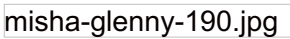


Tonight: Misha Glenny on "McMafia" at Polis

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There are some stories that are so big and complex that everyday journalism can't report them in the usual formats. The global growth of organised crime since the end of the Cold War is one of those huge stories that has proved difficult to tell. So respect is due to Misha Glenny  who has spent the last few years researching the emergence of a world wide web of organised crime. He has published the results in his new book, "[McMafia](#)". On Monday evening he will be talking about his investigations in the Old Theatre, Houghton Street, LSE at 6.30pm. It's free. Details [here](#).

Polis' resident journalist Lara Farrar has been looking at the issues behind Misha's book. This is her take on the reality of organised crime.

Meet Ludmilla Balbinova. In 2002, Balbinova (her name has been changed to protect her identity) left her home in Tiraspol, the capital of Transnistria – a tiny strip of territory squeezed between the Ukraine and Moldova.

Balbinova's destination was Israel. She was going there hoping to find work. An old friend already living in the country had contacted her, promising to help Balbinova find a job and even secure documentation for the trip. For the young woman who had never travelled abroad, it would be a chance to see the world, an adventure. But the promise of adventure soon faded into a nightmare of an unimaginable kind. Balbinova's friend was not working as a waitress in Israel as she had indicated. Instead she was a so-called "recruiter" – her job to lure other women into vast and often inescapable human trafficking networks where they are usually enslaved and sold into a dismal world of prostitution.

Balbinova ended up trapped in a brothel above a pizza parlor in Tel Aviv. "I worked seven days a week and had to service up to twenty clients per session," she said. But before she landed there, Balbinova first underwent a harrowing journey facilitated by a sophisticated network of transnational crime syndicates. From her home in Tiraspol she would travel north via train to Moscow and then fly 2,000 miles south to Cairo. From there she and a group of other women were driven through the Negev desert to Beersheba and finally smuggled north to Tel Aviv.

"By the time she had arrived in Tel Aviv, she had been passed through the hands of Moldovan, Ukrainian, Russian, Egyptian, Bedouin, Russian Jewish and indigenous Israeli hands, half of whom had threatened her with violence," writes journalist and historian Misha Glenny in *McMafia: Crime Without Frontiers* – a startling, and often disturbing, voyage through a complex, uncontrollable and seemingly ubiquitous new world of transnational crime in an era of globalization. Balbinova's tragic story is but one of many vividly recounted in *McMafia*. Glenny spent three years conducting research for the book, traveling to dozens of countries – Bulgaria, South Africa, Japan – and interviewing dozens of people – gang members, drug mules, mafia bosses – to ultimately uncover a new brand of globally networked crime organizations operating not unlike massive multinational corporations.

While criminal markets are nothing new, Glenny points to the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s for the proliferation of criminal activity. "Almost overnight, it provoked a chaotic scramble for riches and survival," Glenny writes. He also blames the deregulation of global financial markets for the perpetuation of large-scale financial crime and looks to failed states as hotspots for corruption and criminal enterprise.

Glenny estimates illegal activities now make up to 20 percent of the world's GDP. And he is not the only one noticing this frightening trend. "[Transnational crime] has simply grown in a tremendous order of magnitude," said James Finckenauer, a professor of criminal justice at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Like Glenny, Finckenauer looks to the collapse of communism along with globalization as causes for the exponential growth of illicit activity. But Finckenauer also blames the West and its unquenchable demand for everything from cocaine and heroin to fake luxury goods and prostitutes. "As long as there are people willing to buy these

things, there is going to be a supply,” said Finckenauer. “It is a simple economic situation.”

There are also ways in which people unknowingly contribute to unlawful trades. Take, for example, a mineral called coltan. The ore, commonly used in electronics, is illegally mined and exported from Africa by criminals. “Ordinary people around the world may think that they have no relationship with transnational crime syndicates, but anyone who has used a cellphone or computer notebook in the past decade has unwittingly depended on organized crime for his or her convenience,” writes Glenny.

While coming up with concrete evidence on the scope and scale of globalized crime is a difficult, if not impossible task, finding ways to police organized criminals is even harder. Glenny writes that part of the problem is governments are struggling to understand the decentralized networked structures of new crime groups and how they are operationally different from the hierarchical familial structures of traditional groups, like the Sicilian Mafia. Enforcement is even more complicated with the advent of the Internet, which has spawned a whole new genre of criminal activities categorized under the name of cybercrime.

“It can’t be underestimated how difficult it is to do any investigation,” said Nigel Phair, an Australian Federal Police agent and author of the book *Cybercrime: The Reality of the Threat*. Phair said online criminals tend to be highly decentralized networks of people who pool their talents – one person will run a money laundering business while another has a so-called botnet, a group of computers that have been compromised without their owners knowledge. Once the crime has been committed, “they all go their own separate ways,” said Phair. And the evidence is simply deleted.

Experts say more international cooperation among law enforcement groups is needed to crack down on cybercrime and other criminal activities, but the international community must also be willing to reassess unfair economic policies that give people in developing countries no choice but to engage in criminal behavior as a matter of survival. Dominik Enste, an economist at the University of Cologne and co-author of *The Shadow Economy: An International Survey*, calls it “fair globalization.”

“Let everybody bring his specific specialization on the market, and let them get paid what they deserve for their product and services,” said Enste. “By improving their wealth in these different nations, you have the chance to dry out criminal activities in these countries.” But others caution that before preventative action is taken, governments must first do more to quantify the true scope and scale of organized crime.

“We really need to develop more sophisticated research tools and intelligence tools for establishing just what the nature of the threat is,” said Adam Edwards, a Cardiff University professor and co-editor of *Transnational Organized Crime: Perspectives on Global Security*. “To talk about transnational organized crime you generate more fog than clarity.”

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