

'Ndrangheta Has No Crisis

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Abstract

The ongoing emergency situation associated with the spread of the coronavirus is already evident in its potential to cause serious consequences for society, the economy, and the population's psyche. Conversely, the most profound changes often emerge due to unforeseen circumstances that compel people to radically redefine their lifestyles. In such cases, we could potentially derive benefits from a serious situation to formulate future plans and adaptive work strategies. However, given recent events including the uncontrolled spread of the epidemic, the artificial escalation of panic, widespread quarantine measures, and other repercussions, one might expect chaos, crisis, and panic to prevail in many European countries. Italy, especially, should be susceptible to such issues as it held a prominent position in the COVID-19 incidence rankings for a considerable period.

Nevertheless, there exist regions and individuals that remain impervious to crisis; their adaptability to any conditions is a skill honed over a prolonged duration. This article delves into the factors contributing to the relatively lower panic and epidemic spread in the southern Italian region of Calabria, specifically examining the role of the criminal subculture known as 'Ndrangheta. The study analyzes its business and organizational model, which has demonstrated its effectiveness to date and exhibited adaptability to modern lifestyles and changes.

Keywords

COVID-19, pandemic, 'Ndrangheta, Mafia, Camorra, criminal tradition

Introduction

In early 2020, the world faced an unprecedented crisis with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, disrupting daily life, causing economic turmoil, and instigating widespread social changes across various facets of human activity. Italy, significantly impacted by the pandemic, underwent profound transformations in its social fabric and economy. Southern Italy, specifically Calabria, stood out for experiencing a surprisingly limited impact compared

to the rest of the country. A notable contributing factor to this resilience was the presence and activities of the 'Ndrangheta, a formidable and secretive criminal organization with historical roots in Calabria. With a substantial influence on the region's economic and social dynamics, the 'Ndrangheta's role during the COVID-19 pandemic raises intriguing questions about how and why this criminal entity not only withstood the crisis but potentially augmented its influence.

The author endeavors to unravel the intricate socio-economic interplay between the pandemic and the 'Ndrangheta's operations in Calabria. The focus extends beyond the organization's current impact amid the pandemic to encompass its historical evolution, structure, and modus operandi. Through a comprehensive analysis of diverse sources, including statistical reports, historical archives, and insights from experts and local residents, the article aims to shed light on the 'Ndrangheta's distinctive position in the social and economic landscape of Calabria during the pandemic.

The objective of this paper is to examine the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations and structure of the 'Ndrangheta, exploring how this criminal organization has navigated and adapted to emerging challenges and altered circumstances. By delving into the historical, social, and economic dimensions of the 'Ndrangheta, our goal is to discern not only how the organization managed to endure the global crisis but also to explore the possibility of its increased influence in Calabria. This research relies on a comprehensive analysis of accessible statistical data, historical records, and contemporary reports detailing the activities of the 'Ndrangheta. Additionally, it incorporates interviews with experts in criminology, economics, and social sciences to enrich the depth and breadth of the study.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this article adopts an integrated approach to scrutinize the endeavors of the 'Ndrangheta amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This investigation incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods, ensuring a thorough comprehension of the influence exerted by this criminal organization on the society and economy of Calabria.

Diverse data sources are employed, encompassing official statistical reports on criminal activity, economic status, and social conditions in Calabria. Historical documents and studies detailing the evolution of the 'Ndrangheta and its role in Italian society are considered. The analysis also incorporates contemporary studies and reports on the activities of the 'Ndrangheta, including its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analytical methodologies employed include content analysis, which scrutinizes publicly accessible materials like news articles, law enforcement reports, and scientific publications pertaining to the 'Ndrangheta. Comparative analysis is utilized to assess the situation in Calabria in relation to other regions of Italy and countries affected by the pandemic. Additionally, expert interviews are conducted with specialists in criminology, economics, and social sciences to glean additional perspectives and achieve a deeper understanding of the situation. The research is carried out following ethical and standardized protocols. All utilized data are anonymized, and information acquired from experts is employed with their consent and in adherence to confidentiality principles.

Results

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'Ndrangheta has demonstrated noteworthy adaptability and resilience, prompting inquiries into the nature of its influence. This article delves into

multiple facets of the 'Ndrangheta's conduct, seeking to comprehend the reasons behind its remarkable effectiveness in navigating crises. The analysis of contemporary research narratives emphasizes the relevance and importance of coping with unforeseen events and effectively responding to crises (Aven & Krohn, 2014; Coombs & Laufer, 2018; Hajikazemi et al., 2016; Kuzmanovic & Gaffney, 2017; Ramezani & Camarinha-Matos, 2019). The history of the 'Ndrangheta illustrates its remarkable capacity to adjust to evolving circumstances. Transforming from a basic criminal entity, the group has evolved into a potent international organization adept at overseeing substantial financial transactions and intricate operations. Emphasize that experts from various fields pay special attention to analyzing how different organizations cope with challenges (Anderson-Fletcher et al., 2017; Lamboglia et al., 2018; Markman & Venzin, 2014; Paraskevas & Quek, 2019).

The 'Ndrangheta not only survived in the pandemic but potentially fortified its position in the region. This is linked to its capability to influence the economy and society, particularly in times of economic instability and social unrest. The 'Ndrangheta's transition from conventional criminal approaches to the utilization of digital technologies, such as online marketplaces and cybercrime, has been noted. This illustrates the adaptability of the organization and its proficiency in seizing new opportunities to broaden its influence.

The 'Ndrangheta's impact on public opinion and even regional politics has been documented. Its capability to manipulate information and leverage public sentiment for its benefit constitutes a significant facet of its influence. The research underscores the necessity for additional exploration of the Ndrangheta as a social and economic phenomenon. Gaining insights into the mechanisms of its resilience and adaptability can provide valuable lessons in combating organized crime and comprehending the impact of criminal structures on society at large.

In order to comprehensively address the posed inquiries, it is essential to delve into the origins of culture and history, analyzing the conditions that shaped the way of life and philosophy of southern Italy. This includes examining the emergence and persistence of criminal traditions within this region. The southern part of Italy serves as a mirror reflecting the broader human history, providing a cross-section of the world's chronology. Within this small patch of land lies everything necessary to study global trends, categories, and phenomena of worldwide significance. The article titled "Criminal Tradition as a Vehicle of Historical Transmission" extensively explores the crucial importance of studying criminal traditions in historical research. These criminal subcultures have remained remarkably consistent throughout centuries, needing to remain effective and resilient in their ever-evolving world. They also serve as a conveyance for history and key skill, as they can stand as a primary source of information (Filippova, 2020).

Another crucial aspect pertains to the training of individuals within these criminal traditions, encompassing the transmission of knowledge across generations, the methods employed for member training, and the factors contributing to their effectiveness. The issues of education and skills acquisition are very relevant today, which is reflected in current research publications in various fields (Ward et al., 2018; see also Hikosaka et al., 2013; Karlson & Birkelund, 2019; Van Laar et al., 2017; Wilson, 2013). The training approach within many criminal organizations is characterized by rapidity, as skills need to be acquired swiftly due to the unpredictable nature of their activities. There is a lack of time and favorable conditions for extensive, years-long training. Moreover, the overall level of training among members of these organizations tends to be relatively low. This simplicity and accessibility in training methods cater to the needs of every member. Despite these factors, criminal structures exhibit a remarkable level of resilience and survival, even in the face of engaging in illegal activities. Their ability to endure is noteworthy, given the constant threat of incarceration. This situation places them at a distinct disadvantage compared to law-abiding individuals.

Yet, these criminal entities consistently achieve results and continue to operate effectively. It means that underscores their efficacy, surpassing even state institutions within the confines of the country in which they operate.

As widely recognized, Italy has witnessed the emergence of three prominent criminal organizations: 'Ndrangheta, Camorra, and the Mafia. It is worth noting that these organizations are of particular scientific interest for interdisciplinary research (Buonanno & Pazzona, 2014; Calderoni et al., 2017; Craparo et al., 2018; Lavorgna & Sergi, 2014; Sergi, 2019). Among these, Camorra stands out as a criminal entity that, according to the prevailing hypothesis, originated directly in Campania during the XVI-XVII centuries. Renowned Florentine writer Marc-Charles-François Monier encapsulated the essence of Camorra, stating, "The term Camorra encompasses much more than a mere association. It signifies a range of power abuses and influences" (Monnier, 1862).

The Sicilian Mafia gained global notoriety, extending its operations to economically robust cities in the United States. Meanwhile, the 'Ndrangheta, a Calabrian criminal subculture, has risen to prominence due to its exceptional efficiency, making it one of the wealthiest and most influential criminal syndicates worldwide. Their prowess lies in their ability to traffic significant volumes of cocaine, manipulate substantial economic assets in global financial markets, while simultaneously preserving age-old rituals, customs, hierarchies, and relationships rooted in the original subculture. Notably, the forces of global crime have been unable to erode these foundations.

Presently, 'Ndrangheta stands as the sole criminal organization that upholds rituals, myths, and symbols that were once shared among Camorristi and other incarcerated individuals in the early nineteenth century, specifically in the confines of Favignana prison near Trapani, as well as Nisida and Procida near Naples. Remarkably, 'Ndrangheta continues to employ symbolic paraphernalia borrowed from the reformed Carboneria, symbolic of the Bourbon opposition, to induct new "Picciotti" members and cultivate a distinct sense of identity and belonging (Gratteri & Nicaso, 2019). It should be noted that all these criminal organizations have adopted economic methods and have, in many cases, established close ties with politicians and infiltrated legal economic systems.

Grown in silence, 'Ndrangheta has emerged as the most formidable, influential, and extensively pervasive criminal syndicate worldwide. Within Italy's confines, no other entity presently matches its accelerated profit growth. Exceeding a staggering 44 billion euros in turnover, excluding money laundered proceeds, 'Ndrangheta stands as a formidable, aggressive, and infiltrative enterprise, adept at permeating both the economy and public institutions. It uniquely attains a global footprint, spanning across virtually all corners of Italy, Europe, Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Oceania (Gratteri & Nicaso, 2010).

Of particular note are the criteria of social acceptability, where membership in a criminal organization is considered immoral to the average European, yet for Sicilians and Calabrians, it signifies affiliation with a potent force. It translates into societal authority, respect, and a prosperous future. Decades ago, a clear distinction was drawn: there is "Vita" – the good life for those within the organization, and for the rest, "mala vita" – a life of hardship (Mirabella, 1910).

When visiting Palermo, Calabria, and Puglia, the distinct disparities among the people and societies become readily apparent. Notably, Palermo and its surrounding areas are marked by a stringent discipline that underscores their orderliness, whereas Naples and the central region of Puglia are characterized by a pervasive sense of chaos.

Within the framework of Academician Oleg Maltsev's proposed tactical strategy for combating epidemics, an initial aspect defining an epidemic as an emergency is its inherent tendency to escalate (Maltsev, 2020). However, a prevalent characteristic of the southern Italian regions is a form of conditional isolation from the broader Italian mainland. Sicily, being an island, naturally fosters geographical separation, while Calabria, situated at the southernmost tip, is not a hub of extensive transportation interchange. Its mountainous terrain further

impedes access to various regions and towns, many of which are perched atop hills. This historical context of “closure” and isolation acts as a deterrent to the rapid propagation of viruses, owing to the challenges and limited accessibility to residential areas. Supporting this perspective, the following facts and published statistics stand out: Calabria boasts the lowest coronavirus mortality rate among regions and is associated with underreported incidence rates relative to other areas (“L’effetto Coronavirus in Calabria: “Tasso Di Letalità Tra I Più Bassi D’Italia,” 2020).

The official statistics for the entire Italy, including the southern region, indicate that the southern part of the country is not in a high-risk zone for the spread of the virus. This is evident from a graph published in the May 4, 2020 edition of “Corriere della Sera” (Fig. 1), which categorizes all the major cities in southern Italy within the “cold” risk zone, denoting a low percentage of virus transmission (Basso, 2020). Only Sicily is marked with a minimal score within the orange zone, which is described as an area with low scores but the possibility of emerging risks. An analysis of the overall trend in the increase of coronavirus cases in the southern region reveals that a significant portion of cases emerged due to induced migration after the initial phase of quarantine and the implementation of the Presidential Decree urging people to “stay at home” (*Decreto Del Presidente Del Consiglio Dei Ministri 4 Marzo 2020*, 2020). By March 24 alone, around 40,000 individuals had returned to Sicily since the beginning of the coronavirus epidemic, which undoubtedly contributed to a considerable spread of the virus within the region (Ganci, 2020). It is worth noting that even after this period, access to the island was not completely restricted, and movements continued with relatively lenient controls at ferry crossings, including during the Easter holidays (“Caos Sullo Stretto, De Luca Rilancia La Banca Dati E Chiede L’intervento Di Musumeci,” 2020). With the transition to the second phase of quarantine on May 4, Sicily remained closed until May 17, allowing access only for essential personnel such as police and armed forces members, healthcare workers, and those involved in essential services (*Decreto Del Presidente Del Consiglio Dei Ministri 4 Marzo 2020*). The governor of Sicily has stated his intention to keep access to the island restricted until the end of May, with the final decision depending on the prevailing epidemiological situation.

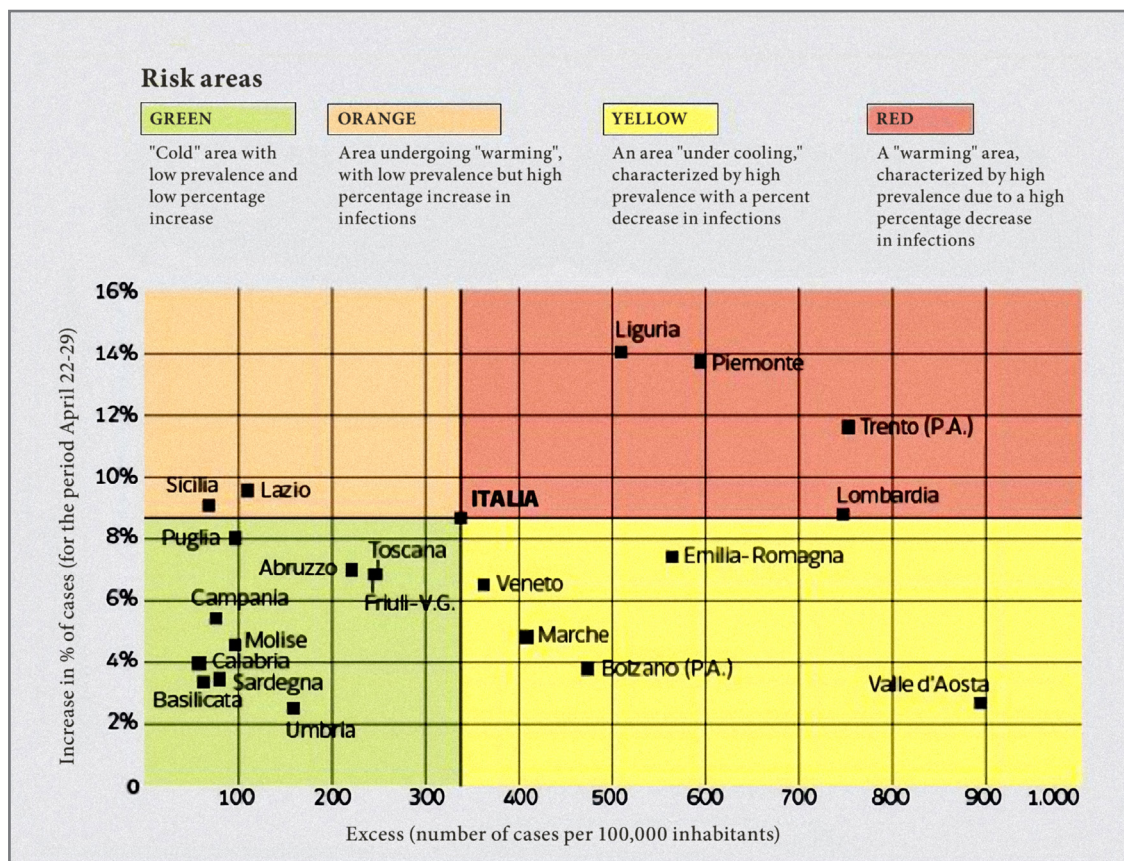


Figure 1. Morbidity statistics on the territory of Italy (April 22-29)

The geographical separation and relative isolation of southern Italy have indeed played a significant role in shaping its unique culture and traditions. This isolation has allowed certain aspects of its heritage to be preserved in a more "mothballed" form, shielding it from some external influences and pan-European trends. This makes the region particularly rich for cultural and traditional research. However, the 'Ndrangheta, while rooted in its archaic identity, is not a static entity. It is a dynamic organization that continually evolves and adapts to modern needs and ideals. Its methods of operation, expansion, and asserting power are constantly changing to become more effective and sustainable. Therefore, it is crucial to stay informed about new trends, economic changes, and conduct ongoing research to understand this ever-changing structure accurately.

The 'Ndrangheta is considered a criminal subculture that has evolved over centuries, adjusting to changing circumstances. The quarantine measures imposed on the Italian territory and the alteration of daily life due to external factors are just part of the ongoing transformation and adaptation of its activities.

Discussion

In recent works by renowned researchers Nicola Gratteri and Antonio Nicaso, it is noted that the 'Ndrangheta is shifting towards being less violent and embracing the world of digital technology and money laundering. New leaders of traditional criminal organizations are increasingly aware of new markets, business opportunities, and how information technology can be harnessed to enhance profits and expand operations. A paper by the National Security Research Division of the Rand Corporation in 2014 highlighted that the online black market has evolved from networks of individuals driven by notoriety to a highly organized and centralized structure linked to traditional criminal groups like drug cartels, mafia, and terrorist cells. This underscores the adaptability and sophistication of these criminal organizations, indicating their capacity to embrace modern technology and remain relevant in a changing world (Gratteri & Nicaso, 2019).

The adaptability of criminal organizations, such as drug dealers, to changing circumstances and technologies is evident in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic challenges it has brought. With the closure of borders and lockdown measures in place, drug dealers have shifted their tactics to home deliveries and leveraging social networks for contacts and distribution. Criminal groups, including the mafia, are capitalizing on their resources and mobility to exploit opportunities and generate profits even in turbulent times. Small and medium-sized enterprises are facing significant financial losses due to the pandemic and are bracing themselves for a post-viral economic crisis. Many businesses are at risk of bankruptcy and other dire consequences as they navigate the challenges ahead.

The online realm has also become a platform for criminal activities. An example is the Mega-online scam originating in Calabria, which involved unauthorized access to computer systems, distribution of access codes, computer fraud, and money laundering (this was reported on March 26, 2020). A group of 117 individuals were implicated in the case, all of whom were involved in the operation. The accusations encompass unauthorized entry into a computer system, unlawful ownership and dissemination of computer system access codes, computer-based deceit, and the act of money laundering ("Truffe Online E Phishing, 117 Indagati a Reggio Calabria," 2020).

Alessandro Anselmi, a researcher who delved into the realm of onion routing, sheds light on the role of "Crypto-markets." Anselmi explains that these platforms serve as venues for trading drugs, firearms, and digital products. These online marketplaces operate in a manner akin to established e-commerce platforms like eBay or Amazon (Anselmi, 2019).

Anselmi emphasizes that a key distinction lies in the anonymity afforded by these plat-

forms, even facilitated by cryptocurrencies like Monero and Zcash. The most sought-after commodities on these sites include drugs, counterfeit documents, counterfeit banknotes, credit cards, weapons, and various forms of malware - ranging from simple data-stealing software to sophisticated, professional-grade programs capable of intercepting, altering, or pilfering sensitive user information. Notably, this extensive network is also routinely exploited for the illicit laundering of funds through covert and anonymous online transactions. Despite this, the security of these systems continues to improve over time, contingent upon their intricacy, exchange mechanisms, and the utilization of multiple concealed pathways for fund recycling.

The shift towards electronic realms has undoubtedly impacted crime trends in Italy, as well as in numerous other countries globally. Recent data reveals a noticeable decrease in criminal activity, reaching approximately 75% in Italy for the month of March compared to the same period in the previous year. This trend also extends to New York City, which experienced a 25% reduction in crime, and Los Angeles, where a 5.6% decrease was observed (bearing in mind that the situation demanding citizens to stay at home had not yet emerged in that part of the world). A similar pattern is evident in Toronto. Nevertheless, given the economic standstill resulting from the quarantine measures in Italy and beyond, this criminal structure possesses a remarkable capacity to swiftly and effectively adapt across various sectors such as the economy, industry, and logistics (Grignetti, 2020).

The frequency of extortion demands seems to have diminished, and even abroad, the strategy in this regard has undergone some adjustments. Rather than requesting a “pizzo” (a monthly cash payment), many restaurant owners, for instance, have acquiesced to utilizing products sourced from companies affiliated with criminal organizations, which may involve operating under the direction of mafia proxies.

This characteristic of rapid adaptation and transformation is not a recent phenomenon alone, but has historical precedents. History illustrates that organized criminal entities have historically capitalized on natural calamities. A notable instance is the catastrophic earthquake that struck Reggio Calabria and its province in 1908, ranking among the most devastating seismic events of the 20th century. This earthquake, measuring 7.1 MW in magnitude, occurred at 5:20:27 local time on December 28, 1908, causing extensive destruction to the cities of Messina and Reggio Calabria in just 37 seconds. Approximately half of Sicily’s population and a third of Calabria’s population perished. It stands as one of the most severe natural disasters in terms of casualties in Europe’s memory and the largest such catastrophe on Italian soil during recorded history. Yet, for the ‘Ndrangheta, this catastrophe presented a remarkable opportunity for financial gain. In the aftermath of the earthquakes in Emilia-Romagna, Abruzzo, and Umbria, several entrepreneurs connected with the ‘Ndrangheta endeavored to secure funds for post-disaster reconstruction (*Che istituisce attestati di benemerenzza in occasione del terremoto Del 28 dicembre 1908*, 1909).

As per the analysis of crime researcher and author Antonio Nicaso, the ‘Ndrangheta’s evolving nature suggests that while they have displayed an inclination towards adaptability over the years, their opportunistic and predatory character renders their actions unpredictable. This dynamic situation calls for vigilance, as the potential outcomes of their actions remain uncertain. It is important to emphasize that while there may be instances where capital is employed for usurious activities, directly impacting struggling entrepreneurs facing liquidity challenges, this scenario should be averted. Specific government interventions ought to be implemented to aid those already grappling with the crisis (Maltsev, 2020).

However, a substantial risk persists whereby certain enterprises could fall into the clutches of usurers. Moreover, there is a looming threat of criminal organizations taking control of businesses, particularly those that are most susceptible to the global economic downturn. It is crucial to acknowledge the likelihood that some business leaders may attempt to bridge financial gaps through purported “charitable contributions.” Nonetheless, these seemingly philanthropic gestures by the mafia are far from altruistic; they mask a cunning strategy

aimed at facilitating hostile takeovers, imposition of dominance, and fostering dependency (Esteves, 2020).

In the midst of economic turmoil and uncertainty surrounding the post-epidemic landscape, certain organizations have managed to mitigate the adverse effects. Notably, Calabria and Sicily have remained relatively unscathed by the crisis. Their legal food businesses, both domestically and abroad, have been able to sustain their operations by adapting to evolving consumer demands.

An important consideration, highlighted by scientist Oleg Maltsev in his developed epidemic control tactics, is the potential psychological repercussions of prolonged stay-at-home measures. Imposing a series of stringent regulations can lead individuals to form conclusions such as the belief that authorities have unchecked power, that legal protections are non-existent, or that their fundamental human rights are being violated. This can even extend to skepticism about the validity of the nation's supreme law, the Constitution. It is worth noting, however, that criminal organizations operate under their own set of laws, norms, and regulations which they strictly adhere to. These internal codes are integral to their sustenance and well-being. They often disregard national laws, which is a central factor contributing to the emergence of criminal traditions within a state.

From a psychological standpoint, it is important to highlight that members of the 'Ndrangheta do not exhibit significant psychological disorders and tend to lead relatively stable lives. As noted by Antonio Nicaso in an interview with the Vatican newspaper, criminal organizations are adept at seizing opportunities amidst crises, often transforming challenges into advantages.

Conclusions

This article has thoroughly examined the key factors contributing to the resilience of southern Italy and entities like the 'Ndrangheta in the face of the changes brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. These factors encompass both morbidity statistics and economic stability, as well as the flexibility inherent in their business system. Specifically, the following factors have been explored:

- Geographical Isolation of the region.
- The historical isolation of the region, along with its unique culture, traditions, and way of life.
- Archaic Identity.
- The existence of their own laws, canons, and traditions, distinct from those of the general state.
- Effective and Flexible Business Model.
- Transition to the Digital Space which, among other things, leads to a reduction of crime in Italy and worldwide.

It is crucial to direct attention towards the philosophy of southern Italy. History reveals it as a philosophy deeply rooted in complete efficiency, spanning generations and effectively addressing a diverse array of challenges over centuries, both in historical contexts and contemporary business. Despite 'Ndrangheta's remarkable resilience and adaptability in facing artificially imposed adverse conditions during the coronavirus pandemic, this should not be misconstrued as an encouragement to join its ranks or partake in its activities. Rather, one should heed the Archbishop of Reggio di Calabria's plea during the pandemic, "Never succumb to 'Ndrangheta", and view this structure through the lens of an efficient business model and management approach ("Coronavirus, L'appello Dell'arcivescovo Ai Reggini: 'Mai Cedere Alla 'ndrangheta,'" 2020). This entails focusing not on wrongdoing, but on efficiency, tactics, logical reasoning, thought patterns, adaptation to the modern world, and more. The knowl-

edge and philosophy that underlie this structure can be judiciously and rationally applied to life, mirroring 'Ndrangheta's adeptness at adapting to events and changes to its advantage, ensuring its uninterrupted existence for decades.

If an individual does not transition from an ineffective philosophy to an efficient one, fails to eliminate obstacles, neglects the cultivation of conditions for their own future, and disregards the elements that shape their outlook, then it is likely that challenges in their life will not merely remain stagnant, but may even escalate.

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