor that has led me to where I am today. They have always wanted 'more' from me (often more than what I wanted myself), and I hope that this piece of work will finally assure them of my capabilities and ambition. A big thank you to my grandparents: Mariangela and Attilio, and Carmen and Emilio. You are my roots and some of the few people I know will always be there for me, no matter what. You have looked after me and cared for me since I was a baby and a big share of the merit (and blame) for the person I am today goes to you. From working in the fields, or commuting for hours to avoid it, I humble myself at the daily sacrifices you had to make throughout your lives so that I wouldn't have to. I have not always been the nephew I myself wished I was, but I do want you to know how lucky I feel being able to still see and talk to you all. Special addition in this category is my great-aunt 'zia Bimba', who fervently prays for me every night. Despite my reservations about your methods of problem-solving, you will always be considered an added grandparent and a big influence over my life. Next come all my aunts and uncles and their families. You are all appreciated and, even if sometimes we do not see each other as often as we would like, I always look forward to a

birthday or Christmas Day to be able to spend time with you. Morena, Simone, and my cousins Leonardo and Gemma deserve special mentions here. You are definitely among the people I consider closest to me. The first two have literally raised me and treated me as one of their own children more times than I would have wanted as a kid. My cousins are some of the best ones a man could ask for. I do really hope that our relationship will continue in the future. Despite life and the distance, we have always managed to stay close as a family and I hope it will continue to be this way.

After my actual family, I want to mention and thank the host family in Texas that welcomed me in their home for a year as one of their own (only after I earned it of course). I did not write any acknowledgments for my Bachelor thesis and as such I am mentioning you here, but I don't think you need this to know how important you have been and always will be for me. You are my first home away from home. So important that I literally have you tattooed on my skin. I wished I could come visit you soon and that I had more time to talk on the phone. Still, you are Texas for me and the moment I will come back is going to be one of the best ones in my life. First among this lot is my host cousin KJ. One of the people that have influenced me the most and to whom I became closest despite only interacting for a year. I want to thank you for the countless hours we spent together in the man-cave playing pool and videogames and talking about life and death. Fratello, watch me from above as you have now done for four years and I know I will not stray or get lost. Say hi to grandma, Kelly and Travis. As always…I'll see you when I see you.

Coming to my friends, I first want to thank the group of people that have endured my company the longest. Baschi, Seba, Bremb, Edu, and Tom. People undergo different experiences in life and adapt by changing their character and nature. We are not special in this regard. Still, I have spent some of the best moments of my life with you since kindergarten and I will always appreciate you for that. Life split us apart, but I will always be down for a 'birretta' to remember the good times and catch up on the new. Extremely

important for my development has also been my group of friends from the Bachelor in the Netherlands. Too many to mention by name, I do still want to highlight a few that made the Hague home. Manfro, Ale, Dani, Ire…I was the luckiest person in the world to be able to spend time with you for three years. It is also thanks to you that I acquired this passion for security. Without our conversations about which fighter jet was better or what type of assault rifle would best fit certain scenarios, I would have never joined IMSISS or written this dissertation. For the ones that are still in the city, watch out! I'm coming back!!! Third, I want to mention all the people that, since I started this Masters, have forced their way into my life and made it significantly better. Special thanks to Cami, who helped me with the cursed IMSISS administration since before I even knew her. Also, thank you and Ele for coping with me in Prague. I know it wasn't always easy, especially since I became the handicapped version of myself. Still, I do wish that, one day, you will look back at those memories and start laughing. If that happens at least once, I will know I did my part. I want to thank the Dublin group (Corentin, Ele, Lu and Juli) that helped me settle in the city and welcomed me as one of their own before I even met people from my own course. I will always be grateful to Andres for allowing me to meet you one random February night. Alongside them, I also want to thank the whole IMSISS group (Sean, Vaibhav, Clara, Mina, Emma…) in Dublin. They were the first people I met in the course after six months that they spent bonding in Glasgow. I had some amazing times with you and I really do hope that we have not yet seen the last of it. Can't wait to see you all in November in Glasgow (hopefully)! Special thanks here goes to Marco for literally being the first IMSISS person to talk to me in real life and make me feel included. He will never know my struggle fitting in and the help he provided me with easing this process. Finally, my best friends Lemon and Ale deserve the biggest thanks in this section. I have known you for a really long time now, but you were never my oldest friends, nor the ones that I saw the most. Despite the obstacles that life put in front of

us at different turns and the natural ups and downs, you have always been present for me. Even if for different reasons, I appreciate you both and consider you people that, no matter where we end up in life, I will always want to stay close to.

Last but not least, I want to thank myself and all of the young people like me that, in the past few years, have had to endure a global pandemic, the apparent approach of WWIII, political chaos, and environmental disaster. We are the first generation whose life prospects are worse than their parents since the inception of the industrial revolution. Despite all of this, we still have to endure daily accusations of laziness and unprofessionalism. I personally entered my academic career as a happy kid bicycling the sunny parks of the Hague and finished it barely being able to attend university courses in person. A lot of times people celebrate big achievements as if it's only the people that are standing that made an effort. We got knocked down, but we were able to stand back up, and high we shall stand now. Our effort will probably be lost in the pages of history. I do still believe that we are it. We are the men and women that graduated with Covid-19, and it's something I will not easily forget. A special thought here goes to all those young Italians that, for fear or force, were compelled to move away from their country to pursue the dreams that they could not achieve at home. We have been pushed around so many times by our country, always being the first to be asked to sacrifice, but the last to enjoy any form of help. Among the rising debt, inflation, and financial uncertainty, we still remain the only beacon of hope for Italy. We are the generation that has not yet failed and, arguably, the only one that can not afford to. Despite all the negativity surrounding us, I do believe that we can take the future of our country in our own hands and improve it as our parents and grandparents could not.

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CESIS → Center for the Study of Social Investments

CJNG → Jalisco New Generation Cartel

CSAM → Child Sexual Abuse Material

DIA → Investigative Direction to Counter the Mafia

DNA → National Direction to Counter the Mafia

EMCDDA / OEDT → European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction

FAI → Italian Environmental Fund

GDP → Gross Domestic Product

GFEM → Global Fund to End Modern Slavery

IOM → International Organization for Migration

IOs → International Organizations

ISTAT → National Institute of Statistics

NGOs → Non-Governmental Organizations

OECD → Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

OCGs → Organized Crime Groups

UIF → Unit for the Financial Information of Italy

UNODC → United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

US FDA → The United States' Food and Drugs Administration

ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a number of overarching effects on many aspects of our daily lives. The health emergency greatly contributed to the economic, political, and social crises that rocked our entrance in the third decade of the 21st century. In this context of fear, many countries found themselves vulnerable to a long-time, internal enemy: organized crime groups. This is particularly true for what concerns Italy, a nation that, apart from being heavily hit by the virus, boasts a long tradition of mafia presence. The terror was fuelled by media organizations, politicians, and a number of additinoal stakeholders that wished to capitalize on the chaos. Interestingly though, the same views were shared by a number of academic researchers. This study thus set out to identify the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on Italian organized crime groups and understand whether they had an actual impact. Taking inspiration from the literature, we employ a mixed-method approach based on a critical, historical analysis of primary and secondary sources from governmental and non-governmental reports and datasets, academic books and studies, and news stories and articles. It was found that, out of 11 variables considered, Italian organized crime groups were actually able to expand and increase their profits in only two of them. In the other cases, they either continued a trend that had been in development for years, or simply failed to achieve their objectives outright.

1. INTRODUCTION

OCGs have been at the forefront of criminal research for years. Since the general public became fascinated with their guns and elegant dresses, members of OCGs have occupied a special place in people's imagination. This is reflected in the number of works dedicated to studying the phenomenon, which thoroughly analyze all of its aspects and component parts. Some of the earliest groups to be considered in academic research were Italian OCGs. The mafia-like organizations were 'privileged' because of their heavy presence in the US, where they dominated the organized crime landscape for decades. That's where different stakeholders started researching and studying the phenomenon, mainly to put an end to it. Therefore, most of these studies focused only on OCGs with Italian origins in the US, neglecting their counterparts in the homeland. Still, when the gap was noticed, endogenous Italian OCGs quickly became central to organized crime literature. This research spree enables researchers today to make use of a high amount of data and information, which is especially important in a field like criminology.

Today, Cosa Nostra, the Camorra, and the 'Ndrangheta are still present in the country and, if anything, they have managed to perfectly adapt to the 21st Century. They have changed their structures to accommodate new conditions and expanded their operations within both the sectors they already occupied and new, uncharted ones.

One phenomenon that aided, if not outright allowed them the achievement of their goals has always been crisis. It seems a very general concept when mentioned like this, but literally any type of crisis can help OCGs in some way. As will be displayed in the literature, economic crises might be good for financial exploitation (e.g. usury), political crises for corruption, a social crisis for state legitimacy and the subsequent ease at conducting operations etc… With the onset of the Covid-19 virus and the disproportionate impact it had in Italy, there was a real fear that OCGs would take their chance to further expand their reach and increase their incomes.

These worries are warranted. OCGs in Italy have displayed the ability to adapt to crises and exploit them to their favor numerous times. Still, the discourse around the alleged heavy effects of the pandemic on OCGs are influenced significantly by the media and largely rely on thought processes that are a relic of the past or the result of a simple repetition of theories. As such, this study sets out to critically discover and assess what effects the Covid-19 virus had on OCGs in Italy.

2. THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In order to be able to efficiently evaluate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on organized crime, and whether they have been so far-reaching as the literature suggest, we must start from the latter.

2.1. The Research Design

The research design that was chosen for this study definitely has some historical traits as it aims to discover the influence of a certain event (i.e. the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent measures) on a specific social phenomena (i.e. OCGs). As for any historical research, one must first contextualize the events to be better able to understand the relationships between them. As such, this study uses the literature review to provide a brief overview of the nature of organized crime in Italy prior Covid-19 and how it reacted to past crises. We do not provide context for the pandemic itself as we believe that, being such an important event and so close to us temporally, everyone has a clear idea of what is being discussed. To avoid misunderstandings, any particular effects of Covid or any event related to the virus that is specific to Italy will be talked about and explained throughout the body of the text and in the footnotes. Finally, historical research can also give credence to our attempt to describe the likely outcome of an existing event. Despite the availability of information and the time of the writing (mid-2022), there is still a lot of predictive work involved in this study (Halperin and Heath 2020, 14, 15).

This study can then be defined as a ‘historical events research’ that involves the study of one case during a limited, but defined period of time. This choice is further supported by the sheer importance of the event under consideration (i.e. the Covid-19 pandemic) and its potential implications for the development of a general theory related to OCGs and health crises. Moreover, knowing about the context and the ‘critical junctures’ that set into motion the pandemic helps us better understand its characteristics, but also how it works and behaves. Most importantly for this research, however, the

historical context of both the pandemic and OCGs enables us to explain what factors or conditions are causally connected to them (Halperin and Heath 2020, 13-15). Everywhere in the world, researchers have analyzed instances in which OCGs were affected, either positively or negatively, by radical developments in their surroundings. Already between the 20th and 21st Centuries, Cottino (1999) and Hessinger (2002) both described this peculiarity of OCGs. They highlighted the latter's relationship with social aspects (e.g. the ethnic community) that are necessarily tied to their surroundings. OCGs are literally embedded with the social and cultural tropes pertaining to their environment. These theoretical notions can help us describe and categorize organized crime phenomena when they do not shift from the focus of analysis and are employed with a critical eye (von Lampe 2005 ,8).

Researchers often investigate such mechanisms using cross-case, large-N studies. Many (e.g. King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 1995; Lijphart 1971, 685; and Smelser 1973, 53, 54) share a hierarchical view that places this type of research in a privileged position when compared to small-N analysis. However, this trend has been in reverse for many years, increasing the numbers of qualitative academics (e.g. Stinchcombe 1978, 21-22; Walton 1992, 125-26, 129; Ragin 1992, 225; Collier 1998a, 1998b; and Munck 1998) that prefer the latter. Within large-N studies, the reasons for causal correlations, like between OCGs and the pandemic, might not be clarified. Case studies can instead allow one to locate the intermediate factors lying between specific causes and their purported effects, which is exactly what we attempt to undertake. They do this by establishing a more variegated set of tools that are more suited at capturing social behavior. Moreover, this type of analytic research enables the use of rational choice tools to test the theoretical predictions of a model, investigate causal mechanisms, and explain the features of a case (Gerring 2011, 3, 13; and Brady and Collier 2004). Case studies are also usually homogenous and therefore more analytically tractable. A clear trade-off is thus involved whereby the researcher gives up generality

for accuracy and conceptual validity. Rueschenmeyer and Stephens (1997), for example, struck a similar compromise in their work whereby they forgo the opportunity of examining a very large number of cases in exchange for a complete reliance on secondary sources. Additional quantitative data collection would have likely not advanced their knowledge substantially, while cross-sectional, quantitative research could have never produced the same information regarding sequence and agency. The use of mixed-methods thus allowed them to avoid small-N problems in their most severe form, while bringing them closer to causal analysis.

It is important to note here that many scholars have reservations regarding this trade-off and that it is still unclear what degrees of generality and accuracy it is possible to achieve (Collier and Mahoney 1996, 89). Moreover, according to Campbell (1975), many of the aforementioned researchers (Ragin 1987, 1992; Geertz 1995; Wieviorka 1992; and Fyvbjerg 1998, 2001, 2002) that conducted intensive, in-depth case studies reported that the material compelled them to revise their views, assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses.

Still, this outcome does not need to be seen as negative. The possibility of revising the hypothesis depending on the research's findings is a necessary condition for any type of analytic study. In most research efforts, and certainly in our case, ideas and evidence are linked in many different ways. Small-N research is better suited to solve such problems as it provides the researcher with additional means to uncover and explain the connections (Ragin 1992, 225). Ragin (1987, 34-52) further explains that a methodology with many explanatory variables and few observations is more apt at considering 'multiple causations'. This is extremely important for our research as the observation of a variegated set of variables can give us an objective idea regarding the multiple forces that, through the Covid-19 pandemic, affected OCGs, their structures, and their activities. The same author goes on to explain

that strictly quantitative, statistical methods often fail to identify the links of causation that different explanatory variables can help recognize and describe.

Finally, this study's design can be considered 'critical' in its nature. A type of action research, critical studies promote emancipatory praxis in the practitioners and a critical consciousness that exhibits itself in political and practical action to promote change (Grundy 1987, 154). This form of science mode is perfect for our study, which is deeply involved with controversial concepts and definitions that, for their political or social nature, can be approached from different directions with diverging results. It also helps us bypass potential biases related to the literature's overwhelming leaning towards the consideration of Covid-19 as a major factor in the changes in OCGs' structures and activities. Berg (2004, 204) describes two different goals that this type of action research tries to achieve. First is the attempt to increase the researcher's proximity with the everyday problems faced by practitioners in disadvantaged settings, and the theories used to explain and resolve the problem. This means effectively trying to bring together theory and book knowledge with real-world situations, issues, and experiences. The second goal must be to assist practitioners in emancipating their thought from the veil of biases and assumptions that riddles the literature. This can allow academics to better understand fundamental problems by raising their collective consciousness (Holter and Schwartz-Barcott 1993). It is this second goal in particular that this study wishes to achieve by performing an honest, objective analysis of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on Italian OCGs.

For this purpose, this study is divided as follows. This chapter, the first following the introduction, deals with the research design and methodology, while also touching on this research's potential advantages and disadvantages. The second chapter is the literature review concerned with the relationship between organized crime and crises. . That is divided into three component parts: 1. Organized crime and crises around the world; 2. Organized crime and crises in Italy and; 3. Organized crime and the Covid-19 pandemic. These are

further split into different subsections that, despite often being similar, do not always match each other. That is simply because of the necessity to adapt each variable to the area under consideration. The time and space to write this research is limited and as such we need to focus on the features that have most contributed to changing OCGs in Italy. Moreover, as we will see, this method allows the researcher to avoid a 'complexification' of the study. The subsections are. 1. Economics, politics, and the environment; 2. Economics, politics, migration, and the environment and; 3. Politics, economics, and smuggling and trafficking. The third chapter, which represents the biggest share of the body of the dissertation, is instead divided into four main areas. These are: 1. Socio-political activities; 2. Economic activities; 3. Trafficking and smuggling and; 4. Counterfeit. These are also further divided into subsections: 1. Corruption, the exploitation of the redirection of police resources, the provision of social support, and the exploitation of the online sphere; 2. The appropriation of public funds, OCGs' online businesses, the infiltration of the Italian economic system, and the practices of usury and money laundering; 3. Drug trafficking and human trafficking, and; 4. Counterfeit. The choice for a division of the sections concerned with trafficking and smuggling, and counterfeits stems both from the plethora of information available, which allows us to conduct research much more in detail, and from the divergence in the findings. Finally, before the concluding remarks, the fourth chapter explores the possibility that OCGs might not have been affected so much by Covid-19 as previously thought.

2.2. The Research Methodology

There are many research methods that different authors have used to analyze the effects of specific crises on OCGs and vice versa. Allum, Merlino, and Coletti (2018, 81) conducted their research on the 'gray zone' represented by business leaders and politicians that silently enable mafia operations and activities with impunity. They mostly relied on desk-based, primary data

collection through fieldwork around Italy. The researchers examined judicial sources (i.e. court files and proceedings) as part of the large-scale investigation carried out by Italian authorities between 2013 and 2017. These documents include interrogations and telephonic interceptions of organized criminal networks that can provide detailed information regarding OCGs' systems of relationships, evolving strategies, and modus operandi. A similar methodology was employed by Campana (2018), who studied Italian OCGs' role in the organization of migrants smuggling across the Mediterranean. The data he relied on was extracted through a systematic content analysis of the evidence collected during another large-scale investigation by the Anti-Mafia Prosecutor's Office in Palermo, Sicily. Following this trend, Bhattacharya and Sachdev (2021, 104) used an amalgamation of archetypical social sciences research tool applications to assemble statistics in a methodical and convenient way. Most of their research, in fact, is based on interviews and surveys to locals and representatives of each contender group. Similarly, Djordjevic and Dobovsek (2020, 809) built their research on four semi-structured interviews with civil society organizations and regional networks, as well as two consultations with police officers.

However, all these researchers also rely heavily on secondary sources. They build on the preliminary research findings based on the analysis of organized crime threat assessments and national anti-organized crime strategies by think-tanks, academic reports, research studies, and investigative journalism stories. Other authors in the literature give credibility to the content analysis of secondary sources. Eligh (2020), along with other reports from the 'Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime', relies on generalizations drawn from information contained within reports by state police authorities, international communities of retired police officers, government organizations, research centers, and civil communities. Finally, one the most interesting studies for our case must be that of Aziani et al. (2021). They performed an assessment of the strategies employed by OCGs to

increase their profits and power at the beginning of the pandemic. Their analysis aimed at the identification of the different ways in which OCGs adapted to the new reality in terms of illegal governance, infiltration of the legal economy, and illicit appropriation of public funds. As such, the researchers identified and collected data through a systematic assessment of relevant information from media articles and international organizations (IOs) reports. They then proceeded to gather data by relying on different sets of keywords and queries related to the topics of OCGs and Covid-19. Of course they filtered out the instances that were most useful and could advance their research, and triangulated information within them by corroborating an article's details with data from other sources addressing the same case. After a manual recognition of factual evidence, they then classified the identified information into various categories with a number of criminal events being included in different classes since they related to several of them. The design and the methodology displayed by these academics is very similar to this study's own. Their success in identifying a number of different instances of exploitation of the Covid-19 crisis by OCGs through illegal governance and the infiltration of the legal economy thus ensures the feasibility of such an effort.

The idea of mixing different methods originated in 1959 from the work of Campbell and Fiske, who used them to study psychological traits. Their encouragement to employ a multimethod matrix to examine different approaches to data collection and analysis promoted others to follow suit. Soon after, qualitative methods (e.g. surveys and interviews) were combined to the more traditional forms of quantitative approaches. With their normalization and subsequent diffusion, mixed-method strategies of inquiry took numerous terms that are still found in the literature but generally indicate the same thing (e.g. multimethod, convergence, integrated, combined…). By the 1990s the idea of mixing different methods had moved from the search for convergence

to an actual integration and connection of both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell 2009; Sieber 1973; and Creswell and Plano Clark 2007).

Creswell (2009) provides an interesting take on the multimethods procedures employed in this study. He dubs them 'concurrent mixed-methods' and highlights the convergence and merging of quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. Using this design, the researcher collects both forms of data at the same time. Only then does he integrate the information within the interpretation of the overall results. This type of design also allows the researcher to embed smaller sets of data within larger ones to analyze different questions simultaneously. Of course, in this case, qualitative and quantitative data play different roles, with the former addressing the process, while the latter being more useful concerning the outcomes.

Taking inspiration from the literature, this study thus aims to employ a methodology that relies on a mixed-method approach. This will mostly entail the analysis of qualitative secondary sources, which are then integrated with quantitative data for clarity and precision. Many researchers (e.g. Pinotti 2020; Bruce, Cavgias, and Meloni 2021, 2; Carrapico 2014; Lavorgna and Sergi 2013, 10; Paoli 2016, 15; Kleemans 2014; and Aziani et al. 2021) point to the difficulty in thoroughly analyzing organized crime and the effects that such an overarching event as the Covid-19 pandemic might have had on it. This crisis affected almost every sector and every aspect of our lives and it becomes difficult to fully describe its effects. It is also difficult to describe OCGs when there is currently still no established and accepted definition of organized crime. Still in the 1980s, when the study of the phenomenon of organized crime was well underway, researchers dubbed 'power syndicates' all those criminal structures that overarched individuals and small collectives (Block 1983, 13). How one wishes to describe the phenomenon depends largely on the group under consideration. As such, a traditional criminal organization, a transnational group, and local gangs can all inspire different definitions of

organized crime. Moreover, we are still oblivious to many of the phenomena related to OCGs themselves. It is extremely difficult to evaluate either positive or negative fluctuations in the problems related to OCGs, regardless of the cause. One culprit might be identified in the errors that are endogenous to crime reporting. This is probably also why little empirical attention has been given to phenomena such as OCGs' provision of illegal governance and their infiltration of the legal economy during the crisis. Furthermore, organized crime, differing from other forms of crime, relies on social opportunity structures (a net of social relations and personal contacts). Its existence and spatial distribution literally depends on particular socioeconomic and political conditions. These differ greatly depending on the models employed or the type of OCGs under consideration. Each one of the models, for example, has different characteristics, aims, degrees of sophistication, and relationships with the society it pertains to. They also have different degrees of adaptability when confronted with social changes. As such, different types of OCGs might react to potential new criminal opportunities in different ways. Subsequently, crises and significant events (e.g. Covid-19) that impact both society and its opportunity structures can also be exploited by OCGs differently. Even Europol (2020, 3, 4, 7) admits that any forecasting or foresight exercise in this sense can be considered speculative to a degree. This is especially true because of OCGs' tendency to react differently to confrontations with social changes.

However, the agency also notes how it is possible to draw up potential developments related to the Covid-19 pandemic and organized crime. Unlike the global financial crisis, the pandemic and the lockdown that ensued impacted societies, politics, and economies around the world much quicker. It also impacted OCGs in several phases (i.e. short-, medium-, and long-term), but it is only now that the real effects on organized crime structures and activities are taking shape. These have already become apparent and are in the process of fully manifesting themselves at the time of the writing of this study (2022). That's because, all around the world but especially in Italy, our case

study, social fear for the virus is waning, same as the will of the government and the most liberalist sectors of society to impose additional lockdowns that might further strain the economic and financial capabilities of the Italian population. A number of researchers (Paoli 2016, 15; Pinotti 2020; and Bruce, Cavgias, and Meloni 2021, 2) also admit that assessments such as this one are possible when localized to a specific context (Italy) or group (the three main Italian OCGs), and especially when the latter has frequent relations with the general population.

After all, determining comparative risk levels to optimize the distribution of resources is the main goal of assessments and predictions in criminal justice just as in other natural sciences (Albanese 2008, 268). An attempt at assessing the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on OCGs must be undertaken because of the sheer importance of the information it could provide. The insight can be useful for a number of different stakeholders (e.g. law enforcement) and, potentially, benefit the entire Italian community. Such concerns are echoed by other researchers. Djordjevic and Dobovsek (2020, 815), for example, explicitly express the need for further systematic monitoring and analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on criminal landscapes. This plea is valid for both old and new forms of organized crime.

But what kind of secondary sources are we going to rely on for such an overwhelming effort? Case studies such as this one require a thorough assessment of the literature. The findings regarding past crises and their relationships with OCGs can indeed be compared to the situation at hand. Such analysis holds the potential to offer a richness in variables' variance that could not otherwise be easily achieved (Collier and Mahoney 1996, 98). First of all, of course, we are going to rely on academic literature (i.e. research books and studies) dealing with OCGs' relationship with crises in general both in Italy and abroad. Similarly, we will be analyzing news stories and articles related to the same problem. The second body of literature we will rely on for our study are academic books and studies related to the relationship between

organized crime and the Covid-19 pandemic around the world. As before, we will also be relying on news stories and articles . Of course, in both cases, governmental and non-governmental reports explaining the connection between crises and OCGs will integrate the literature with additional reliable sources of information and even primary data. Finally of course, the same types of sources will be used to perform the research that will help us grasp the real extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic affected organized crime in Italy and how.

The content of all these sources was analyzed by the author in the process of researching forì this study. A mix composed of academic and research studies, governmental and non-governmental assessments and reports, and news articles and stories is the only formula that can give us a clear view of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdown on organized crime in Italy. Only taking into consideration one or two such types of sources would definitely provide insufficient data and information, and might even possibly lead to bias. We will talk thoroughly about the first category throughout the literature review, but also in the text itself. Governmental reports are instead mainly drawn from the Italian government (e.g. Camera dei Deputati 2017, Governo Italiano e Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2021; and Ministero dell'Interno 2020, 2021) and its different agencies (e.g. Banca d'Italia 2020; Clemente 2020; DIA 2017, 2018, 2020; DNA 2011; FAI 2014; Guardia di Finanza 2020; ISTAT 2014; Unioncamere 2014; and Unità di Informazione Finanziaria per l'Italia 2020). They will provide us with the bulk of the quantitative data included in the analysis. The collection of primary information was, however, also performed online through the use of datasets dealing with different aspects of crime and Covid-19. Examples are the Eurobarometer, Macrotrends (2022), the OECD (2015), Statista (2022), the World Bank (2022), and Transparency International (2019, 2021). This study will also make use of reports originating from foreign governmnets' sources (e.g. Ambasciata e Consolato degli Stati

Uniti d'America in Italia 2020; US FDA 2020; and Royal canadian Mounted Police 2006). Non-governmental reports were then chosen among the most prominent organizations and associations concerned with the topics of Covid-19 and OCGs. One example of this is the EU (e.g. Commissione Europea 2021; EMCDDA 2020; European Council 2022; and Europol 2013, 2020), but also the UN (UN University 2020; UNODC 2018, 2020; UN 2020; IOM 2017; Musumeci and Marelli 2020) and Interpol (2020). Reports by lesser-known, specialized NGOs were also included (e.g. Delić and Zwitter 2020; Dominguez and Martinez 2020; Eligh 2020; Felbab-Brown 2017; GFEM Media 2021; and Serious Organized Crime Agency 2006). However, many of these lesser organizations, and especially the ones focused on mafia-like OCGs, are Italian ones (e.g. Antimafia Duemila 2019; Clusit 2022; Della Michelina 2022; Digital Communication 2020; Enria and masino 2020; Gatta 2020; Ordine dei Farmacisti 2019; and SOS Impresa 2011). Finally, the author employed a mix of news articles and stories to stay atop of the information that is still constantly flowing regarding the pandemic and OCGs' reaction to it. These are mainly in Italian and English. For both of them the author relies on the biggest and most important newspapers, which gives a little legitimacy to their findings and investigations. For Italy these are the Corriere della Sera (e.g. Saviano 2021), la Stampa (e.g. Zancan 2015), la Repubblica (e.g. Candito 2019; Foschini 2020; la Repubblica 2015, 2020; and Palazzolo 2020), il Sole 24 Ore (e.g. Cimmarusti 2020; and Plutino 2014), and Il Fatto Quotidiano (e.g. Gisoldi 2015; Iurillo 2020; and Trinchella 2019). For what concerns the English-language newspapers, they are the BBC (e.g. BBC News 2020; and Fajardo 2020), CNN (e.g. Di Donato and Lister 2020), the Guardian (e.g. Briso and Phillips 2020; Kingston 2007; Nadeau 2018; Rangel, Daniels, and Phillips 2020; and Tondo 2020), Reuters (e.g. Dastin 2020), the New York Times (e.g. Lyons 2015), and TIME (e.g. Tondo 2016; and Vick and Poole 2018). Specialized magazines that focus on either OCGs or Covid-19 were, however, also consulted. Finally, because of the authors' ability to speak

Spanish (e.g. El Economista 2020; Forbes Staff 2020; Gonzalez 2020; InSight Crime 2020; and W Radio 2020) and Portuguese (e.g. Soares 2020), newspapers and magazines in these languages that were concerned with the research question were also taken into consideration.

The Covid-19 crisis, much more than other past ones, is an overarching condition that has affected every economic sector and every single aspect of Italian politics and society. Indeed, such a crisis also indirectly affects crime and OCGs in different ways. To avoid getting lost in specifics and generalizations, and because of the inspiration provided by the literature, the author has chosen to analyze particular areas (i.e. economics, politics, trafficking and smuggling, and counterfeit) and specific activities within them (e.g. the appropriation of public funds, the infiltration of the legal economy, and usury) that apply much more influence on OCGs, especially during the pandemic (Lavorgna and Sergi 2013, 10). Already Cohen (1977) in the 1970s and Skaperdas and Syropoulos (1995) in the 1990s employed structures of activities and association to study OCGs. The former used them to explore the concept of organized crime. The latter instead described the analogy between OCGs specializing in the monopolistic use of violence through game theory models. A focus on OCGs' activities, rather than on specific groups is useful to produce an objective basis for investigative priorities, as well as for assessment and analysis purposes. A similar method to perform risk and threat assessments of OCGs was developed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (2006) and the Serious Organized Crime Agency (2006). They agree that the best method to determine risk is to rank OCGs by their attributes. Also Albanese (2007, 2008, 265, 266), who has thoroughly studied the nature and structure of OCGs, suggests a categorization of organized crime activities that is similar to this study's. Specifically, he presents three fields of research. These are: 1. The provision of illicit services (e.g. loan-sharking, prostitution, illegal gambling and human trafficking); 2. The provision of illicit goods (e.g. drug trafficking, property theft and counterfeiting), and; 3. The infiltration of

legitimate businesses (e.g. extortion, racketeering, money laundering and fraud). All three these categories are included and analyzed in this study.

2.3. The Research's Advantages and Disadvantages

- Advantages

This study will take a critical look at the real consequences of the pandemic and the lockdown on OCGs in Italy. There are a number of reasons that led the author to choose this kind of theoretical framework. This study takes a fresh, new look at the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on Italian OCGs and questions them. And despite a number of thorny problems, historical research like ours also boasts plenty of advantages. Of course, using this framework forces us to take a stance that is contrary to that of most of the literature. This particular point of view however, remains as prone to bias and error as any other. Another advantage of this study is that it was carried out during the end of the pandemic and especially towards the end of the worldwide lockdowns that have kept many people inside their homes and brought the global economy to a standstill. These are the major factors that have allegedly allowed OCGs around the world to thrive and prosper. Analyzing the pandemic's effects at this time allows us to make use of a plethora of information that has been collected on both the social and economic effects of Covid-19 and OCGs' reaction to them. Analyzing this specific historical sequence also allows us to consider evidence about questions of agency and identify the empirical counterparts of theoretical conceptualizations in a more complex and adequate manner (Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1997, 70).

Apart from the different advantages that have already been described throughout the research design and methodology sections, the author wants to highlight two more that he considers particularly important. First, there is already a plethora of sources (e.g. Dellasega and Vorrath 2020; De Santis 2021; Gomez 2020; Guirakhoo 2020; Grattieri and Nicasio 2020; Layachi

2020; Logar and Leese 2020; Namli 2021; Peluso 2021; Sanchez and Achilli 2020; Schneider and Nam 2020; Zivotic and Trajkovski 2020; Aziani et al. 2021; Balletti 202; Blofield, Hoffman, and Llanos; Borisov and Lewis 2021; and Bosisio, Nicolazzo, and Riccardi 2021) from the literature that look at the effects of Covid-19 on organized crime with the pre-held assumption that something in the structure or activities of the latter must have changed. This might be due to bias, or because of the unfortunate time of the analyses, many of which were conducted only after a few months from the appearance of the virus. Many researchers might even have been influenced by the literature itself to varying degrees. In such a scenario, certain researchers could have reached their conclusions because of their compatibility with the ones reached within the context of other crises (e.g. the 2007-2008 global financial crisis). It would thus be interesting to intentionally leave this bias behind for our research and instead focus on the actual changes that have already been accounted for and measured.

Second, much of the literature admits to be making generalizations when analyzing the effects of such an overarching phenomena as Covid-19 has been, touching on literally every aspect of our lives. These generalizations, coupled with the previous bias, might create the wrong impression, even now that the full effects of the pandemic have come to light, that something must have changed in the way Italian OCGs are structured, what activities they

carry out and how. It is also worth mentioning that every country has experienced Covid-19 and the lockdowns differently, as different is the nature of the OCGs that act within the boundaries of their territories. As such, it is possible that, while South American or Asian OCGs took full advantage of the situation created by the pandemic, it was not the same with Italian ones.

The choice of Italy as the focus of this study stems from a number of factors. First, the country has a long, established experience both with OCGs and crises. Both of them have been thoroughly studied there and, thanks to the richness of the literature, there is also a plethora of information that can help

construct links of causality. Italian OCGs, in particular, have been at the center of academic research on organized crime for decades. Moreover, the author of this study is Italian, which allows him to understand cultural tropes that might otherwise negatively bias other practitioners. Being able to read and understand Italian is also a huge advantage with data collection. Most of the information regarding the issue is diffused using this language, it would thus be hard to conduct such a research effort without at least a basic knowledge of it. Similarly, these advantages can also be applied, even to a much smaller degree, to sources in Spanish and Portuguese, languages that the author also can read and speak. This opportunity allowed him to exploit a more variegated set of information important for the construction of the literature review and the analysis of Covid-19 effects on OCG's activities. Another reason that makes Italy the perfect case study for this research is the richness of information regarding the effects of Covid-19 in the country, especially given the devastation caused by the virus there. The first lockdown in Italy started on March 9th, 2020, the first non-Asian country to impose one. Having experienced the potency of Covid-19 and the strains caused by the ensuing lockdown earlier than others, the author believes that its effects might be more visible in Italy than in many other nations that are still reeling from it, or that have never really completely curbed restrictions. Additionally, being a high-income country (The World Bank 2022) with huge internal territorial disparities, it is relatively rich with information regarding internal factors that can prove useful for this research. At last, it is important to note that, while this study's unit of analysis remains the country, we are going to make a number of observations and comparisons that will involve the supra-national, the regional, and even the local levels. This way we can avoid some problems linked to the use of a single case study.

- Disadvantages

On the other hand, we also need to acknowledge the disadvantages of this kind of research. First, it is true that this study's choice of the subject case study (i.e. Italy) and the period under analysis (2019-2022) maximize the availability of sources and information. The study of OCGs, however, has to deal with a general reluctance to report, mostly for fears of retaliation. This is especially the case when dealing with powerful organizations such as Cosa Nostra, the 'Ndrangheta, and the Camorra (Pinotti 2020, 214). This problem becomes apparent when taking into account the results of a survey conducted among Southern Italian entrepreneurs by the CENSIS in 2013. The respondents were asked how much they thought their sales would have increased in the absence of OCGs. Interestingly, participants from one of the only Southern regions that has been spared by mafia presence, Apulia, admitted higher costs (+50%) than respondents from regions where OCGs are stronger (+20% in Sicily and Calabria). That is probably not because of an actual mafia problem in Apulia or its absence in the other regions. It simply showcases the chokehold OCGs apply on human rights and freedoms in certain areas of Italy. In the case of this research, the chokehold can be fatal for the development of a cohesive and sound argument. Related to this issue is the sheer difficulty often faced by law enforcement regarding the collection of data and its reflection of the actual situation on the ground. Indeed, low levels of criminal activity may sometimes just indicate a low rate of detection (Kleemans 2014; Pinotti 2020; and Aziani et al. 2021).

It is also first worth noting that all methods have limitations. Reported perceptions might thus be less correlated than previously thought, or even not at all in some cases, with OCGs. Mixed-method approaches have often been employed in the past to obviate different problems. It was a common belief among scholars that multiple methods would neutralize or cancel each other's biases (Creswell 2009). Of course, this is not always the case and even the use of a variegated set of methods can lead to its own problems. First and foremost, the use of a single case study is limiting both for what concerns the

possibility of constructing a theory and for its generalization, which might be close to impossible when applied to different contexts. Second, Italy might be seen as an extreme case for what concerns OCGs and crises. As such, some might argue this choice to be the result of selection bias. This is a problem even in the case the researcher chooses not to generalize his/her findings to a larger set of cases. Connected to selection bias is case studies' and small-N analyses' tendency to overestimate the importance of certain explanations when discovering new explanations. The non-random nature of the sample of analysis makes its inclusion arbitrary and potentially influenced by exogenous narratives and criteria. If intentionally malicious, they could negatively affect the study and pollute the final results. One example of this is the importance of the media in the discourse surrounding OCGs. As criminal activities are perceived and reported differently, the discourse may change depending on the country or region. A sensationalist bias might be introduced, whereby serious crimes committed by notorious organizations are given more weight and considered more 'newsworthy' (Aziani et al. 2021). The author of this study will try to avoid 'complexification' of the research by using his insider knowledge regarding Italy to anticipate outliers within the data.

Even if this richness in categories and causal variables puts greater pressure on our dataset, their description will not require any substantial modification of key concepts or ideas. In social sciences many dependent variables are influenced by different causal factors. Our definition of causality, however, does not become problematic. Such situations are extremely common and can be easily understood through precision and clarity in the description of the conditions making up each causal effect. Still, the simultaneous analysis of different explanatory variables and their effects can lead to biases, especially when measurement errors diverge. Qualitative researchers often study the explanatory variables sequentially. This procedure can cause problems such as the omitted variable bias. In our case, similar problems might arise when analyzing the different areas (e.g. economic,

political…) that have been pushed by Covid-19 to influence OCGs. Studying them separately helps us assess them and their effects in depth. This method of analysis leaves us with little room to maneuver, however, making it more difficult to identify and describe the links between them. The author will try to avoid this issue by giving more weight within the research to observations over time. Researchers often use this type of historical analysis to dodge certain problems and difficulties associated with case studies. Furthermore, this study can actually be considered a test for the thesis supporting the idea that the Covd-19 pandemic greatly affected OCGs and their activities. To conduct a thorough and effective assessment, the author had to deal with a large body of data comprising both the alleged causes and their purported effects. Constantly questioning the necessity and the degree of influence every dependent variable had can help us uncover alternative indicators. Additional observations relevant to the implications of a theory can thus allow investigators to obviate small-N research-related dilemmas and enable both them and their readers to increase their confidence in their findings. Tracing the process of any sequence of events related to Covid-19 and their effects on OCGs can lead to a high number of observations. Too few of them might lead to omitted variable bias as we have seen, or even indeterminacy. The dilemma would thus remain unsolved. The examination of multiple observations focusing on particularly important factors enables academics to witness the activation of causal mechanisms and assess them. Selection bias also causes the lack of a frame of comparison against which to assess dependent variables. The historical features of this research, however, allow us to obviate that problem by providing clarity regarding the timeline under analysis. Studying a pandemic, it is thus necessary to look at the years anticipating and when possible following the event (Chermak 1995; Collier and Mahoney 1996, 88; and King Keohane, and Verba 1994, 88, 89, 166, 221, 223, 227, 228).

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many researchers from around the world have been fascinated by the link between organized crime and crises. Since the beginning of the new millennium, academia has experienced a proliferation of studies focused on this very link with many theories and concepts being constantly developed and refuted. They explore every aspect of the possible connections that tie organized crime, what most researchers consider a social phenomenon (or at least heavily influenced by its social context), with the ever changing nature of the environment within which it grows and operates.

Raeymaekers, Menkhaus, and Vlassenroot (2008), for example, observe the 'creative destruction' caused by crises of any nature, which are able to provide opportunities for change and a possibility for the creation of a new order by OCGs once peace has been restored. They conducted their observations focusing on South African gangs, but their findings can be employed to explain and describe situations like our own. Of course however, even if concepts and theories are transferable, one still needs to keep an eye out for bias. Similar to South Africa, other regions' OCGs have experimented with new activities, shifting operations, a reinvented organizational structure, and leadership handovers in the face of a crisis.

This chapter thus aims at reviewing the literature concerned with crises and organized crime and identify the ideas and concepts that can be useful in our own research. Because of the diversity of the nature of all these studies, we have created a structure that we believe can help clarify which areas have been mostly responsible for affecting organized crime after a crisis and the ones in which the same OCGs were more active. As such, the first two sections of this chapter focus respectively on the effects of crises on OCGs around the world and the effects of crises on OCGs in Italy. Both these sections are then divided into the same four subsections highlighting the specific area of focus. These are economic activities, political advantages,

migration, and environmental disasters. The third section is instead centered on the effects of Covid and the pandemic on OCGs around the world.

This chapter will help uncover the mound of knowledge regarding the relationship between OCGs and crises contained in the literature and identify the place of this study within it. Furthermore, the information provided to us by previous studies regarding this matter, whatever their specific focus is, aided in the choice for a specific methodology apart from, of course, informing our own research with invaluable data regarding the behavior of OCGs in times of crisis and the latter's ability to affect them.

It is important to note however, and it will become even more apparent throughout the literature, that this study's division of the subsections is completely arbitrary and aimed at simplification. The reality of the situation is much more nuanced. Different spheres such as the economic and political ones, despite possessing their own defined properties, can still both contribute to influencing the same phenomenon in different ways, and even directly affect each other. Sometimes, the right conditions for organized crime to advance its political goals are just not in place until an economic crisis arrives. As such, it is important to remember that many of the authors that will be cited in this literature review have contributed to different aspects that are basic components of its structure. They are thus present in multiple sections, highlighting the interrelated nature of the environment that forms and feeds OCGs. Bugliasca (2008), for example, is able to highlight the importance of entrenched public-sector corruption and weak institutions in OCGs' attempts to coerce and coopt political officials within what is essentially an economic and legal study.

3.1. Organized Crime and Crises around the World

- Economics

The first testimony of a connection between OCGs and crises within the economic sphere comes from Europe after the 2007-2008 global financial

crisis. In fact Europol, in a 2020 report, suggested to look at its aftermath to anticipate general developments related to the pandemic's effects on OCGs and terrorism. A suggestion that we can definitely treasure for our analysis of the relationship between OCGs and the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, Eligh (2020), Fukushima (1995) and Monzini (1999) also highlighted the useful connection between OCGs and economic crises. As will be subsequently displayed, this is the type of crisis that has been studied the longest and more thoroughly within the literature. Arguably, it is also the type of crisis that has the biggest impact on OCGs and their activities. The aforementioned reasearcher's work focuses respectively on: 1. The impact of the Covid pandemic on illicit drug markets; 2. The aftermath of the devastating Hanshin earthquake in Japan and; 3. The history of organized crime within the Mediterranean cities of Naples, Italy and Marseille, France. The diversity in the nature of the different subjects of these studies, and the difference in the very nature of the research itself therefore suggests a durable link that ties inextricably OCGs around the world and the economic situation of the different places in which they live and operate.

- Politics

Naturally, another force with the ability to deeply affect organized crime and influence its structure and activities is politics. Different researchers have described the ways in which juridical and political vacuums can allow OCGs to thrive. Nagan (2014, 55, 57, 59) has analyzed the powerful institutions of organized crime in South Africa, explaining how the corruption of the Apartheid era created a vacuum in law enforcement. Coupled with a rapidly-growing population and the country's developmental dysfunctions, and political chaos enabled OCGs to penetrate and undermine legitimate political and social institutions.

Serbos (2013, 19, 20, 27) has performed a similar analysis focusing on OCGs in the Western Balkans. Despite significant improvements in

sustainability and the economic and financial spheres, the politicized state institutions of the region suffer from a lack of capacity to enforce legislation and control mechanisms, and an almost total absence in transparency. Additionally, the post-communist, weak states of the Western Balkans also lack strong national borders and a vibrant civil society, apart from being infested with unemployment, and widespread poverty. All these factors, in turn, precipitated a situation in which organized crime and corruption were creating new possibilities for conflict in a region of major importance for the E.U.. According to Serbos, this is due to the Western Balkan OCGs' increasing involvement with the European market for human trafficking, counterfeiting, contraband, and drugs (i.e. heroin and cocaine). Without control and accountability, the contract between a state and its citizens breaks apart, intensifying fear and increasing insecurity both at the societal and individual levels. These assumptions are echoed by Anastasijevic (2006, 1-13) and Glenny (2008, 87-104), who both believe that the war in Yugoslavia contributed to make the region more attractive to organized crime because of its privileged geographic location, weak governments, poor economies, and porous borders. Such conclusions, at least for the area of the Western Balnkans, were confirmed in 2011 by the Center for the Study of Democracy in its report on the links between OCGs and corruption.

Another study on the connection between political crises and OCGs came from Heuser (2018, 2, 6, 7, 10). He focused on the challenges faced by the new President of Peru, who inherited power from the corrupt, authoritarian regime of Alberto Fujimori. The incomplete democratic transition that made him Head of State, however, also led to political opposition, a lack of public trust, insufficient reforms, and incapable democratic institutions. Heuser identified OCGs as one of the two[1] main causes for the erosion of the

[1] Just like Serbos (2013), he specified that the power of OCGs is at its maximum when coupled with high levels of corruption in government and public administration. This variable should thus not be ignored in our study, especially since the phenomenon had a long, endemic history in Italy.

legitimacy of the political system. The lack of accountability in Peru's institutions and the corruption of their public servants facilitated OCGs' purchase of political influence and the cooptation of officials. Heuser highlights how the crisis allowed OCGs to recruit workers for their illegal activities in marginalized areas. These people, lacking both alternative economic opportunities and the state's protection, provided cheap labor for OCGs and their leaders. Monetary gains[2] are not the only reason that leads to their exploitment however. Political influence at both the regional and national levels played a big role too. In an environment characterized by insecurity in every aspect, OCGs in Peru have thus managed to further alienate society from the political system and curtail any real hope of change.

- The Environment

Finally, this section concludes with a brief description of the literature concerned with OCGs and environmental disasters. This is particularly important for our study because, being primarily caused by a medical emergency, the Covid-19 crisis and the subsequent pandemic could be classified within this section. As such, it is important that we also consider natural phenomena when assessing the relationship between crisis and OCGs. The first mention of such a relationship appears in Felbab-Brown's (2015) research on water crimes. She identifies irresponsible water-use policies and a severe scarcity of the resource as the cause of intense tensions around the world. The researcher includes the new phenomena of water-smuggling and distribution in her analysis. According to her, this is becoming the new frontier for OCGs in developing communities.

Additionally, the UNODC (2020) also uses past natural crises to gather information useful for a prediction of the evolution of OCGs' activities during the Covid-19 pandemic. The agency mentions the 2011 tsunami in Japan, the

[2] This is not just the additional income obtained through increased productivity in traditional activities, but also the capital gained through the expansion into novel sectors such as money laundering.

Latin American cyclone disasters, and a number of earthquakes in Italy as possible case studies. In particular, it shows how OCGs profited from public procurement processes through the appropriation of public funds destined for distressed companies. Specifically, the report cites the medical, retail, marketplace, transportation, turism, arts, hospitality, entertainment and recreation sectors as the ones most at risk.

3.2. Organized Crime and Crises in Italy

For our analysis of the literature covering the relationship between OCGs and crises in Italy we have structured this section a little differently from the previous one. In particular, the subsection 'migration' has been added to the other three because of its importance and centrality within the Italian organized crime discourse. Research (Barbagallo 1999; Transparency International 2021; and Maiello and Della Ragione 2018) widely agrees that, at least since the 1980s, emergencies have represented the best ally for shady and quick businesses in Italy. Coupled with corruption and bad management, they contribute to the creation of a vicious cycle that ultimately leads to crisis. This is when OCGs are really able to exploit the system and take advantage of the new opportunities. Europol (2020, 9, 10) reached similar conclusions in the multiple reports it released at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The agency identified the Cold War and the global economic crisis as examples of emergenceis during which OCGs have demonstrated their adaptability, resilience, and profit-oriented nature. That is because shifting demands in criminal markets and changes in consumer tastes allow OCGs to more easily acces their battered communities. In turn, because of the crisis, the latter have less power and will to resist certain 'offers that you cannot refuse'.

- Economics

To follow up on these thoughts, we want to start with the analysis of economic crises and their impact on OCGs in Italy in the past. The 2007-2008

global financial crisis definitely stands out here for its importance. The degree to which it transformed the economic (and subsequently also social) structure of many countries around the globe can not be overstated. Its effects were felt more or less in every sector and, particularly for Italy, they lasted for a very long time, thoroughly influencing the realities they came into contact with. Many researchers have attempted to grasp the nature of the relationship between this crisis and OCGs in Italy. Marinaro (2016, 197, 200, 206, 207), for example, analyzed the OCGs' loan-sharking activities within Rome's illegal credit market at the end of the crisis. She employed Mayer's (2012) distinction between high interest rates and long-term debt-trapping, which were both rising as local, informal lenders increasingly sought collaboration with OCGs to continue operations. Indeed, following the crisis and facing a steep rise in the demand for cash loans, the absence of liquidity forced many of these lenders into the arms of OCGs, which represented the only entity disposing of vast amounts of capital. Particularly hit were all of those small- and medium-sized firms that, with narrow profit margins, lacked the financial buffer to withstand the revenue slump. With many of them being run and staffed by family members and the intertwining of domestic finances and the business' capital, the loss of assets had critical repercussions. The CENSIS (2013) calculated that between 2009 and 2013 around 1.6 million businesses closed down in Italy because of their inability to withstand the fall in consumer spending and the rise in unemployment.

Despite making rich profits[3], there were other objectives that Italian OCGs hoped to achieve through their operations. Such a functional service expands social consent within the communities surrounding mafia organizations. At the same time, usury represents a viable alternative to more traditional practices of money laundering (SOS Impresa 2011). Suffering from an historically rooted and geographically widespread practice of illegally

[3] Interest rates ranged from 5% to 20%, with missed-payment penalties reaching dizzying 720% increases.

lending money, Italy seems particularly vulnerable to this type of activity in the aftermath of Covid-19 as well (Ellison, Collard, and Forster 2006; and Unioncamere 2014).

Adding to these challenges, of course, are the chronic stagnation and structural rigidities of the economy. In fact, reports by Unioncamere[4] (2014), ISTAT[5] (2014), and FAI[6] (2014) have all confirmed these fears and further described the trend. In particular, small- and medium-sized firms' narrow profit margins and their lack of financial buffers puts them at higher risk of usury. Again, these conclusions can inform our own pandemic-time analysis as these data are further confirmed by a 2013 CENSIS[7] report. The Italian informal economy, which was estimated at around 21% (the largest within the OECD zone) of its GDP already before the crisis, significantly expanded after 2008. Roughly a third of Italians also avoided bank accounts and legal transactions for fear of high social security taxes and of the complex, burdensome bureaucracy (Schneider 2013; and Plutino 2014). Little rights and a lack of public services thus led many small-business owners to repeal the social contract with the unsupportive state and turn to OCGs (Guano 2011). Marinaro (2016, 205) notes how their financial situation during the economic crisis made it impossible for them to obtain short-term loans from legitimate institutions. Many of them were already their creditors and thus unwilling to further risk their financial situation. The credit crisis also caused a legislative shift that made banks increasingly reluctant to allocate loans or renew them. According to Marinaro (2016, 210) these combined phenomena slashed the safety net under many Italians right in their time of need. Rising unemployment led people to spend less, which affected business owners. Without the latter's capital however, banks also found themselves short of credit soon. Being such a central theme of Italian OCGs' activities following

[4] The public entity that unifies and represents institutionally the bicameral Italian parliamentary system.
[5] Public research institute focused on national statistics.
[6] NGO created for the protection and the improvement of the Italian artistic heritage.
[7] Italian socio-economic research institute.

economic crises, Sergi and Lavorgna (2013, 12, 13) also touch on the issue of usury in their work. They found that the illegal credit system created by Italian OCGs was better suited to answer the demands of the many troubled entrepreneurs in the North of the country. This collaboration allowed them to expand their usury, money laundering, real-estate investing, and business takeover activities. In addition, it also served to build up trust between them and afford legitimacy to criminal organizations, something that can prove useful after the breakdown of the social order that followed Covid-19.

The 2015 OECD '*Economic Survey: Italy*', however, shows us that, since the crisis, the state has been able to at least partially enact legislation to open new sources of credit to businesses, and reform bankruptcy laws, albeit with only little success. Other researchers (Reifner, Clerc-Renaud, and Knobloch 2010) have noted how the state also encouraged banks to ease repayment deadlines for consumers affected by the financial crisis and create channels to facilitate access to loans for high-risk borrowers. This initiative, however, only exacerbated banks' reluctance to provide risky loans given the uncertainty surrounding credit recoverance. In the end, little was done to move people away from OCGs' usury. In fact, mafia groups were even able to adapt their lending practices to accommodate the needs of small- and medium-sized companies that need daily injections of capital to keep their businesses afloat (SOS Impresa 2011; and DNA 2011). Interestingly, both the OECD's report and Williams (2014) blame Italy's poorly targeted social benefits and ineffective welfare redistribution mechanisms. The high taxation, for example, exacerbates social inequality by disproportionately protecting the employed in the face of poor and displaced workers.

Other interesting pieces that uncover the relationship between Italian OCGs and the 2007-2008 economic crisis are Sergi and Lavorgna's (2013, 12, 13) regarding respectively Italian OCGs' attitudes during the financial emergency and in the use of IT technologies, and OCGs in different regions of the world in a comparative study. They believe that the financial crisis had

more effects on Italian OCGs than what the literature has so far displayed. They say that mafia organizations were forced to change their entire operational system. Indeed, OCGs started exploring emerging activities such as renewable energies and investments in gold. However, there was also a revival of more traditional businesses such as activities related to agriculture and gambling. The researchers also focused on the structure of Italian OCGs. In fact, after the crisis, the opportunistic behavior and flexibility of certain OCGs allow them to identify new possible sources of profit. The subsequent income rise attracted many underworld criminals and criminal networks, who increasingly started collaborating or claiming links with the mafia.

Lavorgna and Sergi (2013, 14) also analyzed Italian OCGs' expansion in the counterfeiting market following the recession. Such periods drive up demands for products that are usually disregarded by the majority of the population. With the only mafia-type OCGs in Italy dynamically dealing in this business being Naples' Camorra prior to Covid-19, others such as Cosa Nostra and 'Ndrangheta were forced to mix with informal criminal networks in regions such as Tuscany, Lazio, or Lombardy to make up for their lack of experience. In particular, they have increasingly come to rely on Chinese and Eastern European groups that can offer extremely cheap labor forces and potential international contacts. In exchange, 'Ndrangheta members aid their foreign counterparts with matters in which they are more navigated, such as border controls and tax evasion. The counterfeit business in Italy, after the global financial crisis, was thus an harmonious collaboration based on the exchange of best practices between the mafia, foreign OCGs, and legitimate businesses.

Still, there are other economic woes that have been affecting Italy since the financial crisis and that are still prominent today, influencing the structure and activities of local OCGs. De Angelis, de Blasio, and Rizzica (2020, 375), who studied the corruption surrounding EU funding schemes to Southern Italy, found that the area obtained over 70% of total funds destined to Italy to aid

with the recovery. These were largely managed at the local level. OCGs were thus able to exploit the increased corruption during the same period and appropriate the funds. Criminal groups in the area almost certainly contributed to the '*magna magna*'[8].

The last paper that was considered for this section of literature review is the one by La Moglie and Sorrenti (2019, 3, 4, 30) concerning the relationship between the financial crisis, Italian OCGs, and new enterprises. Interestingly, they find that provinces that are heavily infiltrated by OCGs actually experience a milder post-crisis drop in established enterprises than mafia-free ones. This data is testimony to the extent of OCGs' investments in the legal economy during a crisis and the financial power they can muster. Such a situation could potentially be replicated in 2020 and 2021 after the Covid-19 pandemic. La Moglie and Sorrenti (2019, 4) further describe the legitimate business sectors in which Italian OCGs' prefer to invest: construction and limited companies. They usually do not invest in innovation (e.g. R&D), instead preferring to focus on sectors in which they have experience and that can offer quicker gains with little investment. OCGs' activities such as usury and racketeering, however, contribute to exacerbate entrepreneurs' difficulties and lead to a higher closure rate in infiltrated provinces.

- Politics

There is a plethora of information regarding the relationship between Italian OCGs and political crises. One can easily grasp its importance by taking into account estimates by the European Commission's Eurobarometer, which places Italians' trust into public institutions as one of the lowest in the EU. This can definitely help explain the reluctance to follow social distancing measures when the government sounded the alarm over the virus (Enria and

[8] Typical expression in Roman dialect literally meaning 'eat, eat', indicating a situation in which everyone involved in an issue or project tries to maximize his/her own gains in the shortest possible time.

Masino 2020). Similar assumptions are warranted by the research into the link between such low levels of public trust and socio-political phenomena that are often associated with organized crime. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1994), for example, already described the positive relationship between low levels of public trust and corruption in Italy. In fact, we can find evidence of the interplay between OCGs and political crises already in the 1970s and 1980s. Pinotti (2015, 12), in his evaluation of the reliability of empirical analysis of organized crime, testified that, at the time, OCGs in Apulia and Basilicata exploited changing smuggling routes caused by political turmoil in Eastern Europe to rise and expand. A similar development is described by Bruinsma and Bernasco (2004, 84). Talking about transnational illegal markets, the two researchers tie the political turmoil in the Balkans after the Yugoslav Wars with the shifting smuggling routes that caused an association between Italian OCGs and their Eastern counterparts.

The biggest and most impactful political crisis to rock Italy, however, was undoubtedly the turmoil of the beginning of the 1990s. Guarnieri (1997, 166) identifies its causes in the '*Mani Pulite*' ('Clean Hands') and *'Tangentopoli'* ('Bribe City') investigations that started in February 1992 in Milan and the April parliamentary elections that saw the rise to regional power of the far-right Northern League party in Lombardy, which triggered a crisis among traditional governing parties and the resignation of President Francesco Cossiga. Moreover, the '*strategia del terrore*' ('strategy of terror') enacted by Cosa Nostra's Totò Riina only helped to further plunge the country into chaos, killing leading magistrates such as Paolo Borsellino and Giovanni Falcone. The subsequent weakness of the executive powers led prosecutors in Milan to autonomously expand their investigations, which finally touched the highest echelons of Italian politics. These investigations led to an overhaul of the traditional party system with the '*pentapartito*'[9] witnessing its component

[9] The leading parties in Italian politics up to the 1990s, the ones that had most participated in governing the country.

parts either dissolving (e.g. the Social Democrats), drastically weakened (e.g. the Liberals), or re-branded (e.g. the Socialists). Within this crisis of traditional networks of party power, only the Communists and left-leaning democrats were able to retain some influence on policy processes and avoid extinction. Of course, apart from being affected by it, Italian OCGs and especially Cosa Nostra and 'Ndrangheta were fully involved in these processes. Their nature and structure changed radically after this experience, which is arguably what made them what they are today.

- Migration

The other type of crisis that has deeply impacted OCGs in Italy is migration. Thoroughly tied to political processes and public sentiment, this business was entered by OCGs in Italy during the 2015 migration crisis (Baird and van Liempt 2016, 8). The novelty attracted the attention of many scholars. Cappellazzo (2017), for example, performed a comprehensive study on the exploitation of the crisis by Italian OCGs. Testimony of the relationship between the two are also the reports published by different Italian government agencies (e.g. the DIA) in the following years. The issue was central in its 2017 and 2018 reports, while the lower house of parliament, the '*Camera dei Deputati*', released a similar study in 2017 focusing on the Mineo migration center, which consistently comes up in the literature.

Fontana (2020, 50, 68) mentions it while analyzing the interplay between the migration crisis, OCGs, and domestic politics. He describes a situation in which asylum-seekers stuck at reception centers become involved with the lower levels of criminal rings and the mafia. The latter in turn uses them as a cheap source of labor in the agricultural and drug-dealing businesses all over the South of Italy. Fonatana also mentions OCGs' role in re-smuggling, offering assistance to those migrants that plan on continuing their journey towards other parts of the EU. These assumptions are confirmed in Reguly's (2015) study concerning the mafia's profits from the refugee crisis.

In his own words, they must have seen it as '*manna dal cielo*' ('holy food from heaven'). He adds to Fontana's findings by writing about mafia-controlled companies and the contracts they are awarded by government officials because of their ability to provide cheaper services than their commercial counterparts. Coming back to Mineo, one of the largest reception centers in Sicily, he estimated its budget at around €98 million. Having provided the basic services migrants need (e.g. food and shelter), OCGs can keep the difference as profit. Nadeau (2018) goes so far as saying that the mafia created a market around the information pertaining to long-disappeared migrants, which allowed them to keep the state funding coming.

Similar to these studies is Tondo's (2016). Like the other researchers, he mentions agriculture (mainly oranges and tomatoes), drugs, and prostitution as the main businesses migrants get involved in through the mafia. Migration became so lucrative for OCGs that, according to Tondo, they teamed up with North Africa smugglers to facilitate voyages, hide them, and secure the re-smuggling routes. Such statements become more believable once we account for IOM's 2017 report. It states that the number of Nigerian women registered as sex slaves in Sicily doubled from 2015 to the follwing year. Additional studies concerned with the subject include Mezzofiore's (2015) on the Mineo reception camp and Zancan's (2015) on the sources of mafia profits from the migration crisis.

One of the entities that should protect migrants and aid national governments in their operations is the EU. As testified by Brekke and Brochmann (2014), however, EU legislation (e.g. Dublin III) puts pressure on member states on Europe's borders, further hindering settlement and integration. The slow registration and application process delayed, the mafia can multiply its chances to profit on the crisis. Many of the migrants that actually manage to escape are then sent right back into OCGs' arms due to the same legislation (Lyons 2015).

- The Environment

Finally we can talk about Italian OCGs' relationship with natural disasters, something that particularly interests us for its proximity with the conditions that might follow a pandemic today. Gisoldi (2015) writes about the corruption and waste of capital that followed a 1980 earthquake in Southern Italy. After the disaster, which is also mentioned by Pinotti (2015, 12) in his work, the management of the emergency funds shifted from national to local institutions. OCGs thus managed to exert more influence and embezzle funds. The earthquake disrupted the fragile socio-economic fabric of the region , allowing the mafia to take control of relief programs and secure long-term gains. The affair also indicates the danger posed by corrupt local officials with ties to OCGs and the threat they pose towards locally-managed funds. The importance of this argument in the context of Covid-19 is exemplified by its presence in the UNODC's 2020 report on the pandemic's impact on organized crime. The same report goes as far back as the 1880s, when public funds were earmarked to reconstruct Naples after a cholera outbreak. Already back then, political alliances and corrupt practices allowed the Camorra to obtain most of the money. Similar events are mentioned by Parrinello (2013)[10] and by Riccardi, Sorani, and Giampietri (2016)[11].

3.3. Organized Crime and the Covid-19 Pandemic

At last we can finally talk about OCGs and Covid-19. The pandemic's comprehensive effects have influenced many dimensions that are important for OCGs' activities and their very functioning. Their flexibility has allowed them to adapt to a variety of new challenges, as well as opportunities. To get a grasp

[10] He talks about the mafia's involvement in planning and development efforts in the aftermath of the 1968 Belice Valley earthquake in Sicily.
[11] They describe how Italian OCGs often took advantage of natural disasters and the subsequent reconstruction works to obtain public procurements and subsidies, strengthening their grip on local businesses and markets.

of what direction such changes might take, we must look at the literature for information provided to us by other scholars regarding non-mafia criminal groups in other regions of the world. This section of the chapter is divided into four subsections that represent the spheres in which OCGs in Italy are most likely to gain advantages following the Covid-19 pandemic.

- Society and Politics

There are many examples within the literature of OCGs around the world that have taken advantage of social and political crises to advance their goals. Spigno (2020, 2242, 2243) for example, talking about the medical emergency's effects on weak Central and Latin American institutions, cites a number of sources (e.g. W Radio 2020; InSight Crime 2020; and El Economista 2020) mentioning the narcos' food distribution practices. Different cartels in Mexico (e.g. Gulf Cartel, CJNG, and the Sinaloa Cartel), for example, distributed food parcels for a few months starting in April 2020, and preoccupied themselves with ensuring popular compliance to pandemic restrictions and stay-at-home orders. Musumeci and Marelli (2020) add that, to maximize their reach and effectiveness, OCGs in the country also used social media to publicize their services. Criminal organizations both big and small jumped at the opportunity to associate their brand with socially-positive actions. OCGs were thus able to increase popular support and secure their power. The two researchers believe such practies to be particularly important for OCGs that are traditionally tied to a certain area. Territorial control is a source of strength for them, and the means with which they can take advantage of the Covid-induced crisis. Gomez (2020), analyzing organized crime's governance attempts during the pandemic, reported different similar episodes (e.g. food distribution, financial and medical support, and checkpoint organization) in Mexico, but also in Colombia. He underlines criminal groups' effectiveness when compared to public institutions to provide indigenous solutions to localized problems. Trends like this one have the potential to

cause a serious dent in the government's legitimacy. According to De Santis (2020) and de Cordoba (2020), the security situation in Mexico was further complicated by the deviation of the armed forces' capacity away from fighting OCGs and towards hospitals and medical structures. Understandably, in times of Covid, medical materials' and sanitary operators's security was prioritized.

Pawelz (2020) extends this argument to Brazil and the *favela* residents that found themselves relying on OCGs for the provision of financial support and groceries. Thus, also Brazilian OCGs were able to instrumentalize the pandemic to polish their image. Similar arguments regarding Brazil are presented by Blofield, Hoffmann, and Llanos (2020), Briso and Phillips (2020), and Soares (2020). They further add that also Brazilian gangs promoted curfew compliance, especially through street patrols and via the spreading of information on social media. Densely-populated *favelas* with little sanitation made their intervention vital for many members of these communities. Their actions did manage to mobilize support, especially in the face of government inaction[12], and take on a socially-benevolent role. Brazil was also the focus of the study on OCGs' restrictions enforcement by Bruce, Cavgias, and Meloni (2020). They conclude that interestingly, in Rio de Janeiro, neighborhoods under gang control suffered less casualties by Covid-19 than the ones controlled by the government. They also observe how this success might have been aided by OCGs' sources of profit, which were not dependent on the locals' income, nor on stay-at-home injunctions. Other similar analyses were carried out by Rangel, Daniels, and Phillips (2020) and Dominguez and Martinez (2020) who both focus on the pandemic's effects on prisons in Latin America. They state that rates for non-violent crimes in most countries remained and even declined during the lockdown. This trend

[12] In fact, President Jair Bolsonaro's reaction to Covid-19 was that of utter denial, ignoring it and effectively de-legitimizing efforts to contain it. His behavior pushed many more disadvantaged communities that he had ignored so far into the arms of OCGs.

debunked most predictions and it can help us evaluate the level of confidence in previous omens that similarly foresaw disaster in Italy following Covid-19.

It appears that developing countries are particularly vulnerable to OCGs in the aftermath of the pandemic and that Latin America is not the only place where this phenomenon can be witnessed. Muggah and Dudley (2021) extend their analysis to the Caribbean region. There, OCGs colluded with public and private entities to increase their ability to influence residents and thus acquire additional layers of protection. Aid deliveries, as part of their advertising campaign, are a means to expand their influence and undermine the state. Yasin (2020, 501, 503) mentions similar worries being expressed in Pakistan, where people fear mafia infiltration in the country's already-strained health and care facilities. Moreover, the UNODC's 2020 report includes Japan's Yakuza, Afghanistan's Talibans, Syria's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and the previously-cited Cape Town's gangs in South Africa as unlikely providers of medical goods, information, food bundles, and social order. A similar pooling of OCGs with extremists and terrorists in the 'politically- or economically-motivated actors' category was performed by Gradoń (2020, 137). His motivation behind this choice is their shared ability to produce fake news and orchestrate disinformation campaigns, which can be especially challenging for law enforcement and the intelligence community.

Another phenomena that is deeply tied to the socio-political context and which has been deeply affected by the Covid-19 pandemic isOCGs' ability to recruit members. This danger was first signaled by Europol in its 2020 report. Aguirre (2020), studying the pandemic's impact on inequality, describes OCGs' recruitment operations in Mexico and Afghanistan. Members of disadvantaged communities there are co-opted and coerced into the production, transport, and sale of illicit goods. He also testifies to the appalling conditions they work in. According to De Santis (2021, 57, 73), this phenomenon is triggered by poverty. Unemployment might have pushed people to join the only employer in Mexico that was able to remain

consistently operative. Muggah and Dudley (2021), however, believe that the majority of recruits might have joined primarily because of OCGs' ability to influence residents in local communities. In fact, an increase in micro-criminality, kidnappings, and homicides in the first months of 2020 led the government to famously declare it would be the deadliest year in the country's history[13]. It is indicative that 75% of all homicides are estimated to have been related to drug cartels, which have been forced to adapt to the new situation to continue profiting from the trafficking business (Gonzalez 2020; and Forbes Staff 2020).

- Economics

Of course, of major importance when studying the impact of the Covid-19 on OCGs is the economic sphere. The pandemic's effect on national economies created a situation that forced them to adapt and often allowed them to expand their operations. According to the 2020 Europol report, much of this ability is due to the legal business structure they established just as the virus started spreading. In Italy however, such structures were already present and had been perfected through trial and error for a long time. According to Europol, their creation requires a number of socio-political and economic conditions such as rising unemployment, a reduction in both private and public capital, and social tolerance for OCGs' activities (e.g. buying counterfeit goods and working for them). The result of such a scenario often leads to unfair competition, increased OCGs' infiltration of public institutions, and the growth of the black market's share of the GDP. This is something that, as we have already seen, is already a problem in Italy. Musumeci and Marelli (2020) agree that the closure of countless businesses and economic activities might prove a boon for OCGs' attempts to infiltrate the legal economy. For example, they record cases of attempted usury by OCGs against struggling

[13] Interestingly, overall crime levels in the country ended up declining by 1.27% in 2020 compared to 2019 (Macrotrends 2022).

entrepreneurs. High interest rates make it impossible for those who accept to repay their debt. Usually, they end up relinquishing their property to an affiliate of the criminal group. Muggah and Dudley (2021) add that these practices also allow OCGs to deepen their relationships with political parties and civil society organizations. That is mainly because of their ability to provide services that are in high demand in times of crisis like during a pandemic. Instead of applying high interest loans, OCGs often resort to requesting 'favors' in lieu of cash payments. In the long term, this will allow them to expand their criminal activities via acquisitions, launder their profits, and even ease the shipping of contraband. Sullivan, da Cruz, and Bunker (2020) reiterate this argument adding that the state's financial struggles and OCGs' relative strength in the provision of much needed help might also hurt the former's legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. Therefore, this goal can be achieved both through political, social and economic operations.

Borisov and Lewis (2021, 3, 4) instead consider cases in which OCGs were already deeply integrated within legal sectors (e.g. finance, healthcare, logistics…) of the economy before the outbreak of the pandemic. Such an analysis might prove particularly indicative of our case as Italian OCGs have a long history of infiltrating the public health sector. The two researchers were adamant to highlight the severity of the threat. Indeed, they suggested that their newfound power could have enabled OCGs to paralyze medical care, hindering the fight against the pandemic. Despite not witnessing the unfolding of such a situation in Italy, worries still remain regarding the long-standing conditions that gave rise to the problem. Without arriving at such drastic conclusions, we can confidently predict that OCGs' deep infiltration in a country's economic fabric in times of Covid will spell troubles. Delić and Zwitter (2020) provide us with an example from Slovenia, where corruption in the procurement of public funds intended for medical protective equipment at the height of the pandemic were misappropriated and transferred to a well-known criminal group. Similarly, Europol (2020) uncovered a massive

fraud scheme coupled with money-laundering worth €15 million in face masks in Germany. The 10 million masks were appropriated by OCGs in the country through a complex chain of referrals from Spain, Ireland, and the Netherlands that scammed German health authorities.

- Smuggling and Trafficking

After a brief discussion concerned with the literature's opinion regarding Covid-19's effects on the economic activities of OCGs, we can start talking about these groups' shadier businesses: smuggling and trafficking. According to Borisov and Lewis (2021, 3), almost every country on Earth experienced a slight decrease in the crime rate and in OCGs' activity. However, the continuation of the pandemic, which led to high mortality among the population and a decrease in the state's capacity to secure its territory, initiated a later surge in OCGs' activity and significantly increased the demand for their goods and services. In fact, pandemic measures have hightened the risk concerning the provision of illegal services, such as human trafficking (UN 2020; and GFEM Media 2021).

Musumeci and Marelli (2020) believe that one of the main factors allowing OCGs to achieve such results is their ability to quickly set up a production and distribution strategy for substandard goods. This flexibility, according to the researchers, is mostly due to OCGs' experience in dealing in this illegal trade. Other factors include their established collaborators and the trade channels they own. Products such as fake protective masks are able to infiltrate local shops or are sold online because of them. The two academics also believe that OCGs' infiltration of businesses happens at different levels, with certain OCGs targeting public biddings to infiltrate the highest echelons of the products' distribution chain. Layachi's (2020, 654) work, which focuses on the sale of counterfeit pharmaceutical products, reminds us of many instances in which smuggling and trafficking activities have increased with the onset of the pandemic. Law enforcement from 90 countries (including Italy),

for example, rallied around the framework of Operation Pangea XIII to collectively stop the sale of substandard and unlicensed medical products on the Internet. Interpol (2020) estimates that the operation resulted in hundreds of arrests worldwide and the seizure of more than $14 million in dangerous medical products. The agency's chief, Jürgen Stock, was quick to point his finger towards OCGs. He believes they created a new tactic involving 'criminal contact centers' from which they can call people pretending to be hospital officials, only to later fraud them.

In Mexico, De Santis (2021, 73, 74) describes the shifts in the supply lines for illegal chemical precursors following the government's trade restrictions adopted after the pandemic. The *narcos*, which used these substances to produce the methamphetamines and synthetic opiates that have been in such high demand in the US in the past few years, were forced to reform their supply routes from Asia to Spain. The insufficient amount of product that the European nation can produce, however, is not able to satisfy the demand. The researcher thus believes that, unless normal commercial relations with Asia are re-established, there will be a risk concerning the increase in local drug production, especially heroin and marijuana. This is also likely to resume the conflict in the mountainous areas in which the production of these substances is concentrated. On the other hand, armed struggles in port cities slowed down as a consequence of their Asian operations being largely shut down.

Similar conclusions are shared by the UN University (2020) in its report on armed groups' instrumentalization of the pandemic and Fajardo (2020) in his study of the ways Latin American gangs adapted to the Covid-induced situation. They agree that police shortages, combined with the supply and demand shocks rocking the drug market, would trigger a fresh wave of violence. They also predicted that the countries that would most suffer OCGs' expansion would likely be drug-producing and transit countries like Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. Indeed, the 2020 OEDT report on Covid's

impact on international drug markets recorded an increase in the number of seizures of illegal substances. That was despite the predictions believing OCGs to shrink as a result of travel restrictions and the social and economic hardship. Still, Namli (2021, 19) did not find any evidence of an increase in drug-sale related violence either before or during the pandemic. Instead, according to the researcher, external factors pushed them to strengthen their structures and networks, which allowed them to operate flawlessly. Delgado (2020) and Salomon (2020), who both focus on the pandemic's effects on OCGs and their activities in Argentina, record attempts at both expanding traditional activities and at the diversification of their income streams. Indeed, marijuana production increased substantially in Paraguay, while Argentina, Colombia, and Ecuador witnessed a steep rise in oil theft. Argentina also experienced an increase in extensions.

In the Western Balkans, Djordjevic and Dobovsek (2020, 815) testify of a shortage of drugs, especially hard ones, which led to a steep rise in prices. This phenomenon affected medical products in a similar way, driving up their prices exponentially. The pandemic also caused a rise in micro-criminality in the area, while the appearance of human trafficking-focused NGOs highlighted the issue's move at the center of the national socio-political discourse.

Another criminal activity taking steam during the pandemic were scams performed using mobile and digital technologies. Still, the researchers did not record any increase in cases of online sexual exploitation, which has grown sgnificantly in Western Europe. Interestingly, according to Iwuoha (2020, 4) and Shawnna et al. (2020), trafficking for this purpose, including the demand for CSAM, has increased. While the online sphere has always been a tool for trafficking, the pandemic has elevated traffickers' reliance on it. Online sexwork has started to appear attractive to people losing income and while the recruitment of victims on online sites might not constitute evidence of force, fraud and coercion are definitely involved. The coronavirus pandemic has thus pushed human trafficking, which is always tricky to detetct, further

into the dark and its victims further from assistance. The economic consequences of the pandemic can only exacerbate this trend. According to Sanchez and Achilli (2020, 5, 7) the uncertainty and the mobility caused by the pandemic-induced restrictions drove up both the demand and the price for such services. This is especially true for high-risk practices such as irregular migration. The relationship between OCGs and this business had already been studied extensively before the pandemic. Stoynova and Bezlov (2019), for example, performed an analysis of the migration crisis in Norway and Bulgaria and how it affected transnational OCGs there. What they describe is a change in smuggling networks and activities. Bulgaria's OCGs, for instance, developed a new organizational structure based on a strict division of roles (e.g. guides, brokers, drivers, informers, accommodation providers) under the leadership of the 'coordinator'. Moreover, OCgs in the country also underwent a period of 'professionalization' following the crisis. Indeed, tighter border control measures and the closure of traditional routes forced them to increase the level of sophistication of their operations. In the Mediterranean instead, the crisis led the governments of Italy, Malta, and Libya to close their ports. Despite this and the ongoing war in the North African country, smuggling facilitators continued to organize migrant journeys[14]. The authors predict an increase in the frequency of episodes of violence and victimization tied to the facilitation of irregular migration following Covid-19 restrictions. Additionally, with the demand for these services on the rise, facilitators in the Mediterranean, Europe, the UK, Central America, Mexico and the US will all significantly speed up their operations.

[14] Usually they just try to avoid Libya as much as they can.

4. COVID-19'S EFFECTS ON ORGANIZED CRIME IN ITALY

The Covid-19 virus, and the pandemic it caused, led the Italian state, like most governments around the world, to take measures aimed at the reduction of the number of casualties and of the economic damage. Despite the fact that these measures' primary goal was to overcome the epidemiological situation, they have also deeply affected the development of OCGs and their activities (Zivotic and Trajkovski 2020, 1005). With this chapter, we want to highlight the changes that the pandemic had forced on OCGs in Italy and explain how they managed to adapt. It is thus divided into four sub-sections: 1. Covid-19's effect on Italian OCGs' socio-political activities; 2. Covid-19's effect on Italian OCGs' economic activities; 3. Covid-19's effect on Italian OCGs' trafficking and smuggling activities and ; 4. Covid-19's effect on Italian OCGs' counterfeiting activities. All of these subsections are further divided into different paragraphs both for clarity and to highlight in detail which OCGs features were most affected by the pandemic.

4.1. Socio-Political activities

The Covid-19 pandemic, as we have seen from the literature, has had a huge effect on OCGs' socio-political activities around the world. Despite not being the field in which the most radical changes were witnessed, OCGs in Italy still experienced enough turmoil to be forced to adapt their socio-political operations.

- Corruption

Corruption is one of the major practices that has historically allowed Italian OCGs to infiltrate socio-political and economic realities all over the country. The stagnating 'Covid economy', required the injection of large sums of money to cope with the crisis and the health emergency that had caused it.

The rapidity and urgency of this distribution of capital constituted fertile ground for corruption. Corrupt practices allowed OCGs to obtain better conditions during negotiations for the procurement of medical equipment. Indeed, the urgency of the situation sidelined complex tenders in favor of direct negotiation with medical equipment providers, many of which were controlled by the mafia. This way, OCGs were able to act without attracting attention. According to Transparency International (2021), Italy remains low in the ranking at the 52nd position in 2021. Subsequently, in the South, mafia-related reports to the police concerning corruption increased 94% in 2020 and 2021 with respect to the two years prior. Similar increases have been experienced in the North regarding money laundering, although there was a general decrease in first-level criminal activities (e.g. drug trafficking, robberies…) (Zivotic and Trajkovski 2020, 1005; Della Michelina 2022; Peluso 2021, 86, 87; Europol 2020; and DIA 2020).

- Exploiting the Redirection of Police Resources

Similarly, another phenomenon that contributed to the mafia's blossoming during Covid was the redirection of vital police resources over the crisis. A number of police departments, especially in the South, reported public order problems, which took many officers off guard while they were occupied with their new roles. One example are the revolts in jails across the country that were orchestrated by OCGs. Early on in the pandemic, before the government took some measures, around 6,000 detainees (10% of the total prison population) had revolted resulting in 13 of them ending up dead and 40 injured guards. The main drive behind this movement was the anger caused by overcrowding in detention facilities, which at the time exceeded their total capacity by more than 20%. In the months following the riots, around 2,500 detainees were released, bringing the percentage for overcrowding down to around 15%. Nevertheless, many in the population resented these measures, which awarded freedom to some of the most vicious members of the mafia

since the 1990s[15]. As a result, the head of the Department of the Penitentiary Administration (DPA) had to resign (France 24; Gatta 2020; and Logar and Leese 2020, 3). Many of those that were released were placed on house arrest, which they used to continue carrying out their businesses. Screening failures resulted in the release of some seriously dangerous individuals. The boss Angelo Porcino for example, at home arrest between April and July 2020, was deeply involved in the unification of the Barcellonese family from North-Eastern Sicily. In another case, a prison official was caught helping Francesco Nania, referent of the family from Partinico, exchange letters with the exterior. The benefits he received in exchange are testament to the dire economic situation in Italy during Covid. Cosa Nostra provided him with cheap gas, food, and clothing. (Borrometi 2021, 2022).

- The Provision of Social Support

Social support is another area that is used by Italian OCGs to organize and manage forms of protests against the state. In different areas, OCGs set up actual welfare systems, or 'the proximity welfare of the mafia', as Saviano (2021) dubbed it, to supplant the weaker, governmental one. The Italian bureaucracy is too slow to provide financial safety nets for businesses and the mafia was able to compensate them due to its large resources. They leverage people's hunger and their distaste for state institutions to create a positive image for themselves and further entrench their role in society. Citizens in difficulty are thus offered support and assistance. Cosa Nostra in Palermo and the Camorra in Naples, for example, used newly set up, fake charities to provide underprivileged families with free groceries and sanitary products, but

[15] One example is the Sicilian Cataldo Franco, who is responsible for the abduction and assassination of Giuseppe di Matteo, son of the *pentito* ('repented') Santino di Matteo. The man held the 12-years-old boy hostage for two months in 1994 before killing him and dissolving him in acid. The order was given by Cosa Nostra's Giovanni Brusca as retaliation for Santino's revelations. At the beginning of the pandemic, Cataldo was able to obtain a house arrest order that got him out of prison. Being old and sick, according to the authorities he risked contracting the virus (Borrometi 2020).

also price controls and outright cash handouts. In exchange, members of the population are recruited as low-cost laborers within the mafia (Falcioni 2020; Peluso 2021, 88; Pawelz 2020; Musumeci and Marelli 2020; Crimaldi 2020; Di Donato and Lister 2020; Rosen 2020; Palazzolo 2020; and Aziani et al. 2021).

In terms of governance, the pandemic has highlighted the complexity of the relation between OCGs and the state. The two can sometimes align their goals, to the pleasure of the former. Indeed these forms of governance not only legitimize OCGs, but also have the opposite effect on any action aimed at disrupting their activities in the eyes of the population. If governance is perceived as fair and effective, it acquires legitimacy irrespectively of its provider. It thus becomes easier for them to carry out their operations and swell their ranks (Aziani et al. 2021; Felbab-Brown 2017; Lessing and Willis 2019; and Aziani, Favarin, and Campedelli 2020).

- The Exploitation of the Online Sphere

One new, interesting development connected to the pandemic has been the increase in online activity. All major OCGs in Italy have favored the use of telematic tools during the pandemic. At first they were strictly used to publicize the 'services' we have just described as part of their communication strategy. There is at least one example of the use of Facebook by a known *mafioso* ('mafia member') in Sicily to advertise Cosa Nostra's charity and de-legitimize the state (Musumeci and Marelli 2020; and Foschini 2020). Additionally, because of the untraceability of these devices, they started using them to maintain relationships, carry out criminal activities, and agree to new arrangements. Rocco Morabito, 'Ndrangheta boss and second most wanted man in Italy, was arrested alongside a notorious drug trafficker in the North-East of Brazil in May 2021 thanks to law enforcement's decryption of Sky ECC, a Canadian communication network. This, however, is not the only secure messaging application to be decrypted. The hack against EncroChat led

to different large-scale operations against OCGs in the U.K., the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy (Frediani 2022).

Online crimes were also combined with more traditional forms of cybercrime that exploited the increase in network users. In fact, during the pandemic, regular users of the Twitter and Facebook apps in Italy both increased by 70% (Peluso 2021, 88, 90; Digital Communication 2020; and Europol 2020). OCGs have taken advantage of the situation through the use of malwares and botnets. The Italian Association for Information Security has calculated that the number of servers compromised by such attacks increased by 58% in 2021 compared with the beginning of the pandemic. Everyone that was either vulnerable because working from home, or a direct target because involved in the health industry was considered at risk. (Peluso 2021, 90; and Clusit 2022). Another way the online sphere was exploited by OCGs in Italy are social engineering attacks. They have come in the form of fraudulent emails and social media messages which contain dangerous attachments and links to illegal websites. Many of these emails contain requests for donations allegedly directed towards medical research to counter the virus. Of course, none of that money was ever used for that purpose (Balletti 2021, 13).

4.2. Economic Activities

Arguably though, the sphere of OCGs activities that has suffered the biggest impact from the Covid-19 pandemic is the economic one.

- The Appropriation of Public Funds

To counter the pandemic and the subsequent stagnation of the economy, the government quickly passed a number of emergency measures. The Italian state's recovery aid was quickly integrated with the capital provided by the 'Next Generation EU' fund. Valued at €750 billion and approved in July 2020 by the European Council, it was devised to support

those member states that Covid-19 hit the hardest[16]. More than €190 billion were allocated to Italy (their delivery being spread out up until 2026), which immediately obtained 13% of that total, or almost €25 billion. Additionally, the Italian state passed a 'liquidity decree' in the spring of 2020 giving a €25,000 bonus for struggling businesses (Commissione Europea 2021; and Saviano 2021).

Apart from the sheer amount of the disbursement, the urgency with which these measures were passed meant that they were far from perfect. This rapidity was mainly caused by the belief that the mitigation of social and economic woes would have to pass through effective monetary and financial measures. Already at the end of March 2020, high-level government officials were convinced that Italy's economy was shifting to a war-like scenario to face the virus. They were not the only ones however. The crisis of the economic system created selective pressures not unlike Darwin's own evolutionary theory. Within such an environment established businesses survive and become even stronger, while weaker ones perish. It's a zero-sum game. OCGs exploited the crisis by anticipating this development and approaching entrepreneurs with enticing offers that would allow them to weather the storm. Many honest business owners did not have access to the same amount of reserve capital to weather the crisis. Instead, OCGs generally have access to a lot of liquidity, which allows them to act quickly and without bureaucratic constraints. Moreover, their supranational branched structure perfectly fits a capitalist system that rewards those seeking to maximize their gains. They were thus able to spot changes in the economic order and evaluate new market trends before most other entities (Peluso 2021, 87, 88; DIA 2020; Apollonio

[16] The first cases, a couple of Chinese tourists from the Hubei province, tested positive for Covid-19 at the end of January. On the 17th of February the first outbreak occurred in Codogno, Lombardy. On the 9th of March, for the first time, a ministerial decree extended restrictions to almost the whole national territory. By then the WHO had not even declared the event a global pandemic yet (it would do that on the 11th of March). Moreover, every date in this timeline is about one to two weeks earlier than for most other OECD countries.

2022; Balletti 2021, 32; Iurillo 2020; and Governo Italiano e Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2021).

But what were the effects of the rapid disbursement of such large amounts of capital? De Angelis, de Blasio, and Rizzica (2020) recorded a 4% increase in the number of white collar crimes compared to the pre-Covid period. Most of them probably targeted the financial funds received from the EU. There are two main reasons for that. First, it resulted in the relaxed scrutiny on the use of the funds and hindered the government's ability to devise and activate public procurement policies. Indeed, there were many institutional and bureaucratic problems that favored OCGs' appropriation of the funds. Long waiting times forced some entrepreneurs in dire need of cash to turn to OCGs to settle immediate debts. State funds like the 'liquidity decree' were then actually used to pay OCGs back (Saviano 2021).

Another issue was the requirement to be approved 'mafia-free'. This requirement was not a problem in itself of course, but it only kicked in after an entity requested public financing. As a result, millions of Euros disappeared before any real check could even be started. In one instance the financial police of Bergamo seized a company for receiving state funding illegally. The company made six requests for government financing between January 2019 and September 2020 totalling almost €7 million. Despite being refused much of that money and having been reported three times for mafia association, it was still able to obtain €1 million because of the weak and delayed controls. In fact, many of the entities that have been reported during the pandemic already had some kind of known connection with OCGs. (Balletti 2021, 58, 59; Ministero dell'Interno 2020; Peluso 2021, 86, 87; Europol 2020, DIA 2020; and Aziani et al. 2021). It should thus have been fairly easy to identify malicious actors in the presence of an effective control system. On the other hand however, it is also true that longer times for the disbursement of the recovery funds would have put further pressure on the economy and could have possibly risked an alteration of the disbursement procedures, with the

consequent diversion of resources (Unità di Informazione Finanziaria per l'Italia 2020). OCGs employed different methods to fool officials or overcome obstacles. One widely-used type of fraud involved people substitution. Here, criminals would try to pass for government officials, aiming to obtain access to information necessary to access grants and financial relief (Interpol 2020; and U.S. F.D.A. 2020). The vast majority of attempts at illegally accessing government support employed methods that had already been tried and tested in the criminal financial world. Additional methods include the falsification of tax documents, the use of members of the 'gray zone', such as financial and business consultants and professionals. These can ease OCGs' infiltration of the economy (Peluso 2021, 89; and Sciarrone 2019). A particular one was signaled by Cecchi and Polo (2020), who highlight OCG's appropriation of public subsidies for investments in renewable energy. This phenomenon has been going on for a while now. For years Sicilian towns with a mafia presence also boasted an abnormal number of wind farms. The pandemic, however, contributed to making this business more responsive to rent-seeking incentives. During Covid-19 the share of Sicilian wind farms preferring to operate within friendly regulatory frameworks instead of favoring geographical features that are favorable for energy production has increased. These findings are corroborated by the fact that wind farms in other parts of the South of Italy that do not suffer from high levels of mafia infiltration also did not undergo this phenomenon.

- OCGs' Online Businesses

Finally, the digitalization of the country has allowed OCGs to exploit weaknesses in the security networks of company servers. Since many sectors in Italy had not yet undergone this transformation before the pandemic, such attacks often found fertile ground. Many companies suffered data leaks that helped OCGs pose in their stead when making financial requests to these companies' legitimate business partners. The latter would thus make

legitimate payments to what they thought was their client or supplier. Instead, the money flowed towards third-party, illicit accounts that served illegitimate purposes (Balletti 2021, 13, 14). Additionally, OCGs used crowdfunding platforms for the collection of online funds in favor of NGOs and non-profit associations that can either be traced back to members of the same groups, or that do not exist at all (Peluso 2021, 90).

- The Infiltration of the Italian Economic System

As we have seen then, OCGs seized the opportunity presented to them by the pandemic and started looking into public funds. They were originally aimed at financing the expansion of hospitals capacity and the purchase of medical equipment at the onset of the virus (Zivotic and Trajkovski 2020, 1005). Unfortunately, not all of them would go on to fulfill their goals.

Balletti (2021, 74, 75) describes two different phases exploited by OCGs to infiltrate the Italian economic system during Covid-19. During the first one, the mafia was mainly interested in the sale and production of sanitary products. Our study will deal with this phenomenon in detail in the following subsection. It is only during the second phase of the pandemic that OCGs really started infiltrating companies and attempting to appropriate public funds. Fabrizi and Parbonetti (2020, 66) have highlighted three areas of importance for this second-phase infiltration of the 'Covid economy' by OCGs in Italy. First is the acquisition of companies in dire need of capital after losing income during the pandemic. Second is the acquisition of companies that failed to honor loans to obtain liquidity and were forced to file for bankruptcy. Finally, there is the attempt to obtain state financing for the recovery. In one such case, the 'Ndrangheta appropriated several state relief funds valued at €45,000 through a complex scheme of fraud, false invoices, and fake names within the steel market (Guardia di Finanza 2020; and Dellasega and Vorrath 2020, 6).

The main push behind these shifts was the financial uncertainty in Italy. As we have seen, many sectors harshly hit by the economic crisis and the lockdown measures (e.g. the tertiary sector) were in dire need of capital injections that, in the country, only OCGs could provide. Denmoskopika (2021) estimated that, at the beginning of the pandemic, 4,450 entities were vulnerable to the 'criminal welfare' provided by OCGs. If we consider all medium- and small-size businesses, however, we can estimate that €50 billion or around 10% of the Italian GDP is at risk. Italy's former Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, believed in 2021 that the mafia's business dealings already amounted to 11% of the Italian GDP (a good chunk of it takes place outside of the country however). Colldiretti on the other hand, the association representing Italian firms involved in the agricultural market, estimates that around 5,000 firms are already controlled by OCGs in the country (Saviano 2021). Weakened balance sheets and grim prospects concerning future earnings are indeed fertile ground for OCGs infiltration. Many of the aforementioned companies and businesses are not financially solid and have not been so in a very long time. They regularly operate within the 'gray economy' that allows them to come into contact with morally dubious professionals that are more than willing to bend the rules for a profit. These immoral professionals help struggling businesses with the creation of tax evasion strategies and the optimization of corporate costs using illegal practices. As a result, firms that make use of these services rarely obtain loans from legitimate financial institutions, who do not wish to be associated with similar entities out of fear of losing their credibility. This situation adds to the systemic risk of loan default that stops banks from supporting struggling businesses. Unlike in 2008, banks are not in distress now. Reminiscent of that experience, however, they are not willing to lend money in a high-risk environment. This is especially true if borrowers prove generally unable to provide adequate collateral against this risk. At the same time, the limited amount of private capital reaching the market made it ever less likely for

traditional credit institutions to come to small- and medium-sized businesses' aid. OCGs can instead coerce borrowers into paying back loans or giving up their collateral. The mafia is thus able to acquire shares in legal businesses and even engender loyalty and gratitude, thus also effectively advancing their socio-political agenda. (Falcioni 2020; Rosen 2020; Borrometi 2021; Raffaeli 2021, 45; Grattieri and Nicasio 2020 121, 123; Lavezzi 2014; Scaglione 2014; Aziani et al. 2021; Stephany et al. 2020; and Apollonio 2022).

- The Practices of Usury and Money Laundering

People also started increasingly relying on cash due to fears of a crash of the banking system. This phenomenon led to a rise in the practice of illegally lending money. Usury is one of the only crimes that recorded an increase (+6.5% from 2019 to 2020) during the pandemic. In fact, while it pollutes the Italian economy, usury remains one of the main reasons it is still running. This practice allows many families to continue spending and bear their living costs despite losing income. It is so normal and accepted by the population that eliminating it overnight would probably cause a collapse of the national economic system. Indeed, the risk of usury hangs on almost everyone, precarious workers and entrepreneurs alike. The Italian Central Bank calculated that, in 2020, 142.000 businesses needed €48 billion in liquidity to stay afloat (Saviano 2021; and Banca d'Italia 2020, 2).

The OCGs' end goal is to sway the political opinions of the population or even recruit members of the community into the organization. All the while they pressure business owners into expropriation of their companies. OCGs did not stop there though. The expropriated business is the starting point from which they can expand their network. Ideally, they plan to work their way up or down the market chain to also incorporate all of those other businesses that either supply or get served by the original one (Saviano 2021). Not all OCGs approach the practice in the same way though. The Camorra, which has always been active in loan sharking, adopted a more lenient '*quid pro quo*'

approach by lending money with near-zero percent interest rates. Instead, all they ask in return are unspecified ‘future connivences’ that might land the people involved in real trouble. (Saviano 2021; Falcioni 2020; Rosen 2020; Balletti 2021, 15, 74, 75; Ministero dell’Interno 2020; Peluso 2021, 87, 88; Transparency International 2019, 2021; Banca d’Italia 2020, 2; Saviano 2021; Musumeci and Marelli 2020; and la Repubblica 2020).

We can use data by Transcrime to grasp the effects of this second phase on the Italian economic fabric. 1.3% of corporate acquisitions post-Covid-19 have been performed by businessmen and entrepreneurs from blacklisted or greylisted countries (because of finance and money laundering - e.g. Australia, Albania, Pakistan, Cayman Islands). That number is 5 times higher than average. Another worrying piece of information regards corporate opaqueness. 10 times more companies did not disclose their real ownership during Covid-19 than per usual. As for the ones that disclose their ownership, the percentage value for owners coming from townships with a significant presence of organized crime is higher during the pandemic than before. For instance, in the region of Molise, up to almost 15% of new corporate owners come from high-risk cities. The same region’s business world also experienced a 366% increase in legal interdictives aimed at countering OCGs. (Bosisio, Nicolazzo and Riccardi 2021, 5, 19). Similar, negative conclusions were also reached by the Interior Ministry (2020, 2021) itself. It recorded a 7% increase in reports for suspicious transactions and an increase of about 10% for the companies affected by anti-mafia interdicting measures after the pandemic. This indicated that OCGs did not stop at a ‘horizontal infiltration’. Instead, they also practiced some kind of ‘vertical infiltration’ that allowed them to further spread their vicious arms deeper into sectors that they already largely controlled. One such instance concerns the construction sector, which contains the largest share of companies banned for having links with OCGs. Similar increases are recorded concerning the number of banned companies (+9.7%) and especially the banned companies that had registered a corporate change

(+47%). As such, we can state that corporate change still constitutes the main mechanism used by OCGs to infiltrate and pollute the Italian economic fabric. It is indeed indicative that the regions that experienced the most of them during Covid-19 are Calabria, Sicily, and Campania. These are the birthplaces and bases of operations for, respectively, the 'Ndrangheta, Cosa Nostra (i.e. the 'mafia'), and the Camorra (Peluso 2021, 89). In one instance, a Sicilian company was infiltrated by 'Ndrangheta clans through the businesses they already owned. These provided different services for the company, which was gradually but surely taken over. Despite being placed under public administration by a judicial order, in 2021, the company was able to operate freely during most of the pandemic period, despite having known connections to OCGs. The reason for this was its complex corporate structure with stakeholders in the UK and Luxembourg, but also the numerous changes in ownership it performed during Covid-19 (Bosisio, Nicolazzo, and Riccardi 2021, 20).

Still, 60% of Italian regions experienced an increase in financial crimes (e.g. money laundering). And while the regions that are historically tied to mafia activities all experienced such phenomena, we find the biggest numbers in other parts of the country. Important rises in financial crimes have been witnessed, for example, in Trentino Alto Adige (+47%), Lazio (+38%), Sardegna (+37%), and Valle D'Aosta (+14%). These are all regions that have never suffered heavy mafia presence. Indeed, with the pandemic, OCGs are gradually losing their ties with their birthplaces. They have increasingly been operating in the North of the country and especially around important financial centers such as Milan. That is because they thrive wherever there is a lack of legal capital and the pandemic has turned the whole of Italy into a graveyard of cash (Saviano 2021).

4.3. Trafficking and Smuggling

- Drug Trafficking

The main source of profit for Italian OCGs in the trafficking and smuggling businesses has traditionally been drugs. For a long time before the pandemic, however, the substances that were sold on the Italian drug market originated from Chinese synthetic drug manufacturers operating on the black market. Due to the strict quarantine regime and the increased border controls instituted by Chinese authorities early on in the pandemic, finding these types of raw materials became impossible after the appearance of the virus. Even if OCGs could find them, the deliveries would usually be delayed. Criminal groups were thus forced to look for other sources and even replace certain raw materials that could no longer be found. One such case is the seizure of 84 million counterfeit Captagon[17] pills in the port of Salerno. The Syrian drug, which is mainly enjoyed among affluent youth in the Middle East, had sufficient potential to satisfy the entire European market. OCGs on the continent were thus forced to look to the Levantine country to supplant supply shortages arising from the Chinese and European lockdowns (Zivotic and Trajkovski 2020, 1004; and BBC News 2020). With new groups entering the market, violence among mid-level suppliers and distributors increased. Still though, OCGs' members nowadays, at least in Italy, belong ever more to the *homo economicus* category and only use violence when strictly necessary (Dellasega and Vorrath 2020, 4; and Apollonio 2022). This problem was also softened by the price increases that kept income relatively steady for everyone. These price rises were dictated by the fear surrounding possible temporary stop in the drug trafficking business. Moreover, certain OCGs proceeded to stockpile illegal substances to avoid losing control of market segments in view of supply slumps. As such, to remedy the shortage of specific raw materials, OCGs exploited the flexibility on the demand's side of the drug trafficking business to substitute them. The drug of choice thus became synthetics, which besides being more harmful to one's health, are also easier to produce and more profitable (Balletti 2021, 29).

[17] The brand name for the synthetic stimulant fenethylline.

It is indicative that the amount of narcotics seized by the police in 2021 exceeded 2020's by almost 55%. The seized amount of cocaine in 2020, for example, exceeded 2019's by more than 60%. Despite the lower levels of aerial commerce, maritime transport has been able to supplant airplanes and ensure the continued flow of supply. This phenomenon was also eased by a reduction in border controls at Italian ports during the pandemic. Nonetheless, drug-related offenses still decreased by 12% in 2020 from the previous year. (Statista 2022; Falcioni 2020; an il Post 2022).

The EMCDDA's 2020 report highlights the increased use of online markets in the DarkNet, social media, and home deliveries as methods of distribution. OCGs' necessity to avoid compromising the rich income guaranteed by drug trafficking has, however, also held different groups back from fighting each other. It seems as if they have found a temporary balance. This situation is however extremely fragile and the context is characterized by constant tension and volatility. Short of outright war, different families have resorted to punitive expeditions and arson. Such an environment can not remain viable for much longer (Borrometi 2021).

- Human Trafficking

With the pandemic, it is mainly the poorest members of the population that have become more vulnerable to exploitation by OCGs. Indeed, the economic recession, financial insecurity, and unemployment have determined a sharp rise in human trafficking, which the U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Italy (2021) calculated at raround 50% compared to 2020 levels (Balletti 2021, 14). The lockdown also meant that trafficked women and their children would not be profitable anymore. As a result many of them were abandoned and left without food or money. Their illegal status often meant that they could not even apply for financial assistance or unemployment benefits. What is worse, however, is that while they stop earning their income, the debt collectors still insist that they pay their share or face the consequences (Tondo 2020; and

Dellasega and Vorrath 2020, 5). Moreover, according to the UNODC (2020) the pandemic has left many shelters and safehouses for trafficking victims without funds. Increased closures meant that a lot of those vulnerable people would again become victims of their situation. Such changes resulted in many OCGs shifting their trafficking routes. A sea corridor, for example, has been rendered operative from Albania to Southern Italy to smuggle migrants. Indeed, migrant arrivals in Europe have decreased by 47% since 2019. The Southern route that envisions Italy as its primary destination has, however, become the most important one. While before the pandemic the share of migrants coming through the Mediterranean barely reached 12% of the total reaching Europe, in 2022 that number shot up to 44%. These less explored and more dangerous routes put migrants' lives at risk and present Italian OCGs with an opportunity to enrich themselves (Europol 2020, 12; and European Council 2022).

4.4. Counterfeit

When restrictions on movement took effect in March 2020, the most traditional means of making profit for Italian OCGs became tightly conscripted. As a result, these groups moved into sectors that, being characterized by high demand and low supply, would assure continued revenue sources. Similar to drugs, one such product is counterfeit, which took an increasingly larger share of OCGs' total income. In particular, medical products met the required conditions to become prominent in the market. The pandemic triggered an increase in the demand for health devices and a shortage of medicines and medical supplies that OCGs could exploit. To face this terrible lack of equipment, many countries also relaxed their procurement procedures, opening up opportunities for OCGs (Peluso 2021, 89, 90; Dastin 2020; UNODC 2020; Falcioni 2020; Aziani et al. 2021; Layachi 2020, 654; and Europol 2020, 2022). Different attempts at making a profit off of counterfeit medical equipment have been recorded all around the world, from

Spain to Ukraine, Iran, Azerbaijan, Mexico, and of course Italy (UNODC 2020). The methods employed to distribute the fake products differ. Speculative maneuvers on both the state and health care facilities have led to disproportionate increases in prices. With little choice but paying, OCGs are able to make huge profits. Some of these groups also hoarded supplies, thus causing a further price increase that affected ordinary consumers too (Peluso 2021, 89, 90; and Dastin 2020). It often happens that individual buyers of PPE are asked to pay in advance of delivery, which never actually takes place. Many of these sales leverage people's ignorance and the proliferation of Covid misinformation to place allegedly miraculous products that are said to be able to cure the virus (Interpol 2020; and US FDA 2020). The sale of these illicit products has also taken place in the online sphere, where many fake websites and phantom crowd-funding platforms have been reported. Adverts for counterfeit masks have also appeared in Dark Web forums. Most of the offers have appeared in the surface net, however, as it maximizes the criminals' reach. Testimony to this are the hundreds of reports from the Unity for Financial Information[18], which signaled an increase of cross-border financial activity connected to the sanitary emergency. A number of payments and funds transfers named suspicious Italian subjects as beneficiaries for the provision of sanitary material. Many such payments went through intermediaries or took place on online platforms. This kind of activity suggests that trafficking counterfeit goods is an international business for Italian OCGs. Most of these products are discounted, and that is because they are either illegitimate or do not even exist. (Zivotic and Trajkovski 2020, 1005; la Repubblica 2020; Martin 2020; Guirakhoo 2020; Clemente 2020; and Europol 2020, 2022). Apart from health and revenue issues, the damage these counterfeit products can cause also has a negative effect on people's confidence in medications and

[18] Intelligence agency of the Italian Central Bank instituted in 2007 and tasked with countering money laundering and terrorism financing.

the public health system, pushing them ever closer to OCGs' arms (Schenider and Nam 2020, 418).

In Italy, the Ministry of the Economy's agency, Consip, issued a public procurement contract for 7 million masks at the beginning of the pandemic. The winner, an entrepreneur with past financial crime convictions, was later arrested by the financial police for swindling and disturbing the auction. The procurement contract, which was worth millions, involved a whole criminal scheme that included facilitators and legitimate companies from the 'gray zone'. Of course, the products they provided proved substandard and oftentimes ineffective (Musumeci and Marelli 2020; and Cimmarusti 2020).

5. A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT: HAS COVID-19 REALLY IMPACTED ORGANIZED CRIME AS MUCH AS PREVIOUSLY THOUGHT?

Before talking about why the Covid-19 pandemic might not have had the far-reaching effects that almost everyone expected on OCGs and their activities, one has to acknowledge that the spread of the virus and the related countermeasures did change their operating conditions. As we have been able to observe from the prior analysis, most of the sections and subsections that were included experienced profound changes following the outbreak of the virus. In turn, the new environment applied enough pressure on OCGs that they were forced to adapt on many different fronts.

5.1. The EU and Counterfeits

Still, this phenomenon does not mean that the conditions for them have improved all across the board, nor that it represented anything particularly novel. Already in 2010 the European Council established a multi-annual policy cycle focused on the fight against serious international and organized crime. After a two-year trial cycle, the first real one started in 2013 with the development and implementation of appropriate interventions to tackle the organized crime phenomena. That year, in its Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA), Europol (2013, 9, 39) identified the production and distribution of counterfeit goods as a crime worth monitoring. In particular, the agency was concerned about the possible impact of these bogus products on the health and safety of the European community. A number of researchers (den Boer 2006; Ratzel 2013; and Fijnaut 2014) immediately recognized the importance of this policy cycle. It represented a major innovation that embodied rational, efficient, and accountable policy-making in which crime control goals were set on the basis of evidence and public arguments. This approach radically shifted the way in which the EU counters OCGs and its general guidelines are still followed today.

5.2. Investments in the Legal Economy and the Healthcare System

The production and distribution of counterfeits, however, is not the only phenomenon that had already been developing before the Covid-19 pandemic. Another one is OCGs' investments in the public economy and especially in the healthcare services. While it is true that they have significantly increased during the pandemic and in its immediate aftermath, the mafia was interested in doing business within these sectors (e.g. funeral homes and companies, canteens, cleaning services, disinfection, waste collection and recycling, transportation, and food and oil distribution) long before the virus hit. For years they had been chipping away at the healthcare system's resilience, slowly but surely eroding its quality of access and outcomes. Already at the beginning of the past decade Dube (2011, 268), who was analyzing fraud in healthcare and its relation to OCGs, found that the Italian mafia was deeply involved in these practices. This lucrative sector involves little physical risks and a low starting capital, which induced many OCGs to invest in it. Just one year before the pandemic, Allum, Merlino, and Colletti (2019, 96) were describing the ways in which the gray zone facilitated OCGs' business dealings within the legal economy. Their work highlighted the strong connections between mafia-linked regional and local politicians and the public health services, which explains OCGs' interest in investing in this strategic public sector. As we have seen, the healthcare services facilitate the diversion of substantial public funds. The ease with which these diversions take place create a symbolic crossroads between political, business, and mafia interests that brings OCGs and the gray zone closer to each other and make the health sector a privileged one in the eyes of the former. This cooperation allowed OCGs to place their members within key positions within hospital management and health departments. The criminal networks would then be able to divert investment and influence procurement, commercial agreements, and recruiting processes within the healthcare system. A 2018 investigation,

for example, revealed that fleets of ambulances were controlled by the ‘Ndrangheta. These, naturally, were riddled with inadequacies including defective gearboxes, broken breaks and lights, and a lack of crucial equipment. In addition, many other instances have been recorded in which OCGs infiltrated the healthcare system before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. All of the major Italian OCGs (Cosa Nostra, ‘Ndrangheta, and Camorra) had been highly active in this business for years, especially in their home regions (respectively, Sicily, Calabria, and Campania). This phenomenon was not confined to the South of the country, however. Already before the pandemic there is ample evidence of criminal involvement in hospitals in other regions like Lombardy, which would then go on to become the epicenter of the outbreak (La Rizza 2019; Kingston 2007; la Repubblica 2015; Candito 2019; Ordine dei Farmacisti 2019; Trinchella 2019; Antimafia Duemila 2019; Zivotic and Trajkovski 2020, 1004; Falcioni 2020; France24 2020; Meers 2018; UNODC 2020; and Falcioni 2020). This argument is widely shared by Peluso (2021, 88, 89). The researcher agrees that OCGs’ infiltration in sectors that benefit from state and EU public funding already existed before the Covid-19 emergency and that it could only consolidate in its aftermath. Public administration in certain regions has always been under great pressure regarding the awarding of public contracts. As we have seen, the urgent circumstances created by the pandemic allowed OCGs to evade the necessary assignment checks and exploit direct assignment contracts.

Sectors like healthcare have also suffered from a high risk of money laundering for a long time. Their activities are characterized by a frequent use of cash and irregular laborers and a lack of transparency at the corporate level, which make them perfect for exploitation by OCGs (Savona et al. 2017; UNODC 2020; and Falcioni 2020). Notably, Transparency International (2019) recorded losses amounting to over $500 billion a year worldwide to corruption already before the virus. And while Italy’s corruption index places the country at a poor 52nd position, it lost only one spot from 2019 when it

was 53rd (Transparency International 2021). In the three decades since the reforms of the 1990s, many valuables (e.g. real estate, companies, cash…) worth billions of Euros have been seized in Italy alone. Just between August 2019 and July 2020, the arrests caused by alleged connections with OCGs led to the seizure of property and goods worth €1.447 Billion. They were mostly acquired legally because, even before the virus, many companies were already burdened with mortgages and loans that they could not repay. Something that OCGs could exploit. It is true that the pandemic measures led many businesses to face even greater financial difficulties, but they already had been prey of OCGs for a long time before the virus (Zivotic and Trajkovski 2020, 1003, 1004). Further proof that this situation has not changed excessively since before Covid-19 is provided by the work of Bosisio, Nicolazzo, and Riccardi (2021, 6). Their study on property changes during the pandemic in Italy highlights the fact that their number actually did not change much between April and September 2020 compared to the same period the year prior. In fact, they recorded a slight drop. Despite some anomalies in the organizational structure of certain new companies and the risk of money laundering, OCGs infiltration seems to pose a similar threat as before.

5.3. Usury

The phenomena of usury, instead, has definitely diversified in nature and has been practiced with increasing intensity even by OCGs that traditionally shunned these practices. The data speaks for itself and indicates that the practice has gained in importance during the pandemic. Still, as we have seen from the literature, usury has always been a mafia business. The financial crisis kicked off by the pandemic and the Covid measures simply allowed them to invest the available cash in different directions (Lavorgna and Sergi 2013, 13).

5.4. Trafficking and Smuggling

The increase in the production and trafficking of drugs is another phenomenon that had been consolidating for years before the Covid-19 virus. While law enforcement carried out a number of operations against it during the pandemic, their investigations also took a fair amount of time, with the arrests representing only the tip of the iceberg that is the surveillance and investigative work. Many Cosa Nostra associations that were dismantled in 2021, for example, already started buying cocaine from Lazio and Campania, and hashish from Palermo since at least March 2018, when the DIA[19] investigations started (Borrometi 2021).

Many OCGs also faced increased competition from young, high-tech criminals that took advantage of the sense of impunity and stepped up their activities related to the production and trafficking of drugs. Unlike more traditional OCGs that were forced to minimize their activities, they remained largely unaffected by forced isolation and were instead able to expand in the sale of counterfeit Covid-19 testing and artificial respiration devices. These high-tech criminals use the online sphere and even DarkNet stores to place their products and sell them in high- and middle-income countries (e.g. Brazil, Spain, Portugal, the U.S., Japan, India, China, Norway). Indeed, cybercriminals were able to react much more rapidly than traditional types of OCGs to the pandemic and exploit the new opportunities it created (Borisov and Lewis 2021, 4, 5). A different case concerns the production and trafficking of fake pharmaceuticals. Indeed, the volume of trade around fake medication had already reached $4.4 billion in 2016 (Schneider and Nam 2020, 417). The pharmaceutical sector thus suffered from economic woes, posing a significant health risk to consumers, already before Covid-19.

As many other trafficking and smuggling businesses, the human smuggling market, as well as the facilitators that operate within it, is characterized by a strong adaptability to change and restrictions. Still, irregular

[19] Anti-mafia Investigative Direction - An interforces investigative organism pertaining to the Department of Public Security of the Ministry of the Interior. It executes tasks mainly focused on countering mafia-like OCGs in Italy.

migration has been heavily impacted by the expansion of migration controls. Within this context, Covid-19 has highlighted the fragmented nature of the criminal network involved in the facilitation of migrants' journeys. Indeed, the network of individual actors that operate within this business to counter their own precarity is a far cry from the idea of a transnational criminal web organized into hierarchical and well-structured OCGs that the media, policy-makers, and law enforcement privileged. Information concerning crimes (e.g. scams, extortion, kidnapping, assault, human trafficking…) impacting migrants is abundant both in the media and within databases. Yet they are often decontextualized and sensationalized in a process that seems to be normalizing them. OCGs and their activities have often been the focus of the research on migration-specific violence, but there are many other structures that lead to the emergence of similar forms of violence targeting migrants. These are underrepresented in the literature, which thus ends up giving disproportionate weight to OCgs. In fact, facilitators receive little to no support from criminal conglomerates. Instead, they are often obliged to pay taxes or fees to them, as well as to corrupt law enforcement, to have access to and travel through certain territories. There is evidence that these independent and horizontally-organized actors (most of whom are women) have limited social and financial capital and rely on the facilitation of migration to supplement wages from other low-paying forms of employment. The Covid-19 lockdown impacted the ability of most facilitators to work as they suddenly could not access their support network (i.e. migrants, law enforcement, politicians, ordinary citizens, staff from shelters and NGOs…) anymore. If OCGs were the sole facilitators within the smuggling market, down times such as the pandemic would not have had such a disproportionate impact on the business and access to the 'gray zone' would have been much easier. Claims regarding the involvement of transnationally-syndicated, hierarchical OCGs in the facilitation of irregular migration should actually be a concern for scholars and policy-makers. Indeed, they are used alongside

Covid-19 responses and stepped-up enforcement to justify policing and surveillance actions along migration hubs worldwide. In the end, they end up having a negative impact on the rule of law and human rights. The focus on structured and hierarchical OCGs ignores the nuanced social relations between migrants and their facilitators, generalizing them under the umbrella of coercion and criminality. Such claims can only justify large enforcement budgets and have little chance at reducing the incidence of migration facilitation (Sanchez and Achilli 2020, 3, 6, 8, 9; Vogt 2018; Lucht 2011; Sanchez and Zhang 2018; Maher 2018, 37, 39; Vick and Poole 2018; and Baird 2016).

5.5. Society and Politics

Finally, as was already mentioned, non-violent crime rates remained comparatively stable during the pandemic and even declined during the lockdown period. The number of robberies in Italy, for example, has decreased by 28% from 2019 to 2021[20] (Statista 2022). And while the risk of protests and riots often increased, the main goal for law enforcement was to keep violence from spreading within and outside the prison system and they largely achieved that (Rangel, Daniels, and Phillips 2020; and Dominguez and Martinez 2020). OCGs could mobilize against the lockdown and spread distrust in the Italian state, but they were not able to dominate and control territories that they did not previously control (Dellasega and Vorrath 2020, 6).

While OCGs have tried to win over the population many times through humanitarian actions their efforts have not always been successful at turning the locals against state representatives and the idea of institutions. Many instances have been recorded in which the reckless and arrogant behavior of OCGs members in the face of the Covid restrictions caused controversy. They

[20] It is important to note here that there is an ongoing public discussion regarding whether there are really less robberies in Italy or the population is simply tired of reporting them knowing that little will change their situation. This case is tied to the national problem of distrust in state and local institutions and public administrations.

have often stirred up the population by acting superior and as if the rules did not apply to them. Such actions have often undermined their previous efforts aimed at winning over the communities within which they operate (Borrometi 2021).

6. CONCLUSION

In the end, it becomes apparent that, despite having a great impact on OCGs, the effects of Covid-19 and the pandemic must be put into context. Data alone is not able to explain the reality of the situation. In many cases, if the analysis had only relied on numbers, the author would probably not have been able to identify certain key relationships between the variables and their causes.

Out of 11 variables that were considered in the subsections of the body of this research, we found that only two (the appropriation of public state and EU funds and the exploitation of the online sphere) witnessed the expansion of OCGs and their subsequent increase in profits. Our views regarding the majority of the other variables, which also increase in value and importance, were reconsidered once they were put into context. The corruption phenomena, the infiltration of the legal economy, and the businesses of usury and money laundering, for example, are all variables that, while being greatly impacted by Covid-19, were already in a process of development that only quickened with the onset of the pandemic. A similar argument can be made for the production and sale of counterfeits. The exploitation of police resources and the provision of social support, instead, were simply not as effective as stakeholder predicted. In this regard, Italian OCGs did not match the level of sophistication in their socio-political operations as, for example, the gangs of the *favelas*. Finally, while it is true that the trade in drugs and migrants greatly increased with the pandemic, both these businesses underwent considerable changes that forced many OCGs to adapt and suffer before being able to again turn a profit.

It is true that OCGs in Italy have taken advantage of the crisis. They have infested the national productive system at different levels and exploited the fragility caused by the crisis. Certain categories such as struggling families and entrepreneurs have found themselves particularly vulnerable, needing

urgent economic support to survive the pandemic. It is right at this moment that OCGs offered their services, presenting themselves as a sort of high-class 'benefactors' whose only goal was to help the population. They were then able to provide economic (e.g. loans, provision of employment), but also social support to the general public, thus imposing their authority and legitimizing their rule (Raffaeli 2021, 45; and Apollonio 2022).

However, many of the variables under consideration did not fluctuate as much as would have been thought. And while others did, they are merely continuing a trend that had already been in development before the pandemic. Overall, it seems as if OCGs in Italy just continued their business as usual. The main difference created by the crisis was the feeling of general fear and impunity that gradually led them to emerge from their shadows. OCGs were neither weak, nor static before Covid-19. The crisis caused by the virus simply provided such good opportunities for them that they allowed themselves to be seen in order to maximize profits. As such, when they were noticed, OCGs seemed stronger and more determined than during another period since at least the beginning of the 1990s. And even if that might be the case, it is only an ordinary stop in a never-ending story of criminal adaptation and development.

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