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“The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Transnational Organised Crime”

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INTRODUCTION

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19, in January 2020, the pandemic has had a profound impact on our societies and economic systems. These changes, in turn, have significantly influenced organized crime and illicit markets both at national and international level. “Transnational organized crime” is defined by FBI as organized crime involving groups or markets of individuals coordinating across several national borders and working in more than one country to execute illegal business ventures. This thesis aims at understanding in depth the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had, in one year, on transnational criminal groups and their modus operandi, in several sectors of the criminal market. The first chapter will be entirely dedicated to this aim while the second will focus more in depth on the repercussions of the pandemic on one specific criminal sector, that of drugs production, trafficking, and distribution. This specific sector has been chosen because it has been particularly influenced by the recent global developments and therefore it is useful to provide us with a more concrete understanding of the phenomenon at stake, which would otherwise remain too theoretical and abstract. The main questions addressed in these chapters are: “Which new opportunities and threats affecting transnational organised crime have been brought about by the pandemic?”, “what are the future international policy implications stimulated by these new global challenges?”, and, most importantly, “what important lessons can we learn from the adapting behaviours that transnational organised criminal groups adopted during the year 2020-2021, analysing them after a year from the outbreak of Covid-19?” The study, as we just mentioned, is conducted by going through the sectors of crime most affected by the pandemic and by focusing on one of the traditional and most prominent type of transnational organised crime, namely the illegal drug trade, taking into consideration the Afghan case study with the aim of better understanding the local dynamics affecting the greater global picture. Once the descriptive premises of the phenomenon at stake are set, the study goes even further with the aim of analysing it critically. Therefore, the third chapter will adopt a liberal perspective to analyse the phenomenon. At this point the issues to tackle will be “what is the stance of liberalism concerning these recent global developments?”, and “how will these dynamics affect the IR debate?”. Furthermore, we will borrow the main concepts of one of the main strands of liberalism, which we will call here “institutional liberalism”, adopting the Jackson and Sorensen (2012) classification, to formulate our idea about the policies implications concerning the pandemic and the worsening of transnational organised crime. Finally, we will claim our support for a common solution to the problem, one in which all States fight together, and not divided, in cooperation and alliance against a common enemy, that of organised crime. We will assert that this is the only way in which a problem of such scale can be effectively solved in the long run. We will also go as far as to say that, paradoxically, both the pandemic and the increase in transnational crime linked to it, if they

are handled in the right way, can be seen as challenges that could potentially strengthen the international liberal order of States. This would go against the common conceptions of many realists that assert in the IR debate that these challenges can be solved only if connections between States are reduced and that the best international order is a divided one, made of independent and self-sufficient States, with no cooperation whatsoever.

METHODOLOGY:

This thesis aims at understanding in depth the impact that the pandemic of Covid-19 and its relative national and international restrictions during the year 2020 had on international organised crime. Our goal is to provide a multifaced panorama of the ways in which organised criminal groups have responded to the current health emergency and how they “generally” tend to respond to global crises, with a particular focus on how they have responded to economic recessions in the past, like the 2008 global financial crisis. Here we are making the premise that different criminal groups may have very different modus operandi, and, at the same time, they also have some common characteristics; therefore, it is useful to analyse them to draw some general understanding of the phenomenon of adaptation of crime. The research is divided into three chapters: the first one aims at providing a very broad understanding of how Covid-19 has impacted a great number of criminal sectors worldwide; we will analyse each of them very briefly to have a complete picture of the situation and to find differences and similarities in the ways criminal groups have adapted to the pandemic. In the second chapter we will look more closely at one sector of crime: the international illegal drug trade. In addition, to have a more concrete understanding of the modus operandi of criminal groups and of the issues at stake in the sector of illicit drug trade, we will use Afghanistan as a case study. Therefore, being Afghanistan the greatest global heroin producer, we will focus on the impact that the emergency had on heroin production, smuggling and sale. The third chapter will seek to analyse the relation between the pandemic and international crime in the broader academic paradigm of “liberalism”, by focusing particularly on the liberal strand of “institutional liberalism”, theorised by Jackson and Sorensen (2012), and analysing the role that institutions have had in the past and during 2020 in the war against transnational organised crime. While the first two chapters are merely descriptive of the link between pandemic and transnational crime, the third one is based on a reflection and critical analysis of the phenomena at stake based on the notions provided by “liberalism”. Therefore, starting from general liberal assumptions, the aim is to reach a more general understanding as well as useful future policy implications that States may use to manage the ever-evolving problem of transnational crime and prevent it from worsening even more. The data reported on this paper is the result of a deep study of the resources released by the UNODC (UN Office on Drugs and Crime) in its annual report at the end of 2020, reports from other international organisations like Interpol and the EU, and from international agencies like Europol. Some other information has been taken from the most accredited international newspapers and online journals. In addition, an interview has been conducted to Giampaolo Musumeci, free-lance journalist for Radio 24 and international relations expert, to ask him some specific questions about his episode of the podcast “Nessun luogo è lontano” concerning the same topic of our thesis. Not only he conducted the episode with Angela Me, Director of the UNODC research and statistics branch, but his expertise on the field of international crime is made evident by his two book publications: “Confessioni di un trafficante di uomini”, published in 2014 in six countries, and “Cosa loro,

cosa nostra”, published in February 2021. The latter focuses specifically on the topic of foreign criminal groups within the Italian territory, and it is especially concerned with the dynamics that have taken place during the pandemic. Finally, before going ahead with our study it is important to specify that, because the pandemic is still an ongoing dynamic, all the results presented in this thesis are preliminary and need to be confirmed by further analyses. Not only in fact research about the pandemic is still scarce; we must also consider that the sector of transnational organised crime is very difficult to study without a significant margin of error, and 2020, with its shift of resources in favour of the resolution of the pandemic, has just made it even harder for authorities to study it.

CHAPTER 1: COVID-19 AND TRANSNATIONAL ORGANISED CRIME

According to Giampaolo Musumeci (2021), Covid-19, with all its implications at national and international level, has had a major impact on numerous sectors of transnational organised crime. This is what he explained during the episode of his Radio 24 podcast “Nessun Luogo è lontano” concerning this specific issue. For the special occasion, he invited Angela Me, director of the UNODC, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, at the end of 2020, to discuss with her the official annual report on global crime, just released in December by the Office. As each year, in fact, as they both explained, also in 2020 the UN office drafted a report on the global situation regarding drugs and crime; 2020, however, as confirmed by the data collected by the UNODC, has been a special year, not only in terms of global health and economy, but also for what concerns transnational organised crime. In this thesis we are interested in deeply understanding what lies underneath the link between crime and “crisis” and we will do so by analysing the dynamics that developed during the past year of global pandemic, 2020. We will first give some working definitions. The first one will be that of “Transnational Organised Criminal groups” and we will explain why the large trends of TOCGs working across several borders and coordinating at the international level is a major area of focus in our research, more so than the smaller criminal groups operating at local level. Then we will define the notion of “crisis” and we will explain how the “Covid-19” pandemic perfectly suits this definition in our research. These will be the two main variables of our study and we will deal with the correlation between them in this first chapter, before going more in depth with the analysis of specific sectors of crime and how they have been impacted. After having understood the impact that “crises”, of various nature, can have on crime, both in positive and negative terms, we will look at the concrete repercussions that Covid-19 had on the past year in several criminal sectors by engaging in an empirical observation of the data collected by the UNODC in its final report of 2020, also thanks to Giampaolo Musumeci’s clarifications on the issue. Once we will have all this information, we will be able to construct some more general assumptions about the way in which TOCGs tend to behave in response to a crisis and change in status quo, also by comparing the current situation to the relatively recent 2008 financial crisis. Although the 2008 crisis shares exclusively the economic quality with the present one, it very is useful to draw more general assumptions about the capacity of criminal groups to find and exploit the new opportunities in time of change. In addition, this comparison allows us to give further confirmation to a sociological theory that has been discussed for years by numerous scholars, namely that there is a positive correlation between economic recession and crime. While the theory concerning the relation between economic crisis and crime has been already discussed and validated in the past, in our research we want to go a step further and claim that many other types of “crises” at State or international level, like the one generated by the pandemic, can lead to an increase in crime. At the end of the chapter, we will look at the case study of the Italian criminal group Camorra, which has a deep web of

connections with other organisations at international level. It is interesting to analyse this case to see how this organisation specifically, as the Italian anti-mafia prosecutor Federico Cafiero De Raho (2021) explained, has exploited the economic recession brought about by the pandemic in Italy to increase the criminal offences of usury and “racket protection”. We will discover how these local offences are used by Camorra, in turn, to conceal some even worse transnational criminal activities and how they are linked to incredibly huge sums of money, that flow internationally and often fund additional illicit activities based in other countries. Finally, in the last paragraph, we will look at how the international community has responded to these criminal threats during the last year and what are its projects for the future for handling this fragile and increasingly problematic situation.

1.1 Working definitions: “TOCGs” and “Covid-19”

To explain “Transnational Organised Criminal groups”, it is useful to use the definition provided by the FBI (2020), the Bureau that is dedicated to eliminating transnational organized crime groups that pose the greatest threat to the national and economic security of the United States. According to the Bureau, transnational organized crime groups (TOCGs) are associations of individuals, mostly operating by illegal means and spreading their activities in several geographical areas to obtain power, influence, and monetary gains. These groups can have different types of structures, from hierarchies to clans, to networks, to cells, and they tend to protect their activities through corruption, violence, international commerce, and an organizational structure exploiting national boundaries. There are many sectors of crime in which these groups tend to spread their activities; the majors are drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, human trafficking, money laundering, firearms trafficking, illegal gambling, extortion, counterfeit goods, wildlife and cultural property smuggling, and cyber-crime. This is not an exhaustive list, but it certainly helps us understand the extent to which transnational crime can be present in our everyday life. These activities are mostly engaged in by criminals who expect to generate economic profits through them, and they imply the use of both illicit and legal activities. The vast sums of money involved in these practices can compromise legitimate economies and have a direct impact on governments through the corruption of public officials (FBI, 2020); we claim that this, among the several negative implications that international crime generates, is surely the most dangerous and problematic one, as it involves the global population at large and the very fragile equilibrium between economy and politics at global level. This involvement of large sums of money is also the reason why we chose to focus our attention, in this thesis, on large TOCGs and not, more generally, on any type of criminal groups. This thesis deals with an issue concerning the subject of International Relations and we are therefore interested in observing phenomena, like transnational crime, that, not only take place, as we have explained, across several national borders, but that also have consequences encompassing the societies and economic systems of several States. The vast sums of money involved make transnational

organised crime an important problem not only for some individual States but for the whole international community. So, let us start by seeing where the illegal activities of TOCGs tend to be based. TOCGs may encompass both the Eastern and Western hemispheres and they are able to target victims and execute their schemes from anywhere in the world; some major Organised Criminal Groups come from Africa, Asia, Eurasia, and Middle east. In Europe, the main organised criminal group is the Italian Mafia in all its components, Cosa Nostra, Camorra, 'Ndrangheta, and Sacra Corona Unita, that are today known to collaborate with other international organized crime groups from all over the world to carry out their criminal activities (FBI, 2020). We will talk more about Italian Mafias and specifically about Camorra at the end of this chapter. The transnational nature of this type of crime, that, as we have just seen, bases its entire functioning on ties between different countries, is the reason why it has been greatly influenced by the global pandemic. In fact, Covid-19 too, like organised crime, is a virus that has hit almost all countries over the years and while it has influenced legal economic activities in those geographical areas because of its restrictions and lockdowns, it has had similar repercussions on the illegal activities of TOCGs (UNODC, 2020). While we can draw some similarities between legal and illegal activities regarding the influence produced on them by the pandemic, it is important to underline the many differences that the criminal nature of these groups have entailed in their capacity and speed of adaptation, as we will see that this has constituted for them a major advantage. We will analyse opportunities and limitations to criminal activities brought about by the pandemic more in depth in the next paragraph. First, we will provide a working definition of the notion of crisis, in general, to be able to link it with the definition of transnational criminal activity that we just provided. Then, more specifically, we will analyse how the Covid-19 pandemic suits this definition of crisis and has concretely impacted transnational crime in the past year 2020. The Oxford Learners Dictionaries define “crisis” as a time of intense difficulty and danger. Some synonyms are “catastrophe”, “emergency”, and “disaster”. The dictionary also defines it as a time in which difficult decisions must be made. If we think about Covid-19, in fact, many decisions have been taken at several governmental levels that were indispensable. Those decisions were taken by governments, representative of States at international level, international organisations and agencies, companies, and many other national and international actors. In fact, when the status quo is compromised something must be done to take back control of the situation. This was true, in 2020, for governments who had to protect their population from contracting the virus and had to do so by trying to preserve the national economy; it was true for companies that had to decide how to continue their activities in the midst of numerous restrictions set out by national and international authorities; and finally, it was also true for national and transnational criminal groups that had to adapt their modus operandi to the new reality of the world (Musumeci, 2021). To be as clear as possible here is a definition of the “Covid-19 pandemic” since it is one of the main variables of our study and it is important to deeply understand why it can be inserted in the category of “crisis”. According to the World Health Organisation (2020), “Covid-19” is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered

coronavirus. Most people infected with the Covid-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without special treatment while older people, and those with underlying medical problems are more likely to develop a serious illness. The World Health Organization declared a Public Health Emergency on 30 January 2020, and later declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020. As of April 2021, at the moment in which this research is being conducted, more than 136 million cases have been confirmed, with more than 2.94 million deaths attributed to Covid-19, according to the WHO (2021) making it one of the deadliest pandemics in history. Through this definition we can easily notice how the Covid-19 pandemic classifies as “crisis”. Through a deep research in newspapers, reports and interviews, we can claim that the Covid-19 pandemic classifies as crisis in several areas: it is certainly a global health crisis and emergency, as we have just seen, as demonstrated by the huge number of cases and victims it has produced globally for now a year (WHO, 2021). It has also been an economic crisis, as it has resulted in the largest global recession since the Great Depression because of the closure of businesses activities and the widespread supply shortages (IMF, 2021). It has certainly be a social crisis as it has raised issues of racial and geographic discrimination, health equity, and the balance between public health imperatives and individual rights (Sekalala et al. 2020). Finally, it has resulted in many political crises within the countries it has affected, as it has been extremely difficult for national and international authorities to take effective restrictive measures while still guaranteeing the freedom of their citizens (Herrera et al. 2020). The decisions that authorities have taken in this time of crisis have dealt specifically with travel restrictions, lockdowns, workplace hazard controls, and business closures (Musumeci, 2021). Now that we have explained the meaning of “transnational organised criminal groups” and “Covid-19”, we can proceed in understanding how these two central variables in our study are correlated. We will see this in the next paragraph by looking at the opportunities and limitations that Covid-19 and its restrictions brought about for criminal groups.

1.2 opportunities and limitations

The main implication of Covid-19 for crime at international level has been, according to Giampaolo Musumeci (2021), the governmental measures that have resulted in the closure of borders between countries. Theses restrictive measures have of course impacted all those sectors of criminality related to the smuggling of objects (e.g. cigarettes, drugs...) or persons (e.g. migrants), both in positive and negative ways for the criminals. In fact, on the one hand, criminal groups were faced with the problem of increased border controls across frontiers, on the other, these controls have been mainly focused on people, as the officials in charge of them, during 2020, allocated more resources in preventing persons with Covid-19 to enter and exit the country than in controlling the objects they smuggled. This dynamic, explained by Musumeci (2021), constituted, in certain cases, not only an opportunity for

criminals, that could now more easily hide their illegal merch, but also an advantage with respect to legal businesses that, because they had to follow the national and international restrictions, could not do the same. This has become a huge opportunity in those economic sectors characterised by the presence of both legal and illicit supply, and in which a shortage of legally produced merch could lead to an increased reliance on criminal groups for acquiring the products. In this case we can observe how criminal groups tend to exploit the vulnerability and sense of uncertainty generated in the population in response to a “traumatic” event, in this case the pandemic, and respond to their demands more rapidly than the legal market, specifically because of their criminal nature and their intrinsic “flexibility” stemming from their willingness to breach the law. A pertinent example is that of masks and sanitary objects. In fact, during the first months of 2020, a shortage in legal production, also due to the sudden and huge demand by the population, has led many criminal groups to exploit the vulnerability of the legal market and to substitute themselves to it by smuggling non-certified items. The closure of borders and the rapid rise in the demand of specific sanitary items, however, have not been the only dynamics affecting crime. Most of the changes caused by the pandemic had the potential of changing crime in some way. For example, the simple change in everyday routines that characterised the lives of most of the global population, at least in the western world, during 2020, accounted for an enormous increase in cyber-crime. With the spread of smart-working and online schooling, the risk of being “attacked” on the web has increased enormously. Many Nigerian and East European organised criminal groups, mostly engaged with this type of crime, for example, have been able to exploit the situation to their advantage and increase the number of their cyber-attacks (Musumeci, 2021). This was relatively easy for them because they targeted people who were not used to employ the web so much during their everyday lives before the pandemic and therefore were “de facto” illiterate of the internet. It is easy to understand how some types of cyber-attack, like phishing for example, have increased in the last months in we think about the number of extremely young children who were obliged to use the internet for schooling or even to the number of parents, with no practice and education in the use of technology, who had to work every day at home while distracted by the many home tasks as well as the care of their children. The mental fatigue of these people, main targets of cyber-criminals, and their subsequent vulnerability, according to scholars, is the main cause of success of these crimes (Musumeci, 2021). Nunzia Ciardi (2020), director of the Italian online poste police, has declared that in Italy the cyber-attacks have increased enormously during the pandemic because of the increased use of the web by the population. An additional area that created opportunities for criminal groups, although it is not so clear whether this practice has been engaged in mostly by State apparatuses like Russia, North-Korea, and China, has been the search for information regarding vaccines, because of the incredible economic opportunities that this finding implied (Musumeci, 2021). These, with many others, have been the sectors most hit by the pandemic and the main theme in all of them, as we have seen, has been the

exploitation, by the TOCGs, of the opportunities generated by the pandemic. Criminals have exploited the sanitary crisis, the economic crisis, the bureaucratic and the political crisis and this flexibility on their part has allowed them in many cases to survive the pandemic and even grow. We will see the specifics of some sector of crime hit by the restrictions more in depth in the next paragraphs.

1.2.1 Covid-19 and the drugs market

Drug trade has been one of the main sectors of crime influenced by the pandemic in 2020 (UNODC, 2020) and this is the reason why we have dedicated the entire second chapter to this specific topic. The area of the drug supply chain most hit by the pandemic, as it is easy to imagine, has been drug smuggling. This area has been strongly influenced because of the closure of borders that, as we have just seen, on the one hand led to more controls at frontiers, and, on the other, to an increased focus on people rather than on objects by authorities (Musumeci, 2021). However, the areas of production and micro-distribution were also impacted, in particular because of the “lockdown” measures that were adopted by almost every country hit by the pandemic. These lockdowns, with the consequent diminution of social events and gatherings, for example, have led to a decrease in the demand of certain types of drugs and this, in turn, has impacted supply, as we know that it tends to adjust to demand. Here we are talking about drugs like cocaine and amphetamine-type stimulants. The demand for other types of drugs, like heroin and cannabis, on the contrary, have remained stable and in the case of cannabis even increased during the months of lockdown, revealing how its use is linked more to relaxation and stress release purposes than recreational ones (UNODC, 2020). The lockdowns and closure of borders have also influenced the process of drugs production in many other ways: one of them has been the loss of workers usually coming from nearby countries, like in the case of Afghanistan, usually mostly relying on the work of Pakistani poppy lancers; another was the increased difficulty in importing fundamental precursors from abroad or even, more simply, the natural slowdown of activities due to the increased risks of contracting the virus while performing the illegal activities linked to drug production. Lockdowns have also impacted sale and micro-distribution of drugs at local level especially because of lockdowns and curfews that have made it increasingly difficult for sellers to meet secretly with customers, as the practice of drug sale requests. Therefore, criminals have had to change their modus operandi in this area too to adapt to the situation without being caught by authorities. For example, according to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2020), the sales in the dark web have increased during the lockdowns and postal delivery methods have been used in many cases for drug sale. In addition, the 2020 pandemic, with the increase in poverty and unemployment it has caused, as well as the closure of schools in many countries, have made young students and unemployed increasingly vulnerable to the recruitment by criminal group in the field of drug sale or production. For what concerns sales, as evidenced by the

article by Antonio Frascilla and Carlo Tecce (2020) in L'Espresso, this trend has been particularly frightening in Italy among others, where local authorities have warned against the risk of more and more young people, especially in the South of the country, being recruited by Mafia. We will explore the interesting topic of how poverty and unemployment worsen criminality, both at local and international level, at the end of this chapter, when we will compare and find similarities between the health emergency crisis of 2020 and the 2008 financial crisis and see how both are linked to an increase in crime.

1.2.2 Covid-19 and smuggling of migrants

It is useful, for the aim of our understanding of how the smuggling of migrants has been impacted by the pandemic, to look at the reflections that have been made in the International Dialogue on Migration, which has taken place on 15-16 October 2020, at the Palais des Nations in Geneva. Here, the UNODC has made the following considerations about this crime in general and the implications that Covid-19 had on migrant smuggling in 2020; firstly, it has shed a light on the nature of the crime, by reminding that it is a highly profitable business, with criminal networks thriving on the high demand for smuggling services and a low risk of detection and punishment. Additionally, it has underlined that this crime is driven by political instability and conflict present in some countries, severe socioeconomic conditions, and a lack of opportunities, including for children and youth. Then UNODC has proceeded in presenting data regarding the new trends of 2020, influenced by the global health emergency. Its research has shown how the Covid-19-related travel restrictions have not stopped migrant smuggling and how, on the contrary, these may, in the medium-to-long term, increase demand for smuggling services. It has also shown through the data collected, that the ongoing Covid-19 crisis has made and is making the smuggling of migrants riskier and more expensive for people fleeing persecution, violence, and conflict. Why is this so? For example, the potentially lengthy delays in migrant journeys caused by Covid-19 have made it difficult for migrants to get money from home and they have quickly run out of funds. This has made these same people more vulnerable to using smuggling services offered by criminals and, in some cases, not having other earning options, to earn their journeys along the way by being exploited and abused by the perpetrators of these crimes (UNODC, 2020). Therefore, we can take in from the report of the UNODC that the restrictions and the closure of borders caused by the pandemic not only have not managed to stop the smuggling of migrants, as someone could forecast, but it has also made the service less available to the public and therefore more expensive and riskier. People continue to demand smuggling services, particularly if they are fleeing from conflict and persecution; however, they are now more vulnerable to abuse. In the meantime, the two main factors that can counteract these criminal offences, namely international security cooperation and the national law enforcement capacities, are deeply impacted by Covid-19 and the urgency of strong decision-making in other pandemic-related fundamental areas. Therefore, while national and international authorities

are suffering an overload of responsibilities, migrant smugglers, as many other TOCGs are using their flexibility to adjust their “business-model” to the “new normal” created by the pandemic with some evident success (UNODC, 2020). Finally, to summarise what we have seen so far around migrant smuggling, Covid-19 restrictions have not stopped these illegal activities but only made them riskier for the targeted victims, increasing the scope of the problem at the international level and the urgency of an intervention by the international community.

1.2.3 Covid-19 and cybercrime

According to a Europol press release that took place in October 2020, while the digital transformation of our societies evolves, so does cybercrime which is becoming more present and sophisticated and therefore, less easy to recognise (Schinas, 2020). This problem has been accentuated in 2020 by the pandemic, as the lockdown and closure of schools and economic activities have obliged people to stay home and work from a computer, without any type of education on the use of technology and the risks of cybercrime (Musumeci, 2021). According to a survey conducted by Gartner and published in March 2020, 88% of US organizations had encouraged or required employees to work remotely. In addition, social media usage rates have also greatly increased because of the increased time spent at home by the global population. Such shifts have created a large pool of individuals, businesses and even public officials who are increasingly using online communication, often with less stringent cybersecurity measures in place than would be employed in an office environment. This provided cybercriminals with an unprecedented number of victims to target (Chantam House, 2021). To go even further in our analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on cybercrime it is interesting to look at the 7th annual IOCTA (Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment) published by Europol at the end of 2020. The IOCTA seeks to map the cybercrime threat landscape and understand how law enforcement responds to it. From the assessment it is clearly noticeable that the Covid-19 crisis has increased the vulnerability of the subjects usually targeted by cybercriminals and has therefore made it easier for them to commit their offences without punishment of any kind. However, the assessment has also underlined the fact that, while the pandemic has worsened the situation, the overall threat landscape regarding the internet crime was already extremely problematic. These issues have simply been exacerbated by the restrictions linked to the health emergency and are now even more in need of a targeted intervention by the international community. The main types of cybercrimes in 2020 have been, as we have just seen, crimes that already existed, although in smaller measures: phishing, frauds, fake news aimed at advertising criminal products (where in some cases criminals claimed to sell goods that can cure or prevent the virus), malware, publication of children sexual abuse material, and criminal abuse of the dark web (Europol, 2020). While some could claim that cybercrime is just a minor problem with no macro-implications at stake at national and international level, we will now see some very important cyberattacks that have been made

during 2020 that completely challenge this assumption and shed light on the importance of focusing our attention, now more than ever, in this type of subtle yet very sneaky and problematic criminal offence. According to an article published by Chantam House (2020), a London based international think tank, On 10 September 2020, in Germany, more than 30 internal servers of the University Hospital of Düsseldorf were hit by a cyberattack, and the hospital was forced to give up patients to other facilities. A re-routed patient died in that circumstance. German Authorities are still investigating on whether her death was caused by the delay in treatment; however, if this were the case, this occurrence could represent the first known case of fatality directly caused by a ransomware attack. Moreover, during the pandemic there have been numerous similar occurrences. Malicious cyber actors have also targeted the Paris hospital system, medical clinics and healthcare agencies in the US, the World Health Organization, Covid-19 treatment, and vaccine research institutions as well as other healthcare entities. This should be enough to have an idea of the scope and severity of the problem. Again, we want to underline that these types of cyberattacks were already in rise but that, not only in 2020 the problem was more serious because of the increased opportunities to exploit by criminals due to the pandemic, but in addition the stakes were even higher because the attacks impacted national governments in a period characterised by great political and social instability. All States were struggling in those months to blunt the spread of both a deadly infectious disease and its resulting economic effects. So, which will be the long-term effects of Covid-19 on cybercrime? We could argue that, paradoxically, the effects will be, at least in part, positive. In fact, while cybercriminals have adjusted their modus operandi to better exploit the new vulnerabilities of their targeted victims, international cooperation too is making efforts to adapt, and this whole situation is triggering greater efforts on its part to find solutions to this long-lived problem. However, we still must consider that governments cannot allocate too many resources in the war against cybercrime, at least until the pandemic will be officially eradicated, as they are still rightly focused on trying to slow down the spread of the coronavirus and blunt the pandemic's economic impact. So, a new question arises: will the mechanisms and networks that have been established in response to the rise in cybercrime until now be leveraged and institutionalized in the long term to sustain progress on cybercrime cooperation? Or will these efforts be abandoned because of the struggle of authorities in tackling the health emergency? Will States allocate more resources in researching solutions against cybercrime once the pandemic will be over? Of course, the future is uncertain, and we are not able to make certain predictions now; however, this question is a good starting point to make some important reflections about the future of cybercrime and to think about possible solutions.

1.2.4 Covid-19 and the medical supplies market

Covid-19 has been the perfect opportunity for some criminals to extend their already rising global market of substandard and falsified medical products, including personal protective equipment (PPE). Many seizures by authorities worldwide indicate that very quickly criminal groups have taken advantage of the emerging

opportunities (Musumeci, 2021). While there existed already criminal groups involved in these specific types of crime, many of them were previously involved with other types of offences and rapidly changed activities to match the newly opened opportunity in the market. The opportunity was extremely significant because due to the lockdowns the legal market had to stop many of its commercial activity and the result was a demand for medical products and PPE that severely outstripped supply. This was also due to the speed at which things happened in the first months after the spread of the virus. The production capacity needed to resource materials and manufacture significant quantities that criminal groups were able to achieve during these first months unfortunately is indicative of the level of organization and adaptability of these transnational criminal organizations (UNODC, 2020). Criminals specifically have exploited the needs of the global population for security, medical support, and information on the one hand, and the lack of supply by the legal market on the other. It is worth repeating: the online frauds and sale of counterfeit medical products were aimed at taking advantage of a situation where demand outstripped supply. According to the UNODC (2020) there have been numerous notable cases worldwide in which criminals have taken advantage of the health emergency in the medical and personal protection sector. For example, in March 2020 German health authorities contracted 2 sales companies in Switzerland and Germany to procure 15-Million-euro worth of face masks through a cloned website of an apparently legitimate company in Spain; In Nigeria, national authorities confirmed a high proliferation of chloroquine indicating that the production of falsified pharmaceuticals was on the rise. The problem with this situation is that very often these crimes have been overlooked in their impact to social health and to the global economy. Due to this failure to recognise the severity of the problem, crimes have often been relegated to administrative infringements and the gap in recognizing the seriousness of such crimes has left greater freedom for organized criminal groups, as evidenced by the large quantities of PPE being seized or rejected by countries as substandard (Musumeci, 2021). Evidence of seizures is more striking in Europe, North America, and Asia, although limited data on Africa also indicates the interception of PPE and Covid-19-related medicines (UNODC, 2020). The threat, however, did not stop with the sale of falsified masks. Criminals started more and more seizing the opportunity of creating false medicines and even vaccines, exploiting the great demand and the slowdown in production from the legal market. They had to rely for this venture on the fear of many people triggered by the uncertainty of the health emergency and on the ignorance and fake news regarding the vaccine spreading on the internet and published by people with no knowledge or experience in the medical field. To write their book “Cosa loro, Cosa nostra”, Giampaolo Musumeci and criminologist Andrea di Nicola spent some days in the Dark web at the end of 2020 and they could see before their eyes numerous users selling Covid-19 vaccines before the real vaccine was even released globally and certified as safe. Musumeci (2021) explained how he found many sellers of hydroxychloroquine, a medicine that many, among which US President Donald Trump claimed could be used to prevent Covid-19. However, there had never been any scientific explanation behind those claims and in 2021 the World Health Organisation finally published a

document refuting this unscientific hypothesis. In addition, regardless of the effectiveness of the hydroxychloroquine, not yet tested at the time of his immersion in the dark web, most of the medicines sold likely did not match the description of the seller and therefore could represent an extremely great danger for the buyers' health. It is important to notice that the sale of counterfeit medical product was already an existent market on the web. For example, in Italy, it started rising in 2015 when online pharmacies were legalised. However, the spread of the virus increased enormously this criminal business.

1. 3 How TOCGs tend to adapt to economic recessions

According to Giampaolo Musumeci (2021), Covid-19 has represented a huge “stress test” for individuals and markets as it has made both more vulnerable to the dangers generated by the activities of TOCGs. TOCGs' aim is always to obtain, through their illegal activities, monetary gain and power, and, in the scenario of the 2020 global pandemic, they have been able to locate new opportunities while looking for ways in which they could most profit from them. Here we want to make some reflections about the specific modalities in which these groups tend to adapt their behaviours to crises, focusing particularly on the economic effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and drawing a comparison between the behavioural change of criminals in 2020, triggered by the economic downturn caused by the pandemic, and the one during a past similar global emergency: the one following the 2008 financial crisis. With this comparison we want to make a reflection on the quality of “resilience”, which seems to be a particularly strong and present characteristic in criminal groups. We will thus explore criminals' natural flexibility and speed in responding to critical events and how they manage to thrive in bad societal and economic conditions through the exploitation of people's financial difficulties and needs. This reflection could be important to tackle future economic crises and the resulting adaptation of criminal groups, through international cooperation.

1.3.1 TOCGs and the 2008 financial crisis

As we have mentioned previously, Covid-19 has triggered “crises” in many areas of our national systems: health, economy, politics, society. However, it can be useful, for the sake of our analysis on its impact on crime, to consider in this paragraph only the economic impact of Covid-19, and to compare it with the one generated by another relatively recent economic recession of our time: the 2008 financial crisis. Doing so can be very useful to learn more about how TOCGs respond to global financial crises and will respond to the ongoing one, because, while many factors of the pandemic other than the disruption of economy have affected illegal activities, the financial recession deriving from it is without any doubt one of the most relevant. Before going ahead in this comparison, it is important to define our goal and methodology. We want to give a confirmation to a theory that has been largely discussed in the past years by several sociologists, economists, and IR scholars, namely that there

exists a positive correlation between economic recession of a system and crime. It follows that the methodology we will use will consist of analysing the literature available on this topic and then compare it with the results found in the 2020 and 2008 recessions case studies. Let us start from the literature. The interest in the economy-crime correlation first started with Gary Becker's contribution. Becker (1968) was the first scholar to recognise that the reduction in work opportunities and therefore the rise of unemployment could make the pursuit of illegal activities relatively more advantageous and attractive for the general population suffering the most. Many scholars studied this correlation in the context of local crime, as it is much more evident and easier to identify. For example, the Italian scholars Guido de Blasio e Carlo Menon (2013) report that for a 10% reduction in economic activity, there will be a 6% increase in the level of local robberies. This is a trend that we register at local level, as previously mentioned, but what if the same trend exists in the macro-sphere of transnational organised crime? Can a global economic recession cause a global increase in transnational crime? Apparently, there is still no real consensus among scholars on whether there exists a correlation between economic recession and crime levels at the macro-level. Richard Rosenfeld (2008), a sociologist at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, argues that "every recession since the late 1950s has been associated with an increase in crime". He also argues that typically there is a year lag between changes in the economy and change in crime rates. Another economic theory of crime suggests that the increase in the stock of goods in society will tend to increase the incentive to commit crime, and this trend is better known as the "opportunity effect." Still other scholars, like Steven Raphael and Rudolf Winter-Ebmer (2001) did in their paper "Identifying the Effect of Unemployment on Crime", put unemployment levels at the centre of the debate, arguing that there exists a direct relationship between unemployment levels and crime rates. Europol also took part to the debate. In its 2009 OCTA, the international agency took a stance in favour of this correlation and presented a non-exhaustive list providing with factors that could explain it. This list was the result of an empirical study carried out after a year from the 2008 Great Recession. One of the items from the list was the expansion of the black market. Black markets, according to Europol (2009) may broaden in an attempt by sellers to maintain their level of profit even though the purchasing power of the general population has decreased. Another one was the employment of irregular or undeclared labour caused by the increasing pressure to cut costs due to a financial crisis. Organized crime groups can benefit from this by providing irregular workers to otherwise legal enterprises or by exploiting such workers more directly in the production of cheaper goods or services. In the field of transnational crime, which is the one we are more interested in, this specific issue is closely related to the problem of the smuggling of illegal immigrants and human trafficking. Another problem that can arise due to economic regressions is the increased risk for entrepreneurs to fall victim to organized crime groups as they are forced to seek funds from usurers. After the analysis of the literature and of the criminal-related trend that characterised the period after the Great Recession, we have been able to compare it with our knowledge about the present situation of economy and crime, influenced by the 2020 global pandemic. As revealed by

the data provided by the UNODC (2020) and as we explain in this thesis, transnational crime seems to be living today some similar crime-related repercussions to those that have followed the 2008 crisis. However, it is important to underline that we are still in a very early phase and these considerations could only be validated with time, by observing the new developments that will take place. The reason we are focusing for now on the economic repercussions of the pandemic on crime is because they accounted for the greatest change in criminals' modus operandi, according to early research. In the next paragraph we will go more in depth in the investigation of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the global economy and the extent to which criminals have been influenced by these changes.

1.3.2 TOCGs and the Covid-19 pandemic

The International Monetary Fund (2020) estimates that the global economy shrunk by 4.4% in 2020 during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. The organisation described the decline as the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s. By September 2020, after less than a year from the outbreak of the virus, every advanced economy had fallen to recession or depression, whilst all emerging economies were in recession. According to the World Bank (2021), in some regions a full recovery will not be achieved until 2025 or beyond. What does this recession consist of? What we know for now, as reported in an article of Euronews at the beginning of 2021, is that unemployment rates have deeply increased across major economies during the year and today some of them have unemployment rates around 10% with more severely affected countries having even higher rates. Italy for example, at the time in which the research is conducted, has a forecasted unemployment rate for 2021 of 11,6%. The US have been also deeply affected for what concerns employment, going from a 3,4-unemployment rate to a 9.9. By October, more than 10 million unemployment cases had been filed there. Everywhere in the countries hit by the pandemic many people who have not lost their jobs have instead seen their incomes cut. What is interesting about this recession is the extent to which it was determined by the interdependence between countries. According to the Carnegie Think Tank in an article published in April 2020, "the world has quickly and extensively become addicted to huge benefits and conveniences associated with a global, generally open system. The system allows for the relatively free flow of goods and services, specialization, and decentralization. But this reliance carries important downsides; the coronavirus spread across the globe, and its impact unravelled important supply chains" The economic downturn that hit almost all economies shows how our economies are today interconnected. This is evident if we think about the consequences that the 2020 recession in the countries strongly hit by the pandemic have had during the year: the drop of the oil price globally, the collapse of tourism, the hospitality industry, the energy industry, and the general downturn in consumers activity worldwide. Moreover, 2020 was characterised by a crash in the stock market due to the extreme uncertainty in the markets during the year (EURONEWS, 2021). So, how does all this relate to transnational crime? As we have mentioned, the economic recession has represented for TOCGS one of the greatest opportunities to

exploit during the health emergency. The scenarios that we have observed after the 2008 financial crisis are likely to be observed again, at least in the first period after the recession following Covid-19: broadening of black markets, increased usage of undeclared labour by firms and increased reliance on usurers (Musumeci, 2021). As we will see in the next chapter, all about the illegal drug trade market, many people who lost their job, especially in developing countries where economic conditions are suboptimal, became more vulnerable to the recruitment by criminal groups. This has been true for example for men losing their jobs in Afghanistan and becoming more willing to work as opium cultivators; however, this has also been true in developed economies. In Italy, for example, particularly in the South, young students, often lacking the necessary technological devices to participate in online schooling, have become much more vulnerable during the lockdowns to Mafia recruitments and have started in some cases participating in minor criminal tasks like drugs sale (Fraschilla and Tecce, 2020).

Usury has been one of the greatest consequences of the Covid-19 economic recession in terms of opportunities for criminals to exploit (Musumeci, 2021); we will examine the case study of Camorra in Italy in the next paragraph.

1.4 Case study: Covid-19 and Camorra

Firstly, to analyse how one of the main Italian organised criminal groups has exploited the Covid-19 crisis, it is useful to look at how the Italian economy has been affected by the governmental measures taken at central and regional level during 2020 to containing the virus. In fact, this type of criminal offence is deeply influenced by economic trends and, as we will see, it tends to increase with a rise of poverty and unemployment. In an article of the beginning of 2021, Euronews reports that because of the pandemic, one million people have been pushed into poverty in Italy and another 8 million are temporarily unemployed. This critical economic situation has provided the perfect opportunity for Camorra to perform its illegal activities; the criminal organisation has been able to exploit the vulnerability of the population by offering its “help” before the State could, through the criminal practice of “usury”. In this way not only did it earn monetary gain, but it also acquired a better reputation and more power in the territory, by relying on the slowness of the State to offer support to those in need; in this way, it contributed to delegitimizing of the central government in a time of great political instability. Before going ahead in the case study, it is necessary to give a precise definition of Camorra.

According to a definition provided by Europol in 2013, the Camorra is an Italian organised criminal organisation which is widespread in the whole Italian region of Campania, although the provinces of Naples and Caserta are those in which its oppressive presence is felt the most. The Camorra is a horizontal cluster of Clans and Families, often associated in alliances or in cartels. Referring again to the words of EUROPOL,

in its 2013 Report on the “Global threat of Italian Organised Criminal Organisations”, the use of extreme violence is a feature of the Camorra, which is involved in extortion, usury, cocaine trafficking, money laundering and, using legitimate business structures in the construction industry, infiltration of public institutions to access public tenders, funds and subsidies. For what concerns its transnational nature, which we are most interested in, the Camorra is very active in several EU Member States, South America, and the US. The “U.S. strategy to combat transnational organized crime”, presented on 2011, identifies the Camorra as one of the four most threatening TOCGs from a US perspective. For what concerns the EU, the Camorra performs most of its illegal operations in Spain, France, the Netherlands, and Germany. Now we will see why Camorra is so important in our reflection about the consequences of the pandemic on transnational organised crime; We will focus particularly on the economic repercussions of the 2020 health emergency in Italy and how this local criminal organisation, tied with international criminal networks, has been able to exploit them. As Federico Cafiero De Raho, Italian anti-mafia prosecutor, explained to EURONEWS at the beginning of 2021, "Poverty is the first area of intervention for the various Italian mafia groups, both for recruitment and to gain social power." In fact, Camorra during 2020 intervened by giving work to people in need for economic assistance, not yet supported by the State, and by lending money through “usury”. We will explain this crime more in depth in the next paragraph by focusing on how it has been increased by the economic downturn of 2020.

1.4.1 Usury

In the Oxford English Dictionary, “usury”, also called “loan-sharking”, is defined as the practice of making unethical or immoral monetary loans that unfairly enrich the lender. A loan may be considered usurious because of excessive or abusive interest rates or other factors defined by a nation's laws. It is very difficult to have precise data regarding these criminal offences if the criminals are not directly found out, however, according to an estimate made by ANSA at the end of 2020, 40,000 businesses in Italy were at risk of usury during the year with those operating in southern Italy and in the hotel and restaurant sector being the most vulnerable. During 2020 this phenomenon has increased because the victims, as Cafiero De Raho (2021) said, found themselves in a period of extreme economic vulnerability and uncertainty and felt that the support offered by the Camorra through usury was the only way to meet the basic survival needs for their families during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to reflect on the following question: why is usury, a local type of crime, so important in our discussion about transnational organised crime? usury, like racket, is important to consider in our discussion because it is the first step that allows criminals to perform and conceal some even worse types of crime, involving larger sums of money and a larger use of violence, usually at international level. This is possible because both these crimes allow criminals to perform so-called “money laundering”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “money laundering” is the illegal process

of concealing the origins of money obtained illegally by passing it through a complex sequence of banking transfers or commercial transactions.

What does this process consist of? The process is explained very well in the journal article “Mafia, money-laundering and the battle against criminal capital: the Italian case”, by Yara El Siwi (2018): Camorra uses usury to exploit the economic vulnerabilities of those struggling economically and take their companies and firms when they are not able to pay back the money loaned. Once this happens the criminal organization can acquire management of the business and use the company as a conduit to launder its own illicit money. Therefore, it is evident that the economic repercussions of the pandemic in Italy represent a huge problem not only for the southern Italian population, now more vulnerable to offences like “usury” and other local types of crimes but, in the long run, also for the greater reality of transnational organised crime, as these “minor” offences make it even harder, because of money laundering and the concealing of illegally-gained money, to spot the transnational criminal activities of Mafia groups. Usury might rise by 30% during 2021 because of the pandemic, according to the local anti-usury office of one of the leading Italian workers’ unions, and, unfortunately in this situation, as we have just mentioned, it is the victims themselves who are taking part in the creation of this flawed and toxic relationship with the criminals; of course, because of their extremely hard economic conditions, influenced by the numerous lockdowns imposed by the Italian government during 2020, these people are not to blame too hardly. It will require strong interventions by the State to help them recover and contrast this phenomenon in the months that will follow the official eradication of the pandemic and the resumption to “normal life”. For now, the anti-racketeering association SOS Impresa is bringing together business associations, law enforcement and government institutions to help coordinate against the Camorra (Euronews, 2021).

1.5 International policy implications

As we have seen very clearly in the previous paragraphs of this first chapter, Covid-19 has deeply influenced transnational crime, and, while it has limited certain illegal activities it has also offered numerous opportunities to TOCGs, that have rapidly and flexibly been able to exploit them. The pandemic has therefore strengthened an already very problematic situation and it is fundamental for the international community to cooperate to put an end to it. Firstly, the international community will have to work together to tackle the problem of the pandemic, as it is already doing, and try to do it the fastest as possible while trying not to disrupt the global economy even more. The future of crime will depend on this, as we have seen. The resumption to a “new normal” and the abolition of lockdowns will finally stop those opportunities created in the markets and the recovery of the economy, although

slow, will start to stop this process of exploitation of economic vulnerabilities brought about by criminal groups during the past year. Of course, also more specific interventions on transnational organised crime will be needed and these will likely become easier when the national and international authorities will be free from the burden of the pandemic. For now, some important steps have been taken by the international community and as always, the key words in the discussion about tackling the problem internationally have been “cooperation” and “transparency”. Starting from the global level, as we have seen in many occurrences until now, the UNODC is working hard on making available all the necessary information about the link between pandemic and crime to the member States, to secure their active participation. The 14th UN Congress on criminal justice started in March 2021 in Kyoto and underlined the importance of renewing global cooperation against crime to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and finally recover from the pandemic. There, Mr. Bozkir (2021), president of the UN General Assembly, said that the targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will not be achieved if effective action on the rule of law, crime prevention and criminal justice is not taken, as the objectives envisioned did not consider at the time the experience of Covid-19 and all what it meant for international crime. What about the EU? How has it responded to these increased risks in transnational crime that deeply and directly affect its member States? According to a European Commission press release in April 2021, the EU has released a strategy to tackle organised crime in the next 5 years. Again, the main theme is that of cooperation between member States through justice and home affairs agencies. Another fundamental aspect for this “war on crime” is tackling high-priority crimes and disrupting the structures behind them; it will be particularly useful to investigate on corruption and money laundering to see where criminals infiltrate in the economy and prevent greater forms of crime (Musumeci, 2021). At the institutional level, the EU Commission is committed to doing its part by actively taking part in the international efforts, especially focusing on the new challenges brought about by the pandemic of Covid-19. In addition, the European Parliament and Council will have a fundamental role in ensuring security in the EU, protecting the European economy, and safeguarding the rule of law as well as fundamental rights. In a press release of May 2021, the Council of the EU has listed its top 10 priorities in the war against crime for the next four years.

CHAPTER 2: COVID-19 AND THE ILLEGAL DRUG TRADE

“The pandemic has had a major impact on our lives and in slowing down our economy. However, this economic trend has not been seen in international drug trafficking. These illegal markets continue to generate huge profits, including during the pandemic”. These have been the words of Catherine de Bolle, executive director of Europol, at the beginning of May 2020, when trying to forecast the resilience of criminal groups during the ongoing global pandemic of Covid 19. After a year we can argue that her predictions were right: as shown by the UNODC final report of 2020, the pandemic has not deterred criminal groups from their illegal activities and drugs producers, smugglers and suppliers have been no exception to this. In this chapter we will look at the multi-faced reality of the illegal drug market during the year 2020 and at how, in all the areas of its supply chain, from production to sale, unlike many activities of the legal market, it was able to adapt to the restrictions imposed within and outside the States while continuing to generate profit. More specifically, we want to make the point here that the international illicit market of drugs, as many other illicit activities brought about by criminal groups, as we have seen in the previous chapter, has not been affected by the global pandemic and its relative restrictions in a significant way. In addition, we want to provide a description of the underlying mechanisms that have been lying at the basis of the apparently unchanged set of activities conducted by drugs producers, traffickers, and dealers during the last year. Therefore, some important questions we want to focus on in this chapter are: “what happened to criminal groups involved with drugs because of the pandemic?”, “did they encounter limitations in their habitual illicit activities?” “Did they encounter, on the contrary, some opportunities to exploit?”, “did they change their modus operandi and, if so, how?”

To achieve this goal, we will first need to provide a brief description of the illicit market of drugs and of the main State actors involved. We will then proceed by going through the most common types of drugs produced and consumed worldwide and we will seek to find significant differences in the patterns of production, traffic, and distribution between 2019 and 2020, namely “the pre-outbreak of Covid-19 period” and “the post outbreak of Covid-19 period”. Before we start, it is critical to make two premises: the first one is that the drugs supply chain, in all its components, is an invisible and complex world, often very hard to study because of its anti-institutional nature and the difficulty in finding official and reliable data. Sometimes the data can be missing because of the actual difficulty of authorities, especially in certain countries, to catch illegal activities in the making and to report them. It follows that the data reported cannot provide a precise and complete picture of the actual situation. However, this numbers still give us an approximate view of the reality of the drugs market and, by analysing it, we can produce valuable and interesting reflections. The second premise that we want to make is that this is a descriptive study that does

not aim at making predictions about the future but just at analysing in depth what happened during the first year of the global pandemic of Covid-19 and the repercussions that it had on the international criminal market of drugs.

2.1 General introduction to the illegal drug trade

We start again with definitions. We already specified in the previous chapter what we refer to when talking about “organised criminal groups” and “Covid-19”. For this chapter we now need to give a working definition of the concept of “illegal drug trade”. The UNODC World Drug Report (2005) defines it as the global “black market” dedicated to the cultivation, manufacture, distribution, and sale of drugs that are subject to drugs prohibition. Most States prohibit trade, except under licence, using drug prohibition laws. However, due to the absence of a strong State apparatus in some countries, this is not always sufficient to deter people from engaging in such criminal activities. The illegal drug trade may be estimated today as nearly 1% of total global trade. In fact, consumption of illegal drugs is still widespread globally, despite the numerous efforts made by national and international authorities to challenge its popularity. Before going ahead with our discussion on the repercussions of Covid-19 on drug-related criminal activities, we conclude with some words on the political, economic, and social consequences that illicit drug trade produces in the States involved. As the UNODC (2020) makes clear, the countries involved in drugs production and transit, which are those already presenting the weakest political, social, and economic institutions, are some of the most affected by drug trade in all these areas. As explained by Europol, the European Union’s law enforcement agency, in an article published in 2021, among the global problems that the world of drug trade creates, we have the following: “drug trade ravishes communities, endangers businesses, puts pressure on governments, and damages the wider economy by impacting legitimate businesses”. In addition, drug trade is thought to be linked to violent crimes such as murder or even terroristic activities. The alarming number of illegal immigrants coming to Ecuador to escape guerrillas and drug lord in Columbia, or the enormous murder rate of Honduras, main transit area for Cocaine reaching the US, represent some of the most striking examples of social problems stemming from the international illegal drug trade. This illegal market also entails major problems in the context of human rights as it is often linked to exploitation of labourers; this is again very common in poor countries with very few job opportunities available.

While the link between drug trade and use of violence is especially problematic in all developing countries, it is also a significant problem for many developed countries worldwide. A report by the UK government’s Drug Strategy Unit (2011) Stated that the cost of crime linked to illegal heroin and cocaine habits amount to 16 billion dollars a year in the UK. According to a press release of the UK government in January 2021, the Home Secretary Priti Patel and Health Secretary Matt Hancock have announced a £148 million new governmental investment to cut crime and protect people from the scourge of illegal drugs. This shows how alarming the social effects of these illegal activities are even in western societies. Here, however, we do not

look at the criminal activities that are brought about by small criminal groups at national and local level, although these often tend to present links with the larger networks of transnational crime. On the contrary, it is worth remembering that our study, in this second chapter, focuses on the criminal activities of organised groups that create international networks and coordinate their activities across several national borders in the three main areas of production, smuggling and micro-distribution constituting drug trade. It is these ever more interdependent networks of organised criminal groups that account for one of the greatest global issues of our time, as they continue to generate all the problems listed before and are still able to bring in a fifth of all profits from organised crime (Europol, 2021). The drug trade challenge is continuously addressed by the UNODC, the Interpol, the Europol, and its partner organisations, such as the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), in several different ways. We will look at these efforts, especially at those to tackle the new challenges brought about by the pandemic, at the end of this chapter. Now we are interested in providing an answer to this question: “have these illegal activities shown signs of declining or increasing in the past year 2020, during the global pandemic?” We will now answer by looking, one by one, at the three phases that together constitute the “illegal drug trade”. These are: production, traffic, and sale (or micro-distribution). Firstly, we will focus on the process of drug production and at how it has changed during the past year. Instead of making general reflections about it we will provide a definition and brief explanation of drugs production; then we will go through the most produced and sold drugs worldwide and we will give an answer to the following questions: “has the production of specific types of drugs increased, decreased, or remained stable during 2020?” and “How has the modus operandi of criminals involved with their production changed during the past year?” Only after having found an answer to these questions, we will be able to find common patterns among different drugs and make general Statements.

2.2 Drug production

It is worth repeating this important premise: it is the developing countries with the weakest political and economic institutions that are the most involved in any type of illegal activity, and drug production and trade is no exception to this. Of course, there are also many developed countries that engage in production, and this is especially true for cannabis which is produced in almost every country in the world (UNODC, 2005). However, we first want to focus on those plant-based drugs, like heroin and cocaine, that are the result of the cultivation of precursors in developing countries. As reported extensively by the UNODC (2020), while there exist many deterring programs and State laws banning these illegal activities, all of this is often not sufficient to really deter cultivators from engaging in it. This is often so because the developing countries involved lack a strong State apparatus able to ensure the respect of the rule of law or a system of satisfactory job opportunities in the legal market that would ensure safe and honest job opportunities for all the population. In addition, very often drug production

represents a great percentage of the country GDP and the State has no incentive to make efforts to stop it. On the contrary, it can even be the case that criminal groups involved in drugs production and cultivators of coca and opium are politically protected because of the contribution they provide to the State economy. This is for example, as Mansfield (2018) explained in its paper “Turning deserts into flowers”, what is happening in Afghanistan, which has been the greatest opium producer for the past 30 years. We will focus more in depth on the case study of Afghanistan later in the chapter; for now, we will look at the variations that have taken place in the past year in the production of two of the most consumed drugs worldwide: heroin and cocaine.

2.2.1 Change in heroin and cocaine production due to Covid-19

According to the UNODC (2020), heroin is an opioid used as a recreational drug for its euphoric effects and its main component is Opium. Opium poppy is cultivated illegally in 50 countries in the world: however, in the last 5 years only 3 countries were responsible for as much as 97% of the global opium poppy production.

Afghanistan, in pole position in this regard, is responsible for 88% of production and a market that arrives in Europe, middle East, south Africa, Asia and in a smaller percentage, north America and Oceania. It is followed, in much smaller quantities of production, by Mexico and Myanmar.

According to Giampaolo Musumeci (2021), with the outbreak of the pandemic there have been some important implications for poppy cultivators. Because the pandemic has involved both positive and negative consequences for them, we can talk about a “mixed impact”: on the one hand, a shortage of workers and important precursors from abroad have placed strong limitations on producers, making us think about a decrease in the production of heroin. On the other, if we analyse the situation more in depth, we can see very clearly that the pandemic also offered heroin producers many opportunities to exploit and this explains the fact that the producing countries under analysis do not, in fact, register a significant decrease in production. The reason for this is that, as we already saw, while it is true that the controls at frontiers increased in the past year, they focused mainly and sometimes exclusively on individual profiles. The reason is because authorities, due to the urgent health emergency, were more focused on preventing the circulation of the virus, transmitted by people, than to prevent criminal activities. It was relatively easy then for criminal groups to exploit this momentary shift in priorities to increase their illegal activities and, in the case at stake, to move drugs from one country to another without a significant number of controls. More precisely, as highlighted by the European Commission (2021) in a communication aimed at defining the strategy to tackle organised crime until 2025, the partial shift in the operational focus to public order policing in 2020 has temporarily reduced the availability of personnel to perform investigative and intelligence work on numerous organised crime groups. Another opportunity brought about by the pandemic to criminal groups

resulted in the numerous jobs positions that were lost during 2020 due to the lockdown and interruption of activities. The developing economic crisis, as we know, has been slowly increasing the number of people losing their jobs and refolding to illegal jobs like the position of opium poppy lancer. This increase in the number of local workers available for cultivation has in this way compensated for the decrease in workers coming from nearby countries. Ultimately, according to the data that we can find in the UNODC World Drug Report (2020), comparing production in the year 2019 and 2020, no significant differences have been found, in terms of quantities of heroin produced. Some variations in data have only been found when looking at prices because of a slight increase in heroin prices in some countries at the beginning of the pandemic. This is a very interesting finding. In fact, while it could seem irrelevant to say that the numbers have not increased nor diminished since the previous year, this revealed “stability” does tell us something really important: the fact that production of opium has remained more or less unchanged by the pandemic, unlike the production of many products of the legitimate economy, points out to the resilience of criminal groups and to the rapidity at which they have been able to reinvent themselves changing their *modi operandi* and exploiting the critical situation in original ways. It shows us an alarming datum of reality which is that, unfortunately, criminal groups tend to be much more resilient than legitimate businesses in times of crisis. We will continue to observe a similar pattern when looking at the other types of drugs and the other phases of the drug trade. It is interesting to make a comparison with the legal economy to truly understand the importance of this finding. In fact, it is very easy to see how Covid-19 has impacted the production of legal goods. For example, ISTAT (2021) reports that in Italy during 2020 there was a 11,4% decrease in total GDP compared to the previous year. According to an article published by the BBC at the beginning of 2021, during the pandemic many people have lost their jobs or seen their incomes cut while unemployment rates have increased across major economies. In Italy, for example, unemployment rose to 11%; in the US and France it rose to 8.9% and in Germany, to 4.3%. Some sectors, like tourism and hospitality, have come to a near standstill in several countries. According to another article, published by the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (2020), one of the main affected industries in Italy was the car industry that fell tremendously with a 15.3% decrease in production. This information gives us an idea about the impact that lockdowns and restrictions had on regular workers and on the production of legitimate businesses: if we compare these numbers with the change in opium level of production, we can easily understand why these results are alarming.

Now we will look at cocaine, which, according to the definition provided by the UNODC (2020) is also a plant-based drug, obtained from the refining of coca and produced mainly in Latin America, more specifically in Columbia, Peru, and Bolivia, where the coca bush is able to grow thanks to the warm and tropical climate. Since coca bush is a perennial plant that grows and is harvested throughout the year, the overall impact on the annual coca leaf harvest resulting from those borders restrictions has been limited.

However, cocaine production has been affected in terms of a reduction in eradication and shortage of precursors. For what concerns cocaine precursors, we must take into consideration the fact that cocaine hydrochloride, the most common cocaine retail product distributed across drug markets, relies on several precursor substances and essential chemicals. Most of these substances are diverted from legal supply in the chemical industry. UNODC reports at the end of 2020 that, while many cocaine manufacturers, especially in Colombia, are increasingly aiming to achieve self-sufficiency by producing certain crucial substances themselves, in most cases, they still have not reached this goal and they continue to rely heavily on importation.

Exactly for this reason, cocaine production has found some difficulty especially at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, before criminal groups could find new original solutions. Therefore, as Musumeci (2021) explains, in a very similar fashion as for the heroin market, the main limitations here have been due to the closure of borders and the increased difficulty in importing precursors from other countries. More specifically, the main problems have been registered because of the shortage of gasoline, usually imported from Venezuela, that represents one of the main components in cocaine manufacture. In some cases, the missing components have been replaced with others, synthetic ones, and this has resulted in a decreased purity of the final product at the consumer level. This is important to mention because this kind of implication can aggravate the damage to health caused by drugs consumption at global level, especially if this practice is maintained in the long-run, even after the eradication of the pandemic. In fact, a decreased purity of the final product can account for even greater health problems compared to the simple consumption of drug in its pure formula. Again, as in the case of opium, it is critical to point out that, while covid 19 has created some limitations for the producers it has also been a source of opportunities for them to exploit. In this case too in fact producers have enjoyed an increased freedom of action because of the partial reduction of security work in this area and the shift in its focus from objects to individuals.

2.2.2 Change in Amphetamine-type stimulants production due to Covid-19

We start again our analysis with the information provided in the UNODC World Drug Report of 2020. It has been reported here that most clandestine laboratories producing amphetamine-type stimulants dismantled in the last years, prior to 2020, had been found mainly in North America, which accounted for more than 99% of all laboratories found, followed by Europe and Asia, in much smaller quantities. What these laboratories produce the most is methamphetamine. Only 2% of production is dedicated to amphetamine and 1% to ecstasy. It is important to mention that data should be interpreted with caution as the reporting on the dismantling of laboratories is uneven across countries because of difficulty for authorities in certain countries to access them due to security issues. For what concerns Europe, many laboratories of synthetic drugs have been dismantled in the Netherlands and Belgium. With the outbreak of Covid-19 and due to the closure of venues and cancellation of festivals, in Europe and globally, the demand for these synthetic drugs,

especially MDMA, which are in fact used in recreational settings, seems to have diminished, at least for the short term. Another interesting implication during the pandemic for what concerns amphetamine-type drugs production has been the shift in the role of China in its traditional role as exporter of important chemical precursors. The increased difficulty in importing from China, again due to the closure of borders and the rise in frontier controls, has led many producers at the end of the year to replace Chinese substances with new types of precursors, synthetic ones. It is to see whether the damages to the health will increase (UNODC,2020). Therefore, in the case of these types of drugs the main implication, apart from the resilience that characterises, as we have seen, the production of all drugs, a decrease in the purity of its composition which in turn could account for a worsening in consumers' health. This problem must not be underestimated.

2.2.3 Change in cannabis production due to Covid-19

What was the situation of cannabis cultivation before Covid-19 and how has it change in the past year of pandemic and restrictions? We first spend a few words on the general cultivation of cannabis, and we then answer to the second part of this question. The most striking characteristic of this type of drug, in the context of our research, as reported by the UNODC (2020), is that, unlike other plant-based drugs, for which cultivation and production is concentrated only in a limited number of countries, cannabis is produced in almost all countries worldwide. It is useful here to consider two important premises: the first one is that most countries do not have a comprehensive system in place for monitoring areas under illicit cannabis cultivation and the second is that even the estimates reported on the issue by the UNODC do not generally meet scientific standards because the data for indirect indicators of cultivation generally fluctuate greatly from year to year and do not allow for the creation of any trends in the global practice of cannabis cultivation. However, if we carefully consider these premises, we can still observe through the direct and indirect indicators put in place by the UNODC (2020) in its research, that cultivation of cannabis plants has been reported in as many as 151 countries worldwide, home of 96% of the global population, during the last years. So, what has changed with the restrictions in 2020?

As explained by Musumeci (2021), domestic production of herbal cannabis does not appear to have been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. This does not come as a surprise as the restrictions imposed by the pandemic did not put limitations on domestic activities, at least not to illegal ones. In addition, 2020 revealed the nature of cannabis as a drug used for “stress-release” purposes more than for recreational ones, as the demand in the market did not fall significantly with the dramatic fall in the number of social gatherings and events worldwide. While at the production level there were no notable variations, this was not exactly true for distribution. The issues in this area are responsible for the increase in cannabis retail prices that have been reported in some countries; however, we will analyse more in depth the issues related to cannabis distribution later in the chapter.

2.3 drug smuggling

We will start as usual with some definitions. When we use the term “smuggling”, in the context of this thesis, we refer to the illegal transportation of objects, substances, information or people across an international border, in violation of applicable laws or other regulations (UNODC, 2020). It follows that “drug smuggling” refers to the illicit transportation of drugs across international borders. How drugs are used and are trafficked is constantly changing and the ways in which they are transported are continuously evolving in technical and organisational complexity. This process of technical evolution was only exacerbated during the pandemic, as criminal groups have too faced the stress test of limitation on transportations and have had to quickly think about new and innovative ways to continue their smuggling activities. For what concerns the issues related to this area of drug trade, Europol explains in a 2021 online publication, that drug smuggling too tends to contribute to the destabilisation of countries that are already faced with other serious socio-political problems. This is especially the case of the “Southern route”, that goes from Afghanistan through Pakistan or Iran, via the Persian Gulf and East Africa, because of its larger role in the supply of heroin and other drugs to Europe and its negative impact on many African countries.

2.3.1 change in heroin and cocaine smuggling due to Covid-19

We are now interested in the following questions: “what about heroin and cocaine traffics?”, “how did they change during the year 2020?” As previously mentioned the majority of heroin comes from Afghanistan and it generally follows three main routes: “the Balkan route”, whose path goes from Iran to Turkey and then crosses the Balkans until it reaches Europe; “the Southern route” that stops in Pakistan and then distributes the drug in the markets of China, south-east Asia, Africa, Western and Central Europe; Finally, the “Asian route”, that, although less used, is the route that links producers in Afghanistan with Russia, after crossing central Asia. The heroin that does not come from Afghanistan, usually comes from Mexico or Myanmar. The latter is distributed to Chinese, Australian and Southeast Asian markets. From here they arrive to India and then to the US. However, the greatest exporter of drugs in north America is Mexico, that refurbishes not only the US, but also Canada and smaller Latin-American markets (UNODC,2020). Of course, the pandemic has greatly influenced heroin traffics as this type of drug is mainly transported by land in the previously mentioned traditional routes. The main change in smuggling in this case has been a change in the ratio between heroin transported by land and by sea with an increase in the latter; however, criminals have not ceased to transport heroin via land in these three routes completely, because, while the number of controls during 2020 was higher, as we have seen, it was mainly focused on the control of individuals rather than objects. What about cocaine? Because cocaine traffic takes place mostly by sea it has not faced significant variations. The most

important routes cross the Pacific Ocean and are directed towards Ecuador and other Latin American regions. The drug is then brought from here to the border between Ecuador and the US. Aerial traffic exists in much smaller quantities. For what concerns access in Europe, the main entrance points of cocaine coming from Latin America are Spain, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Here the drug can arrive directly from Latin America, or it stops in transit regions like North Africa. therefore, Covid-19 has not significantly stopped cocaine traffic in any way. This is because the controls were increased in States frontiers on the land, and they did not affect traffics via sea significantly. The only minor cause of drop in the cocaine smuggled might be related to the increased number of aerial vehicles controls but, as we have previously mentioned, Aerial routes are rare for cocaine smuggling, and they are strongly outnumbered by those by sea (UNODC, 2020).

2.3.2 Change in amphetamine-type stimulants smuggling due to Covid-19

Have there been changes in the smuggling routes and quantities of amphetamine type drugs during 2020? We must consider that these types of drugs rely heavily on Aerial traffics and these have been greatly impacted by the pandemic; this is so because of the borders restrictions that have led to an increase in the number of vehicle controls. In addition, UNODC (2020) report has identified the central Asian zone as the most impacted for smugglers, so that in this area drug-related activities have faced a stalemate in the first months after the spread of the coronavirus. Because of this, amphetamines traffic to Europe and South-East Asia have encountered more difficulties than usual. Of course, criminal groups based there have quickly readapted and rethought their activities. In fact, many of them have moved to the “Southern Route” and have refolded on transportation via sea across the Indian ocean. This has been made evident by the increased amphetamine seizures in the Indian ocean described in the UNODC report.

2.3.3 Change in cannabis smuggling due to Covid-19

As the World Drug Report (2020) shows, cannabis trade has been the less impacted by the restrictions and the closure of borders. This can be explained in two ways, that constitute the same reasons why the cannabis production too has not encountered many obstacles during 2020. The first one is that, while the demand for some types of recreational drugs like cocaine, amphetamine and synthetic drugs have reduced in the past months due to the closure of venues and the enormous reduction in festivals, parties and concerts, cannabis demand, as well as heroin one although to a lesser extent, and therefore production and use, on the contrary, have reported stability and, in some cases, even an increase. In fact, cannabis is known to be used by many for the relaxing effect it can have on the mind, therefore it is easy to see how the target population already consuming it might have continued buying it or even increase its use because of the deep sense of uncertainty and restlessness triggered in the population by the pandemic and all its consequences. The stability in the demand and the consequent stability in

production of this type of drug made it possible for cannabis smugglers to work in 2020 with almost no differences compared to previous years; this was also possible because of the fact that, being cannabis produced almost everywhere, it was not affected by the closure of borders as much as the smuggling of other drugs was; in fact, it is important to underline again that cannabis routes are not comparable to those of heroin and cocaine. They entail much shorter paths as often cannabis consumers rely on domestic producers. It is even difficult to really call it smuggling and perhaps we could define it better as “distribution”. It follows that not only the closure of borders has not stopped criminals from distributing cannabis, but, in many cases, the decreased availability of other drugs due to the difficulties in smuggling brought about by the pandemic, has increased the demand for cannabis and therefore promoted the activities of criminal groups involved with its illegal trade (UNODC,2020).

2.4 Drug dealing

“Drug dealing”, also called “drug sale” is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “the activity of selling illegal drugs”. The need for adaptation after the outbreak of the virus has affected the entire supply chain and, consequently, also the local activity drug sale. In addition to the inability to move around empty squares, because of increased authorities’ control, it was the change in consumer demand that forced the clans to reinvent themselves, adopting a new *modus operandi* (Musumeci, 2021). However, we now know that distinct types of drugs have had different variations during 2020 in their level of demand. We will start with an analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on cannabis sales. Although cannabis is often associated with recreational use, the growth in demand during the lockdown, as we have already mentioned, has shown that it is the ability to remedy stress and anxiety that really stimulates and attracts consumers, more than entertainment. Since it is grown mostly domestically, it is a substance whose availability is hardly put to the test. Therefore, often with new and innovative ways to deliver the purchase to the consumer, cannabis sellers have continued their activities without too many complications. What happened to heroin sales instead? We said that the impact of the pandemic on demand for this type of drug was not significant, and that on production was mixed and ultimately stable if compared to the level of the previous year; however, the strong reliance of the heroin illicit business on routes by land and the increased number of frontiers controls has influenced its availability in some States, particularly the furthest from the three main areas of production: Afghanistan, Mexico, and Myanmar. Therefore, the inadequacy in the market for this drug, whose strong dependence created on consumers, as we said, always keeps demand stable regardless of the number of social events during the year, has been filled using synthetic opioids, in particular fentanyl, often consumed in combination with alcohol. According to the UNODC (2020), among the countries that have registered the greatest demand for fentanyl, in substitution of heroin, due to the lack of supply, are the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, and the Czech Republic. As for substances such as cocaine, MDMA and amphetamines, instead, whose consumption is contextual to gathering events, such as parties

and concerts, the demand has decreased and so has the supply accordingly. The closure of clubs and discos has in fact weakened the demand, except for countries such as Holland and Belgium, where sales have remained largely unchanged. Also, in this period the clans acted on two levels: the first is direct supply, thanks to which they were able to gather immediate profit, and the second is usury. While the UNOCD (2020) noted that mail delivery of drugs ordered on the darknet accounted for only 0.2% of retail sales in the United States and the European Union before the pandemic, online supply has increased greatly during the lockdowns. This mainly derives from the increase in encrypted systems that allow the so-called "dead drops", through which the buyer pays the sum of the product and receives the position to withdraw it via social media or text message. An emblematic case of online sales is the Hydra platform, one of the largest markets in the darknet, which has handled most of the distribution of drugs in Russia. However, interpersonal dealing has not disappeared definitively, on the contrary, it was more present than it seemed. The UNOCD (2020) report explains that in Macedonia and in the United Kingdom, and therefore it can be assumed, in general in Europe, the drug dealers have taken on the role of delivery boys and in some cases of medical personnel, to avoid being contracted by the police during the sales operations. In some cases, they simply used the strategy of walking the dog to meet the buyer, in others they made more complex operations such as the delivery of drugs by mail and anti-covid safety devices to ensure greater flexibility in checks. In the last months recruitment has been easier worldwide for criminal associations. For example, as evidenced by the article by Antonio Frascilla and Carlo Tecce (2020) in L'Espresso, in Italy students in the most fragile city districts, especially in the southern regions, are particularly exposed to Mafia recruitment. Often demotivated by the lack of devices necessary to carry out online schooling, and having to share a family atmosphere of crisis, young people have left school and taken up some work. they started by unloading "goods, fruit, meats and vegetables" and then found themselves in increasingly critical situations, such as robberies and shootings, without being able to get out anymore. This is a condition that already existed in certain cities in the south of Italy and the situation has been only exacerbated with the pandemic, online schooling, and the worsening of people's living conditions. But the pressure of the clans weighs primarily on the shoulders of the parents. As already mentioned, the Mafia is also deeply dedicated to usury, which condemns any type of trade, from restaurants to agricultural businesses. Nicola Gratteri (2020), chief prosecutor of the first maxi trial at the 'Ndrangheta "Rebirth Scott", argues that the mafia tends to play the role of benefactor through advantageous short-term loans and organized crime. In this way it apparently takes on the role of the apparently absent State and by so doing it contributes to delegitimizing it in an already very fragile political situation in Italy. In addition, Mafia acts as a "benefactor" to obtain "social consensus", which allows it in turn to gain more political power in the local territory and to eventually influence the decision-making process by dictating its own rules.

2.5 Afghanistan case study

For this study on the impact of the pandemic and related restrictions on the international drug market, a case study was taken as an example to make the analysis of what has been said so far more concrete. Although it is not a model for all countries and types of drugs, nor the most standardised case given that Afghanistan is the greater opium producer at global level, it allows us to provide a very clear picture of the crime mechanisms and of how criminals can change their behaviours to survive and grow.

We already explained that it is the weaker countries at institutional level that are most involved in illegal practises linked to the drug trade, and Afghanistan perfectly suits this description.

2.5.1 Afghanistan drugs market background

According to the research of David Mansfield (2018), displayed in its paper “Turning deserts into flowers”, poppy cultivation in Afghanistan has a long history. Based on his words, we offer a brief report of its main developments in the areas of drug production and smuggling, to enable a more complete understanding of the implications that the pandemic had in the country’s drug trade during the last year. As reported in the paper, evidence of significant production in Afghanistan only started in the 1980s. Its development started, in particular, because of the opium production ban in Pakistan and, most importantly, because of the outbreak of the civil war within the State (1989-1992). It was exactly during these years that Afghanistan emerged as a global leader in opium cultivation. The main reason that accounted for the spread of these illegal activities in the territory was the absence of a functioning and strong State, a problem that was only worsened by the civil war and the difficult socio-political situation of those years. This absence of the State in turn accounted for the impossibility of supporting growth in the legal rural economy and for the absence of effective law enforcement to constrain cultivation. In addition, most of the Afghan population in those years was in poverty and opium was the perfect opportunity for the poor to grow high-value cash crops and gain some much-needed liquidity; therefore, because the social and economic benefits were so strong for the population at large, little was done to contain its diffusion, apart for some rare drug control, aimed more at attracting the attention of foreign sponsors for development assistance than at a real eradication of the problem. With the Taliban seizure of southern provinces in 1994 and then of Kabul, production expanded even more thanks to the removal of militias along the major roads and the further reduction on job opportunities in the field of legal rural economy. The level of cultivation rose further following the Taliban seizure of power, from 18000 hectares in 1987 to 91000 hectares in 1999. During the 1990s cultivation, that was previously concentrated in the South, East, and Northeast, expanded to parts of the North and the Centre of the country. Did Taliban take control of the opium trade in those years? Not really. Many argue that this is

so, as they observe that it was during the Taliban rule that trade became an integral part of the Afghan economy. However, very often production and trade were in the hand of local political groups and the Taliban's responsibility was only based on their unwillingness to challenge those powers. Other times it was in fact Taliban who were involved in trade and taxation. After numerous requests by the UN and the international donors to act against the drugs trade finally Taliban imposed a ban in the 2000, reducing cultivation from 82000 hectares in 2000 to 8000 hectares in 2001. Unfortunately, while this development was effective in the short run it yielded the opposite effect in the long run. In fact, in the years after 2001 there was a great resumption in production and opium became a mainstay of the Afghan economy. This resumption was due to the incredible hardship that the rural population after the ban and its consequent willingness to rebel when the opium price started to increase because of the restrictions. In that period opium even became a major source of political power: members of parliament, ministers and members of the security were thought to be directly involved in the drugs trade and to receive payments from these illegal activities. After the fall of Taliban due to the US invasion the opium production increased even more because of high prices and absence of government control so that by 2004 opium poppy could be found in 194 out of 364 districts and in all 34 provinces, compared to only 54 districts in 8 provinces in 1994. After 2004 production continued to rise, falling between 2008 and 2010 thanks to counter-narcotics efforts, shift in trade between wheat and opium and a growth in the opportunities in the legal economy, only to rise again since 2011. In fact, the factors that accounted for the reduction of opium production in the years 2008-2010 once again only had short-term benefits and did not manage to eradicate the problem at its source. Reduced production in some Afghan provinces were offset by dramatic increases in production in more remote desert areas within the same provinces, areas that had not been under opium poppy cultivation before.

2.5.2 Poppy cultivators, precursors shortage and impact on production

According to Giampaolo Musumeci (2021), who has explained this aspect of our research very well in his podcast "Nessun luogo è lontano", the main factors of change linked to opium production in Afghanistan are all linked to the closure of borders between Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries. These new restrictions have led to three main implications. The first one has been a shortage in poppy lancers, usually coming from abroad, especially from Pakistan, because of governments' prohibition to travel across countries. The shortage in workforce has been additionally increased by the fear and anxiety generated by the spread of the virus, which in turn has led cultivators to decrease their hours of work. The third aspect that accounted for a diminished opium production has been the shortage in fundamental precursors for the creation of heroin. In fact, Afghanistan not only cultivates opium, but in "normal" times it also produces the heroin final product. However, the shortage of precursors and particularly of acetic anhydride, again due to the closure of frontiers and the increased controls between States, has greatly limited its activities. In some cases, a shortage of acetic anhydride was not caused by border closures in and

around Afghanistan, but by reduced opportunities to obtain the substance from licit markets such as those in China and the European Union (Musumeci, 2021).

2.5.3 Increased poverty and unemployment because of Covid-19 and its impact on the Afghan drug trade

According to the United Nations Development Programme new assessment (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic after one year has had tremendous effects on the global economy. It has increased poverty and unemployment, in much greater quantities than during the 2008-2009 financial crisis. While it is difficult to provide precise data because of the ongoing and uncertain nature of the pandemic, as we do not know when it will be completely eradicated, we can say that the strongest effects of this crisis will be felt as usual by developing countries, with the poorest among the population being the most affected. Among these effects we must account for a change and an aggravation of the illicit drug economy. In fact, as the 2008-2009 financial crisis taught us, economic downturns tend to significantly influence the global drug market and usually aggravate the situation. Here, therefore, we want to argue that not only there is a relation between general Covid-19 restrictions and governmental measures, and drug production, smuggling and sale, but that there also exists a second direct relation, this time between the increase in poverty brought about by the pandemic and an aggravation of drug trade. First, we will provide a more precise picture of the economic downturn that has developed during the last year in Afghanistan. The premise is, again, that Afghanistan situation is not the same as any other country, but it is useful to have a more concrete idea instead of analysing only the general global situation. In addition, it gives us an approximate picture of the economic downturn of other developing countries that have a similar situation. Later we will list the factors that explain the correlation between this increase in poverty and an aggravation of the illegal drug trade. So, what is the economic situation of Afghanistan right now, after a year of pandemic? How have the restrictions increased poverty and unemployment? Let us start by saying that, because the restrictions have for long periods of time during the year led many legal activities to shut down, in Afghanistan prices of key food items such as wheat, wheat flour and cooking oil has greatly increased. According to the UNDP (2020), to make matters worse, Afghanistan has suffered during 2020 from a wheat deficit, which is usually offset by imports, primarily from Kazakhstan; however, to minimise the economic impact of the pandemic Kazakhstan during 2020 has introduced an overall export cap so that the price of wheat has increased greatly in Afghanistan and the effects have been felt especially by the most vulnerable that already depended on humanitarian assistance. The situation in 2020 was therefore already incredibly critical. At the time in which the research is conducted, more than 80 per cent of people in Afghanistan are living on less than the international applied poverty line (\$1.90 per day). The Covid-19 crisis has come on top of a string of

atypical weather years, including a widespread drought in 2018 and high seasonal floods in 2019, which had already resulted in high levels of hunger and malnutrition and escalating rates of household debt. These recent climate-related shocks have placed Afghanistan on the verge of famine and made the country extremely vulnerable to other shocks, such as the current pandemic. The disruption of markets and mobility restrictions related to the Covid-19 crisis have additionally negatively impacted labour markets and purchasing power in Afghanistan in a time where a quarter of the labour force was already unemployed and 80 per cent of employment was unstable. This has impacted considerably rural livelihoods and food and nutrition security (UNDP, 2021). Now we will try to understand in which way all these developments i.e. increase in poverty, unemployment, and discontent, tend to lead and have led to an aggravation of the illicit drug-related activities in Afghanistan. The relation between economic downturn and change in drug trade is explained by many factors. The economic crisis generated by Covid-19 has had an impact on the amount of budget available for measures aimed at reducing drug-related illegal activities; it has led to increased unemployment and therefore to less economic opportunities for the population; it has increased corruption and therefore decreased these States efforts to contrast these activities; it has led the population to feel more stress and anxiety. In turn this has caused an increased demand for drug and therefore to increased production, smuggling and distribution. Finally, there has been more involvement of people with drug disorders in illegal activities because of their need to finance their personal drug consumption in such a time of crisis. This is what has happened to Afghanistan among many other countries (UNODC, 2020).

2.5.4 closure of borders and impact on drugs smuggling and sale

As we saw in paragraph 2.3.1, because Afghan heroin trade relies heavily on transport via land it has been greatly impacted by the pandemic and all its border restrictions (Musumeci, 2021). In fact, as we have explained, restrictions have led to an increase in vehicle controls at frontiers and according to the UNODC (2020) report, this has limited the use of the traditional “Balkan Route” exporting heroin to Europe and Southeast Asia while it has led criminals to move on to the “Southern route” and to transport merch by sea up to the European coasts through the Indian ocean. This readaptation of the criminal groups has not managed to completely solve the problem caused by the closure of borders and a shortage of heroin has ultimately been reported internationally so that the insufficiency in the market has led consumers, especially those heavily dependent on heroin, to substitute it with synthetic opioids like fentanyl, often consumed with alcohol. According to the UNODC (2020) report, among the countries that have most consumed fentanyl, we can find the UK, US, Italy, and Check Republic. The UNODC has used, for its controls, the Drugs Monitoring Platform, an early warning tool for promptly shedding light on, identifying, and anticipating possible emerging and ongoing trends, patterns and dynamics related to drug trafficking routes, with the aim of supporting law enforcement, other operational activities, and policymakers. The comparison that the UNODC report was able to provide covers the time frame going from March to December in both 2019 and

2020. This comparison has revealed that, while the “Southern route” has been used more than in previous years, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has not stopped the “Balkan route” from maintaining its status as the principal trafficking route for Afghan opiates, despite the increased number of controls. Despite short-term fluctuations, perhaps resulting from waves of Covid-19-related restrictions in some countries, the large heroin seizures made during 2020 in countries other than Afghanistan suggest that large-scale opiate trafficking has continued throughout the pandemic, possibly by means of larger shipments than before it began (UNODC, 2020).

2.6 How is the international community responding

2020 has marked the 20th anniversary of the Palermo Convention, also known as the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime to which 190 countries are party. The Convention was adopted by the UN General Assembly in November 2000, entered into force three years later and it is supplemented by three Protocols. Among the various sectors of crime, it deals with, special importance is given to the international war on drugs. Now we will look at other international efforts and initiatives that have been taken during the years to counter drug-related criminal activities. A very important one is the Shanghai Opium Commission that in 1909 has put the strengthening of international cooperation at the centre of the discussion on drug control. This was followed by the first International Opium Convention, signed at the Hague in 1912, the three drug conventions of the League of Nations and the three drug conventions adopted by the United Nations in 1961, 1971 and 1988. International cooperation continued to play a key role in more recent policy documents. A question arises: “why is international cooperation so critical in tackling the problem of drug trade?” This is so because efforts to solve it at national level have not worked in the past and they are likely to fail in the future too. In fact, the drug problem is not restricted to just one country. On the contrary, it affects most countries in an intertwined manner. Responses to these illegal activities at the national level are necessary, but they are not sufficient to cope with the global drug problem unless they are also well coordinated across several countries. For example, interventions in one country, leading to a reduction in the drug supply, may prompt a replacement effect, with supply increasingly originating in other countries. Therefore, again, during the fifty-second session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, in 2009, the need for more and better international cooperation has been reminded several times. This need has been underlined once again by the General Assembly in 2016 and in 2019 Ministerial Declaration on “Strengthening Our Actions at the National, Regional and International Levels to Accelerate the Implementation of Our Joint Commitments to Address and Counter the World Drug Problem”. According to the non-profit organization Drug Policy Alliance (2020), UN approach to the war on drugs in the past years has been completely wrong. In fact, according to it, it is a criminal justice rather than health-oriented approach and it continues to promote ineffective eradication and interdiction policies in countries where drugs are produced. According to the organisation, a good solution would be to start to envisage the

legalisation of cannabis, to reduce violence in Mexico, legal exports from Afghanistan aimed at medical use and the modelling of Portugal's drug laws in other countries. While these have been the general efforts conducted by the international community and the main themes of the debate concerning the war on drugs before the pandemic, we want to understand for the aim of this thesis research, what developments in international cooperation have been brought about by the global health emergency of 2020. Therefore, now the question is "how is the international community responding to the global crisis and its influence on drug trade?" Since the pandemic first started, Interpol has worked with law enforcement in its 194 member countries to monitor changing drug trafficking patterns and to share intelligence. In addition, it has regularly issued Purple Notices, which provide information on objects, devices and concealment methods used by criminals. One of them has detailed how criminal groups were using food delivery services to traffic drugs during government-imposed lockdowns. The Interpol Secretary General has also repeatedly warned that organized crime will increasingly try as it has already started doing, to take advantage of the economic consequences of Covid-19 to sink proceeds from drug trafficking and other crimes into the legitimate economy, thus furthering their influence and money laundering potential. As Interpol itself reports in 2020, several additional international initiatives in 2020 have been developed for countering global illegal trade covering the cultivation, manufacturing, distribution, and sale of substances subject to drug restriction and prohibition laws, often in cooperation with other law enforcement agencies. These include Project AIRCOP with its Joint Airport Interdiction Taskforces established to strengthen airport controls and the newly-established WCO Project COLIBRI, a multidisciplinary initiative funded by the European Union which aims at monitoring and controlling General Aviation through an ambitious capacity building programme and sophisticated technological innovation. In general, what must be done, according to the UNODC 2020 annual report, is to continue the work started by the international community in the field of the war on drug and aiming at achieving a stronger interdependence between States, by improving coordination of policies and interventions and assisting countries with limited resources and capacities in undertaking the necessary interventions. This international cooperation can take many forms, including intergovernmental cooperation frameworks and mechanisms, the development of guidelines that promote best practices in the fields of drug demand or supply reduction, and capacity-building initiatives that strengthen the ability of countries to counter the drug problem. The States members of the UNODC must work in coordination to achieve these goals more and more while reporting all their efforts to counter the problem and sharing, as best as they can, their intelligence information. Another practice to improve, according to the UNODC (2020), is that of shared deliveries, that will be particularly important in this time of crisis. Controlled delivery is defined by the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances as a "technique of allowing illicit or suspect consignments of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances to pass out of, through or into the territory of one or more countries, with the knowledge and under the supervision of their competent authorities, with a view to identifying persons

involved in the commission of offences established the Convention”. Article 11 of the Convention then asks the parties to take all the necessary measures “to allow for the appropriate use of controlled delivery at the international level”. The technique of controlled delivery was also advocated in subsequent international drug policy instruments, including the 2009 Political Declaration and Plan of Action. Today it is of vital importance, according to the UNODC to strengthen this practice. In fact, while this technique is highly effective, because it is also resource-intensive, not all countries have the incentive to engage in it. Therefore, efforts must be made to engage those countries which are not yet involved in the war on drugs by helping them understand the importance of this practice so that they include it among the success indicators of national law enforcement and find the right incentive to participate fully in international cooperation against drug trade (UNODC, 2020)

CHAPTER 3: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the first two chapters of this thesis, we have made a descriptive analysis of the phenomenon at stake, namely the impact of the ongoing pandemic of coronavirus, started at the beginning of 2020, on transnational organised crime. Although this descriptive analysis has already been very useful in understanding the ongoing dynamics of transnational crime as well as the cooperative efforts that States are making at international level to tackle the issue, we want to go even further in our study. Our goal in this last section is to provide a new analysis of the phenomenon, this time a critical one, by interpreting it in a liberal perspective. It is, in fact, the stance that we personally take towards issues regarding International Relations and on this one among the others. Therefore, the question we will focus on now will be “how do liberals interpret the impact of the pandemic on transnational crime?”, “which solutions do they propose?” For the sake of a better understanding, we will first make a brief description of “liberalism” and its basic assumptions in the context of International Relations studies. Then, we will go on by focusing on the strand of liberalism that is most relevant for our analysis: institutional liberalism. At the end of the chapter, we will see how the recent developments objects of our thesis have the power to change the IR debate. In addition, we will see that these same developments are triggering numerous reflections about the future of the current liberal international order.

3.1 liberalism

According to Jackson and Sorensen (2012), liberalism is the International Relations tradition that sharply contrasts with Realism. While Realists hold a very pessimistic view of human nature and believe that individuals and States make their decisions only based on their lust for power, liberals hold the opposite view. On the one hand, they agree that individuals, and therefore States, are to a certain extent self-interested and competitive, on the other they still manage to remain very optimistic for the future of humanity. Liberal scholars tend to think that collaborative social action leads to more benefits at both domestic and international level and that the international community, understanding this, can cooperate to achieve a “new and better life” for all people, with guaranteed individual rights, democratic governments, and a higher level of material welfare for everybody. Not all liberals however agree on the extent to which such progress is possible and on the level of difficulty to achieve it. For example, the history of International Relations studies teaches us, as explained by Jackson and Sorensen (2012) in their book “Introduction to International Relations”, that early liberals around the First World War were excessively optimistic and for this reason they were called “utopian liberals” by rival scholars on the opposite side of the debate. After the period of crisis that hit many newly developed democracies and the rise of authoritarian regimes in many European countries, both leading to the outbreak of the second World War, however, these utopian liberal scholars

started approaching more realist ideas. They recognised, at least partially, the self-centred nature and competitiveness typical of the individual, and in the meanwhile they managed to keep some of their optimism and enthusiasm about future human progress. Although they were in part disillusioned, they still believed that international cooperation could help in the process of human evolution and progress. Furthermore, a new surge of excessive liberal optimism rose again at the end of the Cold War propelled by the notion of liberal democracy, just to fade again after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. In fact, while the crisis of newly developed democracies and the first world war had risen the doubt that democracies may not have stability and last throughout time, these attacks raised a new problem: they justified claims against liberalism as the best political international order as new claims were raised about the existence of possible negative sides to the ever-increasing interdependence between States. The terrorist attacks that started taking place at the beginning of the century can be considered equally disillusioning, in terms of the doubts they generated in the benefits of increased interdependence between States, as the situation we are living today and dealing with in this thesis, that of transnational organised crime; therefore, we will soon see that the stance of liberals on the recent developments concerning the pandemic and its consequences on international crime presents some similarities with the one that has been taken following some tragic events of the past, like terrorist attacks, past occurrences of transnational crime, other past pandemics, and humanitarian crises, for which the strong interdependence between States was at least partly responsible. Regardless of these events, as we have already mentioned and is worth repeating, liberals in the past have managed to maintain a generally positive stance on human nature and therefore, of international cooperation between States. Because they think that States exist to underwrite the liberty of their citizens and enable them to pursue their happiness without undue interference from other people, they hope for always greater cooperation at international level to achieve these goals. We will see what has changed in these views following the outbreak of the coronavirus and the relative adaptation of TOCGs, together with the considerations that liberals have been making after these recent developments. The four strands, “sociological liberalism”, “interdependence liberalism”, “institutional liberalism”, and “republican liberalism” that are listed and described by Jackson and Sorensen (2012) in their book, are very useful to recognise the most important aspects of current liberal ideas about international relations. However, we will focus for our analysis exclusively on “institutional liberalism”, as it is the most relevant in the context of our study.

3.1.1 Institutional liberalism, Covid-19, and transnational organised crime

As Jackson and Sorensen (2012) explain, the strand of “institutional liberalism” started developing following World War I, when Woodrow Wilson had the vision to transform international relations, through the creation of the League of Nations, from a jungle of chaotic power politics to a “zoo” of regulated and peaceful intercourse. Since then, the utopian optimism proposed by Wilson has decreased; however, the idea

brought about by institutional liberals is still the same: international institutions help promote cooperation between States and alleviate the lack of trust between them. This lack of trust and fear of each other has been for years the main problem regarding inter-State relations, and realists, on the opposite side of the debate, have often proposed competition and self-interest as a solution. Today this fear and lack of trust often does not translate into war, as it could in the past. International relations in fact in recent years have shifted from “low politics” i.e. related to the use of force, to “high politics”, i.e. political affairs in which economy is at the top of the agenda. Therefore, today the strand of institutional liberalism is relevant if we consider how cooperation between States not only helps maintaining peaceful relations between them, but also brings numerous other benefits, on top of which economic ones. Why then is institutional liberalism useful for a critical analysis of transnational organised crime? We consider this strand of liberalism the most useful because it deals with institutions and the support that they give to maintain peace and safeguard all States’ economies, which are two extremely important themes in the phenomenon we are analysing. In fact, we argue here that institutions have been and will be critical actors in the war against transnational organised crime, especially after its worsening due to the pandemic; in addition we claim that, to solve this problem through international cooperation, will also mean to save the economies of the States involved, as we have already explained that economic issues are now at the top of the international political agenda and we are now aware, thanks to the explanations in the first two chapters, of the toll that TOCGs tend to take on the global economy at large. To go ahead and better understand “institutional liberalism” we first need to understand what exactly institutions are. Institutions are defined by Jackson and Sorensen (2012) as either sets of rules which govern State actions in particular areas, or international organisations. Examples of the latter are NATO, the UN, the WTO, the EU etc. Both these types of institutions have been fundamental not only in tackling the pandemic at international level in the year 2020, but also in managing the specific problem of transnational organised crime and all its recent pandemic-related changes of dynamics. We have seen in the past two chapters in the sections called “international policy implications”. Now that we know what institutions are and why they are relevant in the context at stake, we will seek to understand what the International Relations debate is about on this issue and what is, precisely, the position of institutional liberals within it. While realists would propose an international order of independent and self-centred States and therefore, they would want to tackle this issue, as all the others, on an individual basis, liberals, and particularly institutional liberals, propose an international order of reciprocal help and cooperation to tackle common problems (Jackson and Sorensen, 2012). In this thesis we share the latter view, and we believe that cooperation through institutions is the only solution to tackle the problem of transnational organised crime which, on the one hand involves non-State actors, namely TOCGs, on the other endangers all societies and economies at transnational level. In other words, we believe that the causes of transnational organised crime cannot be territorialised and blamed on specific States, and, at the same time, its effects concern all States and must therefore be considered as a common challenge to solve through cooperation. We also think that

TOCGs' activities, for the toll they take on our economies, represent a major threat. This threat is, again, almost impossible to fight on an individual basis, as the past has taught us. This is so because TOCGs, contrarily to individual State security systems, possess on their part networks that cooperate across several different countries. Criminal groups themselves understand the importance of cooperation for the success of their illegal business ventures. In addition, as we will see, often tackling the problem in one country manages to solve the problem but only in the short term and in that specific geographical area. Unfortunately, often eradicating transnational crime in a country means increasing its level of activity in another one. What is then the solution adopted by the international community to tackle this complex problem? how have institutions worked in this area to safeguard the societies and economies of the States involved? As we have seen in the previous chapters, the UN, among other international organisations, has played a major role in understanding the problem and reflecting on some possible measures to solve it. It has done so through its specific office dedicated to this issue, the UNODC. In addition, many other international organisations and agencies like Interpol and Europol, respectively at international and regional level, have been critical in the war against crime and reflect again the work and importance of the international cooperation. But let us analyse these three institutions more in depth. First the UNODC; what does it do? According to its official website, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has been helping make the world safer from drugs, organized crime, corruption, and terrorism by promoting peace and sustainable well-being as deterrents for now two decades. The UNODC bases its work on institutional liberalism and on the conviction that the scale of these problems is too great for States to confront alone; therefore, it offers practical assistance and encourages transnational approaches to action through its global programmes and network of field offices. In addition, right now the UNODC is supporting Member States in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at its core. The current Agenda recognizes that the rule of law, together with health-oriented responses to drug use, are integral part of sustainable development. What about Interpol? According to its own definition, which we can find on the Interpol official website, the full name of the inter-governmental organisation is the International Criminal Police Organization, and it is composed by 194 member countries; its main goal is to help police in all of them to work together and ultimately, make the world a safer place. More concretely, what it does is to enable all member countries to share and access data on crimes and criminals, while offering a range of technical and operational support. Finally we have Europol, that differently from Interpol, which is an independent international organisation, is the European Union's law enforcement agency. Its main goal is to achieve a safer Europe for the benefit of all the EU citizens. It is based in the Hague, and it supports the 27 EU Member States in their fight against terrorism, cybercrime, and other forms of organised crime.

3.2 Are the pandemic and its effects on transnational crime a setback for the current international liberal order?

As Qingming Huang reports in his article “The Pandemic and the Transformation of Liberal International Order”, published in the *Journal of Chinese Political Science* in October 2020, a heated debate concerning the protection of the current liberal international order started developing worldwide starting from 2018. This debate was triggered by the signature by 43 leading international relations scholars in the United States of a public Statement urging for the protection of the liberal order. Many supporters of this position offered their contribution on the debate; on the other hand, there were also many IR specialists who criticised the Statement for not considering the chronic problems typical of the liberal international model. Huang (2020) argues that the enormous shock that has followed the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, together with the challenges it has generated in the relations between States, and, as we have seen, on the area of transnational organised crime, have represented a setback for the current liberal international order, and therefore they have put renewed attention on the debate about maintaining or restructuring the current status quo of relations between States. Specifically, starting from the interesting reflections offered in his article “The Pandemic and the Transformation of Liberal International Order”, and the claims presented in the article, published in the *Journal of World Businesses* in June 2021, we are interested in understanding: how has the pandemic changed the dynamics of the current liberal international order and harmed its major foundations? What are the implications of these changes? Will we still have a liberal international order in the following years, or will the current order be slowly replaced by a new model? What will be the role played by model challengers such as China in this scenario? Firstly, we want to analyse the bases of the current liberal international order to deeply understand what we are referring to and how the pandemic may change its main features. The current order, according to Huang (2020), rests upon three crucial foundations: the liberal ideology based on democratic values and norms; the emphasis on international cooperation and multilateral institutions; and a group of defenders with common goals to preserve liberal values, principles, and institutions. These core foundational components are greatly challenged by the coronavirus pandemic. The three most significant forces that are currently shaking it at both domestic and international level are the entrenchment of authoritarianism, following the model led by China and other challengers, the exacerbation of nationalism, enabled by nationalist and populist politicians worldwide, and the competition among major powers, including the retreating US, the weakening EU, and the rising China. All these forces were already existing in the global order before the pandemic but have been quickly accelerated by it. The scholar claims that these forces are slowly changing the international panorama and shifting away the global order from its liberal configuration; The international model may become more and more similar to that proposed by the IR paradigm of realism, one made of independent, self-centred States working for their own economic and political interests and alienated from one another. In addition, in the pandemic scenario, challengers like

China are now able to exploit the internal division and fragmentation within the West and extend their influence globally, while also endangering more and more the international liberal order. So, how do we know that the international liberal order is declining, and that the pandemic has accelerated the process? Firstly, as Huang (2020) explains, because of the current decline of US in the international arena. It is worth noting that without the US this liberal order would have never been successful in the first place. This decline was already noticeable before the pandemic but has increased a lot in the past year, especially for the toll that the numerous lockdowns, closures of borders and mobility restrictions took on its economy. Another contributor has been US gradual disengagement from international affairs, especially after Trump took office, and therefore its slow shift towards an increasingly self-centred politics. The second sign of crisis is, on the contrary, the rise of China and Russia in the international arena; these two countries are a threat for the international order as they disrupt it with their own political systems, interests, and ideologies. Particularly, China has gained more and more prominence in the international landscape in 2020 after it was able to tackle the effects of the pandemic in a relatively quick and effective manner; other than solving its health emergency, China was the only major economy who grew in 2020, although at the slowest pace in the past 40 years. In addition, its economy grew a record 18.3% in the first quarter of 2021 compared to the same quarter in the previous year, and this represents the biggest jump in gross domestic product for China since 1992. Its economic advantage already puts it in a great position to rise in the oncoming years and take the place of the declining US. This is not all; many scholars have admired the ability of China to rapidly tackle the emergency and have attributed this capacity to its political system and sets of values. This public exaltation of China could lead, in turn, to an upsurge of anti-liberal ideals among scholars and influence States towards using the same values to rebuild the international order. The result would be the configuration of the international order shifting from liberal values to more realist ones and a new global political model no longer led by the US but by China. Although this is a very strong claim, Huang is not the only one with such arguably “dramatic” views. According to Hitt, Holmes and Arregle (2021), authors of “The Covid-19 pandemic and the new world (dis)order”, “the pandemic has heightened many of the concerns about globalization and may lead to more nationalistic regulatory policies in the future”. This claim is clearly explained in the article in three parts. The first reason why this might happen lies on the discontent of the global population due to the heavy economic repercussions of the pandemic. In fact, while economies are now expected to rebound to some degree and have started doing so, the EU’s GDP remains for now well below its pre-pandemic levels and many of the job losses may be permanent. This discontent in turn could lead politicians to have short-term and visible responses to their citizens to the detriment of more long-term and efficient decisions. The second factor that could lead to more nationalistic policies soon is the need to control access to certain goods, enormously highlighted by the media during the pandemic in response to the shortages in medical supplies, especially at the beginning of the health emergency. Finally, the third factor, which we have already mentioned, could be the attention that has been given by the media to the differences

between democratic and autocratic political institutions and their effectiveness in responding to the crises emanating from the pandemic. It is appropriate to argue that the pandemic has speeded up a process that was already showing its first signs of existence. Until now, however, we have only dealt with the change in international order triggered by the pandemic. What about the effects of the worsening of transnational organised crime emanated by the pandemic on the debate? Has it caused a disillusionment in liberal scholars? Has it led to rethink the international model of globalisation and ever-increasing interdependence? We still do not know precisely how the positions of liberals will change in the IR debate, because of the pandemic and its consequences; however, it is very useful to make a comparison between the ongoing adaptation of TOCGs to the pandemic, and the many terroristic attacks, starting from the 11 September 2001 New York attack, that present some similarities with the phenomenon at stake and have been at the heart of the liberal agenda on IR for years. Firstly, it is important to explain why we are drawing this comparison. Is there a nexus between terrorism and organised crime? Indeed, there is. Terrorism is another form of "organized" criminal behaviour, and although the nature of their aims is different- terrorism has a political objective while organized crime usually seeks primarily economic gain- the two phenomena can very often overlap. The first reason why they do is because terror groups in the last years are learning from crime networks and they are increasingly turning to organised crime to fund their activities. In other words, the problem of transnational organised crime and its worsening, triggered by the pandemic, could also lead, eventually, to more terroristic attacks. It is worth mentioning, although quite straightforward, that, if this were true, the costs of transnational organised crime would be enormously higher and more urgent; such a revelation would put transnational crime at the top of the IR agenda as this is the place reserved inter alia to the issue of terrorism. The second reason is that, although transnational crime and terrorism are two separate realities, the two phenomena have something important in common and this makes it worth to compare them: they both put into question some of the basic assumptions of the liberal international order, namely that increased interdependence between States and globalisation have more benefits than downsides. For these reasons, we assume that the questions that will be raised in the IR debate, considering these new global developments, will be very similar to the one following the 11 September 2001 terroristic attacks. One of the main questions after these attacks was: "is this strong interdependence and connectedness of States promoted by the current liberal order making it easier for these problematic circumstances to happen?" Although in a different scenario, this question is likely to be raised again during the post-pandemic era. The issue of security, and therefore all that is linked to terrorism and TOCGs, is strictly connected to the debate about the global political order. Realists tend to challenge the current order, by focusing on these challenges and using them as an argument to replace it. They underline the fact that it is this connectedness that allows terrorism and transnational crime to develop and grow across different countries because of the free movement of people and objects, the free market and the openness to other countries that is typical of the liberal order and of its underlying values. The liberal value most attacked by realists is that of trust, which is increasingly

present in the liberal order in the relations between different States. The solution that realist scholars propose as an alternative is to go back to a State of competitiveness in the international community with no cooperation whatsoever. According to Jackson and Sorensen (2012), the problem with this argument, as it has been in the past in the debate after the terroristic attacks, is that realists tend to only consider State actors in their political analysis. As a result, they tend to territorialise the threat of terrorism, while not considering the full picture and losing sight of the reality of non-State actors, namely of the fact that TOCGs actually do not coincide with the State but they are separate from it although they may lead their activities in its territory. We argue here that realists will probably make the same mistake in the new debate about TOCGs in the post-pandemic era. Liberals, on the other hand, tend to be aware of this reality; they know that usually terrorist groups and organised crime networks are not representative of a specific territory or State with which all the others must compete, but rather they represent non-State actors that the whole international community, through the help of institutions and organised cooperation, must see as a “common enemy” and seek to destroy (Jackson and Sorensen, 2012). Therefore, we claim that, while it is true that these new challenges could demand new strategies, like greater security at international borders and other entry points to countries as well as closer inspection of international transport of goods, to try to reduce the illegal activities of TOCGs, contrarily to what realists claim, the situation could paradoxically lead to a strengthening of the liberal cooperation between States. In fact, the worsening of this phenomenon, brought about by the pandemic, together with the worsening of the global economy also due to the lockdowns and restrictions, could be interpreted by the international community as a common enemy to fight together. Only in this way will these challenges increase rather than reduce the cooperation between States and lead to greater and more equal solutions for the whole community, rather than only for the most powerful States.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of our thesis was to describe the impact of the pandemic of Covid-19 on transnational organised crime. In the first chapter we have seen how TOCGs have been able during the restrictions and lockdowns of 2020 to reinvent themselves and sometimes even prosper in the face of adversity. We have seen how this can be warning if compared to the slowness at which national and international authorities have been able to address the issues presented by the pandemic and that of businesses in the legal market to stay on track. We have analysed various areas of transnational crime in which criminal groups were already operative but that have changed modus operandi or even grown during the pandemic. The first chapter has therefore made it evident that the pandemic, as other past crises, has acted as an “accelerator of dynamics” and has shed light on the extremely resilient nature of TOCGs. The second chapter has been very useful to concretely understand the dynamics of a specific sector of crime, particularly influenced by the pandemic, with its lockdowns, closure of borders and mobility restrictions: the transnational drug trade. We have seen how the restrictions that have stopped many activities of the legal economy in 2020 have not had the same detrimental effect in illegal activities linked to drug trade and we have analysed what the international community is doing to tackle the problem. Finally, in the third chapter, we have tried to answer some critical questions on the future implications of the pandemic and the worsening of transnational crime on the configuration of the global order and on the debate about the best way to manage the complex relations between States. The answers we provided were developed starting from liberal ideas and claims already present in the IR debate. Finally, the message we want to convey in this thesis, after the empirical observation of the recent dynamics we provided in the first two chapters, is the following: moments of crisis, especially those involving a worsening of the economy, as the one started by the Covid-19 pandemic, tend to be easily exploited by criminal groups. These groups, because of their criminal nature, willingly detached from the constraints linked to the respect of the rule of law, both at national and international level, tend to be extremely resilient and therefore, to respond to critical circumstances more quickly and easily than other actors. This of course is a problem to not underestimate which can incredibly endanger the global economy in the long run, if we consider that very large sums of money are involved in these activities. However, the economic repercussions are not the only ones to not underestimate. We have already mentioned the terrible social consequences of crime in society when we looked at the link between crime and violence; In addition, as we saw in the last chapter, transnational criminal groups can also have direct contacts with terrorist groups, that sometimes rely on them for funding. In this case the social effects on the population would be even worse and irreversible. Because of this, it is very important to be aware of the ways in which such groups tend to act. The best way to do so is through observation. A lot has already been done this year by international organisations such as the UN, Interpol, and the EU to study the phenomenon; therefore, the following step is to act, which means tackling the problem by laying down specific objectives to reach

through international cooperation, with the active participation of all States involved in transnational crime. We believe that States division in the war against crime, especially after the worsening of the situation due to the pandemic, will only lead to more problems in the long run. To conclude, we have added a final consideration, which we regard as very important and urgent: to fight transnational crime is not only fundamental per se. It is undeniable that its societal and economic costs are huge and represent by themselves a major problem for almost all countries worldwide. However, there is also a second, less visible problem that could have even worse consequences if not specifically dealt with. This problem concerns the repercussions that both the pandemic and the worsening of crime could have on the evolution of the international order. As we saw, these new dynamics could lead to increasingly nationalist policies and to reduced trust in the international community. Here again our response is the same: we States must act in unity against this threat. Otherwise, the risk will be to let go of our founding liberal values, the ones we cherish so deeply and that we have strived for so long to obtain. We would have to let go of our values of democracy, peace, and cooperation. We would have to go back to the international system that existed before the second world war; this would probably mean the loss of the long-lasting peace that has been achieved in most of the countries worldwide. Finally, the risk is to go back to an international order based on prevarication, fear, independence, and constant self-defence, an international system characterised not by peace but by war, what Hobbes called “bellum omnium contra omnia”.

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RIASSUNTO IN ITALIANO:

Introduzione

Come riportano tutte le maggiori testate giornalistiche internazionali, dall'inizio della sua diffusione, nel gennaio 2020, la pandemia di Covid-19 ha avuto numerose ripercussioni sulle società e sui sistemi economici globali. Questi cambiamenti, a loro volta, hanno prodotto numerosi "effetti secondari": uno di questi, come vogliamo dimostrare in questa tesi, è stato il cambiamento, e in molti casi peggioramento del problema della criminalità organizzata, sia a livello nazionale che internazionale. Per "criminalità organizzata transnazionale", secondo una definizione rilasciata dall'FBI statunitense, si intende una forma di crimine organizzato che coinvolge gruppi e mercati di individui che si coordinano attraverso diversi confini nazionali e che lavorano basandosi in più di un paese per portare a termine le loro attività illecite. Lo scopo di questa tesi è di comprendere in profondità quale sia stato l'impatto che la pandemia ha avuto effettivamente nel corso di un anno, nel periodo tra gennaio 2020 a gennaio 2021, su questi gruppi e sul loro modus operandi in diversi settori del mercato illecito. Per prima cosa procediamo con la descrizione della struttura generale dell'elaborato, che si compone di tre capitoli, e della metodologia usata per condurre la ricerca. Il primo capitolo è dedicato all'analisi generale dell'impatto che la pandemia ha avuto sui diversi settori della criminalità e il suo scopo principale è quello di cogliere le analogie presenti nei modi di diversi gruppi criminali in differenti aree di attività, di "reinventarsi" e, in alcuni casi, di prosperare sfruttando le nuove opportunità generate dalla crisi; inoltre, il capitolo si sofferma su un'importante riflessione: questa tendenza a "prosperare" nella crisi, è una tendenza sempre presente nei gruppi criminali? Questa tesi vuole dimostrare che la risposta a questa domanda è affermativa e per farlo mette a confronto la risposta del crimine che ha seguito l'emergenza sanitaria mondiale del 2020, e la crisi economica da essa scaturita, con quella che ha avuto luogo in seguito alla crisi finanziaria del 2008. Questo paragone è calzante in quanto, secondo la nostra ricerca, la crisi economica scaturita dall'emergenza sanitaria è uno dei fattori che maggiormente ha influenzato l'attività dei gruppi criminali nel 2020 e che maggiormente continuerà a farlo nell'era post-pandemica. Il secondo capitolo si dedica a un'analisi più specifica del fenomeno oggetto di ricerca nell'ambito del traffico di droga e offre il caso studio dell'Afghanistan, maggior produttore mondiale di oppio. Il suo scopo è quello focalizzare l'attenzione su uno specifico settore e Stato, in modo da offrire un'idea più concreta ed efficace delle dinamiche analizzate. Parte dalla premessa che l'Afghanistan, essendo uno degli Stati maggiormente coinvolti nel mercato della droga con il suo quasi-monopolio della produzione di oppio, pari all'88% della produzione mondiale (UNODC, 2020), non può essere considerato come modello universale del fenomeno. È necessario dunque prestare particolare attenzione al non trarre conclusioni su altri paesi solo basandosi sulla sua descrizione ma, al contrario, usare l'analisi empirica di questo Stato nell'ambito del suo rapporto con il mercato della droga, con spirito critico. Infine, il terzo capitolo si presenta come analisi critica del fenomeno di studio e ha come punto di partenza le premesse

tipiche del pensiero politico liberale, sviluppato all'interno del dibattito sulle relazioni internazionali. Il suo scopo è quello di individuare spunti di riflessione del liberalismo politico applicabili al fenomeno e al contempo di osservare come le stesse dinamiche analizzate possano portare ad una nuova evoluzione di questa corrente di pensiero o, più generalmente, del dibattito riguardante il miglior tipo di sistema internazionale. In particolare, dopo aver espresso le idee principali della corrente liberale riguardo al fenomeno, ci siamo posti una domanda particolarmente sfidante, una su cui da tempo numerosi studiosi delle relazioni internazionali si interrogano e che, con la pandemia e i recenti sviluppi sta tornando al centro del dibattito politico. La domanda è: “queste nuove dinamiche hanno il potere di cambiare l'attuale configurazione del sistema internazionale da liberale a realista?” Il fatto che questo processo sia in atto, ormai da tempo, è di fatto innegabile. Al contempo, alcuni studiosi affermano che le conseguenze della pandemia potrebbero velocizzare il processo di trasformazione e portare a politiche statali sempre più nazionaliste. Per quanto riguarda le fonti utilizzate, i dati riportati nei primi due capitoli sono il risultato di un profondo studio delle fonti rilasciate dal UNODC (UN Office on Drug and Crime) nel suo rapporto conclusivo alla fine del 2020 e nei suoi rapporti precedenti; derivano inoltre da un'attenta lettura ed analisi dei rapporti e comunicati stampa rilasciati dall'Interpol e dall'Europol, che si occupano di gestire il problema della criminalità rispettivamente nel mondo e in Europa, e da altre agenzie internazionali operanti nel settore della criminalità. Inoltre, allo scopo della stesura di questa tesi è stata anche condotta un'intervista a Gianpaolo Musumeci, giornalista d'inchiesta free lance per Radio 24 ed esperto delle relazioni internazionali, con l'obiettivo di porgli alcune domande sul suo episodio del podcast “Nessun luogo è lontano”, mandato in onda il 4 dicembre 2020 con il nome “Il vaccino, la pandemia, la crisi: ma qualcuno si sfrega le mani”, e sul suo nuovo libro “Cosa loro, cosa nostra” (Utet, 2021). E' necessario specificare che questa ricerca ha per tema principale quello della pandemia, attualmente in corso; i dati disponibili sono scarsi, specialmente per quanto riguarda l'area del crimine, in cui stime precise non sono mai del tutto possibili; per questo, per quanto utili a costruire una prima valutazione del fenomeno, i risultati di tale ricerca vanno considerati preliminari e richiedono ulteriori ricerche e conferme da ulteriori dati Statistici rappresentativi appena questi si renderanno disponibili nel tempo. Chiarite queste premesse, entriamo nel vivo dello studio.

Primo capitolo: l'impatto della pandemia sul crimine organizzato transnazionale

Come anticipato, il primo capitolo della tesi si presenta come una panoramica generale dell'impatto della pandemia su diversi settori della criminalità nel corso del 2020. Inizia dunque con l'introduzione del lavoro del UNODC, l'Ufficio dell'ONU contro la droga e il crimine. Come ogni anno, anche nel 2020 l'ufficio ha rilasciato, a dicembre, l'annuale rapporto riguardante le tendenze poste in atto dalla criminalità organizzata internazionale. Come confermano i dati, notiamo che il 2020 è stato un anno particolare non solo in termini di emergenza sanitaria e crisi economica, ma anche nell'ambito della criminalità, sia a livello nazionale che

internazionale (UNODC, 2020). È importante definire le due variabili principali per il nostro studio: I “gruppi criminali organizzati transnazionali” e il “Covid-19”. Affermiamo che esiste una forte correlazione tra queste due variabili e lo scopo di questa tesi è trovare i meccanismi che risiedono alla base di quest’ultima. Al contempo, vogliamo anche effettuare una generalizzazione più ampia: non solo esiste una correlazione tra la pandemia di covid-19 e il crimine internazionale, ma questa tendenza del crimine di prosperare può essere generalizzata a vari tipi diversi di “crisi”; crisi sociali, politiche ed economiche cioè, secondo la nostra teoria, vengono generalmente sfruttate dai gruppi criminali come fonte di opportunità e crescita. Infatti, c’è sostanziosa evidenza nella letteratura che “la capacità di resilienza” dimostrata dai gruppi criminali transnazionali nel corso del 2020 non sia un’occorrenza isolata ma che altri periodi storici “critici” in passato abbiano comportato un aumento della criminalità organizzata. Non è ben chiaro quale sia il meccanismo alla base di questa particolare “resilienza”; tuttavia, teorizziamo, in questo studio, che i gruppi criminali, auto-esonerandosi dal rispetto delle leggi statali e sovra-statali, traggano un aumentato vantaggio durante le situazioni di emergenza politica, in cui le libertà diminuiscono e le regole aumentano, e che questo vantaggio permetta loro di affrontare periodi critici con più vigore e velocità rispetto alle attività del mercato legale. Nel nostro studio, per dimostrare questa teoria, ci soffermiamo inizialmente sull’aspetto prettamente economico della crisi del 2020 e paragoniamo questa con la recessione finanziaria del 2008. Questa strategia ci permette di fornire un’ulteriore conferma a una teoria che da tempo è stata discussa da numerosi studiosi di sociologia, economia e relazioni internazionali: le crisi economiche aumentano i reati criminali, sia a livello nazionale che internazionale. La letteratura sul tema è molto ricca e nasce dal contributo di Gary Becker (1968) che ha riconosciuto che la riduzione delle opportunità nel mercato del lavoro può rendere relativamente più vantaggioso il perseguimento di attività illegali. Il paragone che effettuiamo tra crisi economica del 2020 e del 2008 si propone dunque come conferma di una teoria da tempo sviluppata e validata. I risultati dimostrano, come previsto, che sia la crisi finanziaria del 2008 (Bushway, Cook, & Phillips, 2013) sia quella sociale ed economica che ha mostrato i primi segni nel 2020 e si prospetta nel periodo post-pandemico, sono state seguite da un cambiamento e in alcuni casi un peggioramento dell’attività delle associazioni criminali (UNODC, 2020). Questa scoperta però non ci basta. Siamo interessati nel nostro studio ad analizzare il rapporto tra le due variabili, “Covid-19” e “criminalità organizzata”, nella loro più generale accezione. Poiché la “crisi” generata dalla pandemia è stata ben più ampia di una normale crisi economica ma ha toccato numerose altre sfere, prima tra tutte quella sanitaria, ma anche politica e sociale (UNODC, 2020), vogliamo comprendere in che modo tutti questi cambiamenti, attraverso la creazione di limiti e opportunità, abbiano impattato l’attività criminale. Secondo Giampaolo Musumeci (2021), la maggior fonte di limitazioni ed opportunità per il crimine transnazionale, registrata alla fine del 2020, oltre alla crisi economica risultata dalla pandemia, è stata la chiusura dei confini che ha caratterizzato la relazione tra Stati per diversi mesi, prima attraverso dei temporanei divieti di spostamento dall’Europa, epicentro di diffusione del Covid-19, agli Stati Uniti, e viceversa, poi attraverso altre misure,

come la temporanea sospensione dell'area Schengen. Queste misure hanno portato ad una parziale limitazione delle attività criminali, in quanto la chiusura dei confini si è concretizzata in un'aumentata presenza di controlli di sicurezza tra gli Stati. D'altra parte, però, queste stesse misure hanno costituito un'opportunità; infatti, come Musumeci (2021) ha voluto sottolineare più volte durante l'intervista, questi controlli di frontiera si sono focalizzati sugli individui, potenziali vettori di Covid-19, più che sulle merci trasportate. Altri esempi di opportunità generate dalla pandemia a favore della criminalità sono state il totale spostamento di attenzione e risorse statali nella gestione dell'emergenza sanitaria e quindi una diminuita allocazione di risorse nell'area della sicurezza internazionale; la chiusura di diverse attività economiche del mercato legale e quindi lo sviluppo di un gap tra la domanda e l'offerta di determinati prodotti, facilmente sfruttabile dalla criminalità; e infine, un'aumentata vulnerabilità psicologica nella popolazione, che si è tradotta in alcuni casi nell'acquisto di prodotti sanitari contraffatti per la prevenzione o cura del virus, in altri, nel numero sempre crescente di attacchi informatici che hanno avuto luogo nel 2020. Le principali aree di attività criminali che abbiamo analizzato nel primo capitolo sono, dunque: il mercato illecito di droga, il traffico di migranti, l'area del crimine informatico e il traffico di dispositivi sanitari contraffatti.

Secondo capitolo: l'impatto della pandemia sul mercato illecito di droga

Giungiamo dunque al secondo capitolo, che, come precedentemente affermato, si concentra sull'impatto della pandemia di Covid-19 sul mercato illecito di droga, uno dei settori del crimine internazionale più influenzati dall'emergenza sanitaria (Musumeci, 2021). Iniziamo il nostro studio, come al solito, con delle definizioni. La variabile d'interesse, in questo caso, è quella di "traffico di droga". Il UNODC (2005) definisce il traffico illecito di droga come il mercato nero mondiale dedicato alla coltivazione, produzione, distribuzione e vendita di droghe soggette a proibizione. Questa seconda parte dell'elaborato ha come scopo l'investigazione di come questo mercato illecito sia stato impattato nelle tre fasi distinte di produzione, trasporto e distribuzione, facendo particolare riferimento ad alcuni cambi nelle attività e nel *modus operandi* dei gruppi criminali ed analizzandoli passando in rassegna i tipi di droga maggiormente consumati a livello mondiale: eroina, cocaina, anfetamine e cannabis. La tesi che viene presentata, attraverso la discussione dei dati proposti dal UNODC è che le quantità di droga prodotte, trafficate e distribuite nel territorio nel 2020 non siano cambiate significativamente rispetto all'anno precedente (UNODC, 2020); questo dato è in forte controtendenza con quelli riportati nelle attività delle società economiche del mercato legale, spesso messe in profonda crisi dalle restrizioni nella mobilità e dai lockdown. È proprio il confronto tra l'impatto della pandemia sulle attività legali e quelle criminali che ci permette di notare, in questo settore del crimine come in numerosi altri, una tendenza molto preoccupante: la forte resilienza dei gruppi criminali di fronte alla crisi. Come ci spiega Musumeci (2021), la resilienza di questi gruppi però non è l'unica variabile che spiega la stabilità del bilancio finale nel mercato di droga. Una seconda causa è stata la presenza in egual misura di opportunità e limiti da sfruttare nelle varie aree di produzione, traffico e distribuzione da parte dei gruppi

criminali. Si potrebbe dire che, alla fine, opportunità e limiti si sono bilanciati a vicenda, permettendo al mercato di rimanere nel suo solito equilibrio. Quali sono state dunque queste opportunità e questi limiti? Da una parte i controlli di frontiera sono aumentati, creando maggiori difficoltà a tutti quei trafficanti facenti affidamento ad un sistema di trasporto di droga via terra; dall'altra, la natura di tali controlli è stata focalizzata più sulle persone che sulle merci e questo ha permesso ai criminali di mantenere alcune rotte di trasporto via terra; da una parte, come nel caso della coltivazione di oppio in Afghanistan, la chiusura dei confini ha causato la perdita di manodopera proveniente dall'estero, dall'altra la pandemia, a causa delle numerose perdite di lavoro, della crisi economica e dell'aumento della disoccupazione, ha reso la popolazione locale maggiormente vulnerabile ad essere reclutata per lavorare nel settore della droga; da una parte è stata registrata una minor domanda di droghe ricreative, dovuta alla cancellazione dei grandi eventi e incontri sociali durante l'anno, dall'altra, è stata registrata un'aumentata richiesta di droghe ad uso "calmante", e questo è da attribuire al peso psicologico che i mesi di lockdown hanno avuto sulla popolazione generale nei diversi paesi che li hanno istituiti. Abbiamo dunque spiegato che, grazie ad un egual numero di opportunità e limitazioni scaturite dalla pandemia e alla speciale capacità dei gruppi criminali di reinventarsi, il bilancio finale del mercato illecito di droga, a livello di produzione, vendite e guadagni, nel 2020, non ha subito significative perdite. Abbiamo anche sottolineato però che queste nuove opportunità e limitazioni hanno dato vita a dei cambiamenti interni, poco visibili se non attraverso un'analisi specifica delle varie componenti della catena di approvvigionamento di droga. Queste nuove tendenze sono state individuate grazie allo scrupoloso lavoro di ricerca del UNODC e di altre organizzazioni ed agenzie internazionali come l'Interpol e l'Europol. Quali sono stati dunque questi cambiamenti? le variazioni riguardanti il processo di produzione sono state le seguenti: poiché la domanda di alcune tipologie di droga, come la cannabis o la cocaina, che sono usate rispettivamente per uso "calmante" o perché producono una forte dipendenza in chi ne fa uso, sono rimaste invariate, anche la produzione è rimasta per quanto possibile stabile. D'altro canto, c'è stata una leggera diminuzione nella domanda di droghe a scopo "ricreativo" come le anfetamine e l'eroina a causa della chiusura dei luoghi di incontro e di raccolta e della cancellazione dei grandi eventi sociali come concerti e festival e questo ha inevitabilmente influenzato il loro livello di produzione. C'è poi stata una variazione nella composizione della manodopera per il processo di produzione: questa è stata maggiormente locale durante il 2020; inoltre è stato fatto un maggior uso di precursori sintetici nella fabbricazione delle droghe, dovuto alla difficoltà di ottenere alcuni componenti chimici dall'estero; questo in certi casi ha significato una diminuzione nella "purezza" del prodotto finale e potrebbe avere importanti ripercussioni a livello di salute per i consumatori, specialmente se questa modalità di produzione viene mantenuta anche dopo la fine della pandemia. I cambiamenti nel traffico hanno riguardato uno spostamento di alcune attività di trasporto dalla terra al mare, per evitare i controlli di frontiera, e una diminuzione nei traffici aerei, che ha rallentato soprattutto il traffico delle anfetamine. Tuttavia, i traffici via terra sono stati solo in alcuni casi sostituiti, rimanendo quelli più gettonati, ad esempio, nel traffico di eroina

dall’Afghanistan. Questo perché, come spiegato da Musumeci (2021), sebbene i controlli siano aumentati si sono concentrati soprattutto sulle persone e non sulle merci. Infine, le modalità interne di distribuzione e vendita locale di droga sono cambiate in seguito a lockdown, restrizioni nella mobilità, e istituzione di maggiori controlli decentralizzati da parte delle autorità, e si sono concretizzate in un maggior uso del web per le vendite, in particolare del dark web e dei social network, nello sviluppo di nuovi e originali sistemi di spedizione e consegna di droga, e in un maggior successo nel reclutamento di giovani “spacciatori”, facilitato dal disagio sociale che ha colpito molti ragazzi, già precedentemente a rischio, durante i mesi di lockdown. Il capitolo termina con il caso studio dell’Afghanistan, produttore dell’88% dell’oppio disponibile a livello mondiale (UNODC, 2020).

Terzo capitolo: analisi critica

Il terzo capitolo della ricerca si propone di analizzare criticamente il fenomeno partendo dalle premesse tipiche del pensiero liberale. La ricerca risponde alla domanda “qual è l’opinione del liberalismo riguardo alle dinamiche analizzate?” e “come cambia il dibattito delle relazioni internazionali alla luce della pandemia e del suo impatto sulla criminalità organizzata transnazionale?” Focalizziamo la nostra attenzione in particolare sulla corrente del liberalismo chiamata “liberalismo istituzionale” che vede le istituzioni internazionali come mezzo efficace nell’ottenimento di rapporti pacifici tra gli Stati e di cooperazione nella risoluzione di problemi comuni (Jackson e Sorensen, 2012). Sfruttiamo questa teoria per affermare che il miglior modo per gestire i diversi problemi generati dalla pandemia, come lo stesso peggioramento nell’attività della criminalità organizzata, è la cooperazione tra gli Stati attraverso le istituzioni. Questa permette di non “territorializzare” le organizzazioni criminali identificandole con uno specifico Stato, come spesso propongono di fare i realisti, in una modalità che né trova evidenza nella realtà né propone soluzioni concrete, ma al contrario di riconoscere la loro natura di attori non statali e di combatterli come nemico comune. Questo è infatti l’atteggiamento che è stato promosso da organizzazioni internazionali quali l’ONU, l’Unione Europea e l’Interpol, e da agenzie internazionali come l’Europol. Arriviamo anche ad affermare che, per quanto dannosa, la pandemia abbia dato una forte spinta alle istituzioni internazionali nella ricerca di nuove soluzioni contro il crimine. Anche la comunità internazionale, come un’associazione criminale, può sfruttare la propria “capacità di resilienza” e crescere, fortificarsi, e prosperare nel processo di combattere i gruppi criminali. Infine, ci siamo chiesti come queste dinamiche potrebbero modificare l’assetto internazionale degli Stati: è possibile che i recenti sviluppi descritti nella tesi portino ad un acceleramento del processo di “nazionalizzazione” del sistema internazionale, a favore di una configurazione internazionale di stampo maggiormente realista? Potrebbero le conseguenze della pandemia, tra cui anche l’aumento della criminalità organizzata, contribuire al processo di creazione di un assetto guidato dalla Cina e non più dagli Stati Uniti? È difficile trovare una risposta definitiva a queste domande, già discusse da anni nel dibattito sulle relazioni internazionali; al contempo, è interessante riflettere sull’apporto dei recenti sviluppi nella

discussione. Per iniziare a riflettere su questa questione abbiamo fatto riferimento alle riflessioni riportate in due articoli di ricerca, rispettivamente “The Pandemic and the Transformation of Liberal International Order” e “The COVID-19 pandemic and the new world (dis)order”. Secondo queste ricerche la pandemia velocizzerà il processo di cui si è precedentemente parlato e gli anni a venire vedranno una progressiva nazionalizzazione del sistema internazionale. Non abbiamo una domanda definitiva a queste domande, al contempo, le riflessioni e teorie riportate sono frutto di un profondo studio dei meccanismi alla base delle relazioni internazionali e benché pessimistiche, potrebbero risultare veritiere. Per questo, in conclusione della tesi, rinnoviamo il nostro invito alle istituzioni internazionali a lavorare affinché una cooperazione tra Stati, specialmente nella risoluzione della pandemia e del crimine organizzato transnazionale, possa essere raggiunta.

Conclusioni

Quello della criminalità organizzata transnazionale è un problema importante per tutta la comunità internazionale e come tale, non va sottovalutato. Essa è coinvolta in ingenti somme di denaro capaci di danneggiare gravemente le nostre economie e di conseguenza i nostri sistemi politici. Come abbiamo visto, è anche strettamente legata al problema della violenza, che mette a rischio le nostre società e il benessere dei nostri cittadini. Per questo motivo, soprattutto dopo le ripercussioni che la pandemia ha avuto su di essa, è necessario avvicinarci sempre di più a una soluzione soddisfacente che porti a risultati tangibili e duraturi nel tempo. Questa soluzione deve partire in primo luogo dall’osservazione del fenomeno; questo è fondamentale per sviluppare una profonda conoscenza dei suoi meccanismi interni. In questo senso l’ONU, l’Unione Europea, l’Interpol, e l’Europol hanno già fatto molto negli scorsi anni e specialmente nel 2020 per raccogliere informazioni e metterle a disposizione degli Stati. Il passo successivo è di passare all’azione e farlo in un contesto di cooperazione tra gli Stati in cui tutta la comunità internazionale, toccata dal fenomeno, mobilizzi le proprie risorse per raggiungere gli obiettivi comuni prestabiliti.