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## Organised Crime in—and from—Communist and Post-communist States

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### Introduction

One of the less researched comparisons between Communist<sup>1</sup> and post-communist states since the early 1990s is organised crime (hereafter OC). Yet OC is now widely recognised—at least by Western governments—not merely as a serious crime issue, but also as a security threat. One major reason for this is that organised criminal groups (OCGs) often interact with terrorist groups (Shelley, 2014). Another is that they often corrupt officers of the state, subverting the latter's proper functioning. It is therefore important to analyse and compare the changing nature of OC in both the Communist and post-communist worlds.

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<sup>1</sup>In line with an increasingly common convention, Communist refers here to actual political systems (practice), communist to the ideal of communism (theory).

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Although OC has become a major issue globally, both Communist and post-communist states are often identified as major sources of this problem. For example, in a 2018 article based on an interview with the Director-General of the UK's National Crime Agency (NCA), Lynne Owens, the following challenges to British law enforcement were noted -

There was *Russia's* attempt to kill Sergei Skripal. A *North Korean* cyber-attack. *Eastern European* slave traffickers. *Albanian* cocaine smugglers. (Sensitive to singling out nationalities, Owens used the term "western Balkans") ... In the cities, ex-military *eastern European* and *Baltic* state gangs are behind a spate of thefts of prestige cars stolen at night, driven to the ports and dispatched overseas before the owners wake up ... Other kinds of cybercrime include Wannacry, a piece of *North Korean* ransomware that paralysed much of the health system for four days in May 2017. (Perry, 2018: emphasis added—LTH)

- while a few days later, the *New York Times* (Wee, 2018) referred to the problem of illegal exports of the opioid drug fentanyl into the United States from *China*, which US authorities allege is the main illicit source of a drug that is now killing hundreds of Americans each week (NIDA, 2019). What these two newspaper articles highlighted is that a major and growing problem for developed Western states is OC from both Communist and post-communist states. This chapter explores the growth of such OC, with a particular focus on three Communist and four post-communist states.

Before proceeding with the analysis, however, four introductory caveats need to be noted. One is that the case-selection is skewed, in that the post-communist states chosen (Albania, Bulgaria, Russia and Serbia) are among the worst—though it will be demonstrated that OCGs from Communist states (those considered here are China, North Korea and Vietnam) have also become a significant problem transnationally.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>While post-communist states such as Estonia, Poland and Slovenia appear to have far less of a problem of OC (and the related corruption) than the four selected for analysis here, many other states—including Lithuania, Romania and Ukraine—do have serious OC issues. Siegel-Rozenblit (2011, p. 5) claims that Asian OC is a 'relatively new phenomenon in the EU'.

The second is that the often-clandestine nature of OC, plus the fact that researching it can be dangerous, means that many non-academic sources have to be used here. However, such sources are mostly either well-regarded international organisations and NGOs, or else mass media with an established reputation for serious investigative journalism. Third, terms such as ‘the Triads’ or ‘Russian OC’ are blanket ones, needed for generalisation: In reality, the OC from any country comprises numerous groups that are often in competition with each other.

Fourth, the meaning of the term organised crime is contested: Rather than engage with this debate here (though see Holmes, 2016, pp. 1–14), we adopt a marginally modified version of the definition produced by the UK’s NCA (2014, p. 7), viz. ‘serious crime planned, coordinated and conducted by people working together on a continuing basis. Their motivation is mostly financial gain’.

The basic argument in this analysis is that OC has been expanding in *both* Communist and post-communist states, suggesting that the type of politico-economic system is less relevant to its fate than the amount of political will and administrative capacity. But even with strong political will, the transnationalisation of OC makes it difficult for individual states to cope with it. Unfortunately, different definitions and systems, plus mutual suspicion—a lack of trust—between many law enforcement agencies, renders the task of countering transnational OC (TOC) particularly problematic.

## Albanian OC

Albania has been described as the ‘new Colombia of Europe’ (Daragahi, 2019), while the UK’s NCA has identified Albanian OC as the biggest player both in Britain’s illicit drug trade (Townsend, 2019) and in human trafficking into Britain’s sex industry in recent times (OCCRP, 2018). A January 2019 article in the *Economist* (2019a) referred to Albanian OC as ‘Piranhas from Tirana’. Michaletos (2012) claims that Albanian OC constitutes ‘the largest enterprise in terms of sales and profits in South Eastern Europe’. Moreover, Albanian OC has a reputation for particularly nasty violence and misogyny—‘Albanian speaking

criminals are notorious for their use of extreme violence' (Europol, 2011, p. 39; see more generally on Albanian OCGs' culture Arsovska, 2015).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, there is evidence of Albanian OC's involvement in politics, especially relating to Kosovo's armed struggle for independence: Albanian OC has been cited as a major source of weapons for the KLA during the 1990s in a drugs-for-arms agreement. Given the often close ties between politicians and OC in so many countries, it is also worth noting here the (ultimately unproven) public allegations made in 2002 that the Prime Minister of Albania in 1991, Fatos Nano, was involved in the arms smuggling (Cameron, 2004).

One important source of members for Albanian OCGs is former security people from the Communist era, who were dismissed during President Sali Berisha's government downsizing in the early 1990s. According to Europol, 'Many group members have a secret service, police or paramilitary background' (Europol, 2011, p. 39).

While Albanian OC's presence internationally is a relatively new phenomenon, essentially dating from the 1990s, its history can be traced back to the sixteenth century, and many OCGs allegedly continue to be clan-based, as they were back then. According to Zhilla and Lamallari (2015), the growth and transnationalisation began in 1990, following alliance-building with Italian OC. But there appears to have been a major expansion following the 1997 Albanian economic crisis (the collapse of a pyramid scheme), and then again post-1999 in connection with the war in Kosovo. Since then, Albanian OCGs have spread as far as China and the Middle East, and have become a major presence in both Europe—especially Belgium, France, Italy (though less so there since a major clampdown in 2002) and the UK—and North America: in 2004, the FBI claimed that Albanian OC might even replace the ethnically Italian La Cosa Nostra as the dominant OC formation in many US cities (Frieden, 2004). Following this warning, however, US authorities clamped down hard on Albanian OC from 2005: This resulted in

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<sup>3</sup>Europol and several other law enforcement agencies typically use the term 'Albanian speaking', rather than Albanian, since ethnically Albanian Kosovars are often involved in the criminal activity they are countering. Note that Athanassopoulou (2005, p. 4), *inter alia*, maintains that Kosovo is 'the notorious criminal capital' of South Eastern Europe.

somewhat less violence emanating from Albanian OCGs, though it has not been completely eliminated (US Attorneys, 2013).

In the past, Albanian OC was structured along traditional OC lines, with codes of honour (*besë*), a strict hierarchy, etc. However, the research conducted by Fabian Zhilla and Besfort Lamallari (2015, 2016) reveals that new forms began to emerge at about the same time the FBI began seriously targeting Albanian OC. Since then, there has been some trend towards more networked structures and less overt hierarchy (on criminal networks generally see Morselli, 2009, 2014).

Although Albanian OC is polycriminal (i.e. engaged in several types of criminal activity), it is particularly well-known for heroin trafficking; human trafficking and prostitution, esp. since the late 1990s; arms dealing (there were massive losses of weapons in Albania in 1997); and car trafficking (ramming expensive cars, such as in Italy, forcibly ejecting the driver, then ‘exporting’ the stolen car).

## Bulgarian OC

OC has been a serious problem for Bulgaria since the mid-1990s. While other post-communist states were being admitted to the EU in 2004, Bulgaria’s (and Romania’s) entry was delayed to 2007, largely because of their problems with OC and corruption. Once admitted, these two South-East European states were under strict supervision: The EU introduced a new instrument—the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM)—specifically to monitor judicial reform, anti-corruption measures and, in the case of just Bulgaria, anti-OC measures. The CVM is enacted every six months, and has been identified by Eli Gateva (2013) as the first example of *post*-accession EU conditionality. In 2008, the EU warned Bulgaria that it would be financially punished if it did not seriously address corruption and OC, and, to press the point home, temporarily froze some of the funds earmarked for the country.

But this was not the only penalty Bulgaria has suffered on account of its OC problem. Like Romania, it had hoped to be admitted to the passport-free Schengen Area in 2011 (JHA, 2011); but it still had

not been admitted as of June 2019—and the OC–corruption nexus is often cited by France and the Netherlands in particular as reasons why Bulgaria remains an unsuitable candidate for admission.

The EU and members of the Schengen Area are not the only critics of the OC situation in Bulgaria. In a confidential July 2005 cable sent from the US Embassy in Sofia, it was suggested that ‘The strength and immunity from the law of organized crime (OC) groups is arguably the most serious problem in Bulgaria today’ (Wikileaks, 2005).

On one level, this problem with OC is unusual, in that Bulgaria is the only state analysed in this chapter that essentially had no significant OC before the 1990s. According to Jovo Nikolov (1997, p. 80), Bulgarian OC was ‘... created by the “transitional state”’, and does not predate the 1990s. Similarly, the well-regarded Sofia-based Center for the Study of Democracy maintains that ‘... the basic structures of organized crime in this country’ emerged in 1995 (Bezlov & Tzenkov, 2007, p. 20).

Nikolov’s (1997) analysis identifies three main components of Bulgarian OC in the 1990s—ex-wrestlers and other former athletes; ex-police officers (up to 17,000 law enforcement officers were dismissed in the early 1990s); and former members of the *nomenklatura* (an essentially similar but more complex breakdown is in Bezlov and Tzenkov, 2007, p. 12). The wrestlers are a particularly interesting group. They initially operated protection rackets, but some of these groups mutated into legitimate insurance companies and security firms after the change of government in 1997: the new government encouraged these OCGs to convert themselves into legal companies, and some did (Bezlov & Tzenkov, 2007, p. 21). However, many OCGs continued to act in a purely criminal way, and the 2000s have witnessed a large number of contract killings carried out by members of such gangs.

A major stimulus to Bulgarian OC in the early–mid-1990s was the UN sanctions imposed on neighbouring Yugoslavia because of the war in Bosnia. Bulgarian OC played a major role in sanctions-busting in smuggling items such as cigarettes (it is alleged that Romania was the main source of oil during the period of the sanctions).

Bulgarian OC is flexible and polycriminal, but is particularly well-known for counterfeiting, human trafficking and prostitution, cigarette

smuggling, contract killing (e.g. mayors, investigative journalists), car trafficking and protection rackets. While it has become more transnational since the 1990s, it is still focused mainly on Europe.

## Russian OC

In 1994, then head of the CIA James Woolsey testified to the US Congress that OC threatened democratic reform in Russia (cited in Boylan, 1996, p. 2006). In May 1996, the then heads of the CIA (John Deutch) and the FBI (Louis Freeh) took this a step further, both warning Congress that Russian OC and corruption were undermining the Russian system and could even pose a threat to the United States (cited in Webster, 1997, p. 3). For those who might see this as simply Western propaganda and scare-mongering, note that the Russian president himself, Boris Yeltsin, claimed in February 1993 that, ‘Organised crime has become a direct threat to Russia’s strategic interests and national security’ (Talalayev, 1993).

The OC situation in Russia has changed significantly since the 1990s. The 2000s have been generally calmer (despite some claims OC would increase in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis), and there has been a marked decline in the role of the traditional OCGs, the *vory v zakone* (see below). At the same time, there has been a move by other OCGs into the more legal economy.

Joseph Serio’s (2008, pp. 71–94) thorough analysis of numerous sources on Russian OC highlights the confusion and contradictions that arise from using differing methods for calculating its scale, yet concludes that there is widespread agreement that both the number of OCGs and the number of people involved in OC almost certainly *declined* in the 2000s. Vadim Volkov takes this one step further, arguing that the changes in Russian OC in the 2000s are such that the Russian ‘mafia’ has become extinct—‘The “golden age” of the Russian mafia is clearly passed; the mafia turned out to be a one generation phenomenon’ (Volkov, 2014, p. 159).

This is potentially misleading, and perhaps wishful thinking. For instance, Russian (and post-Soviet more generally) OC is still

considered by Interpol to be a major concern that warrants one of only three dedicated Interpol anti-OC projects ('Millennium'), the working group of which continues to meet regularly (e.g. in Moscow in June 2017 and in Lviv, Ukraine in May 2018). In late 2017, Europol announced that it had recently played a role working with Spanish authorities to bring down two Russian OCGs heavily involved in money laundering (Europol, 2017a). Furthermore, many specialists have long perceived Russian OC to be major players in cybercrime (Holmes, 2015; Thomas, 2005). Thus Gragido, Molina, Pirc, and Selby (2013, p. 75) maintain that, 'Russia and Eurasian nations carved out of the former USSR have long been (and remain today) the arguable leaders [globally—LTH] of malicious cyber activity and cybercrime'. Europol's 2018 assessment of threat assessments on the internet makes several references to Russian OC's involvement in various kinds of cybercrime. Finally, *Fortune* magazine's most recent assessment of the wealth of the world's leading transnational OCGs rated Russia's Solntsevskaya Bratva the world's wealthiest (Matthews, 2014; Alux [2018] ranks Russian OC the world's 4th wealthiest OCG, behind the Japanese Yakuza, the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel and—richest of all—the Italian Camorra).

Russian OC is not new, although in a format that would normally be considered OC (as distinct from, for example, highway banditry), it dates only from the Soviet period. During the latter, the best-known OCGs were the so-called 'thieves-in-law' or 'thieves living by the code' (*vory v zakone*—see e.g. Galeotti, 2018; Siegel, 2012). Unlike many OCGs, ethnicity was not a relevant factor in rendering someone eligible to join the *vory*; rather, the prerequisite for joining was having served a prison sentence.

However, as the USSR began to liberalise in the late 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev, so new OCGs began to emerge. This process intensified following the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991. During the 1990s, there were frequent violent conflicts between both the traditional *vory* and the much newer, less structured OCGs, as well as between the latter. As in so many other post-communist states, a major source of OCGs' new recruits was former members of the secret police (KGB) and other law enforcement officers.



The activities of Russian OC are diverse, but are said to have included in the 1990s the smuggling of nuclear materials (Lee, 1998), though this claim is now dismissed by most analysts. More recently, two of the principal foci are cybercrime and human trafficking. Russian OC can be found in many countries outside Russia, but is a particular problem in the United States and Israel.

## Serbian OC

OC in Serbia is often called ‘*Naša Stvar*’, which is a direct translation of the Sicilian or American Mafia’s alternative name, *La Cosa Nostra* (lit. ‘Our Thing’). While its reputation for extreme violence is not as pronounced as that of Albanian OC, a 2009 report that gang members in Madrid had killed one of their own members with a hammer for alleged betrayal, put his body through a mincer and then eaten him, reveals that Serbian OC is by no means squeamish when it deems violence appropriate (Altozano, 2012; Worden, 2012).

Unlike Albanian OC, Serbian OC appears to have emerged relatively recently, in the early twentieth century; the ‘Gang of Mountain Birds’ under its leader Jovan ‘Jovo’ Čaruga is often cited as an early example. However, this was more like a gang of bandits than a modern form of OC, and in many ways the more appropriate starting point is the 1970s and 1980s, when gangs under leaders such as Ljubomir Magaš (better known as *Ljuba Zemunac*) and Željko Ražnatović (better known internationally as *Arkan*) became a significant problem for authorities. At that time, however, these OCGs operated mainly outside Serbia—in Magaš’ case, first in Italy and then in Germany, while there were arrest warrants for Arkan in no fewer than seven West European states during the 1970s and 1980s, mostly for bank robberies, murders, and prison escapes. There is considerable circumstantial evidence that Arkan worked closely with the Yugoslav secret police (UDBA and its successor the SDB) during the 1970s and 1980s (CSD, 2004, p. 42).

It is ironic that what was widely perceived to be the most liberal Communist state experienced the most violent collapse and

disintegration. Given its violent intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the first half of the 1990s, Yugoslavia—by 1992 comprising only Serbia and Montenegro—was subject to UN sanctions 1992–1995. In order to circumvent these sanctions, the Yugoslav government collaborated with OC in smuggling oil, cigarettes, weapons and other items into the country (OSCE, 2011)—a fact explicitly acknowledged by the Yugoslav Prosecutor-General in January 1996 (OMRI, 1996). One analyst has gone so far as to argue that ‘economic sanctions led to the over-criminalisation of Serbian population in 1990s’ (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2004, p. 689).

The 2000s have seen continued activity by Serbian OC, and further evidence of collusion between OC and corrupt officials, especially law enforcement officers and politicians (IRBC, 2014; Mladenovic, 2012; OSCE, 2011). In 2012, the Centre for Investigative Reporting of Serbia published documented allegations of OC links to a Deputy Prime Minister—who subsequently became the Prime Minister and then President of Serbia (see too Rujevic, 2018).

In October 2016, the Serbian authorities acknowledged that the organised crime situation was worsening, and declared a ‘war’ on OC. Yet law enforcement was unable to prevent violent clashes between OCGs in Belgrade and Novi Sad in 2017, while a number of OC-related murders were reported in 2018 (Rujevic, 2018). The situation is still not under control.

Serbian OC is both flexible and polycriminal. There is evidence of its engagement in arms smuggling, cigarette smuggling—and threatening senior politicians, including the Minister of the Interior. Serbian authorities initially blamed Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić’s 2003 assassination on the Zemun OCG, and eventually convicted a number of OC figures, including a leading member of the Zemun clan who had previously been a senior officer in the Special Operations Unit of the secret police and a close friend of Arkan. Serbian OC operates in several countries in Europe, the USA and Australia—but apparently not in Asia.

## Chinese OC

OC in China is usually described by the generic term ‘black societies’ (*hei shehui*),<sup>4</sup> but the focus here is on the best-known of such groupings, the Triads. Chinese OC is now considered by some analysts to be the largest OC grouping globally; given the sheer size of the Chinese population (over 1.4 billion in 2019), this is not surprising. Moreover, Emil Plywaczewski (2002) has stated that several Western law enforcement agencies considered it one of the seven most serious international OC threats during the 1990s.

The origins and history of the Triads are disputed. They are traced back to the seventeenth century by some scholars (e.g. Wing Lo & Kwok, 2012), based on claims by Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-sen—though Murray (1994), Chu (2000, pp. 12–13) and others maintain that they first emerged in the 1760s. Whether in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, China was ruled by the Qing dynasty (from 1644)—also known as the Manchu Dynasty, since the Emperors were Manchurian, not Han Chinese. According to several scholars (e.g. Lintner, 2002, pp. 41–42; Wing Lo & Kwok, 2012), the Triads were originally a political group whose goal it was to overthrow the Manchus and instal a Han Chinese emperor. But this political grouping mutated into an OCG in the nineteenth century that was increasingly attracted to the opium trade. For this reason, it focused primarily on Shanghai and Hong Kong, especially once the latter was separated from China and became a British colony.

Following the takeover of China by Mao and the Communists in 1949, there was a severe clampdown on all forms of ‘black society’, and the Triads became even more focused on Hong Kong. But as China began to open up to outside trade from the late 1970s, so the Triads and other OCGs began to move back into mainland China. Already in 1982–1983, the closest Chinese city

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<sup>4</sup>There are two main forms of *hei shehui*—one of which (usually translated as dark societies—*hei* can mean both black and dark in Chinese) is more loosely organised than the other (black societies) and does not enjoy protection provided by corrupt state officials.

to Hong Kong—Shenzhen—launched a campaign (‘Notice on Abolishing Black Society Activities’) against OC. This was the first ‘strike black’ (*dabei*) anti-OC campaign in China, and resulted in the execution of more than 80 OCG members.<sup>5</sup>

The Triads and other OCGs are now found in many parts of China. But their style has changed. Having once been a classic ‘traditional’ type of OCG—with a strict hierarchy, a code, initiation ceremonies, and overt symbols of membership such as tattoos—there has in recent years been what Broadhurst and Lee (2009, p. 2) describe as a ‘gentrification’ of the Triads, as they have moved increasingly into the licit economy, become less code-adherent and opted for business suits rather than tattoos.

The Communist authorities have continued to pursue OCGs, having introduced several ‘strike hard’ campaigns in the twenty-first century. One recent development is the increasing use of public executions of OCG members involved in drug manufacturing and trafficking, as in Lufeng in 2018; Lufeng, in Southern Guangdong Province, is sometimes called ‘the city of ice’, being a major source of methamphetamine (including into Australia).

In January 2018, President and General Secretary Xi Jinping announced another major 3-year crackdown on OC, even claiming that OC was threatening Communist rule. By December 2018, this campaign had resulted in the removal of more than 1000 OCGs (Xinhua, 2018). Of particular concern to Xi is the so-called ‘red–black nexus’—i.e. the frequent collusion between OCGs and corrupt Communist officials: the latter often provide a ‘protective umbrella’ (*baohusan*) to the former in return for bribes or a share of criminal profits (see e.g. Chin & Godson, 2006, p. 6). Xi has been clamping down on corruption almost since he took power in 2012, but appears to have become increasingly aware of—and concerned about—the linkages that frequently exist between OCGs and officials.

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<sup>5</sup>China has two types of anti-OC campaigns—‘strike black’ (*dabei*), which are launched by local authorities, and ‘strike hard’ (*yanda*), which are national campaigns—See Broadhurst (2013, p. 100), Wang (2013, pp. 50–51).

The best-known case of the red–black nexus emanates from the city of Chongqing (Sichuan Province), and relates to the former party leader of that city (from 2007), Bo Xilai. In 2009, Bo initiated a major crackdown on OC, especially the Triads, which resulted in almost 5000 arrests between October 2009 and 2011. But not all of those arrested were OCG members; a considerable number were allegedly corrupt officials, including several senior police officers. Bo’s campaign was one of the factors that made him extremely popular in Chongqing. But in 2012, he himself was first removed as party secretary of Chongqing (March), then expelled from the Chinese Communist Party (September). Finally, in mid-2013, Bo was charged, tried and found guilty of corruption, and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

The Bo case is significant not only because of the apparent hypocrisy between his campaign against the red–black nexus when he himself was later found guilty of the kinds of crimes he had so strongly criticised, but also because of the claims by many observers that a major reason for his trial and sentence was that he could have been a challenger to Xi, who was keen to promote many of the same ‘leftist’ (Maoist) ideas espoused by Bo (Dominguez, 2013; Zhao, 2016). Bo was a so-called princeling, meaning that he was the son of one of the Eight Elders of Chinese Communism, and had advocated a return to some of the more ‘red’ (i.e. Maoist Communist) policies that had been largely sidelined in recent years: Deng Xiaoping’s economic policies had resulted not only in impressive growth and development, but also rising and extreme economic inequality, as well as corruption, in the country. It should be noted that Xi’s anti-OC policy since January 2018 has also been seen as designed to counter *political* threats to his and the CCP’s rule (*Economist*, 2019b).

Chinese OC is polycriminal: among its major activities are drug manufacturing and trafficking (the number of drug-related convictions in the PRC increased approximately fivefold 1991–2003, while the reader is reminded of the point above about trafficking of fentanyl into the United States); gambling (including in soccer); counterfeiting; people smuggling and human trafficking; money laundering; extortion; kidnapping and contract killing; protection (Wang, 2017); licit enterprise; and corruption.

## Vietnamese OC

Vietnamese OCGs have a reputation for being among the most violent of the Asian OCGs, both at home and abroad. This was noted in late 1991 by a US Senate subcommittee: While acknowledging that Chinese OCGs (and street gangs) were often violent, Vietnamese ones were even worse (US Senate Sub-Committee, 1992, esp. 68, 218 and 268).

According to Schloenhardt (2010, p. 249), Vietnamese OCGs are primarily involved in the trafficking of drugs and humans. Vietnam's proximity to the so-called Golden Triangle (Laos—another Communist state—Myanmar and Thailand) helps to explain both foci: the area is known as one of the world's most prolific producers of opium (for heroin), while both Thailand itself and some of its neighbours are major sources of trafficked persons, in the international movement of whom Vietnamese OC is an important player. Given its role in both smuggling and international trafficking, it is not surprising that Vietnamese OC within Vietnam has since the 1990s been concentrated mostly in port areas such as Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) and Haiphong.

While Vietnamese OC does not have as high a profile internationally as Russian or Chinese OC, it is certainly considered a serious problem by many law enforcement agencies outside Vietnam, not least in Europe (Siegel-Rozenblit, 2011, pp. 9–10). The spread of Vietnamese OC to other countries is linked to the mass emigration from unified Vietnam after 1975. Nevertheless, the problem has intensified since the 1990s. For instance, an Australian Parliamentary Committee referred in a February 1995 report to the growing threat from Vietnamese OCGs in comparison with the previous decade (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1995). In 2013, Europol issued a warning against the re-emergence of Vietnamese OCGs in Europe (Europol, 2013): Schoenmakers, Bremmers, & Kleemans (2013) provide a detailed scholarly analysis of the role of Vietnamese OC in illicit cannabis production in the Netherlands, while Silverstone and Savage (2010) provide evidence of this—and of money laundering and child trafficking—from the UK. Much of the human trafficking of women for sex work is to Cambodia and China (Schloenhardt, 2010, p. 249).

The history of Vietnamese OC can be traced back at least to the 1920s, with the emergence of the paramilitary organisation Bình Xuyên that engaged in OC to fund its activities. While both North and South Vietnamese authorities clamped down on OC during the 1940s and 1950s, OC began to expand again in the 1960s and early 1970s; this was particularly so in (anti-Communist) South Vietnam, where the so-called Four Great Kings of Saigon's underworld became a significant force. Following the reunification of Vietnam under the Communists in 1975, the authorities initially clamped down hard on OC once again. But by the 1990s, control had slackened, and two major OCGs—one led by Truong Văn Cam (better known as Năm Cam), the other by one of the few major female OC leaders globally, Dung Hà—emerged as significant criminal forces. But this phase of domestic OC activity came to an end around the turn of the century. In 2000, Dung Hà was murdered by members of Năm Cam's gang (Cohen, 2002), while Năm Cam himself was executed in 2004 for a number of offences, including having ordered the killing of Dung Hà. He had been tried along with 154 other people, including a number of corrupt Communist officials who were found guilty of collusion with OC. Once again, the close ties between OC and corrupt officers of the state are evident.

Vietnamese OCGs engage in smuggling (including of wildlife products—Ngoc & Wyatt, 2013); gambling; prostitution; drug trafficking; cannabis cultivation; child trafficking; home invasions; extortion and fraud. Within Europe, they can mainly be found in Central and Eastern Europe, especially Czechia (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2017).

## North Korean OC

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is renowned for being one of the world's most secretive states, so that much of the information cited here from scholars has to be based on Western intelligence reports, reports from defectors, etc. But there are also critical reports from China, a fellow Communist state and North Korea's closest ally.

One of the most striking aspects of OC in North Korea is that the state itself often appears to act like an OCG (Blancke, 2014), with numerous

North Korean officials having been accused in more than twenty countries of involvement in drug trafficking (Perl, 2004). The state's criminal activities are allegedly coordinated through the Communist (Korean Workers') Party's Central Committee Bureau 39, which was established in the mid-1970s (Gollom, 2017; Kan, Bechtol, & Collins, 2010). These allegations of state-sponsored OC activity have earned the DPRK the label of a 'mafia state' (Kelly, 2016; Wang & Blanke, 2014).

It seems that the state encouraged drug production and trafficking from the early 1990s until about 2005—initially of heroin, subsequently of methamphetamine—but at that time enjoyed a near-monopoly over this (Yun & Kim, 2010). However, a growing drug addiction problem at home then led to a state clampdown on production and trafficking (Hastings, 2014). One outcome of this change of government policy appears to have been a growth in citizen-initiated (i.e. private) drug-related OC from around 2005.

While a number of Western analysts have focused more on this non-state OC in recent years, several Chinese sources claim the state is still heavily involved. Thus, Peng Wang and Stephan Blancke (2014, p. 57) point out that:

Chinese-language primary sources... show that while official DPRK state involvement in the large-scale production, trafficking and sale of illegal drugs may have lessened, it has not stopped, and the narcotics trade is still regarded by Kim Jong-un as an important means of earning hard currency... Published materials from China and South Korea suggest that, since the early 2000s, the North Korean government has managed to conceal its criminal activities by exporting the major part of its illegal drugs, especially methamphetamine, to northeast China... Moreover, the North Korean government has failed to control the increasing private participation in drug production and trafficking.

While the explanations for the North Korean state's involvement in OC activity are complex, one major factor—especially in the 2000s—is the authorities' reactions to international sanctions. North Korea has long been subject to US sanctions, which were first imposed in the 1950s, tightened in the 1980s (especially after the downing of Korean Airlines flight KAL 858 in 1987), temporarily eased in the 1990s, and have been



further tightened again as the nuclear programme has developed in the twenty-first century. UN sanctions have also become progressively harsher since 2006, as the Pyongyang regime has pursued an increasingly active nuclear weapons testing policy.

In addition to drug production and trafficking, North Korea is alleged by some to be heavily involved in counterfeiting Western currencies, though this is disputed by others (Nanto, 2009). There is persuasive evidence on its involvement in wildlife smuggling. For example, some North Korean diplomats allegedly purchase rhinoceros horn in Africa and then smuggle it via diplomatic bags to China and Vietnam, where it is sold for a significant profit (Rademeyer, 2016, pp. 22–24). The state is also reputed to be involved in international trafficking of its own citizens, as a way of securing forced remittances from abroad: key destinations include Russia, China, and many countries in the Middle East and Africa (US Department of State, 2018, pp. 255–256). In addition to human trafficking, people smuggling—mainly to South Korea (often via Communist China, Laos and Vietnam, as well as via Thailand) and China (Davy, 2018, pp. 70, 97, 101)—is another profitable business for North Korean (and foreign) OC. Recently, the state itself is believed by some to have been involved in the hacking of a Bangladeshi bank in 2016 (Corkery & Goldstein, 2017). Finally, the DPRK is also alleged to be involved in the manufacture of fraudulent medicines (Lale-Demoz & Lewis, 2013, p. 135).

Like so many aspects of OC in and from North Korea, evidence on the composition of private OCGs is blurry. However, there is some proof that they include North Koreans, Korean Chinese, South Koreans and Japanese (Wang & Blancke, 2014, pp. 55–56).

## Comparative Impact of OC on Business

One of the few comparative and over time sources on the impact of OC on licit businesses is the World Economic Forum's annual *Global Competitiveness Report*. Since this has only been produced in its current format since 2004 (with assessments for 2003), it cannot provide data for the 1990s. Nevertheless, in the absence of alternatives, the perceived

**Table 5.1** Perceived impact of OC on domestic businesses

	2003	2006	2010	2014	2017
Albania	n.d.	3.8	5.2	4.3	4.3
Bulgaria	2.9	2.9	3.9	4.0	3.7
China	4.3	3.8	5.2	4.7	4.6
North Korea	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Russia	3.3	3.8	4.3	4.2	4.5
Serbia	3.6	4.3 <sup>a</sup>	4.3	4.1	4.1
Vietnam	4.3	4.3	4.7	4.6	4.9

Source 2003—Sala-i-Martin (2004, p. 486); 2006—Schwab and Porter (2006, p. 414); 2010—Schwab (2010, p. 380); 2014—Schwab (2014, p. 420); 2017—Schwab (2017, pp. 43, 75, 91, 249, 257, 309)

<sup>a</sup>Includes Montenegro

The actual question asked was, in some variant, ‘To what extent does organized crime (mafia-oriented racketeering, extortion) impose costs on businesses in your country?’. Scaling is 1–7, where 1 = to a great extent and 7 = not at all  
n.d.—no data

impact of OC on our seven countries since 2003 can be compared by citing their scores for selected years.

It emerges from Table 5.1 that, as of 2017, Bulgarian businesses considered themselves to be more impacted by OC than businesses in any of the other countries focused on here, while Vietnamese businesses were apparently the least impacted.

## Drivers of OC

There are numerous drivers of OC, including psycho-social and cultural ones. Moreover, many structural factors are specific to individual countries (e.g. the impact of the food crisis from 1994 and of the heavy rain-induced collapse of the poppy harvest in 1996 in North Korea; the effects of Deng Xiaoping’s ‘cat’ metaphor on both Communist and popular morality<sup>6</sup>). Here, we briefly consider just three of the most significant structural (systemic) ones relevant to all or most of the cases analysed.

<sup>6</sup>In 1962, Deng argued that ‘it doesn’t matter whether a cat is black or white—if it catches mice, it is a good cat’, which has often been interpreted as meaning that the authorities will turn a blind

## Collapse of Communism

In the aftermath of the collapse of Communist systems in the USSR, Eastern Europe and some Asian states between 1989 and 1991, all of the formerly Communist states experienced serious economic and social problems (the DPRK's economy was also negatively impacted). The problems of inflation, negative economic growth and rising unemployment in post-communist states during the 1990s were compounded by the fact that new welfare systems and new laws were only slowly introduced: Given the widespread insecurity and the lack of legal clarity, it is not surprising that some were attracted to the potential gains offered by OC.

It has been noted that Russian (and Ukrainian) OCGs have been increasingly involved in cybercrime. While the USSR did not encourage critical creative thinking, its record on teaching physics, mathematics and computing skills was world-class, which helps to explain why Russian and Ukrainian OC figure so prominently in computer-based crime. While North Korean hackers are also a problem for many states and foreign citizens, a recent analysis suggests that Russians are considerably more adept at this than even the North Koreans or the Chinese, being some seven times faster than the former and more than 13 times faster than the latter at gaining access to others' networks, according to US cybersecurity company CrowdStrike (*Economist*, 2019c). While these figures refer to the speed of intelligence services—with civilian OC being much slower—it has been argued here that the distinction between the state and OC is sometimes very blurred.

One apparent difference between OCGs in Communist and post-communist states is that the latter include a large number of members who were once officers in either the security police, the conventional police, or sometimes the military.<sup>7</sup> In their endeavours to distance

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eye to questionable practices as long as they achieve the ultimate objective of substantial economic growth. This is seen by some as having triggered widespread corruption in China once Deng came to power (1978), which in turn can stimulate OC.

<sup>7</sup>Some members of Vietnamese OCGs in the United States have been former Vietnamese military officers (US Senate Sub-Committee, 1992, pp. 170, 296), but from (non-Communist) South Vietnam.

themselves from their Communist pasts, many post-communist governments significantly downsized and restructured the security police. This not only resulted in many former officers feeling that their years of loyal service to the state had now been essentially dismissed or even implicitly criticised, but also widespread unemployment among such officers. This combination of alienation and unemployment was ripe for exploitation by OCGs, for whom former officers had considerable appeal as gang members. Among these attractions were the facts that they had mostly been weapons-trained; sometimes still had their weapons; had often been desensitised to killing; often knew and could explain how the state's intelligence system worked for investigating OC; and could in many cases identify potentially corruptible officers still employed by the state. While such people have often been recruited into OCGs from post-communist states, it appears that they are not typically members of Chinese OCGs (Wang, 2017, pp. 102–103).

## Globalisation

While the notion of a 'borderless world' (Ohmae, 1990) is often exaggerated—it is far more borderless for capital than for people—there is no question that globalisation has been a major stimulus to the transnationalisation of OC. Within Europe, the introduction of the passport-free Schengen Area in 1995 has meant that once goods or people are smuggled into that zone, it has been easy to move them around. This is a major reason why Bulgaria and Romania have still not been admitted to Schengen.

The ideology of globalisation is neo-liberalism. With its emphasis on ends being more important than means (due process), downsizing the state, and not valuing the loyalty of long-term officers as functions that were once the exclusive responsibility of the state are either privatised or outsourced, neo-liberalism can be seen as a stimulus to both corruption and organised crime. Of course, this is not peculiar to the kinds of states considered in this chapter, but it is a factor that must be included in any attempt at explaining the rise of OC in Communist and post-communist states—none of which has been immune to the impact of globalisation.

## Technological Revolution

In 2019, the world noted—if not necessarily celebrated—the 30th anniversary of Tim Berners-Lee’s invention of the World Wide Web. The dramatic rise in access to the internet since the 1990s, and the development of the Darknet (Glenny, 2011; McCormick, 2013), has been a boon to OC, which has shown itself to be highly flexible and adept at using the web to its advantage. When it is borne in mind that even Interpol and the Pentagon have been hacked, it is clear that neither international nor domestic agencies are completely protected against ill-intentioned hackers, including OCGs.

## Conclusion

OC is on the rise everywhere, and this chapter demonstrates that Communist states are just as prone to it as post-communist ones. In some cases, the particular focus of OC in post-communist states relates to the Communist legacy, which helps to explain some of the resonances between the two types of state.

One development since the 1990s that applies equally to Communist and post-communist states is the tendency for OC to become more transnational: This point applies to every one of the OCGs considered in this chapter. Furthermore, as demonstrated in the cases of both North Korea and Serbia/Yugoslavia (i.e. a Communist and a post-communist state), the application of international sanctions can have the unintended consequence of at least making states more reliant on OC and sometimes even encouraging states to act more like OCGs themselves.

According to a Europol report (2017b, p. 11), ‘The most threatening OCGs are those which are able to invest their significant profits in the legitimate economy as well as into their own criminal enterprises’. This point resonates with the observation that there has been some ‘gentrification’ of OCGs in both post-communist (e.g. Russia) and Communist (China) states.

The approach to the law also appears to differ relatively little in practice between the Communist and many post-communist states. The four post-communist states considered here are far from perfect in terms of respect for the key tenets of the rule of law: according to the World Justice Project's *Rule of Law Index 2019* (2019, pp. 6–7), Albania scored 0.51 (on a 0–1 scale—the higher the figure, the greater the assessed adherence to the rule of law: see too Mavrikos-Adamou, 2014) and was ranked 71st out of 126 states and territories, while the respective figures for Bulgaria were 0.54 and 54th (see too Pavlovska-Hilael, 2015), for Russia were 0.47 and 88th (see too Smith, 2007), and for Serbia 0.50 and 78th (see too EWB, 2018). But the scores and ranks for China and Vietnam were not markedly different from the worst of these post-communist states, at 0.49/82nd and 0.49/81st, respectively (see too on China DiMatteo [2018], and on Vietnam Bui [2014]; North Korea has never been assessed in the Rule of Law Index, but it is assumed here that its score and rank would be the worst of the seven countries compared).

One of the most concerning findings when comparing OC in several Communist and post-communist states is that there are often close links between corrupt officers of the state and OCGs in both kinds of system: along with numerous sources, both concrete and strong circumstantial evidence has been cited in this chapter. There can be absolutely no question that such collusion means that the scale of OC in and from these countries is much greater than it would otherwise be.

Given the numerous similarities between OC in both Communist and post-communist states, are there any significant differences between the two types of system? One already noted is that former law enforcement officers are far more likely to be recruited into post-communist OCGs than into OCGs based in Communist states. Another is in the severity of the possible penalties for involvement in OC, especially drug-trafficking. Thus, all three Communist states considered here allow for the death penalty for murder, drug trafficking and human trafficking (the last of these in the cases of China and North Korea), whereas none of the post-communist states does. However, all of the post-communist

states analysed here are members of the Council of Europe, which requires that member-states do not permit capital punishment,<sup>8</sup> whereas the death penalty is allowed in many non-Communist Asian states—again, especially for murder and drug trafficking. Hence, the difference here may relate less to the Communist/post-communist divide than to cultural differences.

Another difference relates to the role of civil society, including the mass and social media. While not as developed in some post-communist states as might be expected or wished for (Bernhard & Kaya, 2012; Howard, 2003; Petrova, 2007), civil society—including the mass and social media and NGOs—still enjoys greater freedom in most than in the Communist states (on China see Simon [2013], Spires [2018]: on North Korea, Szalontai & Choi [2014]: on Vietnam, Wischermann & Dang Thi Viet Phuong [2018]).

Consideration of the numerous ways in which states can seek to counter OC deserves at least a chapter in its own right. But briefly and arguably, the most important factor in addressing many sociopolitical problems, including OC, is political will—of political leaders, officials (especially in law enforcement), civil society, the business sector and ordinary citizens—and state capacity. Yet even this might not be enough in the case of OC. Its transnationalisation since the late 1980s poses significant problems for law enforcement agencies, most of which are domestic and often find it difficult to agree with other jurisdictions on definitions, data-sharing, extradition, etc. While some international agencies, such as the UNODC and Europol, are making concerted efforts to combat TOC, others (e.g. ASEANAPOL) are still doing far too little to address the problem. At present, TOC—including that from Communist and post-communist states—is usually at least one step ahead of the authorities.

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<sup>8</sup>Russia does still in principle have the death penalty for murder and ‘encroachment’ on the lives of public officials, but there has been a moratorium on this since the mid-1990s.

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