

# Organised Crime in East Central Europe: The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland

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*Recent developments in East Central Europe have made countries in the region increasingly attractive to organised crime. The development of organised crime in ECE is seen as a significant problem with global implications. The roots of organised crime in ECE date back to the 1970s, but conditions after the revolutions of 1989 led to an influx of foreign-based gangs into the region. This has resulted in the emergence of organised crime that is predominantly international in character. Gangs have established strategic alliances to organise operations spanning three continents. The countries of ECE have been fighting back against organised crime and significant advances have been made. Continued criminal operations through the region, however, are perceived as a threat on a global scale. The accession of the Czech republic, Hungary and Poland into the EU in May 2004 will provide a clear litmus test for how successful these attempts have been to date.*

*Keywords: Organised Crime; European Security; East Europe; Czech Republic; Hungary; Poland*

Since the revolutions of 1989 the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland have largely succeeded in their quest for western-style political stabilisation and economic development. Developments in the region have made these countries increasingly attractive to organised crime however, and all of the East Central European (ECE) countries have seen levels of organised crime increase, both within and across national borders. According to a recent Interpol report, most of the well-known organised criminal networks have already established operations in ECE [1]. The growth of

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organised crime in the region is seen as a significant problem, confined not only to these countries themselves, or even within the European continent, but on a global scale, meaning that the countries of ECE now stand on the front line of the international fight against organised crime.

### **The Development of Organised Crime in East Central Europe**

International concern about organised crime in ECE began to be voiced in the early 1990s. The roots of organised crime in the region however, can be traced much further back. Throughout the socialist period, systemic and professional organised crime in ECE was concealed within the 'criminal-political nexus' of state and society [2], described as an environment of 'institutionalised illegality' [3]. Constant economic shortages led to general acceptance of and reliance on the black market. Bribery was necessary to secure even the most basic goods and services and corruption was generally considered to be the rule rather than the exception when dealing with anyone in an official capacity.

This environment led to the development of a criminal subculture within society. Unable to rely on the state to provide adequately for their needs, people increasingly turned to the black market and relied on social networks, based around friends and family, to get things done [4]. Many of these social connections also formed the basis for the first professional criminal networks however, while the extensive informal economy provided the ideal environment to make large illegal profits. The roots of organised crime in ECE can be traced back as far as the 1970s when gangs of underground entrepreneurs controlled the illegal production and supply networks of black market goods and services on an extensive scale [5]. Some gangs specialised in property crime, particularly in burglary, with separate networks established for the sale of the stolen goods [6].

The countries of ECE were regarded as ideally situated for incorporation into European smuggling routes, despite the restrictions on travel and trade that existed within the Eastern bloc prior to 1989. Networks were established with Soviet criminals to smuggle goods into ECE [7], and from the other side of the iron curtain, electronic goods were regularly smuggled into ECE from western Germany [8]. Other gangs were already involved in the smuggling and supply of drugs [9]. Police reports from this period indicate that ECE countries blamed much of these activities on criminals from outside their own national borders, but the most likely scenario is that many of these operations required cross-border cooperation with gangs based elsewhere in ECE, in the Soviet Union and in Western Europe [10].

Admittedly many of these early criminal networks were rather primitive, often built around small, closed groups, and rudimentary in terms of their structure, level of development and the scope of their operations. However, these preliminary criminal networks did demonstrate many elements of organised crime in terms of both the personal relations between gang members and of their modus operandi [11]. Most maintained internal order through some kind of hierarchy and a division of labour;

their activities were profit orientated and their crimes were professionally and systematically carried out. What is particularly significant is that even at this embryonic stage, many gangs were already demonstrating some level of international criminal connections outside of their country of origin.

It was the collapse of socialism in 1989 and the subsequent transition process to democracy and market economics that provided organised crime with the opportunities to gain a real foothold in ECE. After the events of 1989, chaotic economic conditions, weak law enforcement, a permissive legal framework, unprotected borders and porous financial systems all combined to provide an environment highly favourable to the development of organised crime in the region [12]. The countries of ECE were engaged in a rapid and simultaneous 'triple transition' [13]. With all of the post-socialist governments keen to implement the necessary reform programme as quickly and as broadly as possible, official monitoring of the transition process was limited and mistakes were made. Criminal gangs were able to exploit legal loopholes in much of the new government legislation to find new sources of illegal income. For example, the introduction of a dual pricing system for different types of oil in Hungary in the early 1990s allowed a number of criminal groups collectively dubbed as the 'oil mafia' to import massive quantities of oil cheaply, which they then sold at a much higher profit [14]. It has been claimed that the oil mafia defrauded the Hungarian government of an estimated 400 million US dollars through these operations [15].

Post-socialist economic reform also provided the opportunity for criminal growth through investment in the legal economic sector of ECE. The privatisation process in each of the ECE states was dogged with allegations of corruption. The speed and scale of privatisation enabled criminal gangs to invest their illegal profits in businesses and real estate, which often served as a front for further illicit activities, or for laundering money. This led to the investment of a great deal of 'dirty money' in the ECE economies [16].

This favourable climate was also realised by criminal gangs based outside of the ECE region, and there was an influx of foreign mobsters in the early 1990s who viewed the region as a potential criminal haven [17]. The ECE countries were attractive to gangs of numerous nationalities due to their position in the heart of Europe, perfect for illegal transit operations involving both goods and people. The establishment of criminal operations in ECE was made easier with the opening of borders to encourage greater freedom of trade and travel after 1989. Criminal interest in ECE was raised further by the outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia. Instability in the Balkan region meant that establishing new smuggling routes into Western Europe was necessary.

Today there is evidence that criminal gangs from Arab countries, Africa, Asia, the Balkan region, Turkey and Western Europe (including Italy) are all active in ECE [18]. Perhaps most noticeable however, was the influx of criminal organisations based in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) across ECE. By the mid-1990s intelligence reports were linking the powerful Moscow-based Solntsevskaya mafia, the St Petersburg

Tambovskaya organisation [19] and various Chechen gangs to operations across the region [20] and in 1998 the Russian Minister of Interior stated that ECE was acting as a 'headquarter' for organised crime originating from FSU territories [21].

In most instances incoming gangs tried to seize control of territory or markets by force, leading to a series of 'turf wars' between rival criminal gangs across ECE during the mid-1990s [22]. Most of these gangs were already heavily armed, while ongoing instability in the Balkans provided them with a constant source of weaponry and explosives [23]. Thus the turf wars were bloody and brutal, often spilling out of the underworld and into wider society. By the close of the 1990s the key battles had been fought and won. Weaker gangs had been decimated, or else incorporated into the structure of their stronger rivals. Compromises were reached and gangs established working relations. In many cases foreign-based gangs began 'subcontracting' to local criminal groups across the ECE territories [24].

### **East Central Europe: A Criminal Melting Pot**

The turf wars triggered a fundamental reshaping of the underworld order in ECE, that resulted in the emergence of organised crime that was predominantly international in character. Today, ECE is a criminal melting pot. No single ethnic group has achieved dominance in ECE and even domestic criminal groups operating in the region rarely confine their operations within national borders. Evidence suggests that while certain ethnic groups may have specialised knowledge and control over certain markets or territories within ECE, the transnational scope of many operations requires a high level of collusion between different gangs. This is true even of gangs that have traditionally been considered to be ethnically closed, insular and largely self-sufficient (for example Albanian, Chinese and Turkish networks), at least at a regional level [25]. The level of cooperation should not be overstated however; as ties between criminal groups are primarily strategic alliances, formed in the interests of the gangs involved [26]. Such agreements are volatile and can often break down over the longer term; however, the situation in ECE demonstrates the increasing willingness of most criminal organisations to work together.

Organised crime across the region is also marked by the immense variation both in gang structure and in activities undertaken. Levels of organised crime penetration also vary to some degree both within and between countries in the ECE region. It does appear as though the increasing scope for international organised crime in the region has seen the traditional model of large monolithic criminal organisations with a strong, centralised pyramidal structure (as in the model of the Italian Cosa Nostra) replaced by smaller, more flexible and inter-connected networks [27]. The latest intelligence reports suggest that gangs operating in ECE are displaying increasing fluidity, are less compact and more fractionalised. Rather, organised crime today largely functions as a greater number of looser syndicates whose organisational style is altogether more entrepreneurial, embracing a particularly harmful blend of crime, politics and business, with activities carried out according to a risk-benefit analysis [28].

Most gangs remain based around some kind of loose structure and division of responsibility however, and the majority of criminal networks uncovered have been of medium size, (averaging 10–20 members) [29], although cases of gangs with over 100 members operating in ECE have been documented [30]. Most gangs retain some kind of internal discipline based on violence. Violence also remains infrequently directed outside of the gang hierarchy: at rival organisations and at individuals involved in the settling of scores. There has been no repeat of the widespread and systemic turf wars of the mid-1990s, but occasional incidents linked to organised crime demonstrate that these gangs have retained their capacity for violence. In addition, there is increasing evidence of criminals seeking to conceal or facilitate their activities through the corruption of law enforcement and politicians in all ECE countries [31].

The ECE underworld is in a constant state of flux. In the early 1990s criminal organisations from the FSU were seen as the principal threat to the region, but today Albanian gangs are one of the primary causes for concern [32]. It is highly probable that there will be further evolution in terms of gang structure and market control. While some of the strategic alliances currently in force in ECE will survive in the long term, others are likely to disintegrate and new alliances will be formed.

### **Criminal Operations in East Central Europe**

Organised gangs working in the region rarely confine their scope to a single area of criminal activity. Indeed recent reports have stressed the ‘multi criminal character’ of East European organised crime [33]. It is believed that many gangs mix their involvement in ‘high risk’ criminal activities with lower risk enterprises. For example, it has been estimated that 20 percent of all Class-A drug smugglers also smuggle cigarettes [34]. Whichever activities various organised gangs are involved in however, they all channel their illegal capital through investment and money laundering and thus ECE also remains considered as a centre for economic crime.

The favourable geographical location of ECE means that countries of the region form a natural transit route through Europe and there is evidence of international smuggling operations carried out in the region by land, sea and air [35]. The smuggling of various commodities including alcohol, cigarettes, artwork, antiques, jewellery and fuel through the ‘green borders’ of ECE provides a growing market for organised crime [36].

During the early 1990s many gangs operating in the area began to specialise in the organised theft and smuggling of vehicles. EU member states recorded a general increase in the figures for vehicle theft from 1989–93 [37], and it is believed that many of these cars were smuggled on to Serbia, Ukraine, Russia and Central Asia [38]. Many stolen vehicles had already been transported out of the country before their theft was even registered, making them difficult to trace [39]. It is estimated that around 80 percent of vehicles smuggled through the ECE region are stolen, while others are simply imported illegally, without payment of the relevant import duties [40]. The criminals involved in this trade demonstrated considerable organisation, professionalism and specialisation.

In many cases cars were stolen ‘to order’ and often required some alterations to documentation and license plates before delivery, which generally occurred in the countries of ECE, en route to their ultimate destination [41]. Recent statistics suggest that from the mid-1990s the market in stolen vehicles has been in decline, largely because western vehicle manufacturers have developed more sophisticated anti-theft devices. It has also been noted, however, that in cases where organised vehicle theft does occur, gangs are resorting to more violent methods and the practice of carjacking is increasing in ECE [42].

The disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and ongoing conflicts in the Balkans provided a ready market for criminal organisations trafficking in arms in the 1990s. Weaponry, ammunition, explosives and even nuclear and radioactive materials from the Former Soviet Union have been smuggled through ECE. In 1998 Polish police exposed a gang involved in the smuggling of light weapons and ammunition worth almost \$6 million, through the Polish port of Gdansk and on to countries that were under UN weapons embargoes [43]. Between 1998–2000 a series of seizures of arms and explosives in Hungary uncovered a clear link between Hungarian and Slovakian gangs involved in the arms trade [44], and as recently as 2000 the Czech customs authorities detected a total of 46 cases of illegal trading in weapons, explosives and radioactive materials [45].

Drug trafficking remains one of the most profitable markets for organised crime to develop operations in ECE. Heroin from Afghanistan, cocaine from Columbia and cannabis from Morocco all enter ECE en route to supplying markets in Western Europe and the USA. Operations in this area are believed to be controlled by a mixture of gangs including Albanian, Columbian, Nigerian, North African and Turkish members, however, many are believed to ‘subcontract’ operations to indigenous criminal organisations in ECE who act as couriers [46]. This not only enables the organisers to benefit from the local knowledge and connections of these criminals, but also makes their operations less visible to the authorities in many cases.

The Balkan routes remain perhaps the most significant transit routes for drugs into Europe (and for heroin in particular—it is estimated that 80 percent of heroin entering Western Europe does so via the Balkan routes) [47]. The various routes usually encompass ECE territories. There has also been a recent resurgence in use of the old ‘silk route’ passing from Central Asia through the Former Soviet Union and into ECE [48]. In recent years there has also been an increase in synthetic drugs, such as ecstasy being smuggled out of western Europe: from countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and the UK [49]. In 1997 a joint operation between Austrian and Hungarian police led to the arrest of 25 gang members who were trafficking amphetamines into ECE [50].

Many gangs today use fractional transport to conceal their operations. Heroin enters ECE under the control of Turkish and Albanian organisations, where it is stored and then delivered into western Europe in smaller amounts by domestic criminal gangs [51]. Similarly, shipments of cocaine have been delivered by boat to Polish ports and then transported into the Czech Republic and Hungary by land [52]. It is believed

that the Colombian Cali Cartel has links with Polish gangs who act as 'couriers' to smuggle cocaine across the Polish-German border [53]. Other gangs utilise the Danube–Rhine canal system, which enables barges from the Black Sea to enter Hungary [54]. Airports in ECE are also increasingly used to transport drugs into the region. Evidence suggests that airports in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland are used as key entrance points for cocaine from Africa and South America [55].

While initial interest in ECE was largely down to its value as a drug transit route, as ECE develops economically, and citizens develop greater purchasing power, the region is becoming increasingly viewed as valuable as a target as well as a transit region [56]. Of particular note is the rapid increase in levels of synthetic drugs produced in ECE, particularly in Poland (now reported to be the third largest producer of amphetamines in Europe) [57], and the Czech Republic where several professionally equipped laboratories have been discovered [58]. In addition there is evidence of a continuing trend towards cocktail-style drug trafficking with many individual gangs now dealing in more than one type of illegal substance [59].

Illegal immigration remains one of the most worrying aspects of organised crime in ECE and is recognised as a serious problem for EU member states. Again this is a trade often controlled by groups based outside of the region; with Albanian, Chinese, Russian and Turkish organised gangs believed to dominate the market. Many gangs have ethnic representatives based in the ECE transit countries, while others subcontract the transit of the migrants to gangs based on the domestic territories [60]. Organisers often make arrangements for the methods of transit, border crossings, accommodation and residence of the illegal immigrants for the full length of their journey however [61], and as some illegal immigrants (for example, those travelling from China) may pass through several countries en route to their destination, this also requires collaboration between criminal organisations of various ethnic and national backgrounds. The trade in illegal immigration generates high profits for the organisers but often with tragic results for their cargo. In one case, the bodies of 18 illegal immigrants from Sri Lanka were discovered hidden in a lorry in Hungary, which had been left just a few miles from the Austrian border [62].

Gangs involved in organising illegal immigration often employ highly specialised and professional methods to carry out transportation. Many use forged passports and documents to enable their cargo to gain entry to countries in Europe. In 1997 alone German police confiscated 1,700 false passports at the German–Polish border [63]. While the countries of ECE were initially seen as transit points along the route into western Europe, they are increasingly becoming destination countries themselves, as applications for either temporary or permanent residence in ECE have doubled in recent years [64]. Some illegal immigrants claim temporary residence in ECE and use this as a basis to move on (generally illegally) into Western Europe a few months later.

Despite a series of measures taken to improve border controls in the ECE countries in anticipation of EU membership, several border areas remain as cause for concern. The Czech–German border is one such example; in 1998 Czech police reported the existence of a 'human smuggling pipeline' running through the former Czechoslovakia

and into Germany [65]. The borders between Poland and the FSU, and between Hungary and Ukraine also pose a problem. Significant advances have been made in border controls since the ECE states first applied for EU membership, but corruption amongst the border guard does still exist, and their eastern neighbours have often yet to benefit from the same level of technological and financial assistance given to the ECE states by the EU. There have even been reports of illegal immigrants simply walking through the Hungarian–Ukrainian border in wintertime, and of Ukrainian border guards following them, kicking snow over their footprints to hide the evidence! [66].

In a related market, some criminal gangs are involved in the illegal trafficking of human beings. It is estimated that this trade earns organised crime groups up to five billion US dollars per year [67]. The trafficking of women in particular has intensified since the early 1990s. On arrival at their destination they are forced into illegal employment and many become involved in the sex trade, also largely controlled by organised crime. Women are generally lured overseas with the promise of employment, and the criminals often use physical violence to force them into prostitution and take their passports to prevent them returning to their homeland [68]. Many ECE women are discovered each year working as prostitutes in Western Europe, with one report suggesting this figure may be as high as 10,000 [69].

Again, the organisers are often believed to operate outside of ECE with Albanian, Russian and Turkish groups all linked to this trade [70]. Two recent cases highlight the involvement of ECE criminals in this activity however; in 2000 a network organising the trafficking of young women for prostitution involving criminals from FSU, Poland, Bulgaria and Germany was uncovered. The women were transported from the FSU into Poland, where they were supplied with false passports and then sold on to work in brothels in Germany [71]. Also in 2000, ECE police uncovered a network organising the illegal transportation of young girls from Hungary and the Czech Republic into Austria where they were held against their will and forced to work as prostitutes in nightclubs owned by one particular criminal syndicate [72].

Despite the enormous range of activities that different criminal organisations are involved in, all are involved to some extent in economic crime and money laundering. Therefore ECE has also become a centre for economic crime. By 1992, Hungary was already considered to have become the third largest money launderer in Europe [73]. The lack of sufficient financial regulation coupled with mass privatisation across ECE in the 1990s enabled many criminals to purchase real estate and invest in legal businesses. Often though, these businesses simply serve as front companies to facilitate illegal activities and launder illicit profits. Italian-based organised crime, and criminal syndicates from the FSU are believed to use ECE as a major base for investment and money laundering [74]. Criminals also target banks in ECE: in 1999 the Central European International Bank in Budapest was linked to a financial scandal in Russia, involving Kremlin officials [75]. Since 1991 the increased use of credit cards and electronic money transfer techniques in ECE have also provided new opportunities for organised crime to exploit [76].



### **Fighting Organised Crime in East Central Europe**

Negotiations for accession to the European Union began with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in 1998. The criteria necessary for membership included meeting certain standards in Justice and Home Affairs, and ensuring effective border security. Particular concern has been voiced regarding the policing of the Eastern borders of the ECE countries, as these became external borders of the EU in 2004 [77].

Significant progress in combating organised crime has been made in ECE in recent years. All three countries have publicly launched programmes aimed at reducing and preventing organised crime. Changes in domestic law has recognised the existence of new forms of criminality and specific measures have been adopted in the fields of illegal immigration, drug trafficking and serious economic crime [78], (particularly money laundering, with banks now required to report suspicious transactions to police authorities). Specialised law-enforcement units, trained to combat organised crime have been formed in each of the ECE countries and have been granted extensive powers to aid in undercover work, such as the use of wire tapping and full access to the financial records of suspects under investigation [79]. Officers working undercover have managed to infiltrate a number of criminal organisations and a number of arrests have been made in connection with organised crime.

Greater commitment to border security has also been demonstrated. The countries of ECE have developed good working relations and cross-border cooperation along their western borders. For example, regular meetings are now held between the border authorities from the Czech Republic, Germany and Poland to enhance communication [80]. The countries of ECE are working together in their fight against organised crime, in recognition that cross-border crime in the region is a common threat. Since 1999 there have been bi-annual meetings between the Ministers of Interior of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland (including representatives from Austria and Slovakia) with the aim of coordinating procedures against organised crime and strengthening border controls [81].

Despite these advances in law enforcement and border security across ECE, organised crime continues to pose a problem for the countries of the region, and as a result significant intelligence gaps exist in regard to organised crime operating in ECE [82]. Police and border guards continue to complain of a lack of funding, technology and expertise [83]. Although the governments of ECE have committed themselves to fighting organised crime, there is often no corresponding financial commitment to tackle the problem. Police and border guards remain underpaid and corruption is a major problem. The competition for the limited resources available means that in some cases cross-border networks are actually more developed than communications between local police departments. They are often unwilling to share intelligence with their perceived 'rivals', which is vital considering the scope of organised crime throughout the region. Thus police work on organised crime often lacks the flexibility and specialist knowledge to be sufficiently effective [84].

The cost of improving border security by investing in modernised technology, increasing the number of border guards and ensuring they receive adequate training is

high, although the ECE countries have received both strategic and financial assistance from their western European neighbours, and from the EU's PHARE fund [85]. Relations with their eastern neighbours have not progressed so well however; the situation at Poland's eastern borders was recently described by one German newspaper as 'chaos and corruption' [86].

The ECE countries have made agreements on fighting organised crime and information sharing with other countries on both a bilateral and a multilateral basis. Given the international nature of organised crime in the region, and the scope of criminal activities in terms of type and territory, there is a need for increased international cooperation if attempts to prevent organised crime are to be successful. International efforts to prevent organised crime require the speedy exchange of both strategic and operational information between foreign partners. In many cases a delay in exchanging this information is a limiting factor for those conducting operations against criminal organisations [87].

The level of criminal investigation needs to match the level of operation reached by organised gangs in ECE. It is impossible to combat criminals operating internationally with anything less than a truly international response. An effective programme to diminish the threats posed by organised crime can only be sustained through improved cooperation, collaboration and information exchange both within and across national borders [88]. In most cases, the exchange of information occurs on a bilateral basis only, and greater exchange of information through the international forum (for example, Interpol) would increase knowledge and understanding of organised crime in the ECE region and therefore benefit those trying to combat it.

Drug trafficking, Illegal immigration and Trafficking in human beings are some of the most significant problems facing the ECE countries. In each of these markets ECE remains primarily a region of transit at present. However, its attractiveness as a target destination is already increasing and this is likely to increase since these countries gain full EU membership. Criminal organisations will continue to target ECE as a lucrative market for their operations. The countries of ECE have already made significant advances in the fight against organised crime; now they must use their recent accession to the EU as the basis for preventing the further spread of organised crime on their territories. The recent inclusion of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland into the EU in May 2004, will provide a clear indication of how successful attempts to combat organised crime in the region have been to date.

## Notes

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- [85] For more information about PHARE, consult <http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/pas/phare/>
- [86] Bort, op. cit., 196.
- [87] *Threat Assessment: The impact of east European organised crime on the EU*, EUROPOL, 2000
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