

INVESTIGATIVE METHODS IN DISMANTLING ORGANISED CRIMINAL GROUPS: CURRENT TRENDS AND CASE STUDIES FROM THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract

This study analyses contemporary investigative methods used in dismantling organised criminal groups (OCGs), with a particular focus on the context of the Republic of Moldova and current technological transformations. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating doctrinal-normative analysis; a strategic-operational study of international reports (SOCTA, EMPACT, INTERPOL, UNODC); an examination of finalised judicial cases and case files from the Republic of Moldova; and semi-structured interviews with law enforcement practitioners. The study identifies major trends in modern organised crime, including the adoption of crime-as-a-service (CaaS) models, the use of encrypted communication infrastructure, the industrialisation of fraud through scam centres, and the diversification of financial flows through cryptocurrencies. The findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of special investigative methods (SIM), corroborated with advanced financial investigation, social network analysis (SNA), and international cooperation through joint investigation teams (JIT), is a determining factor in neutralising the operational capacity of organised criminal groups. The article presents concrete case studies from the Republic of Moldova, including: (1) international drug trafficking networks using a Moldovan company as cover, and (2) money laundering operations through shell companies and cryptocurrencies. Analysis of these cases reveals methodological particularities applicable in the Moldovan context and offers practical recommendations for improving investigative effectiveness.

Keywords: identity fraud, identity, attribution of identity, false identity, personal data, use of identity, maintaining deception, inducing deception.

Introduction

Contemporary organised crime is undergoing a period of profound transformation, driven by the acceleration of digitalisation, globalisation, and technological innovation. In the specific context of the Republic of Moldova, this phenomenon presents particular characteristics, influenced by the country's geographic position at the intersection of major trafficking routes, economic and social transition processes, and challenges related to post-Soviet institutional consolidation.

According to the Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) produced by Europol in 2021, approximately 70% of criminal groups active at the European level operate in three or more member states, and 65% use encrypted communication

infrastructure to evade detection by law enforcement authorities (Europol 2021). The Republic of Moldova is no exception to these global trends, recording a significant increase in transnational activities of organised criminal groups over the past decade.

According to data from the Prosecutor's Office for Combating Organised Crime and Special Cases (PCCOCS) of the Republic of Moldova, between 2014 and 2021, 657 offences committed by organised criminal groups were registered, with the number rising from 87 in 2014 to 142 in 2021 (PCCOCS 2021). The areas most affected by OCG activity in the Republic of Moldova include human trafficking (including child trafficking), international drug trafficking, money laundering, tax evasion, high-level corruption, and arms trafficking.

According to the *Trafficking in Persons Report* published by the United States Department of State, between 2020 and 2024, the Republic of Moldova continued to figure as an important source country for human trafficking: authorities identified annually between 138 (2020) and 312 (2021) victims, tracking 150 victims in 2022, 167 in 2023 and 149 in 2024. The number of investigated cases varied (e.g. 73 in 2022; 49 in 2023; 67 in 2024), while persons prosecuted increased from several dozen (approximately 37 in 2021) to over a hundred (109 in 2022; 119 in 2024), while convictions fluctuated significantly (e.g. 32 in 2020, 44 in 2021, only 6 in 2022, then approximately 33 in 2023–2024) (U.S. Department of State 2020–2024). These figures reflect not only variations in identification and prosecution capacity, but also the activity of transnational organised criminal networks that recruit, traffic and exploit victims for both sexual exploitation and labour exploitation.

The crime-as-a-service (CaaS) phenomenon represents one of the most significant developments in the modern organised crime landscape (Europol 2021). This business model allows criminal groups to outsource specific components of their operations to specialists, creating complex criminal ecosystems. In the context of the Republic of Moldova, this phenomenon has manifested through the emergence of specialised services facilitating illegal migration, production of false documents, money laundering through cryptocurrencies, and the provision of secure communication infrastructure.

This study aims to identify, validate, and systematise effective investigative methods for dismantling OCGs in the Republic of Moldova, under current conditions, with an emphasis on legal standards and evidentiary effectiveness. The research addresses the following fundamental questions: (1) What are the current trends of OCGs in the Republic of Moldova, and what implications do they have for investigative methodology? (2) Which investigative methods produce the most robust evidentiary chain for dismantling organisational structures in the Moldovan context? (3) How are the legality and proportionality of the methods used ensured in accordance with Moldovan legislation? (4) What are the particularities of international cooperation in investigations involving OCGs with cross-border activities? (5) How is the real impact of OCG dismantling actions measured in Moldovan judicial practice?

Materials and Methods

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the investigated phenomenon in the specific context of the Republic of Moldova (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018). The research strategy is based on the principle of methodological triangulation, through which data obtained from multiple sources and through diverse techniques are corroborated to validate conclusions and increase the robustness of results.

The research was conducted in five consecutive and complementary stages: (1) doctrinal-normative analysis of the Moldovan and international legal framework; (2) strategic-operational analysis of open sources and grey literature; (3) case study analysis based on finalised jurisprudence and case files from the Republic of Moldova; (4) primary data collection through semi-structured interviews with Moldovan practitioners; and (5) quantitative social network analysis on cases from Moldovan judicial practice.

Legal Framework Analysis

The first methodological component consisted of a systematic examination of the legal framework relevant to organised crime investigation in the Republic of Moldova. The analysis focused on the Criminal Code of the Republic of Moldova (Law No. 985-XV of 18 April 2002, as amended), particularly articles on criminal liability for creating or leading a criminal organisation (Art. 284) and participation in a criminal organisation (Art. 285), as well as general provisions on criminal participation (Art. 41–48) and aggravated liability for acts committed by an organised criminal group or criminal organisation (Art. 46(4), Art. 77(d)) (Criminal Code 2002).

The provisions of the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Republic of Moldova (Law No. 122-XV of 14 March 2003, as amended) were also analysed, with emphasis on Chapter IV — Special Investigative Methods, which regulates the conditions for authorisation, judicial oversight, and use of results obtained through such activities (Code of Criminal Procedure 2003). Additionally, the research included examination of Law No. 241-XVI of 20 October 2005 on preventing and combating human trafficking (Law 241/2005), and Law No. 50 of 22 March 2012 on preventing and combating organised crime (Law 50/2012), which establishes the legal and institutional framework for cooperation between law enforcement authorities.

Case Study Analysis

The central empirical component consisted of an in-depth analysis of a sample of 10 finalised criminal cases concerning organised criminal groups from the Republic of Moldova, strategically selected to cover the diversity of criminal domains and operational contexts. Selection criteria included: (1) the cross-border nature of criminal activity; (2) involvement of a significant number of OCG members (minimum 8 persons); (3) use of special investigative methods in criminal prosecution; (4) existence of a final judicial decision; and (5) availability of case documentation.

The sample included cases from the following criminal categories documented in the Republic of Moldova: international human trafficking (3 cases), organised online fraud (2 cases), human trafficking for exploitation purposes (2 cases), tax evasion and money laundering through offshore structures (2 cases), and high-level corruption involving organised groups (1 case).

This empirical stage involved a qualitative interpretative approach through documentary analysis of official reports, judicial decisions, and institutional communications of PCCOCS, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), and the Centre for Combating Human Trafficking, covering the period 2020–2024 (PCCOCS 2020–2024). Statistical data on human trafficking and organised crime cases were also examined, drawn from the annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* of the U.S. Department of State (U.S.

Department of State 2020–2024) and national reports produced by the Permanent Secretariat of the National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking (Secretariat CNCTFU 2020–2023).

For qualitative validation of conclusions, European strategic studies on organised crime trends were analysed, including Europol's SOCTA 2021 and 2025 reports, which describe the evolution of crime-as-a-service models, the expansion of transnational activities, and the digitalisation of criminal networks (Europol 2021; Europol 2025). Primary data were complemented by 18 semi-structured interviews with Moldovan practitioners (6 prosecutors, 5 criminal investigation officers, 4 financial investigators, 3 criminal intelligence analysts).

Results and Discussion

International Trends in Organised Crime: Literature Synthesis

The international specialist literature highlights a series of emerging trends that redefine the structure, operating mode, and transnational dimension of contemporary organised crime. According to the EU-SOCTA 2021 report produced by Europol, approximately 80% of organised criminal groups active in the European space use outsourced services for at least one critical component of their activities, within the crime-as-a-service (CaaS) model, which allows the subcontracting of specialists, technical tools, or criminal infrastructure in the cyber environment (Europol 2021). This trend is confirmed by Europol (2025), which describes an accelerated transition from hierarchical structures to flexible criminal ecosystems based on temporary partnerships and digital skills exchange.

Recent studies by UNODC (2021) and INTERPOL (2024) reveal the industrialisation of online fraud through scam centres — coordinated operation centres run by criminal networks that recruit and exploit trafficked persons for cybercrime activities, particularly in Southeast Asia. According to these analyses, over 100,000 persons have been trafficked and forced to participate in scam operations, generating global economic losses of over USD 64 billion annually (UNODC 2021; INTERPOL 2024). In parallel, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF 2024) draws attention to the diversification of financial flows associated with criminal networks, with emphasis on the integration of cryptocurrencies, fintech services, and offshore structures into money laundering processes.

From a theoretical perspective, the academic literature offers essential contributions in explaining how criminal networks adapt to the global economy and digital technologies. Morselli (2009), in *Inside Criminal Networks*, argues that social network analysis (SNA) is an essential tool for identifying central nodes and structural vulnerabilities of criminal organisations. In a similar direction, Campana and Varese (2013) show that OCGs increasingly function as adaptive networks, in which weak ties facilitate transnational expansion and reduce detectability. Levi and Maguire (2004) analyse the economic dimension of these networks, underlining that market globalisation and financial deregulation have generated new opportunities for reinvesting criminal profits in the legal economy.

More recently, Ardizzi et al. (2020) and Bright and Koskinen (2023) document the technological integration of criminal networks, demonstrating that encrypted communication platforms, digital currencies, and darknet marketplaces function as criminal infrastructure nodes, allowing OCGs to operate in an as-a-service regime. Collectively, these

works converge on the idea that contemporary organised crime has transitioned from a hierarchical paradigm to a hybrid network model, characterised by decentralisation, functional specialisation, and operational digitalisation.

The international specialist literature also highlights the differentiated effectiveness of special investigative methods depending on the operational context. Studies by Udroui (2018) and Suian (2021) show that communications interception remains the method with the highest evidentiary impact, providing both direct evidence of criminal activity and essential data about the organisational structure of criminal groups. Chiriță and Uzlău (Volonciu et al. 2017) emphasise the importance of respecting the principle of proportionality and procedural guarantees in the use of special technical surveillance methods, insisting on their exceptional character and the necessity of rigorous judicial oversight. The jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights (*Roman Zakharov v. Russia* 2015; *Big Brother Watch v. United Kingdom* 2021) has established strict standards in the matter of secret surveillance: special measures may be used only when less intrusive methods have proven insufficient, their duration and scope must be limited to the minimum necessary, and the authorisation, execution, and oversight regime must include clear and effective safeguards against arbitrariness.

The specialist literature also highlights the essential role of international cooperation in investigating offences committed by transnational organised criminal groups. Studies on the EMPACT framework for the 2026–2029 cycle (Council of the European Union 2025) highlight operational cross-border cooperation mechanisms — such as Joint Investigation Teams (JIT), rapid information exchange centres, and inter-institutional coordination platforms — underlining that these represent the "single platform" linking national authorities, EU agencies, and international partners in combating complex criminal networks. As defined by Trif (2022), a joint investigation team is "a modern method of collaboration that allows direct exchange of information and evidence between authorities from different jurisdictions, without the need for repeated formal requests through diplomatic channels." International cooperation thus becomes not merely an option, but a *sine qua non* condition for the effective detection, investigation, and prosecution of organised criminal groups operating across multiple states.

Organised Crime in the Republic of Moldova: Specific Features

Our research makes an original contribution by identifying the particularities of global organised crime trends in the specific context of the Republic of Moldova. Analysis of PCCOCS activity reports, Ministry of Internal Affairs data, and interviews with relevant practitioners allowed the delineation of a distinct profile of the phenomenon at national level.

The first identified trend is **increasing specialisation along transnational segments**. Unlike the classic vertically integrated model, Moldovan organised criminal groups increasingly function as specialised nodes in extensive criminal networks: some focus on recruiting and transporting human trafficking victims, others on producing and distributing false documents, smuggling, or money laundering through offshore structures and cryptocurrencies. This functional fragmentation corresponds to the crime-as-a-service typology described in Europol and UNODC reports, but with a stronger local imprint in the logistical and documentary component.

The second distinguishing feature is the **persistence of kinship- and territorial-based structures**. In 7 out of 10 analysed criminal cases, the hard core of the criminal group

consisted of members of the same extended family or persons originating from the same rural locality. These kinship networks are characterised by high internal cohesion, personal loyalty, and increased resilience to infiltration, but also by structural vulnerabilities — such as predictability of routes and geographic concentration of operations. This phenomenon is confirmed by criminological literature, where kinship-based network models are associated with high cultural resistance to cooperation with authorities (Paoli 2014; Varese 2020).

The third distinctive trend is the **use of the Moldovan diaspora as an operational resource**. Large communities of Moldovan citizens in Italy, Russia, Turkey, Germany, and the United Kingdom act both as recruitment pools for victims (particularly in cases of human trafficking and labour exploitation) and as logistical and financial support infrastructures for transnational criminal activities. In 8 out of 10 analysed cases, at least one key member of the organised criminal group was permanently established in the diaspora and ensured the transfer of funds, documents, and communications between members. This trend corresponds to UNODC observations, according to which transnational mobility and diaspora networks are major factors in maintaining criminal networks in the Eastern European region (UNODC 2021).

A further relevant trend is the **functioning of the Republic of Moldova as a poly-criminal transit node**, situated at the intersection of routes between the European Union and the eastern space. International analyses show that criminal networks use Moldovan territory for drug, arms, and human trafficking, as well as for smuggling of counterfeit goods and stolen vehicles, exploiting the country's strategic geographic position and vulnerabilities in certain border segments, including in the Transnistrian region (Global Initiative 2023). This multifunctionality of routes amplifies both the capacity for diversifying criminal group activities and the operational complexity of investigations and international police cooperation.

The research also reveals additional emerging elements: hybridisation of criminal activities, combining human trafficking with online fraud and money laundering through cryptocurrencies; digitalisation of criminal logistics, using encrypted communication channels (Telegram, Signal, WhatsApp Business) and anonymous money transfer applications; and infiltration into legitimate economic activities, particularly in international transport, recruitment services, and construction companies used as cover for illicit operations.

Effectiveness of Special Investigative Methods: Empirical Findings

The research provides concrete empirical data on the effectiveness of special investigative methods in the specific context of the Republic of Moldova, based on analysis of 10 finalised criminal cases and interviews with 18 Moldovan practitioners.

Communications interception proved to be the method with the highest evidentiary impact in 9 out of 10 analysed Moldovan cases. However, interviewed practitioners signalled a specific challenge: OCG members in the Republic of Moldova frequently use telephone numbers registered in Ukraine, Russia, or Romania, which complicates and delays the process of obtaining interception authorisations and requires rapid international cooperation. One investigation officer stated in interview: *"When group members use Ukrainian SIMs, we have to obtain authorisation from a Moldovan judge, then make a request for legal assistance to Ukrainian authorities, then wait for their authorisation. By this time, the group*

has changed its numbers and communication strategy. We need faster cooperation mechanisms with neighbouring countries."

Financial investigation proved essential in 6 out of 10 analysed cases, particularly for money laundering and corruption cases. Analysis of banking transactions, tracing of financial flows, and identification of assets allowed not only the accumulation of evidence, but also the effective confiscation of illicit proceeds. The integration of the financial dimension from the outset of investigation significantly increases recovery rates (from an average of 23% to 67% in cases with proactive financial investigation and rapid application of freezing measures).

Video and GPS surveillance was used in 7 out of 10 cases, proving effective in documenting meetings between OCG members and confirming cross-border movements. However, equipment costs and the need for specialised personnel limit the extensive use of these methods.

Detailed Case Studies from the Republic of Moldova

Case Study 1: International Cocaine Trafficking Network Using a Moldovan Company as Cover (2018–2019)

Between 2018 and 2019, authorities from the Republic of Moldova, Belgium, and Suriname investigated an international criminal network specialised in cocaine trafficking from South America to Europe, which used a Moldovan commercial company specialised in importing meat and agricultural products from South America as a front (Europol 2019; INI and PCCOCS 2019).

Initially, group members attempted to transport drugs by concealing approximately 880 kg of cocaine in crane equipment structures, but this attempt was foiled by Brazilian authorities in the port of Paranaguá. The network subsequently adjusted its *modus operandi* rapidly: through the involvement of two Belgian nationals administering the Moldovan company, a new logistical arrangement was created in which cocaine was camouflaged in rice sacks officially destined for the Republic of Moldova.

The company administrators procured five containers with approximately 100 tonnes of rice from the Republic of Suriname. Drugs were concealed in one of the containers, with the cargo shipped to the port of Antwerp, Belgium, from where it was to be transported onward by road to the Republic of Moldova in a Romanian-registered truck. Based on information initially provided by Belgian authorities, the National Investigations Inspectorate (INI) and PCCOCS initiated criminal prosecution for illegal drug trafficking in particularly large proportions and smuggling, and established a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) with Belgian law enforcement.

Investigative activities included: operational exchange of information between Moldovan, Belgian, and Surinamese authorities; monitoring of container routes and the truck transporting rice from the port of Antwerp; simultaneous searches in the Republic of Moldova and Belgium, including at the Moldovan company's headquarters and in storage warehouses; and correlation of data obtained with Belgian Federal Police and Europol investigations. Following searches and analyses conducted in Moldova and Belgium, Surinamese authorities conducted a special operation in port, seizing 2,200 kg of cocaine concealed in rice sacks destined for the same Moldovan company, as well as funds and assets derived from criminal activity worth approximately EUR 1.5 million, including 12 luxury

automobiles. In total, at least 37 persons were implicated, of whom 20 were arrested in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Suriname (INI and PCCOCS 2019).

Despite being a success story, this case highlights several specific challenges for Moldovan authorities: dependence on information and actions initiated in other jurisdictions (Belgium, Suriname), which can generate temporal gaps and the risk of some participants evading justice; use of a legitimate Moldovan company as cover, complicating the distinction between licit and illicit commercial flows; and the need for very fine coordination between customs, criminal, and international cooperation procedures, including through JIT, to ensure both obtaining evidence and preserving seized goods and assets.

Case Study 2: Money Laundering Network through Shell Companies and Cryptocurrencies — "Operation Crypto Wave" (2024–2025)

Between 2024 and 2025, PCCOCS dismantled an international criminal network laundering funds derived from cybercrime and online fraud through a chain of shell companies and cryptocurrency conversions (Eurojust 2025). Investigations demonstrated that the network operated through at least 12 companies registered in the names of intermediaries, which made fictitious transfers to accounts in Romania, Poland, and Estonia, where amounts were converted into virtual assets (Bitcoin, USDT) and subsequently withdrawn in cash.

Investigative activities included: complex financial analysis of interbank transactions and verification of falsified accounting documents; blockchain analysis to trace the cryptocurrency path to foreign exchanges, with application of international cooperation through Eurojust and Europol, based on a Joint Investigation Team with Romania; digital searches and seizure of digital equipment (phones, servers, hardware wallets). Financial flows of over EUR 2 million derived from cybercrime, redirected through the shell company network to accounts controlled by group members, were identified. Following cooperation with Romanian authorities, over 30 victims were confirmed — FATF (2024) specifically mentions this type of scheme — successive conversions between accounts and unauthorised platforms — as one of the main AML vulnerabilities in the post-Soviet space.

The operation resulted in 12 simultaneous searches in Chişinău and Bălţi, 9 members arrested (including company administrators and accountants), seizure of over 20 IT devices, 7 crypto wallets and company incorporation documents, and freezing of bank accounts and funds derived from illicit activities. Total estimated damage was EUR 2,000,000, with direct involvement of foreign cryptocurrency exchange platforms (Eurojust 2025).

Practitioners encountered the following challenges: difficulties in rapidly identifying the real beneficiaries of foreign accounts; lack of legislative uniformity regarding the crypto exchange regime; and the need for specialised technical expertise for blockchain analysis and digital evidence preservation. This case represented the first complex crypto-financial crime investigation in the Republic of Moldova conducted in cooperation with Eurojust, consolidated the institutional capacity for investigating digital financial flows, and prompted updates to internal AML/KYC procedures in several commercial banks.

Conclusions

This study has pursued the identification and systematisation of effective investigative methods for dismantling organised criminal groups in the specific context of the Republic

of Moldova and contemporary technological transformations. The research results permit the formulation of several fundamental conclusions with significant theoretical and practical implications for Moldovan judicial practice.

Organised criminal groups in the Republic of Moldova are characterised by: (a) increasing specialisation along specific segments of transnational criminal chains; (b) persistence of structures based on kinship ties and territorial affiliation; (c) extensive use of diaspora as an operational resource; (d) adoption of crime-as-a-service arrangements for specialised components; and (e) high vulnerability to communications interception due to frequent use of telephone numbers from neighbouring countries.

The effectiveness of special investigative methods in Moldovan practice varies significantly depending on the operational context and available resources. Communications interception remains the instrument with the highest evidentiary impact (9 out of 10 cases), but its effectiveness is conditioned by the capacity for rapid cooperation with authorities in Ukraine, Romania, and other states for obtaining necessary authorisations. Proactive financial investigation and early asset freezing have a major impact on the operational capacity of OCGs, but remain insufficiently utilised in practice. The integration of the financial dimension from the outset of investigation significantly increases recovery rates (from an average of 23% to 67% in cases with proactive financial investigation). International cooperation represents both a critical necessity and a major challenge in the Moldovan context, with excessive response times to mutual legal assistance requests (6–14 months) significantly limiting investigative effectiveness.

Based on these conclusions, the following specific recommendations are formulated for the Moldovan context:

- Creation of a rapid operational cooperation mechanism with at least Ukraine and Romania for authorising communications interceptions (target timeframe: 48–72 hours instead of 2–3 months);
- Mandatory integration of financial investigation from the outset of OCG cases and application of freezing orders within the first three weeks;
- Equipping the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the National Anti-Corruption Centre, and PCCOCS with modern GPS tracking equipment and blockchain analysis software tools;
- Development of simplified procedures for the rapid establishment of JITs (target timeframe: maximum 30 days in urgent cases);
- Creation of a specialised training programme for prosecutors and criminal investigation officers in the field of OCG investigation with transnational elements.

The effective dismantling of organised criminal groups in the Republic of Moldova requires an integrated approach combining special investigative methods with proactive financial investigation and robust international cooperation through rapid mechanisms, all implemented with strict observance of legality and proportionality standards. Success is measured not only by the number of arrests, but by the sustainable neutralisation of OCGs' operational capacities and the significant recovery of illicit proceeds.

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