A photograph of a man wearing a red baseball cap and a white tank top, leaning over and working in a field of green, leafy plants. The background is filled with dense green foliage and trees. The overall scene suggests agricultural or manual labor in a rural or undeveloped area.

THE ABSENCE OF THE STATE IN THE MOST CONFLICTIVE REGIONS STRENGTHENS ORGANIZED CRIME

In the opinion of the researchers Óscar Palma and Jochen Kleinschmidt, the absence of the State in the most conflictive regions of the country and the lack of opportunities for a better life on the part of their inhabitants are the problems which underlie the debate on how to fight against narcotics-trafficking and organized crime.



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Photos: Leonardo Parra, Alberto Sierra, Ximena Serrano

Narcotics-trafficking, illegal mining and the trafficking of migrants are the top three crimes which present the biggest challenges to the authorities in Colombia nowadays. They are tentacles of organized crime which intercross not only because the collusion of different criminal organizations makes organized crime stronger, but also because organized crime links legal with illegal activities in a network of actions which make it very difficult to define its structures, *modus operandis* and actors.

Its ways of evading or fending off the actions of the State – whether due to its defensive capacity, use of bribery or skill at blending into society – have grown, and that, of course, poses more challenges to the authorities, aggravated by a global, hyper-interconnected scenario, which lays out the red carpet for illegal transnational activities.

Working from different angles, the Colombian specialist in international relations, Óscar Palma, and the German political scientist, Jochen Kleinschmidt, have studied the phenomena of organized crime in Colombia and the world, local insurgencies, irregular wars, intelligence and terrorism. One of their recent joint studies is a comparison between the former Colombian guerrilla, the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the Cartel of Sinaloa in Mexico, where they tested the hypothesis of convergence, which posits that the structures of organized crime, terrorism and insurgency automatically resemble each other in the contemporary world. Despite the similarity of some of these arrangements, there is always some change in the position of States which also leads the criminal organizations to change their tactics and, according to Kleinschmidt, that means that the “State and organized crime are like the sun and the shade.”

Along with this study, there is one about the achievements and failures of the Colombian government’s fight against the FARC between 2002 and 2012, and another, still unfinished, about the innovative nature of the maritime traffic used by narcotics-trafficking. While these studies are being polished and submitted for publication in indexed journals, the two researchers, who work at the Center for Political and International Studies (CEPI) at the Faculty of Political Science, Government and International Relations of the Universidad del Rosario, tell us about some of their views on organized crime.

Advances in Science (AS): We are at a critical point in the discussion about whether the agro-chemical glyphosate should be used to eradicate coca plants, but you go further and call for the decriminalization of drugs. How would that be managed?

Óscar Palma (OP): Colombia has had a historical problem and it is the failure of the State to exert its presence in many regions of the country and this has enabled a number of parallel and illegal actors to emerge. Why is there coca in Guaviare, the Putumayo and many other regions? Because, in practical terms, there is no other way for people to survive. Let’s say that the use of glyphosate is authorized. If the State does not build infrastructure or develop productive projects, however, we are never going to escape from



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that. As was shown in the recent debate at the Constitutional Court, the number of hectares where coca is replanted after it has been fumigated is higher when there are negotiations with the community. Thus, with or without glyphosate or with or without peace talks, the State has a pending task which it has not assumed since it was founded in 1810.

If the coca plants are eradicated, people turn to other illegal sources of income, as we have seen in the case of mining. I say 'State' because it is the responsible party, but this construction is also done by the communities; that is, it is not a matter of designing models in Bogotá and reproducing them in the regions because the social, economic and political realities of those places are often ignored and that is why the model winds up clashing with their inhabitants.

Jochen Kleinschmidt (JK): Decriminalization would lead to a significant improvement in terms of violence and the harm done by the micro-trafficking of narcotics would disappear. We have seen that, in countries like Spain or the Czech Republic, where a policy of decriminalization was implemented, the consumption of drugs did not automatically rise: That is a myth; it would also allow the State to have more control of such substances. What is the country where more people die from the abuse of alcohol? Saudi Arabia, because it is illegal there and they sell them adulterated liquor. We are not going to solve the problems

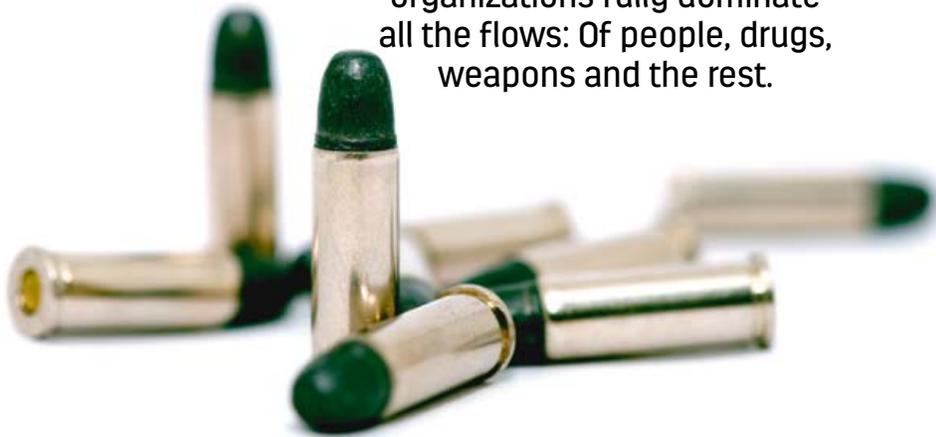
of these regions in Colombia, the north of Burma or parts of the golden triangle in Mexico if there aren't other options, because they have always been uncontrolled places where, in the absence of the State, other ways of benefitting themselves will be found.

AS: And that decision to decriminalize should be made in collaboration with other countries or can a country do it on its own?

OP: Some States have decriminalized some products, but not entirely. In Colombia, despite what is happening with marijuana (the industry of medical cannabis), the problem of narcotics-trafficking has to do with cocaine. The debate about its decriminalization in the world is still very heated and I don't think it is going to happen, because countries like China and the Philippines won't even consider it. Colombia won't get anywhere if it legalizes the production of cocaine, because it would still be sold illegally abroad, that is, there wouldn't be anyone it could legally sell it to and thus it would remain a lucrative business for criminals. Yes, there is a need for global agreements to achieve the desired result. The foreign policy of the administration of former president Santos took the lead in international discussions of the problem, but it is difficult now, due to the change of government.

JK: Perhaps a regional agreement, in America, would be enough. I think that is feasible and I am going to see it in my life time, perhaps when I am an old man. But I think it is going to happen, because there is a significant generation gap, even in the United States, where a majority of the young people who vote for the Republicans are in favor of decriminalization. Even president Donald Trump said during his campaign that this subject should be left to each State and no one in the Republican Party can come out against 'States rights'. The opposing trend is found in the Asian countries, like China, for example, where they not only penalize marijuana but even give people a life sentence for distributing pornography. Thus the

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problem is not only to do with narcotics policies, but also with the idea of the role of the State.

AS: What can be done to halt illegal mining and the illegal trafficking of migrants?

OP: My studies have focused more on narcotics-trafficking. We know that gold mining has been a source of funding for organized crime and at the same time, it nourishes itself on a long chain of organized crime which supplies it with inputs and services. Therefore, it is immersed in an illegal economy in which more persons than you might imagine participate. We also know that the environmental harms caused by illegal mining are much bigger than those caused by coca, and that, due to the behavior of the global market, mining may be more attractive to some criminal organizations: When the price of gold rises, we see that some people immediately shift from drugs-trafficking to mining, and when it falls, the acreage of illegal crops grows. The manpower used in both economies is interrelated.

I have not studied the trafficking of migrants, but it goes beyond what is happening in Venezuela. Rather, it refers to the traditional trafficking of migrants from all over the world to the United States. Colombia is a kind of entrepot for large flows of persons and there are regions, like the Darién, where the criminal organizations fully dominate all the flows: Of people, drugs, weapons and the rest.

In his book *El fin del Poder* (The End of Power), Moisés Naim argues that power is becoming more and more difficult to brandish and hold onto and that it easily weakens. Can you extrapolate that to the world of organized crime?

OP: The dynamics found in the legal sectors, public and private, are found in organized crime. The academic studies of such problems even say that organized crime should be regarded as a corporate enterprise, that is, with the logic of administering a business venture which competes with others in order to dominate a market.

AS: And that has made it more difficult to fight against crime?

OP: Yes. If there were a single organization in Colombia in charge of all of the crimes, it would be easier to find a political response. But there are many which compete with one another, and the civilian population always winds up in the middle, as is happening in the Catatumbo or Tumaco, where a number of illegal companies are trying to monopolize the inputs for a global market.

Nowadays, we speak of a system of organized crime consisting of different groups of different sizes: Organized Armed Groups, capable of controlling a territory and defying the State; Organized Criminal Groups, who are linked to the above ones and help them do certain jobs, but which cannot fight the State head on; and after that, there are a number of small enterprises, called “offices”, and individuals, who, with less power, undertake specific actions and are integrated into the system.



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JK: You almost no longer see those monolithic criminal structures of the recent past, like Los Zetas in Mexico, or Pablo Escobar and the Castaño brothers in Colombia. That form of private armies has tended to move to the periphery of crime, while in the center we do have that entrepreneurial logic of people who are well dressed, educated and very formal and manage an illegal empire in a quasi-legal manner.

AS: Have the hyper-connectivity of the Internet and the special possibilities of the “deep web” strengthened organized crime?

OP: The Internet and the “deep web” have turned into large venues in which many illegal transactions take place. But organized crime also needs more open venues and the legal system, as happens with money-laundering, which passes through the major banks of the world. Of course, there are a lot of illegal activities which take place in the shadows, in the underworld, but there are also many which occur in the world we live in, but without anyone realizing it.

AS: Is there a “mother” of all crimes in the world of organized crime?

JK: Any form of prohibition is the initial cause. The daddy of modern organized crime was Al Capone and you only have to look at the mafia which arose when alcohol was prohibited in the United States. ■