

# THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



## *Political Regime Changes and Transnational Organized Crime* By Cüneyt Gürer and Lisa Lauer

From July 5 to July 29, 2022, The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC) hosted the Countering Transnational Organized Crime (CTOC) course. This course brought together 51 participants from 23 countries in order to better understand the challenges posed by transnational criminal networks to the national security of their countries. Also discussed were ways to establish countering strategies to eliminate these Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) challenges. During this event, Dr. Cüneyt Gürer, professor of Transnational Security Studies at GCMC and Lisa Lauer, research intern at GCMC, gave a lecture based on their research findings related to the connection between political regime changes and how authoritarian regimes establish connections with organized crime groups to gain advantages in the political sphere.

In a previous GCMC paper, Dr. Gürer<sup>1</sup> presented how the contemporary strategic environment is redefining the interactions between states and criminal actors. Specifically, un-democratic states now leverage TOC as a new method against their political rivals. Un-democratic practices and the spread of democratic backsliding give rise to opportunities for authoritarian countries not only to cooperate with criminal actors, but also to control these non-state actors and to use them for their own benefits.

This new contemporary strategic competition environment compels us to redefine our traditional approach of looking at TOC and to adopt what we developed in our research, the “Strategic Competition Model of CTOC.” This novel concept requires us to understand TOC as an instrument of competition. According to this new approach, there is no longer a clear distinction between what is legal/illegal due to the ties between state structures and criminal groups. In this context, non-democratic states possess a toolbox and connections with organized crime (OC), which allow for the existence of a mutually beneficial relationship. This assumption changes the traditional perception of criminal networks trying to infiltrate state structure and the latter trying to fight back. Organized crime is becoming part of regional and global politics and is thus becoming more than a law enforcement issue.

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<sup>1</sup> Gürer, Cüneyt (2021) Strategic Competition: International Order and Transnational Organized Crime. Security Insights N.069: <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/strategic-competition-international-order-and-transnational-organized-crime-0>.



Within the strategic competition debate, the question of political regime changes is of great importance. The traditional distinction between democracies and non-democracies is incomplete in order to understand political regime transformation from democracy to non-democracy as a process. In addition to the classification provided in the literature, three main phases must be established in order to analyze the process of departure from democracy: populist politics, strong man leadership, and erosion of institutions which symbolizes the existence of backsliding.

The crucial point when one analyzes the connection between political regime changes and organized crime groups is the fact that un-democratic regimes are more likely to develop working relations with organized crime groups both at the national and global level. As soon as the departure from the democratic process has been engaged, the need for illegality is starting and illegal orders become the norm in order to allow an emancipation from institutional constraints. Thus, authoritarian regimes are using TOC groups as a tool to reach their domestic and foreign policy objectives, and criminal groups have found a legitimate partner to conduct illegal practices. TOC groups thus become part of the “gray zone” tactic in contemporary irregular warfare.

Several case studies can be cited to emphasize how some states rely on illicit actors to assert their influence not only at the local scale, but also at the global scale. Russia, China, and Iran are examples that can be used in order to emphasize this assumption.

Russia’s strategy is based on the will to weaken the “internal coherence of the enemy system”<sup>2</sup> by using two channels of influence: economic (aimed at discrediting the capitalist system) and political (aimed at discrediting democratic institutions). Both of these channels are preventing the western democratic ideal to be seen as a viable model of governance. There is evidence of ties between the Kremlin and criminal networks which confirm the use of hard, soft, and also sharp power at the global level.

China also relies on criminal networks in regard to its strategic objectives towards Taiwan, as is demonstrated by its cooperation with the Bamboo Union. Its entire system relies on strategic corruption.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese party state apparatus is very influential beyond its borders as the existence of the United Front Department (UFD) demonstrates. By implementing this policy of controlling ideological proxies around the world, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is able to spread its influence and to institutionalize a relationship with illicit actors. This department is among others responsible for the implementation of the National Intelligence Law (2017)<sup>4</sup> which imposes a legal obligation for Chinese individuals, companies, and organizations to act as citizen spies in the name of national security.

Because of its historical, political, and economic background as well as its multi-level decision making layers, Iran is also a prime example of this tie relation between the state apparatus and

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<sup>2</sup> Center for Strategic & International Studies (2016) The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe: [http://csis-websiteprod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fspublic/publication/1601017\\_Conley\\_KremlinPlaybook\\_Web.pdf](http://csis-websiteprod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fspublic/publication/1601017_Conley_KremlinPlaybook_Web.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Rithmire, Meg & Chen, Hao (2021), The Emergence of Mafia-like Business Systems in China. Harvard Business School Working Paper 21-098 : [https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication Files/21-098\\_8bddf731-212d-4939-a3ca-0d708d53c7d3.pdf](https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20Files/21-098_8bddf731-212d-4939-a3ca-0d708d53c7d3.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Aukia, Jukka (2021), China as a hybrid influencer: Non-state actors as state proxies. Hybrid CoE Research Report 1 : [https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/20210616\\_Hybrid\\_CoE\\_Research\\_Report\\_1\\_China\\_as\\_a\\_hybrid\\_influencer\\_Non\\_state\\_actors\\_as\\_state\\_proxies\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/20210616_Hybrid_CoE_Research_Report_1_China_as_a_hybrid_influencer_Non_state_actors_as_state_proxies_WEB.pdf).



criminal actors.<sup>5</sup> This is especially the case with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps which became highly dependent on these illicit activities.

This research found much evidence of not only authoritarians, but also democratic backsliders, established connections with organized crime groups. At the early stages this occurs in the form of cooperation, but as the level of authoritarianism increases, it gets to the level of controlling these groups and their activities. As a conclusion, no country is completely immune to this phenomenon and authoritarian regimes have a natural tendency to work with criminals to increase their comparative advantage in the political space. At the structural (legal, economic, and political) and institutional level, it is important to evaluate the vulnerability of a country in order to understand their weakness in terms of malign influences in the strategic competition and to prevent backsliding of democracy. Transnational Organized Crime groups provide opportunities to authoritarians to undermine democratic practices in countries that are trying to establish their position in the strategic competition era; therefore, policy makers should consider TOC groups as a part of the authoritarian toolbox used against Western rules-based liberal order. This analysis does not claim that all the institutions of democratic backsliders or authoritarian regimes have deep connections with the criminal elements, but instead it argues that even those states fight certain TOC issues (drugs, corruption, human trafficking, etc.), and that they still use clandestine tactics and organizations which require close attention in the strategic competition environment.

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<sup>5</sup> Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2020), Under the Shadow – Illicit economies in Iran. Research Report: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Under-the-shadow-Illicit-economies-in-Iran-GITOC.pdf>.



## ***About the Authors***

**Dr. Cüneyt Gürer** is a professor of Transnational Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. His research interests and areas of expertise comprise transnational security issues, regional security dynamics, human displacement, and non-state actors in the contemporary conflicts.

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