



Organised crime in Latin America: an introduction to the special issue

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Abstract

This article provides an introduction to the articles submitted to the special issue of *Trends in Organised Crime* on ‘Organised Crime in Latin America’. The aim of the special issue is to draw together novel empirical research findings and theoretical accounts on various aspects of organised crime in the particular geographic context.

Keywords Organised crime · Illegal markets · Cartels · Violence · Politics · Latin America · Mexico · Brazil · Colombia

Many countries in Latin America have been known in the last 35 years for breeding, developing or exporting violent forms of organised crime, mainly around the (still flourishing) cocaine industry in the region (Bagley 2013; Erlick 2012; Garzón Vergara 2012; Vellinga 2004). A longstanding but dramatically failed ‘war on drugs’ waged by security forces and politicians, combined with increasing social inequality, state failure to provide basic social services, and endemic corruption, are all factors that have pushed the growth or reshaping of organised crime in various Latin American countries. In addition, different political frameworks and changes in the region have deeply influenced developments, particularly in countries such as Mexico and Colombia (Bagley and Rosen 2015; Durán-Martínez 2018; Garzón Vergara 2008; Ríos 2012; Medel and Thoumi 2014; Thoumi 2014).

An increasing number of researchers and journalists from Latin America, the US and Europe have been producing a growing number of studies documenting those developments and trends (e.g. Garzón Vergara 2008; Olinger 2013; Solis and Rojas Aravena 2009). Most of those efforts – and this issue is no exception – concentrate on three ‘extreme-case’ countries (Colombia, Mexico and Brazil) for three different reasons.

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Firstly, these countries have shown exorbitant levels of lethal violence connected to the activities (mainly cocaine trafficking) of their local organized crime networks, in all three cases with devastating social and political consequences. Secondly, the three countries play a major role in the export of cocaine (and organized crime) to the American and European markets, which are prioritised in media, police and research agendas. A third reason is the vast amount of human and economic resources in or from these countries – major universities, wealthy media networks, number of researchers from these countries based in the North – invested in studying these phenomena. Although countries of the Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina and Uruguay), small countries like Paraguay or Ecuador, or even the countries of the North Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala) present forms of organized crime, they fail to meet all three ‘conditions’; thus, research on these countries remains relatively limited. There are, however, some very informative studies on these contexts as well (see, for example, Arias 2013; Arnson and Olson 2011; Bobea 2010; Dammert 2017; De Simone 2014; UNODC 2012).

Organized crime in Latin America has mainly been researched by political scientists (e.g. Bailey and Taylor 2009; Briscoe et al. 2014; Cruz 2016; Durán-Martínez 2018; Garzón Vergara 2008; Ríos 2012), which is perhaps not surprising given the plurality and intensity of links between state actors and criminal networks across the continent. However, we also find major contributions by sociologists (Astorga and Shirk 2010; Silva de Souza 2004), economists (Thoumi 2014), criminologists (Mujica and Galdos 2016), criminal lawyers (Zaffaroni 2013), historians (Sáenz Rovner 2008), and anthropologists (Ovalle and Giacomello 2006). Moreover, major think-tanks and NGOs (e.g. Transnational Institute, Igarapé Institute, Open Society Foundations, CELS – Centre de Estudios Legales y Sociales) and investigative journalistic sources (e.g. InSight Crime, Animal Político, Infobae) have also supported or generated critical and often innovative research on organized crime in the region.

Although each country follows its own specific dynamics, all these studies show distinguishable general trends and developments over the past 15 years regarding organized crime in the region. These trends and changes are mainly the result of the remarkable capability of criminal networks, particularly those involved in illegal drug trafficking, to learn, adapt, innovate and ‘rebel’ (Garzón Vergara 2012) in order to stay in business, both despite and as result of rather ineffective and harmful state policies and interventions to fight organized crime.

The first trend includes criminal networks in Latin America having geographically expanded their activities to regions and countries far from their home base, extending their presence beyond borders, fostering alliances with other criminal groups, and opening up new drug hubs and routes. Some have conceptualized this as a ‘*balloon effect*’ (Bagley 2013) or displacement. Good examples of this trend are the Brazilian PCC (*Primeiro Comando da Capital*) and the Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) expanding activities to other states and countries (see *Ferreira*, this issue and *Fuerte Celis* et al., this issue). Internationalization has also implied more links with European, African or Chinese criminal collectivities, and the proliferation of transit and export cocaine routes.

The second important trend, logically connected with the first one, is a strong process of dispersion and fragmentation of criminal networks: “*growing disputes between criminal factions that opt to compete rather than to reach agreements*” and

“the replacement of *capos* (bosses) with ‘brokers’” (Garzón Vergara 2012: 1). This ‘cockroach effect’ (Bagley 2013) is visible not only in Mexico and Colombia but also in countries like Peru and Bolivia.

Third, organized crime in many parts of Latin America has increased ‘criminal density’ (Garzón Vergara 2012: 2), which in some areas means a diversification of illegal activities beyond cocaine trafficking (e.g. human smuggling and trafficking, kidnapping, arms trade, timber trade, illegal mining, etc.), in others an expansion of territorial control, all accompanied with increased levels of violence. This is what Garzón Vergara has described as the process of “*social accumulation of illegality and violence*” (2012: 2), increasing social tolerance of violence and lack of respect for the rule of law.

Paradoxically, a fourth development refers to the increasing involvement of legal actors (state agencies, politicians, etc.) in organized crime activities. Garay and Salcedo explain that the most important actors in Latin American criminal networks are not necessarily the most central or highest figures in the hierarchy, but rather those that connect illegal actors with legal institutions (Garay and Salcedo 2012). Growing forms of corruption and collusion involve bribes, negotiation (*Dulin*, this issue), use of legal companies, or the direct involvement of state officials in the organization of crimes.

This special issue on ‘Organised crime in Latin America’ presents novel theoretical accounts and empirical findings that illustrate some of the recent developments summarized above. The five articles included in the issue cover case studies from Mexico, Colombia and Brazil. The authors belong to different disciplines, use various theoretical frameworks to analyse the data, and deploy diverse methodological tools, both quantitative and qualitative. Although they emphasize different key aspects to understand the recent evolution of organised crime in those countries – some mainly focusing on drug trafficking organizations – they have a common interest in understanding how and why these groups use or avoid violence, negotiate with state actors, and are rooted in local contexts and cross-border activities.

In the first article of this issue, *Marcos Ferreira* analyses the evolution of the Brazilian criminal organization *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (PCC—First Command of the Capital) from its original status as a prison gang advocating human rights inside São Paulo’s overcrowded state penitentiaries, to a transnational violent non-state actor (TVNA) involved in drug trafficking and arms trade. Based on Brazilian official judicial sources, NGO reports, and news accounts, the author claims that the PCC has become a “*group that is not only armed and outside the control of the state but is also transnational and violent in a broad sense, making use of direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence*” (Ferreira, this issue). After providing a description of the history, structure, ideology and key operations of the group, *Ferreira* explains that in its geographical and economic expansion - partly due to the misconceived public policies against the group - the PCC fostered alliances with local and ‘disorganized’ criminals, kept loyalties from families of detainees or individuals released from prison, and managed to cross borders to neighboring countries in order to control key cocaine routes from producing countries to Brazil. The author argues that “*the presence and lethality of PCC has reached such gravity that a law and order approach needs to be combined with a presence in favelas and poor areas through social policies and public participation that make crime a less attractive option for youth*” (Ferreira, this issue).

Focusing on the situation in Colombia, the second article by *Krzysztof Krakowski* and *Gladys Zubiría* attempts to answer the relevant question of why some organized crime groups (OCGs) refrain from fighting, while others constantly resort to violence, even if it harms their business and exposes them to the authorities. For that purpose, they compare the extent and nature of violence used between 2003 and 2013 by two different OCGs operating respectively in the Pacific Coast (*Los Rastrojos*) and in the Eastern Plains (*Bloque Centauros*). The researchers construct a ‘violence dataset’ using quantitative and qualitative information systematically collected by a well-known research institute since 2001 on the Colombian Civil War. The authors come to the conclusion that the extent to which OCGs engage in ‘underworld’ conflict is related to their strategies of extra-legal governance, i.e. the provision of services for ‘good order and workable arrangements’ that regulate social and economic exchange (Varese 2014). Such strategies, argue *Krakowski* and *Zubiría*, have origins in the availability of resources possessed by the OCGs when entering the ‘underworld’. Access to easily extractable resources develops limited governance, leaving them vulnerable to internal and external challenges. On the contrary, OCGs without access to easily extractable resources invest in extended governance, reducing their risk of ‘underworld’ conflict, thus violence.

The third article of this issue, by *María del Pilar Fuerte Celis*, *Enrique Pérez Lujan* and *Rodrigo Cordova Ponce*, also explores the relation between organized crime and violence, this time analyzing the case of Mexico during the infamous ‘War on Drugs’ period of 2007–2011. Using a database published by the CIDE-PPD (Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas - Programa de Política de Drogas) with the spatial patterns of violent acts during that period, the authors try to understand the extent to which violent clashes are a product of ‘territorial struggles’, and what the link between these disputes and the characteristics of the different criminal organizations analyzed is. For that purpose, *Fuerte Celis* et al. firstly present a typology of criminal organizations according to the use of violence and their control over territory, based on four different components essential to them: economic activities, ability to negotiate with other groups, relations with state authorities, and strength of local roots. Subsequently, they offer a comprehensive overview of five DTOs in Mexico (*Zetas*, the *Cartel del Golfo*, the *Sinaloa Cartel*, the *Juárez Cartel*, and the *Familia Michoacana*), including a spatial analysis of their violent acts. The authors find very different patterns in terms of frequency, intensity and victims of violence deployed by the cartels. Patterns vary according to the criminal activities of the groups, their territorial control, social roots, and the level of persecution by the authorities (*Fuerte Celis* et al., this issue).

In the fourth article, *Adam Dulin* applies pure sociology to understand the negotiation activities of Mexican DTOs. Using crisp set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (cs QCA), *Dulin* identifies unique status configurations associated to non-violent crime-state interactions. Mexican DTOs hold and combine different types of status, measured high/existent or low/inexistent in terms of plaza profitability, criminal diversification, territorial control or alliances, extreme violence levels, law enforcement actions against them, and organizational cohesion (*Dulin*, this issue). These types of status are also present or absent regarding micro-contextual factors in each municipality or conflict zone, so the same DTO can hold differing levels of status depending on where it operates. As an indicator of crime-state negotiation, the author uses a database of so-called ‘narco-messages’ (any public message issued by DTOs), found from 2010 to

2012 in 35 municipalities/conflict zones carefully selected. His results indicate that high status configurations are unique to groups that utilize negotiations in a particular territory. As a policy implication of the study, Dulin's results also illustrate the numerous options available to the state in combating DTOs in Mexico.

Also focusing on Mexico, the final article by *Aldo Ponce* focuses on the relation between violence by DTOs and electoral competition, the latter being defined by the number of electoral alternatives or candidates in Mexico's municipal elections. DTOs can influence electoral competition by killing politicians or candidates, by discouraging or threatening potential candidates, or even by favoring or funding new candidacies. The author performs a quantitative analysis based on the same dataset used by *Fuerte Celis et al.* (this issue), including information of homicides directly related to the activities of DTOs from December 2006 to November 2011. He analyzes the number of homicides in a given municipality during the 12 months prior to the elections. *Ponce* finds that the killing and threatening of politicians, effective tools to influence politics, jeopardizes competition in violent Mexican municipalities by reducing the number of candidates, falling to as low as one in more violent municipalities (*Ponce*, this issue). As confrontation intensifies among DTOs (fragmenting and increasing in numbers), the negative effect of violence on electoral competition moderates. The article also concludes that DTOs finance candidates to capture municipal governments when facing intense competition and attacks from other DTOs. Understanding the extent of the political costs resulting from violence, *Ponce* finally argues, “*constitute valuable information for policy makers when evaluating the current (aggressive) security policy against the traffic of illegal drugs in Mexico*”.

The results and implications of these studies, although rooted in specific political and historical contexts, can possibly serve to ‘predict’ developments in other Latin American countries and regions, and certainly to inform policy interventions that reduce - and not increase - the evident harms of both organized crime and state responses to it (see also Garzón Vergara 2012).

Finally, these studies can also serve to challenge or refine some of the traditional concepts developed, mainly in the US and Europe, to understand the problem of organized crime. In particular, we can learn more from the Latin American context about the complex - and by no means automatic - relation between organized crime and violence, about the symbiotic relation between organized crime and state actors, and about the links between legal and illegal economies in specific settings like prisons, banks, slums, rural territories or border areas.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest Damián Zaitch and Georgios A. Antonopoulos declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Human and animal participants This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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