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The 'Ndrangheta in Germany

Abstract

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It may be fair to call the 'Ndrangheta the best-organised criminal organisation in the Western world; as such, it has been an established part of Germany for more than 30 years. It found its way to Germany following the immigration of Italian guest-workers who did not manage to shake off its influence and established bases, so-called *locali*, all over the country. In Germany, the 'Ndrangheta organises drug trafficking (mainly cocaine) and is also active in the line of money laundering, tax evasion and smuggling of motor vehicles.

With its home at the toe of the Italian boot as a starting point, the 'Ndrangheta has spun a net reaching out over all of Europe, the American continent and Australia. There also are connections to Asia and Africa. Where it cannot control the market on its own, it engages in alliances. Germany is an important part of the network, although the 'Ndrangheta does not have the same influence here as it does in Italy.

Despite its global structures, the centre of 'Ndrangheta's power is to be found in the economically underdeveloped South of Italy. All important decisions are made in the small mountain villages or provincial towns where the 'Ndrangheta has its origins.

The 'Ndrangheta draws its strength from its members' secretiveness and absolute obedience. In its ideology, this falls under the caption of blood and honour. Mostly, family members are recruited. The 'Ndrangheta adheres to an elitist world view and is deeply rooted in Catholicism. Due to its conservative stance its political views have a right-wing tendency.

Originally, this Mafia organisation consisted of numerous local clans who grew to become the leading criminal force in their villages. This territorial hegemony was used to both commit crimes and exert influence on persons from the political and economic sectors. Nevertheless, the clans remained limited to their closer environment.

All this did not change before the mid-seventies when some clans - notably those from the San Luca village in the Aspromonte mountains - began to abduct industrialists and their families to demand high ransoms. By way of long-term planning, the 'Ndrangheta invested the extorted money in cocaine trafficking.

It was the cocaine that helped the 'Ndrangheta grow to international dimensions. In doing this it could rely on numerous compatriots who once had emigrated from the Mezzogiorno and now live scattered all over the world. Today, the 'Ndrangheta is the dominant power driving international trafficking in cocaine. It controls the entire path the cocaine travels - from production in South America to distribution in the USA, Canada, Australia and Europe, down to local markets in the countries of destination. Some godfathers already have their own coca plantations.

Germany, with its sea ports such as Hamburg, is of interest for the importation, transit and distribution of cocaine, but only for bulk quantities. The 'Ndrangheta is not involved in street-level drug trafficking. The organisation knows that this would attract police attention which it is keen to avoid.

The international scale of activities soon became too big for the 'Ndrangheta's horizontal structure. Hence, the most powerful clans created structures enabling them to react faster and more efficiently to the demands of international business. They formed alliances, so-called mandamenti, that have a pyramid-shaped structure and are headed by an executive body. For instance, the province of Reggio Calabria alone has three mandamenti.

In Calabria, the 'Ndrangheta evolved into a true parallel society which essentially influences social life. It rules over a host of lawyers, tax consultants, bank directors, business persons and political figures who all are instrumental in laundering the organisation's money and protect it against government prosecution.

The reasons why the 'Ndrangheta could become so powerful are to be found not only in its relentless propensity for violence but also in a striking state failure. Organised crime will always blossom where there is a deficit of regulation. In Italy we see an immense gap between the state's claim to be a factor preserving public order on the one hand and factual reality on the other. In fact, the government has only little influence on the country; it is not capable of sufficiently organising its citizens' life, be it by means of a functioning administration, efficient criminal prosecution or appropriate medical care. The 'Ndrangheta draws part of its power from filling this vacuum.