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Crime, organised crime and corruption in post-communist Europe and the CIS

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Abstract

This article examines the incomplete and sometimes contradictory evidence on the crime, organised crime and corruption situations in post-communist states, and then seeks to explain the apparent increase in all three in early post-communism. Among the factors considered are the impact of weak states and economies, neo-liberalism, globalisation, Schengen and Fortress Europe, the Communist legacy (the ‘ghost from the past’), and collusion. The article then examines the dynamics of criminality and malfeasance in the region, and provides evidence to suggest that the crime and corruption situation has stabilised or even improved in most post-communist countries in recent times. The factors considered for explaining this apparent improvement are the role of external agents (notably the EU), the move from transition to consolidation, and the role of political will.

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Keywords: Crime; Organised crime; Corruption; Post-communism; CEE; CIS

In the first, euphoric weeks and months following the collapse of Communist power, some commentators claimed that the democratisation, marketisation and privatisation of the formerly Communist states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union would lead to a marked decline in corruption levels. In fact, virtually all of the measurement methods available suggest that most of the post-communist states experienced a marked increase in corruption. At the same time, several of them

appear to have experienced a substantial growth in both crime generally and organised crime more specifically; the latter has been particularly pronounced in parts of South-Eastern Europe (SEE) and the CIS. But is the situation now beginning to improve?

This article considers the incomplete and sometimes contradictory evidence on the crime, organised crime and corruption situations in post-communist states, and then seeks to explain the apparent increase in all three of them in the 1990s. It goes on to examine the dynamism of criminality in the region, showing how and why some states now appear to be beginning to get on top of these problems, while others continue to deteriorate.

The overall crime situation

Unfortunately, there are numerous and substantial problems involved in using recorded crime statistics to compare criminality across countries. One is that the definitions and categorisation of particular types of crime vary. There are also differences over the kinds of crime-related statistics collected and published. While most countries provide aggregate data on all reported crimes, a few – most of the successor states to former Yugoslavia – provide details in national statistics year-books only on the number of persons accused, not the total number of crimes reported. Some countries – notably Latvia and Lithuania – have in the 2000s explicitly amended the way they record and present crime statistics, in both of these particular cases making them appear higher in more recent years than they would have had their previous methodology been applied (though any trends *since* the changes can still be discerned). The EU is acutely aware of these problems, as revealed in the European Council's Hague Programme ([European Council Presidency, 2004, pp. 34](#)). Because of this awareness, the EU Commission's statistical arm – Eurostat – has been authorised to collaborate with the statistical offices of each EU Member State and the Commission's Directorate-General for Justice, Freedom and Security on a project designed to increase the level of standardisation of crime statistics.¹ However, this is not to be completed until 2010 at the earliest, and it will apply only to some of the states considered here anyway.

Eurostat standardisation is also unlikely to change the *culture* of reporting for many years anyway. This relates to a second group of problems, the actual recording process. Police forces vary in their levels of efficiency, capacity, integrity and traditions. Some are much more thorough than others at registering every crime brought to their attention. Moreover, whereas some forces 'de-record' a hitherto recorded offence if, after investigation, they determine that no offence took place, others register all reported crimes and retain these in their published records, whatever the outcome of investigations. Some police forces are simply more honest than others. While this can relate to the overall culture – notably ethical values – in

¹ Details at: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=3073,67701349,3073_67745354&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL (accessed 1.08.08).

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