Original Scientific Article
DOI: 10.5937/gakv98-67745
UDC 502/504:343.9.02

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ORGANIZED CRIME AND CRIMINAL OFFENSES AGAINST THE ENVIRONMENT[***]

ABSTRACT: The standards for the protection and improvement of the environment are in obvious and profound discord with the actual situation. The environment is threatened and damaged continuously, on a daily basis, through numerous and diverse individual and collective activities. Over time, many of these activities have been prohibited and sanctioned through various types of regulations, while some have been recognized as exceptionally socially dangerous and sanctioned through criminal legislation. Environmental crime encompasses a wide range of illegal activities and harmful consequences, which is why no universally accepted definition exists. In addition to direct and indirect harmful consequences for the environment and human health, certain forms of environmental crime are aimed at obtaining benefits. The United Nations has singled out environmental crime as a key factor aggravating

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[***] The paper was received on September 1, 2025, and it was accepted for publication on December 23, 2025.

The translation of the original article into English is provided by the *Glasnik of the Bar Association of Vojvodina.*

the so-called “triple planetary crisis” – climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Organized criminal groups and networks perceive environmental criminal offenses as an opportunity for high profit with relatively low risk, enabling them to finance other illegal activities and expand their influence. Environmental crime has been identified as the fourth most lucrative criminal activity in the world, following trafficking in human beings, drugs, and weapons. The effective suppression of environmental criminal offenses still does not rank among priorities in many states. The introductory part of this paper provides conceptual definitions of environmental and organized crime, after which the focus shifts to key areas. In addition, the operational methodology of criminal networks is examined, with particular emphasis on corruption and money laundering as key factors contributing to convergence, as well as on the role of corporations and state authorities in those mechanisms. Finally, the paper offers a brief critical review of the dynamics and state of environmental crime in Serbia.

Keywords: environmental crime, organized crime, criminal networks, convergence of organized and environmental crime, corruption, money laundering

1. INTRODUCTION

The right to a healthy environment is one of the fundamental human rights which, in recent decades, has been acquiring equal status among already universally recognized and guaranteed human rights, both at the national and global levels. Although it is not expressly recognized in relevant international human rights instruments, since the first United Nations (UN) conference on the environment,[1] this right has gradually become part of the so-called third generation of human rights.[2] The right to a healthy environment generally refers to access to clean air and water, adequate food and sanitation, as well as to a stable climate, healthy biodiversity, and healthy ecosystems.[3] In other words, this right entails the right of every individual to live in an environment

[1] The Conference was held in Stockholm in 1972. At this conference, the Declaration on the Human Environment, the “Stockholm Declaration”, was adopted – UN General Assembly, *United Nations Conference on the Human Environment,* A/RES/2994, 15 December 1972.

[2] For more, see: Vasak, K. (1979). For the third generation of human rights: the rights of solidarity. *Inaugural lecture to the tenth study session of the International Institute of Human Rights*. Strasbourg.

[3] Árnadóttir, S. (2023). International Obligations Calling for Constitutional Protection of the Right to a Healthy Environment: An Icelandic Perspective. *Nordic Journal of European Law*, 6(3), 107.

that is clean, safe, and conducive to their health and well-being. Such development has encouraged many states to implement the right to a healthy environment in their national legislation.[4] The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (Article 74), in the part entitled "Human and Minority Rights and Freedoms," also guarantees the right to a healthy environment, and the content of that right includes the right to a healthy environment and to timely and complete information about its condition, the responsibility of all, and especially of the Republic of Serbia and the autonomous province, for environmental protection, as well as the duty of everyone to preserve and improve the environment.[5] It is not limited only to the rights of present generations, but also includes the right of future generations to healthy nature and adequate resources.[6]

At the same time, at the global level, the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, as a universal human right, is explicitly recognized by a Resolution of the UN General Assembly.[7]

On the other hand, even a lay insight leads us to the conclusion that there is an obvious and profound discrepancy between the standards for the protection and improvement of the environment, proclaimed in numerous political documents and guaranteed by legal instruments at the international, national, and local levels, and the actual situation. We are witnessing the fact that the environment is threatened and damaged continuously, on a daily basis, by numerous and diverse individual and collective activities of both natural and legal persons, business entities, and even states themselves. Over time, many of these activities have been prohibited and sanctioned through various types of regulations, while some, due to their frequency, prevalence, and the severity of their consequences, have been recognized as exceptionally socially dangerous and sanctioned through criminal legislation; in the literature, they have therefore been termed environmental criminal offenses or environmental crime (hereinafter: EC).

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[4] In 2019, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment reported that 110 states had implemented the right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment in their constitutions. Moreover, 156 states had legally recognized this right through domestic or international obligations. – For more, see: UN Human Rights Council, *Right to a healthy environment: good practices, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment*. UN Doc A/HRC/43/53, 30 December 2019, paras. 10–13.

[5] Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, *Official Gazette of the RS*, No. 98/06, 16/22 – other regulation.

[6] Joldžić, V. (2008). *Ekološko pravo, opšti i poseban deo (Primer Srbije države u tranziciji)*. Belgrade: Institute of Criminological and Sociological Research, 25.

[7] UN General Assembly, *The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment,* UN Doc. A/RES/76/300, 28 July, 2022.

EC is also specific because its consequences are intergenerational in character. Unlike some other forms of crime, whose consequences may be quickly visible and measurable, EC destroys natural resources and ecosystems whose restoration, if possible at all, may take decades. In this way, it becomes a threat not only to present but also to future generations. It is paradoxical that, in the practice of many states, EC is treated as victimless crime, primarily because there are no obvious victims, because victims are not aware that they are victims, or because, in the absence of immediate and visible consequences, they have no interest in reporting these criminal offenses. The consequences of EC are numerous and diverse, often long-term and irreversible,[8] ranging from immediate consequences that directly affect the ecosystem (land degradation, destruction of forests and water resources, air pollution) and biodiversity (loss of biodiversity and extinction of species),[9] to indirect consequences such as social consequences (threats to livelihoods, reduction of food and water sources, mass migration, impairment of human rights), economic consequences (major losses for local economies and reduced state revenues),[10] and health consequences (increased mortality and various types of disease, especially infectious diseases).[11] The consequences of EC are most often borne by local communities that depend on natural resources. For example, illegal logging may lead to soil erosion and flooding, directly threatening the livelihood of small agricultural producers. Illegal waste disposal often affects poor communities that lack the capacity to protect themselves from toxic substances. This gives rise to a form of "environmental injustice," in which the

[8] Elliott, L., Schaedla, W. H. (2016). Transnational environmental crime: excavating the complexities – an introduction, In: Elliott, L., Schaedla, W. H. (ed.). *Handbook of transnational environmental crime*, 3–23. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 6–8; Lirëza, L., Koçi, G. (2023). Environmental Crimes: Their Nature, Scope, and Problems in Identification. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*, 10(1), 238.

[9] Wyatt, T. (2013). *Wildlife Trafficking: A Deconstruction of the Crime, the Victims, and the Offenders*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 40; Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). (2019). *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (Summary for Policymakers)*. Bonn, 12; Zimmerman, M. E. (2003). The black market for wildlife: Combating transnational organized crime in the illegal wildlife trade. *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*, 36(5), 1660.

[10] Nellemann, C. (Editor in Chief), Henriksen, R., Kreilhuber, Ar., Stewart, D., Kotsovou, M., Raxter, P., Mrema, E., Barrat, S. (2016). *The Rise of Environmental Crime – A Growing Threat to Natural Resources, Peace, Development, and Security*. UNEP, Interpol, 7; Financial Action Task Force (FATF). (2021). *Money Laundering from Environmental Crime*. Paris, 9.

[11] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2020). *World Wildlife Crime Report*. New York, 15; Karesh, W. B., Cook, R. A., Bennett, E. L., Newcomb, J. (2005). Wildlife trade and global disease emergence. *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 11(7), 1001.

most vulnerable become victims of criminal activities motivated by the profits of wealthy actors.[12] The United Nations has singled out EC as a key factor aggravating the so-called "triple planetary crisis" – climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.[13]

Technological progress, the development of new industrial facilities, the globalization of economic activity, especially trade, and the development of information technologies, on the one hand, and the growing demand for natural resources and the increase in their market value, on the other, have created a basis for illegal exploitation, that is, for the abuse of the environment for profit. In other words, certain forms of EC are aimed at obtaining benefits for individuals, groups, or business entities (companies, corporations) through the exploitation, damage, trade, or theft of natural resources, or through illegal trade in and disposal of hazardous waste and other pollutants, as well as the smuggling of substances that deplete the ozone layer.[14]

EC was long treated as an isolated problem, primarily local in character. However, today there is credible and documented evidence that contemporary forms of environmental criminal offenses, especially those of a lucrative character, have transnational features.[15] It may be so characterized whenever there is cross-border movement of offenders, goods, and/or illegally acquired proceeds. Illegal logging in one country may have a market in another, while the profit ends up in a third. Criminal networks skillfully use globalized trade channels, transport routes, and international financial systems for money laundering. Thus, EC ceases to be a local problem and grows into a global challenge that no state can solve on its own.

> "Transnational EC entails and is defined as cross-border trade in species, resources, waste, or pollutants contrary to prohibitions or regulatory regimes established by multilateral environmental agreements, or contrary to

[12] White, R. (2011). *Transnational Environmental Crime: Toward an Eco–Global Criminology*. New York: Routledge, 11.

[13] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Explainer: What are crimes that affect the environment?*. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2024/April/explainer_–what–are–crimes–that–affect–the–environment.html, accessed on October 10, 2025; United Nations Environmental Programme, *UN Environment Assembly advances collaborative action on triple planetary crisis*, https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/un-environment-assembly-advances-collaborative-action-triple, accessed on October 20, 2025.

[14] Elliott, L., Schaedla, W. H. (2016). Transnational environmental crime: excavating the complexities – an introduction, In: Elliott, L., Schaedla, W. H. (ed.). *Handbook of transnational environmental crime*, 3–23. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 5–6.

[15] Wright, G. (2011). Conceptualising and combating transnational environmental crime. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 14 (4), 336; White, R. (2011). *Transnational Environmental Crime: Toward an Eco–Global Criminology*. New York: Routledge, 7–10.

national laws. This includes trade in illegally harvested timber (sometimes called 'stolen' timber), illegal trade in endangered and protected species, cross-border disposal of toxic and hazardous waste, including electronic waste (e-waste), and the black market in substances that deplete the ozone layer or other prohibited or regulated chemicals."[16]

"Transnational environmental crime (TEC) can be split broadly into two categories: trafficking in natural resources and trafficking in hazardous substances. The former includes the trade in endangered species, illegal logging and illegal exploitation and trafficking of mineral resources while the latter includes the illegal trade in ozone depleting substances and the dumping and trafficking of waste."[17]

It is precisely the profitability and transnational character of environmental criminal offenses, on the one hand, and the shortcomings of normative solutions and weaknesses in their application, on the other, that have contributed to organized criminal groups and networks perceiving environmental criminal offenses as an opportunity for high profit with relatively low risk, enabling them to finance other illegal activities and expand their influence.

2. ORGANIZED ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME (OEC)

The very nature and characteristics of lucrative criminal offenses against the environment, as well as the practice of regulatory bodies and detection and prosecution authorities, lead to the conclusion that they almost never involve a one-off individual criminal activity. On the contrary, they involve continuous criminal activity, the commission of which requires adequate organization and the participation of a larger number of persons. This brings the perpetrators of this category of environmental criminal offenses within the definition of an "organized criminal group" under the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime,[18] provided that the criminal offenses in question are punishable by imprisonment of four years or more. From a theoretical point of view, EC can be placed within the framework of organized crime (OC), because it meets most of its basic criteria: continuity and systematic character,

[16] Elliott, L., Schaedla, W. H. (2016). Transnational environmental crime: excavating the complexities – an introduction, In: Elliott, L., Schaedla, W. H. (ed.). *Handbook of transnational environmental crime*, 3–23. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 3–4.

[17] Wright, G. (2011). Conceptualising and combating transnational environmental crime. *Trends in Organized Crime,* 14(4), 334.

[18] Law Ratifying the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Supplementary Protocols, *Official Gazette of the FRY – International Treaties*, No. 6/2001.

professionalization, structural connection, corruption, and a transnational dimension. Some studies even emphasize that, in this century, EC will become the dominant form of organized criminal activity, precisely because of the enormous profits it generates and the global character of the problem. Today, there is almost no doubt in the scientific and professional community that EC is yet another form of transnational organized crime.[19]

Although OC and EC have traditionally been observed and analyzed as separate phenomena, their mutual connection is becoming increasingly clear, and this has become an important area of interest for policymakers, detection and prosecution authorities, and researchers around the world.

The growing global scarcity of natural resources and the increased demand for environmental products on global markets appear to be a good predictor of the emergence of OEC in the twenty-first century. In recent years, contemporary OC has begun to engage in the illegal trade in natural resources, in addition to "traditional" criminal activities such as drug trafficking or trafficking in human beings. Criminal groups respond to socioeconomic, political, and environmental changes by seeking opportunities to diversify their illegal activities. This enables convergence between EC and other types of serious criminal offenses. Drug trafficking is linked to trafficking in minerals and metals; established smuggling routes for weapons and ammunition are used for the illegal trade in timber and endangered species; and trafficking in human beings for forced labor is often connected with illegal fishing.[20]

The convergence of OC and EC is the result of several key factors. Natural resources often have a high market value and can easily be placed on international markets. In addition, in many states, environmental protection laws are not sufficiently developed, while the institutions that enforce them suffer from a lack of resources or are affected by corruption. Finally, compared with other forms of crime (such as drug trafficking), penalties for EC are more lenient, which makes it attractive to organized criminal groups.

Although official statistics do not show this, EC is estimated to be growing at an annual rate of 5–7 %, making it more frequent than other forms of

[19] van Uhm, D. P., Nijman, R. (2020). The convergence of environmental crime with other serious crimes: Subtypes within the environmental crime continuum. *European Journal of Criminology*, 19 (4); van Uhm, D. (2023). *Organized environmental crime: black markets in gold, wildlife, and timber*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic; Earth League International and John Jay College of Criminal Justice. (2023). *Launching an Environmental Crime Convergence Paradigm Through Investigation of Transnational Organized Crime Operations*. Los Angeles. Available at: https://earthleagueinternational.org/wp–content/uploads/2023/06/ELI-Environmental-Crime-Convergence-Report-June-2023.pdf, accessed on October 19, 2025.

[20] van Uhm, D. (2023). *Organized environmental crime: black markets in gold, wildlife, and timber*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 7.

OC and two to three times faster than the growth rate of the global economy. The estimate of the value of unlawful proceeds from OEC is not sufficiently precise, which is understandable given the high dark figure of this category of crime. Nevertheless, since these are estimates by relevant international organizations, it is worth noting that it ranges between USD 100 and 300 billion, making OEC the fourth most profitable form of OC.[21] It is estimated that, at the global level, transnational EC "produces" almost two-thirds, or 64 %, of total unlawful proceeds from crime.[22]

2.1. Treatment of OEC in Legislation and Practice

Despite the consequences and scale of OEC, it has been sadly neglected at all levels.[23] The international community has strongly focused on "traditional" forms of OC, to the detriment of OEC and other contemporary forms of OC. Where international agreements dealing with the protection of particular elements of the environment are concluded, "implementation is left to national priorities at the expense of the broader picture of the global control regime," which often does not include the effective suppression of EC.[24] States usually approach this category of crime exclusively from the perspective of conservation and management of the environment and natural resources, thereby

[21] Nellemann, C. (Editor in Chief), Henriksen, R., Kreilhuber, Ar., Stewart, D., Kotsovou, M., Raxter, P., Mrema, E., Barrat, S. (2016). *The Rise of Environmental Crime – A Growing Threat To Natural Resources, Peace, Development, and Security*. UNEP, Interpol, 7; Europol. *Environmental crime*. Available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime–areas/environmental–crime, accessed on October 22, 2025; FATF. *Environmental Crime*. Available at: https://www.fatf–gafi.org/en/topics/environmental–crime.html. Accessed on October 22, 2025; World Bank. (2019). *Illegal Logging, Fishing, and Wildlife Trade: The Costs and How to Combat it*. Washington. Available at: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/422101574414576772/pdf/Illegal-Logging-Fishing-and-Wildlife-Trade-The-Costs-and-How-to-Combat-it.pdf, accessed on October 19, 2025. According to the same sources, illegal logging and timber trafficking account for USD 51–157 billion which accounts for 10–30 % of the legal market, illegal mining and trafficking in minerals and metals account for USD 12–48 billion, illegal fishing accounts for USD 11–36 billion, illegal trade in and poaching of wildlife accounts for USD 7–23 billion, illegal trade in and disposal of hazardous waste accounts for USD 10–12 billion.

[22] RHIPTO (Norwegian Center for Global Analyses), Interpol, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized crime (2018). *World Atlas of Illicit Flows*. Available at: https://globalinitiative.net/wp–content/uploads/2018/09/Atlas–Illicit–Flows–FINAL–WEB–VERSION–copia–compressed.pdf, accessed on October 22, 2025.

[23] Wright, G. (2011). Conceptualising and combating transnational environmental crime. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 14(4), 334.

[24] Hayman, G., Brack, D. (2002). *International Environmental Crime: the nature and control of environmental black markets*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 17.

neglecting criminalization or failing to give it the same level of priority as "traditional" forms of transnational OC.[25] National environmental laws are often "burdened by loopholes,"[26] as well as by a lack of enforcement capacity. National judicial systems often lack exclusive jurisdiction over organized EC,[27] while state authorities competent for the detection and prosecution of EC are usually poorly trained, inefficient, and lacking human and material resources.[28] This particularly applies to states rich in natural resources, which are, as a rule, insufficiently economically developed, with weak and corrupt institutions and structures of political power, and which are exposed to intensive illegal exploitation of those resources.

As a consequence of the neglect of OEC, impunity for this category of criminal offenses occurs in a large number of cases, as a result of which state authorities face the "overconfidence" of offenders. One wildlife trafficker recently commented that wildlife trafficking is "better than drug smuggling."[29] Accordingly, because of the lack of strong and focused action, OEC is perceived as highly profitable and low-risk.[30]

2.2. Similarities and Differences between OEC and Traditional Forms

As already noted, most OEC has a transnational character, like other forms of OC. Both categories of crime require the organization of a larger number of persons, with, as a rule, divided roles and continuous action according to a previously established plan for the purpose of acquiring criminal profit.

[25] For more, see: Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, Expert consultation on the use of the Convention for combating emerging forms of crime. Vienna, 30 June–2 July 2025. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/organized_crime/COP5/CTOC_COP_2010_1/CTOC_COP_2010_1_E.pdf, accessed on October 19, 2025.

[26] Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA). (2007). *Upholding the Law: The Challenge of Effective Enforcement*, 2. https://eia-international.org/wp-content/uploads/Upholding-The-Law.pdf, accessed on October 20, 2025.

[27] Fröhlich, T. (2003). *Organized Environmental Crime in Accession Countries*. United Kingdom: BfU in association with Max-Planck-Institute.

[28] Hayman, G., Brack, D. (2002). *International Environmental Crime: the nature and control of environmental black markets*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 16.

[29] Schmidt, W. C. (2004). Environmental Crimes: Profiting at the Earth's Expense. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 112(2), 98.

[30] Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA). (2007). *Upholding the Law: The Challenge of Effective Enforcement*, 2. https://eia-international.org/wp-content/uploads/Upholding-The-Law.pdf, accessed on October 20, 2025.

Both categories are the result of the globalization of crime, where perpetrators of OEC offenses operate across "disturbingly porous" borders facilitated by the "ease of communication and movement of goods and money." Like many other forms of OC, OEC is "business crime rather than predatory crime." This means that OEC offenses are committed as a business, where illegal supply meets demand for goods and services. Finally, that demand, as a rule, comes from the global North, while the supply comes from the global South, just as is the case with drug trafficking and trafficking in human beings.[31]

In addition to the above similarities, there are also significant differences between "traditional" forms of OC and OEC. EC encompasses very different criminal offenses, which is already evident from the very fact that the bases for their criminalization are found in numerous international agreements, with a separate agreement for each issue (for example, wildlife trade, ozone-depleting substances, waste disposal, hazardous chemicals), rather than a single comprehensive instrument as in the case of "traditional" forms of OC. The literature notes that from the first UN conference in Stockholm in 1972 until the end of the twentieth century, several hundred international and regional environmental agreements were concluded.[32]

OEC differs from many forms of OC in that illegal activities take place in parallel with legal ones; that is, the illegal market operates alongside the legal market, and there is no complete prohibition on trade in natural resources. This is contrary to the traditional paradigm of OC, where there is a complete prohibition of certain products or activities. For example, while drug trafficking and trafficking in human beings are prohibited and criminalized, trade in certain protected species of flora and fauna may be criminalized only if they originate from specific countries, or illegal trade in and disposal of waste may take place alongside legal trade. The presence of a legal market makes it particularly difficult for control authorities to distinguish legal from illegal conduct, and the technical nature of the differences between legal and illegal products often exceeds the abilities of control-authority personnel who are not specifically trained in this field.[33] In addition, given that trade in many natural resources is subject to restrictive permit and quota regimes, it is clear that, through falsified documentation or corruption of the authorities that issue permits and determine quotas, the illegal can very easily be transformed into the legal.

[31] Wright, G. (2011). Conceptualising and combating transnational environmental crime. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 14(4), 336.

[32] Brown Weiss, E. (1997). Strengthening National Compliance with International Environmental Agreements. *Environmental Policy and Law*, 27(4), 297.

[33] Wright, G. (2011). Conceptualising and combating transnational environmental crime. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 14(4), 337.

3. CONVERGENCE OF OC AND EC

Convergence of crime is usually defined as the dynamic intertwining of markets, actors, and techniques of different criminal activities toward shared infrastructure and mutual reinforcement (spillover effects).[34] Convergence has been recognized as a key characteristic of organized criminal groups and networks, which have expanded their criminal activities thanks to globalization, cross-border commercial systems, technological progress, and the development of online money-transfer systems.[35] In academic literature, the convergence of OC and terrorism has most often been problematized, along with accompanying criminal activities such as corruption and money laundering, while the convergence of OC and EC has attracted the attention of the scientific and expert community only recently.

The conceptualization of OC in the scientific and expert community has a long and complex history, with many partly contradictory meanings attributed to it ever since the term began to be used in the United States more than one hundred years ago.[36] Theoretical models that analyze the organizational aspects of OC are usually grouped into three basic approaches:

– Hierarchical models, which emphasize a strict internal structure and pyramidal organization (for example, the Sicilian Mafia).

– Network models,[37] which point to flexible, horizontal links between actors, without a formal hierarchy, and

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[34] For more, see: Walters, R. (2014). Organized Crime and the Environment. Bruinsma. G., Weisburd, D. (eds.) (2014). *Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*. New York: Springer; van Uhm, D. P., Nijman, R. (2020). The convergence of environmental crime with other serious crimes: Subtypes within the environmental crime continuum. *European Journal of Criminology*, 19(4); Earth League International and John Jay College of Criminal Justice. (2023). *Launching an Environmental Crime Convergence Paradigm Through Investigation of Transnational Organized Crime Operations*. Los Angeles. Available at: https://earthleagueinternational.org/wp–content/uploads/2023/06/ELI-Environmental-Crime-Convergence-Report-June-2023.pdf, accessed on October 19, 2025.

[35] Earth League International and John Jay College of Criminal Justice. (2023). *Launching an Environmental Crime Convergence Paradigm Through Investigation of Transnational Organized Crime Operations*. Los Angeles. Available at: https://earthleague-international.org/wp–content/uploads/2023/06/ELI-Environmental-Crime-Convergence-Report-June-2023.pdf, accessed on October 19, 2025, 9.

[36] For more, see: Paoli, L., Van der Beken, T. (2014). Organized crime – a contested concept. Paoli, L. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of organized crime*. New York: Oxford University Press; Banović, B. (2016). Organizovani kriminal kao aktuelna bezbednosna pretnja. *International problems*, 68(2–3), 172–192.

[37] For more, see: Europol. (2024). *Decoding the EU's most threatening criminal networks*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Europol%20report%20on%20

– Hybrid models, which combine elements of hierarchy and networks depending on the specific circumstances and markets.[38]

On the other hand, theoretical models that analyze the functional aspects of OC increasingly emphasize the concept of "global criminal entrepreneurship," according to which criminal groups and networks operate similarly to multinational companies, using logistical, financial, and technological resources in order to maximize profit and reduce risk.[39] When the connection between OC and environmental criminal offenses is analyzed, the concepts of criminal networks and global criminal entrepreneurship are particularly important, because OEC requires a combination of local operational control and global market links.

Unlike rigid, bureaucratic structures, organized criminal networks are decentralized and adaptable, which makes them less vulnerable to measures by detection and prosecution authorities. The concept relies on sociological theories of social capital, where trust, reputation, and mutual connectedness serve as key resources for operations. Morselli emphasizes that criminal networks are essentially "inner worlds" in which illegal activity takes place within normal social interactions.[40] Networks are highly resilient and can be reconstructed and revitalized even after suffering serious damage. Another advantage of network structures is that they can easily expand to include connections with other criminal organizations. The nature of these connections ranges from transient one-off links to much more durable cooperative arrangements, which may be described as strategic alliances. Most connections fall somewhere in between and are best described as tactical alliances. Strategic alliances are characterized not only by sustainable patterns of cooperation but also by the expectation that such cooperation will continue. Regardless of whether alliances are strategic or tactical, they enhance the capacity of criminal networks to circumvent detection and prosecution authorities, facilitate risk-sharing, neutralize or co-opt potential competitors, and enable profit maximization across different markets.[41]

Decoding %20the %20EU-s %20most %20threatening %20criminal %20networks.pdf, accessed on October 22, 2025. In this report, Europol developed an ABCD typology of criminal networks operating within the EU, describing their organizational and functional characteristics.

[38] For more, see: Paoli, L. (2002). The Paradoxes of Organized Crime. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 37(1).

[39] For more, see: Castells, M. (2010). *End of Millennium. Chichester*, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 171–214.

[40] For more, see: Morselli, C. (2009). *Inside Criminal Networks*. New York: Springer.

[41] Williams, P. (1994). *Transnational Organised Crime and National and International Security: A Global Assessment*, 29–30. Available at: https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/SWILLIAMS.PDF, accessed on October 22, 2025.

Criminal networks have become involved in a wide range of illegal environmental markets, including timber, wildlife, waste, and minerals and metals.[42] Environmental criminal networks are organizational structures that have developed to facilitate illegal activities related to natural resources. They are characterized by several key features: decentralization, modularity, and corruption. Decentralization means that, instead of hierarchical structures, networks are often fluid and adaptable. They consist of loosely connected cells or groups, which enables them to avoid detection and quickly reconfigure after interventions by detection and prosecution authorities.[43] Modularity means that networks can be divided into specialized modules, such as poachers, transporters, intermediaries, document forgers, money launderers, etc. Each module functions relatively independently, thereby minimizing the risk to the entire operation. Corruption is a key factor in facilitating and concealing environmental crime. Criminal networks bribe state officials, control authorities, and politicians in order to ensure the uninterrupted flow of illegal goods and protect their operations from detection and prosecution.[44]

Transnational EC networks are extremely resourceful and adaptable, capable of moving their money, illegal goods, and people across borders and continents as suits them. By contrast, government agencies and detection and prosecution authorities are often unable to coordinate and respond effectively when convergence of EC is discovered, because they are usually structured by region, type of criminal offense, jurisdiction, and specific domain of authority. Such an organizational structure prevents them from conducting and coordinating long-term intelligence-gathering operations along international supply chains. This gap in interinstitutional cooperation often renders EC networks and their leaders invisible, resulting in ineffective attempts to disrupt and prosecute criminal networks.[45]

As noted, globalization, economic liberalization, and transition processes in post-socialist states have enabled criminal networks to infiltrate the natural-resource management sector. Infiltration into the legal economy

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[42] van Uhm, D. (2023). *Organized environmental crime: black markets in gold, wildlife, and timber*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 14.

[43] See: Morselli, C. (2010). Assessing vulnerable and strategic positions in a criminal network. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 26(4).

[44] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2024). *World Wildlife Crime Report: Trafficking in Protected Species*. Vienna: United Nations publications, 122–123.

[45] Earth League International and John Jay College of Criminal Justice. (2023). *Launching an Environmental Crime Convergence Paradigm Through Investigation of Transnational Organized Crime Operations*. Los Angeles. Available at: https://earthleague-international.org/wp–content/uploads/2023/06/ELI-Environmental-Crime-Convergence-Report-June-2023.pdf, accessed on October 19, 2025.

shows that crime is not merely an isolated phenomenon, but has become a parasitic, systemically integrated part of the global economy. The use of violence as a strategic tool and the recruitment of vulnerable persons point to a cold-blooded, business-oriented logic that maximizes profit at the expense of human lives and social values.[46] Europol also points to the use of legal business structures for OEC activities in its latest report, emphasizing that "EC is committed behind the facade of legitimate businesses."[47]

As OC networks have expanded their operations beyond "traditional" activities into the extremely lucrative criminal exploitation of nature, there is increasing evidence that EC "overlaps" or "converges" with counterfeiting, drug trafficking, cybercrime, trafficking in human beings, financial crime, corruption, arms trafficking, and terrorism.[48] On the other hand, current knowledge of the convergence of various serious criminal offenses with EC is relatively limited, and there is a significant lack of empirical evidence on the scope and degree to which these criminal offenses overlap with other forms of OC.[49] Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that recently there has been a growing number of reports and studies by relevant international organizations on specific forms of OC and EC.[50] Forms of infiltration by "traditional" OC structures, such as the Italian Mafia, Russian criminal organizations, Chinese triads, the Japanese Yakuza, and Colombian drug cartels, into various areas of EC have also been documented.[51]

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[46] See: Europol. (2024). *Decoding the EU's most threatening criminal networks*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/Europol %20report %20on %20Decoding %20the %20EU-s %20most %20threatening %20criminal %20networks.pdf, accessed on October 22, 2025.

[47] Europol. (2025). *European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment – The changing DNA of serious and organised crime*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 27.

[48] Interpol and UN Environment. (2016). *Strategic Report: Environment, Peace and Security – A convergence of threats*. Available at: https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/17008, accessed on October 23, 2025.

[49] Wyatt, T., van Uhm, D., Nurse, A. (2020). Differentiating criminal networks in the illegal wildlife trade: organized, corporate and disorganized crime. *Trends in Organized Crime*, 23(4).

[50] For example, see: Wildlife Justice Commission. (2021). *Convergence of wildlife crime with other forms of organised crime*. https://wildlifejustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Crime-Convergence-Report-SPREADS-V07.pdf, accessed on October 25, 2025 – This study presents 12 case studies of the convergence between OC and crime involving the illegal trade in protected plant and animal species. In 2023, the same organization published a new study with three additional case studies.

[51] van Uhm, D. P., Nijman, R. (2020). The convergence of environmental crime with other serious crimes: Subtypes within the environmental crime continuum. *European Jour-*

4. TYPES OF CONVERGENCE BETWEEN OC AND EC

The concept of criminal convergence is key to understanding the dynamics and activities of environmental criminal networks. As noted earlier, convergence refers to the increasing mutual connectedness, overlap, and intersection of different categories of criminal offenses. This phenomenon is a key characteristic of contemporary OC, where networks often engage in numerous illegal activities, blurring the boundaries between traditional categories of criminal offenses. A recent Interpol study emphasizes that 84 % of the countries covered by the survey report convergence between EC and other forms of serious crime.[52] Recognizing and understanding patterns of convergence is essential for the classification of criminal networks because it reveals the interconnectedness of their operations and their ability to adapt and diversify their criminal activities.

For a better understanding of the process of convergence, van Uhm, on the basis of data collected on more than 100 international EC cases connected with other forms of serious crime, developed a model called the "EC continuum."[53] According to this model, there are five stages of the "EC continuum":

1) Alliance

At this initial stage, traditional OC groups enter into an alliance with groups engaged in EC. The aim is to share expert knowledge, intelligence, and operational services. For example, a drug cartel may use its established smuggling routes to transport ivory, while illegal wildlife hunters may, in return, provide logistical support and local knowledge of the terrain. This is not full integration, but temporary cooperation for mutual profit.

2) Mutualism

The mutualism stage represents a higher level of cooperation in which both groups share and exchange resources in a way that brings mutual benefit. Here, the relationship becomes deeper and longer-lasting. An example would

nal of Criminology, 19(4), 545–546; van Uhm, D. (2023). *Organized environmental crime: black markets in gold, wildlife, and timber*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 16–25.

[52] Interpol. (2016). *Strategic Report: Environment, Peace and Security – A Convergence of Threats*. Lyon, 13. Available at: https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/17008/environment_peace_security.pdf?sequence=1&amp %3BisAllowed=, accessed on: October 22, 2025.

[53] van Uhm, D. (2023). *Organized environmental crime: black markets in gold, wildlife, and timber*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 32–34.

be a drug cartel providing financial resources and weapons to local groups engaged in illegal logging, while in return gaining access to timber used to conceal cocaine during transport. The mutual benefit is clear, and the structure has become more stable.

3) Convergence

At this stage, groups merge into a single entity that simultaneously displays characteristics of both original types of crime. They are no longer two separate entities, but a single organization. One example is the Colombian cartel Clan del Golfo, which, after the pacification of FARC, took control of illegal gold mining while retaining its traditional drug-trafficking operations. The new organization integrates both criminal activities into its core structure.

4) Transformation

The transformation stage entails the transformation of a criminal group into a new organization in order to adapt to changing circumstances. In this case, the original criminal model changes in order to exploit new, more lucrative opportunities in EC. For example, a group specialized in drug smuggling may completely abandon that activity and direct all its resources toward the trade in tropical timber if profitability is higher and the risk is lower.

5) Domination

This is the final stage of the continuum, in which a criminal group dominates a particular area or trade line of EC in order to achieve greater profit. At this stage, the group has become so powerful and influential that it effectively controls the market, often using violence and corruption. An example would be the Yakuza, which took complete control over the illegal trade in whale meat, from fishing syndicates to distribution in restaurants. Such groups eliminate competition and establish a monopoly.

The geographical distribution of the above cases of convergence of OC and EC shows that the regions of origin of the natural resources being traded are most often Africa, South America, and Asia, while the most frequent destinations are Asia, North America, and Europe. Most cases connected with protected animal species originate from Africa, many cases involving minerals and metals and cases involving fish are connected with South America, and most timber-convergence cases originate from Asia. Most EC cases with drug links originate from South America, while cases of trafficking in human beings are mainly connected with Asia, and arms trafficking in EC cases almost always comes from Africa. This is also supported by the so-called "resource curse," a term used in the literature to denote the fact that countries rich in natural resources, compared with those that do not possess such resources, on average have lower rates of economic growth, lower levels of human development, greater inequality and poverty, and higher levels of corruption and crime.[54]

Analysis of the above international EC cases connected with other forms of serious crime has produced a classification of OEC called "OEC clusters," which includes:

The Green OC cluster, which includes groups that are highly structured and hierarchically organized and engage in "traditional criminal activities," such as drug or arms trafficking, but have diversified into EC in order to expand their profit and influence. Their approach is strategic and long-term.

The Green opportunistic crime cluster, which refers to groups that are less formal and less hierarchical. Their activities are driven primarily by the exploitation of market opportunities rather than long-term planning. They engage in EC when an opportunity arises, for example, in unstable regions where state control is weak.

The Green-camouflaged crime cluster, which includes groups that use legitimate business structures as a facade for their illegal environmental activities. They engage in EC in a manner that is difficult to detect, concealing illegal transactions within legal operations.[55]

In addition to the above, the literature also contains different typologies of convergence between OC and EC, among which the typologies of Earth League International[56] and the Wildlife Justice Commission are worth mentioning.[57]

Finally, in this discussion, the convergence of OEC with the entire spectrum of legal business, citizens, the private sector, and civil society should also be mentioned.[58] On the one hand, large companies routinely cooperate with OC

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[54] Boekhout van Solinge, T. (2014). The Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources, In: Paoli, L. (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime*. New York: Oxford University Press, 500.

[55] van Uhm, D. (2023). *Organized environmental crime: black markets in gold, wildlife, and timber*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 36–39.

[56] Earth League International and John Jay College of Criminal Justice. (2023). *Launching an Environmental Crime Convergence Paradigm Through Investigation of Transnational Organized Crime Operations*. Los Angeles. Available at: https://earthleague-international.org/wp–content/uploads/2023/06/ELI-Environmental-Crime-Convergence-Report-June-2023.pdf, accessed on October 19, 2025.

[57] Wildlife Justice Commission. (2020). *Infiltrating the illegal wildlife trade: A strategic analysis of criminal networks*. WJC Report.

[58] For more, see: Earth League International and John Jay College of Criminal Justice. (2023). *Op. cit.*, 61–62.

groups, for example, by purchasing their products (directly or through intermediaries) or paying them "fees" for access to specific regions or markets. On the other hand, micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises are often forced to cooperate with OC groups as a result of debt, limited opportunities, and pressure from enterprises that control local supply chains. A particularly lucrative business connection for OC is the growing private security sector, which is up to five times larger than the police forces of a significant number of countries. Poorly regulated, these companies are well-positioned for storing, selling, and trading goods, as well as almost any type of smuggled goods. Such cooperation has led to particularly efficient and destructive criminal offenses, such as "narco-ranching," which involves large and small enterprises at almost every point of the production chain.

As with the business sector, the expansion of relationships between OC and citizens at multiple levels makes operations flexible and far-reaching. At one level, there is an increasingly broad spectrum of citizen-based armed entities cooperating with OC groups, such as community-policing groups, neighborhood watches, and rural militias hired for money. Another dimension is the expanding labor force, as OC groups hire large numbers of temporary workers on contracts for specialized services, from knowledge of indigenous languages to document forgery. These workers are temporary, replaceable, and expendable. Such a contract-based structure also helps divide operations into discrete and geographically limited nodes, such as recruiters in rural areas and officials in customs facilities, which are connected at limited points and thus maximize flexibility to absorb disruptions such as arrests or natural disasters.

5. THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF CORRUPTION IN OEC

Corruption is today treated as the "fuel" of OC. Regardless of different theoretical views, there is extensive evidence, both in practice and in the literature, that OC "entrepreneurs" use corruption as one of the means (methods, tools) for infiltrating and influencing politics, the media, public administration, the judiciary, and the legitimate economy.[59] There is a well-recognized symbiotic relationship between corruption and OC in every society: corruption enables OC to function and flourish, while OC provides financial and social

[59] Banović, B. (2023). Korupcija kao konstantni bezbednosni rizik. In: Stekić N., Milošević, M. (ed.). *Zbornik radova sa Druge memorijalne naučne konferencije „Predrag Marić"*. Belgrade: Faculty of Security Studies, 21.

incentives that may attract individuals to engage in corrupt activities.[60] This connection may exist at the local, national, and transnational levels, and may involve government officials and the private sector. The greater the ability to corrupt, the greater the ability to remain invisible.

The ability to corrupt depends on the extent to which an individual or group is integrated into "legitimate" society. If they occupy secured positions of influence and power, or have secured access to structures of power, whether in the sphere of the economy, politics, or the police and judiciary, their activities are much more easily defined as legitimate. Greater ability to corrupt provides a greater possibility of remaining invisible or being seen as legitimate. At the most sophisticated level of integration, the ability to corrupt enables an individual to control what is, and what is not, defined as corruption.[61] In its most advanced form, OC is so thoroughly integrated into the economic, political, and social institutions of legitimate society that it may no longer be recognizable as a criminal enterprise. On the other hand, the criminal justice system is least effective in combating OC when it reaches this level of maturity.[62]

When it comes to the role of corruption in the commission of environmental criminal offenses, it is important to note that OEC occurs in parallel with legal business activities; that the boundary between illegal and legal is often imprecise and fluid even in normative terms, and subject to interpretation; that there is no complete prohibition, but rather business is conducted under a regime of permits and quotas; and that the existence of a legal market significantly hampers the recognition and detection of illegal activities. This part of the paper will mention only some of the forms of corruption recorded and documented in reports of international organizations and in academic literature.

One of the areas with the greatest risk of corruption in the natural-resource supply chain or in the waste-disposal process is the process of submitting and deciding on applications for licenses, permits, or other official documents. Corruption risks in the permitting process may include issues such as the acceptance of bribes by licensing officials or the issuance of a permit to an unqualified person or entity, overcharging for permits and retaining the

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[60] Tennant, I. (2021). *All Roads Lead to Rome: Towards a coordinated multilateral response to organized crime and corruption*. Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 1.

[61] Beare, M. E. (1997). Corruption and Organized Crime: Lessons from history. *Crime, Law & Social Change*, 28(2), 158.

[62] Stier, E. H., Richards, P. R. (1987). Strategic Decision Making in Organized Crime Control: The Need for a Broadened Perspective. Edelhertz, H. (ed.) *Major Issues in Organized Crime Control*. Washington: National Institute of Justice Symposium Proceedings, 65.

difference, bribery for the misclassification of species or origin for import or export permits in order to facilitate trade or avoid monitoring and control.[63]

Seaports and airports are key transport hubs for all types of international smuggling for the purpose of moving shipments through the supply chain. Public- and private-sector personnel working at these locations may be exposed to corruption risks from criminal networks seeking access to secure shipping routes. This includes customs officers, shipping companies, freight forwarders, as well as security agencies responsible for cargo protection.[64]

Corrupt practices have also been recorded in cases involving attempts to recover already seized natural resources and products derived from them, as well as the illegal sale of seized goods by corrupt customs and police officers after they had declared and publicly displayed only part of the seizure for media publicity and sold the remainder through close contacts in the criminal milieu.

A common *modus operandi* of OEC is the use of falsified documentation to move illegal shipments through legitimate commercial channels, with the complicity of freight-forwarding agencies.[65]

A regular corrupt practice, as in other categories of OC, is bribery and regular payments to control and supervisory authorities, as well as to detection and prosecution authorities, primarily the police, in exchange for protection from competitors or advance warnings of planned inspection activities, which enables impunity in business operations. This type of corruption allows

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[63] For more, see: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2020). *Scaling Back Corruption: A guide on addressing corruption for wildlife management authorities*. Vienna: United Nations publications, 18.

[64] Wildlife Justice Commission. (2023). Dirty Money: *The Role of Corruption in Enabling Wildlife Crime*, 21. Available at https://wildlifejustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/corruption-report-2023-SPREADS-V12.pdf, accessed on October 24, 2025.

[65] The Wildlife Justice Commission analyzed the internal operation of the Chen organized criminal group, which was successfully convicted in China in 2020 for smuggling at least 20 tons of ivory and rhinoceros horn from Nigeria to China between 2013 and 2019. The Chen group concealed wildlife products in timber shipments sent from Nigeria to Singapore. There, the goods declaration would be changed to timber produced in Malaysia, accompanied by a forged certificate of origin. The shipments would then be sent to South Korea, and subsequently to China. The Chen group relied heavily on the use of multiple transit points to conceal the port of departure in Africa, as well as on bribing officials at customs checkpoints. They also used freight forwarding agencies for customs clearance of the shipments, replacement of the bill of lading, and repacking of containers for further transport. Upon arrival in China, the illegal shipments were cleared through customs with the assistance of a corrupt customs officer before being transported to a designated storage location, where they awaited further sale to buyers. – Wildlife Justice Commission. (2023). Dirty Money: *The Role of Corruption in Enabling Wildlife Crime*, 25. Available at https://wildlifejustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/corruption-report-2023-SPREADS-V12.pdf, accessed on October 24, 2025.

"higher-level" offenders, with better connections to government officials, to exercise a high level of control in the criminal environment, while those who cannot afford high amounts intended for bribery are more exposed to detection and prosecution.[66]

At the end of the supply chain, falsified, false, or illegally issued permits and documents are often used to facilitate the import of illegal shipments. This may include the use of fictitious consignees and freight-forwarding companies on air waybills and bills of lading, as well as changing documentation while shipments are in transit. This method often relies on corrupt practices in order to enable the use of false documents.[67]

Similar overlap between legal and illegal business, as well as similar corrupt practices, also exists in the collection, storage, transport, and disposal of waste, particularly hazardous and special waste.[68]

According to Europol's assessment, corruption today is not merely an auxiliary component of OC but a fundamental mechanism through which criminal networks consolidate power, evade justice, and expand their operations.[69]

6. CRIMINAL OFFENSES AGAINST THE ENVIRONMENT AND OEC IN SERBIA

Although an increasing number of relevant international organizations point to problems of organized environmental pollution in this region, and to the organized commission of lucrative EC offenses in the Balkans, including Serbia, domestic academic literature pays very little attention to the problem of OEC, while the practice of detection and prosecution authorities and case law completely neglect it. This situation is probably influenced by a number

[66] For more, see: Stoner, S., Verheij, P., Jun Wu, M. (2017). *Illegal rhino horn trade dynamics in Nhi Khe, Vietnam from a criminal perspective – A case study*. Wildlife Justice Commission. Available at https://wildlifejustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Black-Business-2017.pdf, accessed on October 24, 2025.

[67] Wildlife Justice Commission (2023). *Op. cit.*, 27.

[68] For more, see: Massari, M., Monzini, P. (2004). Dirty Businesses in Italy: A Case–Study of Illegal Trafficking in Hazardous Waste. *Global Crime*, 6 (3–4), 285–304; Interpol. (2009). *Electronic waste and organized crime – assessing the links, Phase II Report for the Interpol pollution crime working group*. Available at: https://www.interpol.int/content/download/5174/file/Electronic%20Waste%20and%20Organized%20Crime%20-%20Assessing%20the%20Links.pdf, accessed on October 25, 2025.

[69] Europol. (2025). *European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment – The changing DNA of serious and organised crime*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 29.

of factors. One of them is certainly the normative framework, that is, domestic punitive legislation. Namely, numerous forms of conduct that pollute, threaten, or abuse the environment, despite their social dangerousness, are classified as misdemeanors and economic offenses rather than as criminal offenses, thereby placing them outside the focus of criminal policy. EC is still not considered serious and dangerous crime, as is demonstrated even by a superficial analysis of the current criminal offenses in the chapter on criminal offenses against the environment in the Serbian Criminal Code (Articles 260–277).[70] Of the 18 criminal offenses, only three expressly provide for the punishment of organizers (Bringing Hazardous Substances into Serbia and Unlawful Processing, Disposal, and Storage of Hazardous Substances (Article 266), and Killing and Abuse of Animals (Article 269)), while in the latter case the organization, financing, or hosting of fights between animals of the same or different species, as well as organizing or participating in betting on such fights, is criminalized. The Draft Amendments to the Criminal Code, although introducing new criminal offenses against the environment in accordance with Directive (EU) 2024/1203 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on the protection of the environment through criminal law,[71] retain solutions similar to the current text of the Code in terms of failing to recognize and punish the organized commission of these criminal offenses.

On the other hand, when the prosecution policy and sentencing policy for these criminal offenses are taken into account, as presented in a recent comprehensive study,[72] it is easy to conclude that more minor criminal offenses committed individually, such as Timber Theft and Killing and Abuse of Animals, are prosecuted and punished. These criminal offenses consistently

[70] Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia, *Official Gazette of the RS*, No. 85/05, 88/05. – corr., 107/05. – corr., 72/09, 111/09, 121/12, 104/13, 108/14, 94/16, 35/19, 94/24.

[71] European Union: Council of the European Union, *Directive (EU) 2024/1203 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on the protection of the environment through criminal law and replacing Directives 2008/99/EC and 2009/123/EC*, PE/82/2023/REV/1 OJ L, 2024/1203, 30 April 2024, 1. The Directive itself states, in point 28 of the Preamble, that due account should be taken in criminal proceedings and trials of the involvement of organized criminal groups in the commission of environmental criminal offenses, and it particularly draws attention to the corruption of public officials in the commission of such offenses. The Directive also requires that special investigative techniques be made available for the detection and prosecution of OEC, as is the case for other OC offenses (point 53 of the Preamble). In addition, the Directive provides that the commission of an environmental criminal offense within a criminal organization should be treated as an aggravating circumstance, unless it already forms part of the constituent elements of the offense (Article 8(c)).

[72] For more, see: Bejatović, S., Dokić, S. (2024). *Krivična dela protiv životne sredine i kaznena politika – norma, praksa i mere unapređenja*. Belgrade: Serbian Association for Criminal Law and Practice, Ministry of Environmental Protection.

account, year after year, for 85–90 % of the total number of criminal complaints filed for criminal offenses against the environment. To this should be added a relatively lenient judicial sentencing policy, given that it remains within the limits of the statutory minimum, that suspended sentences were imposed in more than half of the cases covered by the study, and that imprisonment was imposed in only 10 % of cases, consisting of short-term sentences around the special minimum. One of the main reasons why EC remains on the margins of official statistics is the complexity of proof, which often requires extensive and expensive investigations, various expert examinations, and cooperation between different inspection authorities, the police, and the prosecutor's office. Public prosecutor's offices, courts, and the police face a lack of specialized personnel for suppressing EC, which entails knowledge of specific regulations, investigative techniques, and forensic analysis. Many criminal complaints are dismissed precisely because of a lack of evidence or because of the impossibility of establishing a clear causal link between the criminal offense and environmental damage.

This confirms the thesis, also advanced in this paper, that EC offenses are low-risk in terms of prosecution and punishment. It is therefore entirely understandable that OEC is completely outside the focus of domestic detection and criminal prosecution authorities, as is eloquently shown by the fact that, according to data from the Higher Court in Belgrade, the Special Department for Organized Crime, from its establishment on 1 October 2010 until 21 January 2021, did not conduct a single proceeding against organized criminal groups for criminal offenses against the environment.[73]

7. CONCLUSION

Environmental crime, despite its diverse, long-term, and often irreversible consequences, was long outside the focus of policymakers, legislative bodies, and detection and prosecution authorities. It was often treated as victimless crime and as a problem of local character. In recent decades, primarily thanks to civil society organizations and the research efforts of the academic and scientific community, the global public has become aware of the social dangerousness and global character of EC. In the wake of increased interest in EC, numerous international, regional, and national political and legal documents have been adopted, proclaiming and guaranteeing high standards for environmental protection and improvement, and prohibiting and sanctioning

[73] Blažić Pavićević, M. (2023). *Specifičnosti krivičnog postuka za krivična dela protiv životne sredine*. Doctoral dissertation. Novi Sad: Faculty of Law, 112.

activities that threaten and damage the environment, whereby the socially most dangerous conduct is criminalized and referred to in the scientific and expert literature as EC.

Certain forms of EC are aimed at obtaining benefits for individuals, groups, or business entities (companies, corporations) through the exploitation, damage, trade, or theft of natural resources, or through illegal trade in and disposal of hazardous waste and other pollutants, as well as the smuggling of substances that deplete the ozone layer. By their nature, these forms of EC require a certain level of organization, both in planning and execution, and the participation of a larger number of actors with divided roles, which gives them the character of OC, while their geographical distribution and global prevalence indicate their transnational character.

Profitability, transnational character, shortcomings of normative solutions and weaknesses in their application, and the low level of priority given to the treatment of EC by detection and prosecution authorities are the basic factors that have contributed to the perception of EC by criminal groups and networks as high-profit, low-risk crime. This has led to the diversification of their criminal activity toward EC, through the use of already established infrastructure (channels, routes, warehouses, intermediaries), financial channels, corrupt networks, and other methods of avoiding criminal prosecution, as well as violent protection mechanisms, that is, to the convergence of OC and EC.

The convergence of OC and EC, as the dynamic intertwining of markets, actors, and techniques of different criminal activities toward shared infrastructure and mutual reinforcement, has only recently come into the focus of the scientific and professional community, as well as of detection and prosecution authorities in certain states. OC networks have expanded their operations beyond "traditional" activities into the extremely lucrative criminal exploitation of natural resources, and there is increasing evidence that EC "overlaps" or "converges" with counterfeiting, drug trafficking, cybercrime, trafficking in human beings, financial crime, corruption, arms trafficking, and terrorism, on the one hand, and that OEC converges with the entire spectrum of legal business, citizens, the private sector, and civil society, on the other. Criminal networks have become involved in a broad range of lucrative EC offenses, that is, illegal environmental markets, including timber, wildlife, waste, and minerals and metals. Transnational EC networks are extremely flexible and adaptable, capable of moving money, illegal goods, and people across borders and continents, and, through infiltration into legal economic entities and activities and the use of corruption, of remaining outside the focus of detection and prosecution authorities.

Recognizing and understanding patterns of convergence by control, detection, and prosecution authorities is essential, because it reveals the interconnectedness of their operations and their ability to adapt and diversify their criminal activities, which is the basic precondition for any effective social response to this category of crime. For a more effective social response, it is also necessary to overcome limitations relating to the normative treatment of this category of crime, the organizational structure of detection and prosecution authorities, the lack of material and specialized human resources, and interinstitutional cooperation at the national, regional, and global levels. Finally, it is necessary to raise the prevention and suppression of EC to the highest level of priority, not only in political proclamations but also in legislation, and especially in practice.

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