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Research Report

What explains Ecuador's late integration into the regional trend of powerful non-state armed actors infiltrating government branches and using violence to shape political outcomes?

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Introduction

Organized criminal groups (OCGs) have significantly influenced the political, social, and economic landscapes of Latin America. Initially functioning as illicit economic entities, these groups have evolved into formidable non-state armed actors capable of challenging state authority and subverting state functions (Lentz 2013). As OCGs gain power, they exploit systemic weaknesses in state institutions, undermining the state's capacity to govern effectively. In Mexico, Colombia, and increasingly Ecuador, the interplay between state fragility and the rise of OCGs has created environments where state control diminishes, allowing OCGs to govern through violence, coercion, and economic influence.

A critical dynamic in this context is the formation of "gray zones of criminality," where the lines between legal and illegal governance blur (Trejo and Ley 2020). OCGs and state actors coexist through informal agreements or collusion, as seen in Mexico's historical context under the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). The collapse of this political monopoly in the 1990s destabilized the arrangement, leading to violent competition among cartels (Trejo and Ley 2020). Similarly, in Colombia, the intertwining of guerrilla warfare with narco-trafficking has created gray zones, allowing powerful cartels to thrive in areas where state presence is weak.

Ecuador, in contrast, initially avoided the large-scale violence and gray zones prevalent in Mexico and Colombia. Historically a transit point for drugs, Ecuador remained insulated from severe criminal violence until the 21st century, when groups like Los Choneros and Los Lobos began to establish dominance (Fiscalía General del Estado 2024). However, systemic weaknesses in governance, corruption, and economic instability have enabled these groups to embed themselves in the political and economic fabric of the country, creating gray zones similar to those seen in its neighbors.

This report seeks to analyze the factors behind Ecuador's delayed integration into the regional trend of organized crime and how national and subnational differences in political structures, violence, and state capacity have shaped this evolution. By comparing Ecuador's experience with those of Mexico and Colombia, we aim to provide insights into the dynamics that have allowed Ecuador to avoid earlier criminal violence but now face similar challenges.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Complex political, economic, and social factors have shaped the evolution of organized crime in Latin America. This report adopts a three-phase model—predatory, parasitic, and symbiotic—as the primary framework for understanding the progression of organized crime. This model, developed by Edwin Stier and Peter Richards, emphasizes the gradual entrenchment of criminal organizations within state institutions (Stier and Richards 2017). However, complementary theories, such as Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley's political logic of criminal wars and the

theory of state-criminal relations, provide additional explanatory power. These frameworks help clarify how political competition, corruption, and the breakdown of governance contribute to the evolution of organized crime in the region (Lessing 2020).

The Evolution of Organized Crime: Predatory, Parasitic, and Symbiotic Phases

In its most advanced form, organized crime becomes deeply integrated into legitimate society's economic, political, and social institutions, often to the point where it is no longer easily recognizable as a criminal enterprise. This integration poses a significant threat to society, as it allows criminal organizations to operate under the guise of legitimacy, evading traditional law enforcement efforts and perpetuating social harm (Stier and Richards 2017). The evolution of organized crime can be seen in three stages: predatory, parasitic, and symbiotic. Each stage represents a different level of integration with society and varying degrees of harm inflicted upon social institutions.

⇒ Organized Crime as Predator

In the predatory stage, organized crime involves violent crimes like robbery, extortion, and assault (Stier and Richards 2017). These crimes are aimed at society, with crime groups targeting individuals and businesses for money. At this stage, the group's structure is usually straightforward, relying on outer-directed violent crime as its primary source of income. These crime groups operate as outlaws on the edges of society without much involvement in typical social structures. They do not offer any goods or services for which society has no tolerance for their crimes. Their actions target civilians, making them more susceptible to criminal justice efforts. Their removal is welcomed by society, and the injury to society is cured by lessening the threat of predatory violence.

⇒ Organized Crime as Parasite

In the second stage of evolution, organized crime groups' focus becomes twofold. First, they shift away from sporadic and violent predatory activities and seek sustenance from continuing business enterprises that provide illicit goods and services demanded by society. This shift includes activities such as gambling, loansharking, narcotics trafficking, and controlling prostitution. The lines between legal and illegal activities blur as the group seeks protection through corruption and bribery to maintain a stable, unlawful market (Insight Crime 2023).

Second, the group's internal control and discipline become more sophisticated, often based on reputation carried forward from predatory days and on skill. The expansion and change of character of the organization's activities necessitate specialization, and outside services, such as lawyers and accountants, may become necessary to give the group's enterprises the facade of legitimacy. Control from upper management flows down to operational levels through more protective layers of insulation and is exercised more through established procedures than through actual inner-directed violence (Stier and Richards 2017). This twofold focus leads to the exploitation of the market by parasitic organized crime and the resulting corruption of law enforcement institutions, posing a significant danger to society.

⇒ Organized Crime as Symbiont

In its most advanced stage, organized crime becomes symbiotic with legitimate society, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between criminal and non-criminal enterprises.

The symbiotic stage is characterized by the group's ability to infiltrate and exploit legitimate businesses, labor unions, and political institutions (Stier and Richards 2017). Economically, these individuals shift from violent activities and illegal goods and services to competing in the commercial marketplace with lawful businesses by providing legal goods and services. At this point, organized crime has become deeply embedded in the fabric of society, and its activities may no longer appear overtly criminal. Instead, they involve sophisticated schemes such as labor racketeering, business infiltration, and high-level corruption. The leadership of a symbiotic organized crime group often maintains a facade of legitimacy, making it challenging for law enforcement to identify and prosecute them. The group's influence is subtle yet pervasive, with the ethics of organized crime infiltrating legitimate institutions. This stage represents the greatest threat to society, as the group's activities can destabilize entire industries and corrupt political processes.

Summary of stages of evolution of organized crime

	Predatory Stage	Parasitic Stage	Symbiotic Stage
Nature of Activities	Violent crimes such as robbery, extortion, and assault.	Provision of illegal goods/services like gambling and drugs.	Infiltration of legitimate businesses and institutions.
Societal Impact	Direct victimization, high societal harm.	Blurred lines between legal/illegal, moderate societal harm.	Deep societal integration, subtle and widespread harm.
Level of Integration	Operates on the fringes of society, with minimal integration.	Moderate integration occurs through corruption and bribery.	High integration appears legitimate and deeply embedded.
Law Enforcement Challenges	High vulnerability to traditional law enforcement.	It requires tackling corruption and persistent demand for services.	It is difficult to prosecute and requires systemic societal change.
Group Structure	Loose, unsophisticated, relies on physical violence.	Hierarchical, specialized roles rely on corruption.	Highly sophisticated, indistinguishable from legitimate society.
Economic Base	Sporadic, violent, high-risk activities.	Stable, ongoing illicit markets, moderate risk.	Legitimate-looking businesses, low-risk activities.

Complementary and contending theories

While the phases of the evolution of organized crime help establish the evolution, they fail to account for a thorough explanation of the facilitators for progression between the stages as they often include a reduced description of factors like political dynamics and subnational variations in violence. For this, the phase narrative will be accompanied by the application of theories on the political logic of criminal wars, state-criminal relations theory, and criminal governance.

Conversely, alternative perspectives such as market-centered approaches and structural theories of inequality provide valuable, though limited, insights. Market-centered approaches focus on the economic forces driving organized crime, such as the global demand for illicit goods (Correa-Cabrera 2013). However, these perspectives overlook the political dynamics that play a critical role in cartel violence and governance. Structural theories of inequality, on the other hand, emphasize the socioeconomic conditions that give rise to organized crime, such as poverty and inequality (Correa-Cabrera 2013). While insightful, these theories do not fully explain why criminal organizations seek to capture state institutions or wield political power. As such, while useful in understanding some aspects of organized crime, these perspectives need to offer the required comprehensive analysis to explain the political, economic, and social dynamics at play in Ecuador, Mexico, and Colombia.

The **phases model**, with its complementary theories, thus remains the primary framework for explaining what accelerates or delays the transition from one phase to another in a country—key for answering the research question at hand.

The evolution of organized crime in Colombia

Colombia's organized crime landscape developed due to political instability, economic inequality, and the state's failure to control rural territories. These conditions allowed criminal organizations such as the Medellín Cartel and Cali Cartel, as well as guerrilla groups like the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), to become influential actors. Over time, these groups evolved into non-state armed actors (NSAs), taking control of territories, infiltrating state institutions, and influencing political decisions.

Predatory Phase (1940s - Early 1980s):

Colombia's history of organized crime began in the early 20th century when the country entered the marijuana trade due to socioeconomic exclusion in densely populated areas (Britto 2020). Agrarian reforms in 1936 and 1961 aimed to address land inequality but ended up concentrating wealth and land, leading people to seek alternative sources of income. The marijuana trade started to thrive after these reforms, especially when a corruption scandal in 1961 increased support for local groups involved in illegal activities (Britto 2020).

The marijuana trade peaked in the 1950s due to international demand, but the market declined in the late 1960s (Lentz 2013). From 1974 to 1985, large amounts of US dollars flowed into Colombia from drug trafficking activities, particularly marijuana production and exportation. The government's banking practices facilitated the influx of dollars, leading to significant capital

injections into various sectors of the country, estimated at around 2.2 billion dollars annually from cannabis (Lentz 2013).

The rise of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 1964 coincided with the marijuana boom. FARC emerged as a self-defense group during the civil war "La Violencia" and aimed to establish a Marxist regime to address injustices and redistribute wealth (Insight Crime 2024). They initially operated in areas with weak state presence, focusing on survival and territorial expansion through violent means.

In the 1970s, Colombia became a major producer of cocaine due to high global demand. This led to the emergence of prominent drug traffickers such as Pablo Escobar, Cesar Gaviria, the Ochoa Vasquez brothers, Carlos Lehder, and Gonzalo Rodriguez Gacha, who formed the Medellín Cartel (Insight Crime 2023). These individuals played a significant role in the armed conflict and the drug trade during this period.

Parasitic phase (Early 1980s)

By the end of the 1960s, the demand for marijuana decreased sharply as its processing became possible almost anywhere in the world (Britto 2020). There was a peak in cocaine demand in the 1970s, making marijuana trade no longer significant during the beginning of Colombia's parasitic phase.

FARC first appeared in 1964, and between 1964 and 1974, other groups like the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19) emerged (Insight Crime 2024). These groups, influenced by socialism, fought against injustice, political exclusion, and control over land. Initially lacking military capacity, their situation changed when cocaine became a source of finance for their fight against the Colombian government. After the VII Conference in 1982, FARC began drug trafficking to gain capital to improve its capabilities (Insight Crime 2024). They also started extorting money from people, forcing anyone who could afford to pay a "vacuna" (extortion fee) to fund the revolution. This led to a motivational convergence within the group, where they had both political and criminal motivations. Peace negotiations with the guerrillas began in 1982, but while peace was being discussed, FARC expanded its fronts through extortion and cocaine trafficking, and other groups, supported by mafias and the military, were assassinating left-wing politicians (Insight Crime 2024). One notable case of extortion was when the group M-19 tried to obtain capital through kidnappings, including the kidnapping of the Ochoa brothers' sisters, which led to intense clashes between the guerilla group and the cartel (El Tiempo 2024).

By the 1980s, the Medellín Cartel had become a transnational organization, exporting cocaine to the United States, especially to New York and Miami (El Tiempo 2024). The production of cocaine took place in the jungles of departments like Caquetá or Meta, and transportation was handled through multiple plains, making this an easy task. This peak in production had additional consequences, including cultural transformation, especially in the city of Medellín. With new inflows of money, people acquiring wealth from these illicit practices, known as "magicos," revolutionized Medellín, transforming it from an agricultural zone to a cosmopolitan area (Smith 2013). This is believed to be the beginning of narco populism, where the drug trade became a tool for maintaining social and political stability in the region.

The early 1980s saw increased violence from both the guerrilla groups and the cartels. M-19 notably carried out "Operación Libertad y Democracia" (Operation Liberty and Democracy), involving the taking over of the Dominican Republic embassy in Bogotá and the kidnapping of diplomats from various countries during a celebration for the independence of the Dominican Republic (Smith 2013). The Medellín cartel reached its peak during the early 1980s, establishing itself as the most influential drug trafficking organization globally. At that time, illicit drug money had infiltrated Colombian politics (El Tiempo 2024). According to Carlos Ledher, a co-founder of the Medellín Cartel, during the 1982 presidential campaign, candidate Alfonso López, who was running for the liberal party, allegedly received financial support from Pablo Escobar and approximately seven other drug traffickers, amounting to around \$100,000 (Noise 2020). However, in an interview with journalist Enrique Santos, the former president dismissed the significance of this meeting, stating that he briefly greeted individuals he didn't recognize and was not aware of their background. Ledger also claimed that drug lord Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, also known as El Mexicano, and other traffickers provided nearly a million dollars to presidential candidate Belisario Betancur's Conservative party, which ultimately won the 1982 elections (Noise 2020). These contributions were purportedly part of a strategy to prevent the implementation of an extradition treaty, which would have allowed the Colombian state to hand over offenders to other countries for prosecution.

It is argued that the existing strategy of subjecting drug traffickers to prosecution within Colombia's jurisdiction was ineffective due to the pervasive influence of narco politics, leading to low perceived risks of apprehension and punishment severity. Extradition would have increased the likelihood of facing severe consequences, particularly in the United States, where cartels lacked the same level of corrupt networks.

Colombia eventually approved extradition through Law 27 of 1980, which established the extradition treaty between Colombia and the United States (Cámara de Representantes de Colombia 2024). However, when Belisario Betancur Cuartas assumed the presidency, he announced his opposition to the use of extradition based on political philosophy (El Tiempo 2024). Escobar, seeking a more respectable public image and aiming to evade prosecution or extradition, became involved in politics. He led a movement called Civismo en Marcha, which involved environmental and social initiatives such as tree planting, wildlife conservation, and funding for local projects, hospitals, and housing for underprivileged communities in Medellín. In 1982, he was elected to Congress as a substitute for another member, thus obtaining parliamentary immunity (Noise 2020). Despite widespread knowledge of his involvement in criminal activities, no one publicly accused him until Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla implicated him as a drug trafficker. This led to Escobar's resignation. Subsequently, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla was assassinated in a motorcycle drive-by shooting on April 30, 1984, in Bogotá (El Tiempo 2024). This event marked the beginning of Escobar's "plata o plomo" ("silver or lead") strategy, where he offered government officials and law enforcement the choice of accepting bribes to facilitate the cartel's operations or facing retaliation.

Following a surge in violence and the increasing sophistication of non-state armed groups in Colombia during the 1980s, it is assumed that the transition from the parasitic to the symbiotic phase occurred between the latter part of the first half of the 1980s and the beginning of the

second half. By the first half of the decade, corruption was rampant across institutions, activities expanded, and external services were introduced to enhance the organization's reputation, particularly within Escobar's political team. These events marked the peak of the parasitic phase in Colombia and the transition into the symbiotic phase.

Symbiotic Phase (Late 1980s – Present)

In the late 1980s, Colombian society was heavily involved in criminal activities, particularly in the political arena. Pablo Escobar, a prominent figure in Colombian society, led an anti-extradition campaign based on extreme nationalism. He garnered local support by building over 60 soccer fields and establishing the neighborhood Medellín sin Tugurios, which is now known as the Pablo Escobar neighborhood (Noise 2020). During this time, he began recruiting young individuals from marginalized communities to train as hitmen, creating a deviant subculture.

The war against drug trafficking intensified, leading to numerous deaths due to illicit activities. In 1985, guerrillas attacked the Justice Palace, taking 350 hostages, including magistrates, state consultants, public servants, and visitors (Insight Crime 2023). The military's response resulted in the deaths of 98 people, including 11 Supreme Court judges. Although some believed that Escobar financed the attack to erase incriminating records, a truth commission of ex-members of the M-19 in 2020 proved this wrong.

The same year also witnessed the assassinations of judicial branch members, including magistrate Alvaro Medina Ochoa and the judge handling the case related to the assassination of former Justice Minister Lara Bonilla (Insight Crime 2023). In 1986, members of the Medellín cartel formed the group Los Extraditables, advocating "we'd rather have a grave in Colombia than jail in the United States," and used tactics such as car bombings to intimidate the Colombian populace and further their anti-extradition campaign.

In 1987, the Medellín Cartel suffered a blow when founding member Carlos Ledher was captured on February 12 and extradited to the United States (El Tiempo 2024). Later that year, extradition was declared unconstitutional. Violence continued across the country, with armed groups employing tactics like bombing local businesses and paramilitaries carrying out massacres, such as the killing of 43 people in the municipality of Segovia in Antioquia (Lentz 2013).

In 1989, Colombia experienced a surge in violence, including assassinations, bombings, and direct attacks on political and judicial figures, as part of the cartel's efforts to maintain control. Notable events included the Rochela massacre in January, where assassins under the command of Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha executed 12 judicial officials, a series of car bombings targeting Drogas La Rebaja locations, the assassination of José Antequera, a prominent lawyer and political figure from the Unión Patriótica, and the killing of Luis Carlos Galán, a popular presidential candidate who openly opposed drug trafficking (Smith 2013). These events highlighted the close relationship between drug traffickers and certain sectors of the state and society, perpetuating a climate of fear and violence. In response to these tragic events, President Virgilio Barco declared war on the cartel by establishing a task force dedicated to apprehending its members (El Tiempo 2024). However, approximately 4047 people died as a result of narcoterrorism that year.

As the Medellín Cartel reached its peak, the FARC transitioned from a purely political organization to one deeply involved in the drug trade, implementing a tax system on coca farmers and cocaine producers to fund their guerrilla war against the Colombian state (Insight Crime 2024). Meanwhile, the ELN continued its operations by extorting companies involved in the extraction of natural resources, solidifying its position in Colombia's illicit economy.

Tensions remained high, and in 1990, negotiations between the state and the "extraditables" – those targeted for extradition – were unsuccessful, leading to continued violence. In 1991, Colombia approved a new constitution that prohibited extradition, leading to Pablo Escobar and his brother voluntarily turning themselves in (El Tiempo 2024). However, they continued to control the Medellín cartel from prison. By the end of that year, the death toll had risen to 8,954.

In 1992, Escobar and his brother escaped from prison, which led to a significant increase in killings as the government intensified its search for him. As Escobar fled from La Catedral and violence escalated in urban areas, the FARC expanded its influence (Insight Crime 2024). The FARC effectively controlled key drug-producing regions and used its earnings from drug trafficking to bolster its military operations. In these rural areas, the FARC acted as both a political and military force, often replacing the role of the state by providing some form of governance. This symbiotic relationship between the guerrillas and the drug trade solidified their role as key actors in Colombia's long-lasting internal conflict. Their reach extended across much of the country, making any governmental effort to combat drug trafficking and organized crime incomplete without addressing the guerrilla issue.

With fewer associates and mounting pressure, Escobar tried to renegotiate his capture, seeking protection for his family. However, in December 1993, while attempting to contact his family, Escobar was located and killed by the Search Bloc (Smith 2013). After Escobar's death, the Medellín cartel fractured, with smaller gangs vying for control of Medellín. Don Berna, a former lieutenant of Escobar, collaborated with Colombian and U.S. authorities, which helped lead to Escobar's capture. Don Berna, under the protection of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), established the Cartel de la Oficina de Envigado (El Tiempo 2024).

After the fall of the Medellín Cartel, BACRIM (Bandas Criminales) emerged from the remnants of various cartels and paramilitary groups. The FARC, in turn, continued to exert control over rural regions and maintain its role in drug production. As the state focused on dismantling the cartels, the FARC filled the power vacuum in many areas, creating its own illicit networks that rivaled the urban criminal organizations (Insight Crime 2024).

During this time, the ELN also maintained its influence, particularly in areas rich in natural resources like oil and mining operations. Like the FARC, the ELN relied on extortion and control of these territories to finance their operations, creating a parallel system of governance in regions where the state had little to no presence (Lessing 2020).

While BACRIM formed primarily in urban areas, many of these new criminal groups established relationships with the FARC and ELN, coordinating drug trafficking operations and exchanging resources (Lentz 2013). The AUC, a paramilitary organization formed in 1997, directly opposed

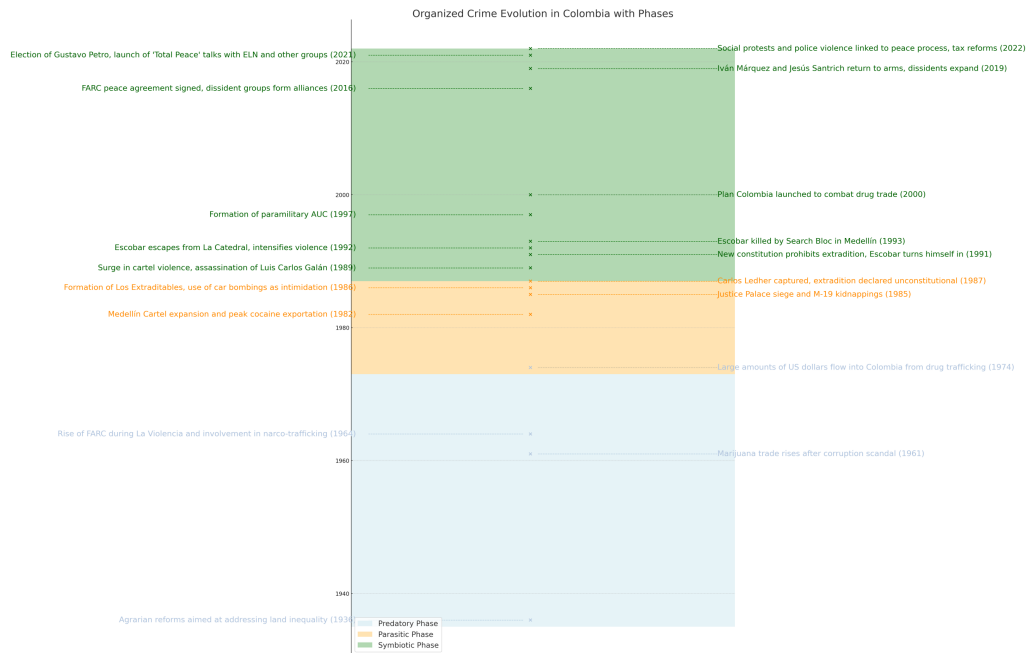
the FARC but also engaged in drug trafficking, further complicating the criminal landscape. This period marked a deepening of the symbiotic relationship between criminal actors and political structures, as these groups sought to influence governance while benefiting from the lucrative drug trade.

In the late 1990s, President Andrés Pastrana of Colombia, with the support of the United States, launched Plan Colombia, a U.S.-backed military and anti-narcotics strategy (Hylton 2010). The aim was to reduce coca cultivation, weaken insurgent groups like the FARC and ELN, and restore the Colombian state's control over its territories. Plan Colombia heavily focused on aerial fumigation of coca crops and military crackdowns, but it had limited success in reducing the overall influence of these groups. The FARC and ELN responded by moving their operations to more remote areas and dispersing their drug production networks to evade fumigation and military efforts (Hylton 2010). Criminal groups, including the FARC, adapted by decentralizing, and further embedding themselves into local governance structures, solidifying their role as both insurgent and criminal actors.

Despite military gains, corruption within law enforcement and the military hindered Plan Colombia's effectiveness. Some regions remained under the control of criminal or guerrilla actors, where the state's presence was weak. Plan Colombia ultimately succeeded in weakening the FARC militarily and reducing coca cultivation in some regions, but it also had unintended consequences (Hylton 2010). As the FARC and ELN became more adept at navigating the drug trade, their symbiotic relationship with criminal economies deepened, making it harder to disentangle criminal activities from political insurgency. The BACRIM, often partnered with guerrillas, enabling both groups to maintain their influence in drug trafficking.

In 2016, the Colombian government and the FARC signed a historic peace agreement, officially demobilizing the guerrilla group (Insight Crime 2024). However, while most FARC members reintegrated into civilian life, several dissident factions continued their involvement in drug trafficking, illegal mining, and other criminal enterprises. These ex-FARC dissident groups formed alliances with BACRIM and Mexican cartels, perpetuating the symbiotic relationship between criminal actors and the drug economy. The ELN, which did not participate in the peace process, remained active, controlling key regions involved in drug production and natural resource exploitation. Their ongoing operations ensured that Colombia's internal conflict, while diminished, continued in various forms.

With the demobilization of the FARC and the rise of dissident groups, BACRIM, like the Clan del Golfo and Los Rastrojos, strengthened their control over Colombia's drug trafficking routes. These criminal organizations continued to cooperate with ex-FARC dissidents and the ELN, creating a fragmented but interdependent criminal network. In many regions, these groups functioned as de facto rulers, providing services such as security and informal justice in exchange for loyalty and control over the local economy (Insight Crime 2024). Even after the peace agreement, criminal actors retained a significant influence in Colombia's governance structures that remains in the present. Corruption within local governments and law enforcement enabled these groups to operate with relative impunity, ensuring that their symbiotic relationship with the state persisted.



The evolution of organized crime in Mexico

The evolution of organized crime in Mexico, shaped by the country's historical, social, and political landscape, follows a path distinct from Colombia's. While both nations saw the rise of powerful criminal groups, Mexico's proximity to the U.S. and the influence of strong political institutions, particularly the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), set it apart.

During the 1940s through the 1980s, Mexico's narcotics trade focused primarily on supplying marijuana and opium poppies to the U.S. market (Correa-Cabrera). Unlike in Colombia, where drug trafficking led to widespread violence and significant government involvement, the Mexican drug trade remained relatively low-profile during this period. The PRI maintained a firm grip on both political and criminal spheres, keeping violence in check and controlling much of the underground economy.

This period, known as the predatory phase, was crucial in shaping Mexico's future as a global narcotics supplier. It established the foundations for the country's later, more violent stages of organized crime, marking a key difference between Mexico's gradual shift towards drug cartel dominance and Colombia's rapid, conflict-driven transformation.

Predatory phase Mexico (1940s-1980s)

During the 1940s, Mexico primarily supplied marijuana and opium poppies to the U.S. market (Correa-Cabrera 2013). The narcotics trade was significant but relatively low-profile, and did not provoke widespread violence or high-level government involvement. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had a firm grip on the Mexican political system, controlling not only political spheres but also the police, military, and judiciary (Trejo and Ley 2020). This widespread influence created a fertile ground for corruption, enabling drug traffickers to operate with impunity as long as they maintained close relationships with local authorities.

Mexican traffickers were largely intermediaries for American criminal organizations. Small-scale traffickers moved heroin and marijuana across the U.S. border, but these operations were often independent and relatively disorganized. However, as U.S. demand for narcotics continued to grow, Mexican traffickers began to organize and consolidate their operations. The 1950s saw the rise of small drug syndicates, particularly in the northern states of Sinaloa and Sonora, regions that would later become the heartlands of Mexico's drug trafficking industry (Correa-Cabrera 2013).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mexican drug traffickers began to establish more substantial and direct relationships with Colombian cartels, which were rapidly emerging as major cocaine producers (InsightCrime 2024). This collaboration allowed Mexican traffickers to expand beyond their traditional markets of heroin and marijuana and become critical intermediaries in the burgeoning cocaine trade. In the mid-1970s, Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) had firmly established themselves as essential players in the global drug trade. During this period, Mexican organized crime was relatively peaceful compared to later decades. Violence, though present, was limited to internal conflicts between rival smugglers or in cases where traffickers failed to pay off local authorities.

The Mexican government, under the PRI, largely ignored the drug trade as long as it did not disrupt political stability or draw too much attention from international observers (Trejo and Ley 2020). A significant turning point during this phase was the U.S. government's war on drugs, initiated by President Richard Nixon in the early 1970s. Nixon's "Operation Intercept" targeted marijuana production and smuggling from Mexico, which led the Mexican government to launch Operation Condor in 1975. This large-scale operation aimed to eradicate drug crops in the northern states of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua (Trejo and Ley 2020). While temporarily successful in reducing marijuana and poppy production, Operation Condor pushed traffickers to diversify into the cocaine trade, which would become far more lucrative and significantly more violent in the following decades.

Parasitic Phase (1980s – Early 2000s)

In the 1980s, Mexico entered a phase of increased involvement with drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). During this time, these organizations expanded their influence and strengthened their connections with Mexican state institutions through corruption and coercion (Correa-Cabrera 2013). Mexican cartels began to develop more organized structures, drawing upon their connections with Colombian cartels, especially after the U.S. government's crackdown on Caribbean drug routes.

One pivotal development during this phase was the formation of the Guadalajara Cartel in the late 1970s. Led by Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, Rafael Caro Quintero, and Ernesto Fonseca Carrillo, this cartel pioneered the use of Mexico as a key transit route for Colombian cocaine bound for the U.S. The Guadalajara Cartel was the first to consolidate power in Mexico, uniting various traffickers and criminal groups under a single banner, thereby creating a more organized and cohesive drug trafficking system (Correa-Cabrera 2013).

By the early 1980s, cocaine had become the dominant drug in the illicit market, and the Guadalajara Cartel controlled much of its flow through Mexico (Insight Crime 2024). The cartel's success was built on its ability to maintain close ties with Mexican law enforcement and political figures. Gallardo, known as "El Padrino" (The Godfather), was particularly adept at forging corrupt relationships with government officials, ensuring that his operations would face minimal interference.

The 1985 murder of DEA agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena was a turning point in Mexico's fight against organized crime. Camarena had been investigating the Guadalajara Cartel and its massive marijuana fields in Chihuahua, one of which—Rancho Búfalo—was destroyed by Mexican authorities in a joint operation with the DEA (Insight Crime 2024). The cartel's retaliation was swift and brutal. Camarena was abducted, tortured, and killed, exposing deep corruption within Mexico's government and law enforcement agencies. In response to Camarena's murder, the U.S. government pressured Mexico to dismantle the Guadalajara Cartel, leading to the arrests of Caro Quintero and Fonseca Carrillo. Félix Gallardo, however, managed to evade capture for several more years, continuing to operate from within Mexico's corrupt political system.

The fall of the Guadalajara Cartel in the late 1980s resulted in the emergence of new criminal organizations such as the Sinaloa Cartel, the Tijuana/Arellano Félix Organization (AFO), and the Juárez Cartel (Insight Crime 2024). These groups quickly gained power by controlling key smuggling routes into the United States. This period also coincided with the gradual decline of the PRI's political monopoly. Throughout the 1990s, Mexico transitioned towards a more competitive multiparty democracy, with the National Action Party (PAN) gaining political power (Trejo and Ley 2020). This shift led to greater instability and violence as the long-standing pacts between drug traffickers and the PRI were undermined. The decentralized control that the PRI had once maintained forced drug traffickers to engage in open competition, often resulting in extreme violence to settle disputes. By the late 1990s, the Mexican government, under pressure from the U.S., began cracking down on the cartels (Trejo and Ley 2020). High-profile arrests, such as that of Gulf Cartel leader Juan García Ábrego in 1996, marked a new phase in the government's approach to fighting organized crime (Insight Crime 2024). However, these arrests also contributed to the fragmentation of criminal organizations, leading to heightened competition and violence among the cartels.

Symbiotic Phase (2000s – Present)

In the early 2000s, Mexico experienced a new and more violent phase of organized crime. The cartels became fragmented, facing increased pressure from the Mexican government and U.S. law enforcement (Trejo and Ley 2020). This led to the emergence of smaller, more aggressive organizations that were often more violent and less hierarchical, resulting in a significant increase in cartel-related violence.

In 2006, newly elected President Felipe Calderón initiated a military offensive against Mexico's drug cartels, marking the beginning of Mexico's War on Drugs. Calderón's strategy involved deploying tens of thousands of soldiers and federal police officers to cartel strongholds, particularly in Michoacán and Sinaloa (Trejo and Ley 2020). His administration also increased cooperation with the U.S. through the Mérida Initiative, a multibillion-dollar security cooperation agreement aimed at curbing the influence of organized crime.

While Calderón's strategy initially led to the capture or killing of several high-profile cartel leaders, including Arturo Beltrán Leyva in 2009, it also had unintended consequences. The government's militarized approach fractured many of Mexico's largest cartels, leading to the emergence of over 60 smaller criminal organizations by 2012 (Trejo and Ley 2020). These groups, often more violent and less predictable, engaged in brutal turf wars, leading to an unprecedented rise in cartel-related homicides.

Two organizations that epitomized this new wave of cartel violence were Los Zetas and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG). Los Zetas, originally formed as the enforcement arm of the Gulf Cartel, broke away in the mid-2000s and quickly became notorious for their extreme brutality (Correa-Cabrera 2013). Comprised of former Mexican special forces soldiers, Los Zetas introduced military-style tactics into the cartel wars, including the use of torture, beheadings, and mass killings. They operated with a level of ruthlessness that had previously been unseen in Mexico's drug trade. The CJNG, formed in 2010 after splitting from the Sinaloa Cartel, rapidly rose to power, becoming one of Mexico's most powerful and dangerous drug trafficking organizations. Led by Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, also known as "El Mencho," the CJNG quickly gained control of key territories, particularly in Jalisco, Michoacán, and Veracruz, and expanded its operations across Mexico (Insight Crime 2024). The CJNG differentiated itself by aggressively challenging both rival cartels and state authorities, engaging in direct confrontations with security forces. Its willingness to use extreme violence, including attacks on police and military convoys, helped cement its reputation as one of the most violent cartels in the country.

The CJNG also diversified its criminal portfolio, becoming heavily involved in the production and trafficking of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamines. By the late 2010s, the CJNG had extended its reach beyond Mexico's borders, establishing connections with criminal organizations in South America, Europe, and Asia (Insight Crime 2024). This expansion marked the cartel's emergence as a transnational criminal organization with a vast and diversified revenue stream.

Throughout the symbiotic phase, cartels not only controlled drug trafficking routes but also deepened their integration into the political and economic fabric of Mexico. Corruption became endemic at all levels of government, from local police forces to federal politicians. In many regions, cartels acted as de facto rulers, providing services such as protection, justice, and even social programs in exchange for loyalty and obedience from local populations.

One of the most notorious cases of cartel infiltration into the state was the Iguala mass kidnapping in 2014, in which 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College were abducted and likely killed by members of the Guerreros Unidos cartel (Insight Crime 2024). The event exposed the extent of cartel influence over local law enforcement and politicians, as it was later revealed that the local mayor had coordinated with the cartel to carry out the kidnapping. The Iguala case became a symbol of the Mexican state's inability to protect its citizens from the pervasive reach of organized crime.

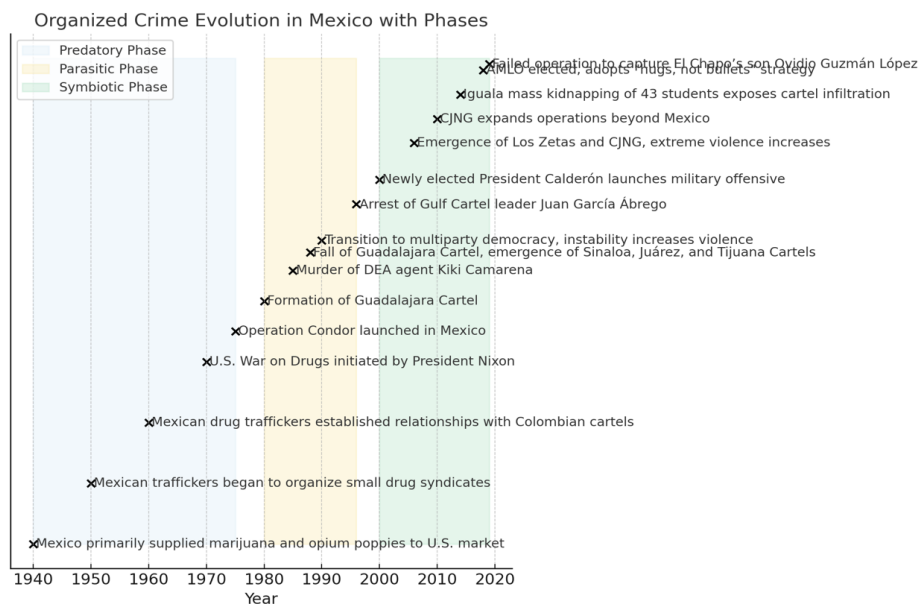
As cartels infiltrated state institutions, they gained even greater control over local economies, expanding their activities beyond the drug trade. Criminal organizations diversified into fuel

theft, extortion, human trafficking, and illegal mining. In many regions, cartels established protection rackets, extorting money from businesses, farmers, and even local governments. The U.S.-Mexico collaboration on anti-drug initiatives, particularly through the Mérida Initiative, had a profound impact on the structure and tactics of Mexican cartels. The initiative, launched in 2008, provided Mexico with billions of dollars in security assistance, focusing on improving law enforcement capabilities, border security, and judicial reform (Correa-Cabrera 2013). However, despite the influx of resources, the Mérida Initiative failed to curb the rise in violence or significantly disrupt the cartels' operations.

One of the key challenges was the fragmentation of Mexican cartels, which made it difficult for law enforcement to target a single, centralized organization (Insight Crime 2024). While high-profile arrests and the elimination of top cartel leaders, such as Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, garnered international attention, they did little to stem the tide of violence. Instead, the Sinaloa Cartel, under El Chapo, fractured into smaller, more violent factions, many of which sought to fill the power vacuum left by his capture in 2016.

The CJNG and Los Zetas, along with other criminal organizations, filled the void left by the weakened Sinaloa Cartel (Correa-Cabrera 2013). Their use of terror tactics, including mass executions and attacks on civilians, fundamentally altered the nature of Mexico's organized crime landscape. The cartels no longer just fought over control of drug routes; they actively sought to control territory, influence elections, and challenge the Mexican state itself."

Today, Mexico's organized crime landscape remains highly fragmented, with numerous criminal groups operating across the country. Some, such as the CJNG and remnants of the Sinaloa Cartel, continue to dominate large areas, while others, like Los Zetas, have split into smaller, more violent factions. These groups no longer rely solely on the drug trade. Cartels have diversified into other illegal activities, including fuel theft (or "huachicol"), human trafficking, and extortion (Insight Crime 2024). This diversification has made it even more challenging for Mexican authorities to combat organized crime.



The evolution of organized crime in Ecuador

Ecuador's involvement with organized crime, particularly drug trafficking, developed at a slower pace compared to neighboring countries like Colombia and Peru. This delay was due to several structural factors that limited the infiltration of transnational organized crime (TOC) into Ecuador, including a weaker economy, a lack of large-scale coca cultivation, and a strong military presence in potentially vulnerable areas. Despite its proximity to the world's largest coca producers, Ecuador's **predatory phase** in organized crime evolved gradually.

Factors Behind Ecuador's Delayed Drug Trafficking Development (Late 20th Century):

1. **Lack of Coca Cultivation:** Unlike Colombia and Peru, Ecuador never developed a tradition of coca leaf cultivation. In the Amazon region, where coca might have thrived, the Ecuadorian military maintained a strong presence, preventing cultivation from taking root (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). This significantly curbed the country's early involvement in cocaine production, keeping Ecuador on the fringes of the regional drug trade.
2. **Weak Currency and Economy:** The national currency, the sucre, was unstable and had low value throughout much of the late 20th century (BBC Mundo 2024). This made Ecuador less attractive to large criminal organizations that relied on stronger economies for laundering their illicit profits. Ecuador's weak economy was plagued by rampant inflation and political instability, which further discouraged significant criminal investments.
3. **Limited Guerrilla Presence:** Unlike Colombia, which had large guerrilla movements like the FARC that were closely tied to the drug trade, Ecuador's guerrilla activity was minimal and confined mainly to urban areas. Alfaro Vive Carajo (AVC), a leftist group that operated in the 1980s, never gained significant control over rural areas or became involved in drug trafficking at a meaningful scale (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). Under the leadership of President León Febres Cordero (1984-1988), the government launched a brutal crackdown on AVC, effectively dismantling the group and preventing further linkages between insurgents and organized crime.
4. **US Anti-Drug Pressure:** The United States exerted strong anti-narcotics pressure on Ecuador beginning in the 1980s. This pressure included the establishment of DEA operations in Ecuador as part of the broader Andean Initiative, which aimed to curb drug production and trafficking throughout the region (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). Ecuador's participation in the Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA), which granted it tariff exemptions in exchange for drug control efforts, also limited its role in the cocaine trade. However, as Colombia and Peru experienced more intense counter-narcotics campaigns, trafficking routes shifted, bringing Ecuador further into the fold by the late 1990s.

Predatory Phase (Late 1980s to Mid-2000s)

By the late 1980s, Ecuador began to see the emergence of its first organized crime figures. This development coincided with political and economic crises that weakened state institutions, making it easier for criminals to operate. In 1992, the government launched Operation Cyclone, Ecuador's first major anti-drug effort (BBC Mundo 2024). This operation led to the arrest of Jorge Hernán Reyes Torres, regarded as Ecuador's first prominent drug lord. Reyes Torres operated with impunity for years, using his connections to Colombian traffickers to establish a

base in Ecuador (El Pais 2024). His capture marked a turning point, as it was the first time Ecuador acknowledged the presence of major drug figures within its borders.

Another key figure from this period was Oscar Caranqui, who rose to prominence in the late 1990s. Caranqui was considered one of Ecuador's leading drug traffickers, controlling smuggling routes along the Pacific coast (El Pais 2024). He built a network that included connections to Colombian cartels and Mexican traffickers. Caranqui's arrest in 2004 was one of the first significant victories for Ecuadorian authorities in their battle against transnational organized crime. His activities were emblematic of Ecuador's transition from a peripheral player to a more integral part of the regional drug trade.

Dollarization and Its Impact (2000)

Ecuador's decision to adopt the U.S. dollar in 2000 had significant implications for organized crime. The dollarization of the economy was a response to a severe financial and political crisis in the late 1990s, triggered by a collapse of the banking system, high inflation, and widespread poverty (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). President Jamil Mahuad, who led the country during this turbulent period, saw dollarization as a way to stabilize the economy and restore public confidence. However, this move also inadvertently facilitated money laundering and drug trafficking.

With the U.S. dollar in circulation, Ecuador became an attractive hub for international criminal organizations (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). Dollarization removed the need for currency exchange, simplifying transactions for traffickers who wanted to move money between Ecuador and the United States or Mexico. While the economy stabilized, it also exposed Ecuador to greater risks of corruption and organized crime infiltration.

Street Gangs and Criminal Organizations (1990s)

During the 1990s, Ecuador's political and economic crises contributed to the rise of street gangs, particularly in urban areas like Guayaquil. Gangs such as Los Choneros, Los Queseros, and Los Corvicheros initially emerged as small-time operators involved in local disputes over control of fishing territories and markets (El Pais 2024). However, these gangs gradually evolved into more sophisticated criminal organizations.

Los Choneros, in particular, transitioned from a local gang into a key player in Ecuador's drug trafficking network. By the early 2000s, they became the armed wing of Colombian cartels, facilitating cocaine shipments to the United States and Mexico (El Pais 2024). This period marked Ecuador's shift from a peripheral player in the regional drug trade to an increasingly important link in the international drug trafficking chain.

Political Instability (1997-2001)

Ecuador's political instability during this period further weakened state institutions and exacerbated the rise of organized crime. Between 1997 and 2001, Ecuador went through five presidents, including the ousting of Abdalá Bucaram in 1997 for alleged corruption and insanity, and the forced resignation of Jamil Mahuad in 2000 due to his mishandling of the economy during the financial crisis (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). This constant turnover of leadership weakened

the government's ability to effectively combat organized crime, leading to increased impunity for drug traffickers and criminal organizations.

The combination of political instability, economic vulnerability, and the rise of organized gangs positioned Ecuador as a strategic hub for transnational drug trafficking networks by the early 2000s.

Parasitic Phase: Mid-2000s to 2018

Ecuador's parasitic phase began in the mid-2000s when criminal organizations deepened their ties with international drug cartels, especially the Colombian FARC and Mexican Sinaloa Cartel (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). During this period, organized crime didn't just grow; it infiltrated state institutions, embedding itself in both the military and political spheres. The phase was marked by the development of symbiotic relationships between Ecuador's organized crime groups (OCGs) and political and military actors.

One key player in this period was Telmo Castro, a former high-ranking military officer. He acted as a middleman between the FARC and Mexican cartels, moving large quantities of cocaine from Colombia through Ecuador (BBC Mundo 2024). Castro used military resources to smuggle drugs, relying on state equipment and infrastructure to evade detection. His arrest in 2009, while escorting half a ton of cocaine, revealed the deep-rooted corruption within Ecuador's security forces.

Corruption ran rampant through Ecuador's military and police forces. Organized crime groups like Los Choneros strengthened their alliances with Mexican cartels. These groups used military trucks and official infrastructure to move drugs, while bribing high-ranking officials to ensure impunity. OCGs essentially operated without interference, particularly along Ecuador's border regions, which became major transit points for cocaine shipments.

This period also saw organized crime forge political alliances. Groups like the FARC sought to secure political influence within Ecuador, especially in the early 2000s (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). Allegations of campaign financing emerged, suggesting that OCGs were funding the political campaigns of key figures. The Manta Air Base, a U.S. military facility in Ecuador, had served as a deterrent against drug trafficking. However, when President Rafael Correa chose not to renew the U.S. lease, the base closed in 2009, opening new opportunities for OCGs to expand their operations.

By the mid-2000s, the presence of organized crime in Ecuadorian politics was undeniable. Los Choneros and other criminal groups allegedly funded political campaigns at both the local and national levels. Investigations linked political elites, military officers, and government officials to drug trafficking operations (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). Criminal groups didn't just buy influence; they penetrated Ecuador's political structures, establishing relationships with politicians and using these connections to protect their operations.

Correa's government implemented sweeping social reforms aimed at alleviating poverty and improving the lives of Ecuador's poor. His administration invested in education, healthcare, and housing, and these efforts lifted millions out of poverty. But alongside these achievements, Correa's government also shifted Ecuador's security doctrine (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). The role of

the military in internal security matters diminished, with the government focusing more on police-led operations. While social programs expanded, this demilitarization left the country vulnerable. Along the northern border with Colombia, criminal groups took advantage of the lack of military presence to strengthen their drug trafficking operations.

In 2007, Correa took a controversial step by legalizing street gangs. The government officially recognized groups like Los Ñetas and Latin Kings, hoping to rehabilitate them through education, vocational training, and job programs (Insight Crime 2024). While the legalization of these gangs initially reduced violence, it also allowed gangs to organize more effectively. As these groups grew in size and influence, they became more deeply involved in drug trafficking and extortion.

After the closure of the Manta Air Base, Ecuador witnessed a surge in drug trafficking activity. Criminal groups capitalized on the absence of U.S. surveillance and enforcement, leading to a significant increase in drug smuggling through Ecuador (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). Organized crime not only entrenched itself within political institutions but also formed alliances with transnational criminal organizations, further entangling Ecuador in the global drug trade.

By 2017, as Correa's term came to an end, Ecuador found itself at a critical juncture. The government had succeeded in reducing poverty and improving social welfare, but organized crime had expanded its reach. Correa's shift in security policies and the legalization of gangs had created unintended consequences. Criminal organizations had infiltrated both state institutions and society, leaving Ecuador more vulnerable than ever to the influence of transnational cartels.

Symbiotic Phase: 2018 - Present

In May 2017, Lenín Moreno took office as Ecuador's president, initiating a period of political upheaval by distancing himself from his predecessor, Rafael Correa. Moreno implemented reforms that shifted national priorities, particularly in security, which had been neglected under Correa (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). A turning point came in January 2018 when Ecuador experienced its first large-scale terrorist attacks orchestrated by organized crime groups, marking the onset of the symbiotic phase.

On January 7, 2018, Walter Arízala (alias "Guacho"), leader of the FARC dissident faction Frente Oliver Sinisterra, executed a car bomb attack on a police station in San Lorenzo Canton. Guacho's faction had strong ties to the Sinaloa Cartel and other criminal organizations in Ecuador (BBC Mundo 2024). The violence escalated further in March 2018, when an explosive device killed three Ecuadorian soldiers in Mataje. Later, Guacho's group kidnapped and murdered three journalists from El Comercio newspaper.

These incidents compelled President Moreno to act swiftly, replacing key government officials, including the Defense and Interior Ministers, and establishing the Esmeraldas Joint Task Force to restore order in northern provinces. He also initiated institutional reforms, such as dissolving SENAIN and replacing it with the Centro de Inteligencia Estratégica (CIES) (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). Despite these efforts, violence and criminal activities continued to rise. Guacho's death in December 2018, resulting from a joint military operation with Colombia, temporarily weakened the Frente Oliver Sinisterra. However, his elimination did little to diminish the influence of

criminal organizations in Ecuador, particularly along the northern border, where groups like Los Choneros and dissidents from FARC had already established dominance.

The assassination of Jorge Luis Zambrano (alias "Rasquiña"), leader of Los Choneros, in December 2020 further destabilized Ecuador's organized crime landscape. His death created a power vacuum, leading to violent clashes among rival factions, particularly between Los Choneros, Los Lobos, and other criminal organizations vying for control over Ecuador's lucrative drug trade (El Pais 2024). The violent infighting extended into the prison system, resulting in massacres that claimed hundreds of prisoners' lives in brutal clashes between rival gangs in 2021 and 2022.

Operation Metastasis and the "Cancer" of Corruption

The Metastasis case, named for the medical term describing the spread of cancer, highlighted the rampant corruption within Ecuador's political and judicial systems. Initiated by Ecuador's Attorney General's Office in late 2023, this investigation uncovered a vast network of high-ranking officials, judges, and prosecutors who shielded drug traffickers from prosecution in exchange for bribes (CNN Español 2024).

At the center of this case was Leandro Norero (alias "El Patrón"), a notorious drug lord deeply entrenched in Ecuador's criminal underworld. Norero amassed considerable wealth through his drug trafficking operations, protected by connections to politicians and judiciary members (Fiscalía General del Estado 2024). His assassination in 2022, while serving a sentence in a high-security prison in Cotopaxi, underscored the power and reach of Ecuador's criminal organizations. Norero's death was believed to have been orchestrated by rival factions within the criminal world, likely with the cooperation of corrupt officials.

The Metastasis case revealed the depth of organized crime's infiltration into Ecuador's judicial system. Prosecutors and judges faced accusations of facilitating money laundering and drug trafficking operations (Fiscalía General del Estado 2024), further demonstrating that the symbiotic relationship between organized crime and the state had penetrated the core of Ecuador's institutions.

Operation Encuentro and the Albanian Mafia Connection

Another high-profile investigation, Operation Encuentro, launched in January 2023, unveiled connections between Ecuadorian officials and the Albanian Mafia, a powerful transnational criminal organization that established operations in Ecuador (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). This case merged with Operation León de Troya, which exposed ties between Rubén Cherres, a close associate of President Lasso, and the Albanian Mafia. Cherres faced accusations of facilitating drug shipments from Ecuador to Europe using his influence in public enterprises.

Danilo Carrera, Lasso's brother-in-law, emerged as a central figure in the Encuentro case. He allegedly acted as the intermediary between organized crime and Ecuador's government, accepting bribes for state contracts (Boscan and Velásquez 2023). Revelations from this case shocked the nation, highlighting the deep penetration of criminal organizations into the highest levels of government. Leaked audio recordings from March 2023 implicated top police generals in discussions about halting the investigation at the behest of powerful criminal interests

(Primicias 2024). This case exemplified the extent to which organized crime had embedded itself in Ecuador's law enforcement, judicial system, and state-run enterprises.

The Assassination of Fernando Villavicencio

In August 2023, Ecuador experienced the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, an anti-corruption journalist and former National Assembly member (BBC Mundo 2024). Villavicencio built his political career on exposing corruption within the government and the ties between politicians, the judiciary, and drug cartels.

Villavicencio was shot and killed during a campaign rally in Quito, just days before the presidential election. Widely believed to have been orchestrated by organized crime, his assassination sent shockwaves through the country, reinforcing concerns about criminal infiltration in Ecuadorian politics. He had openly addressed the Encuentro case and the Albanian Mafia's involvement in Ecuador, making him a target for those within criminal networks seeking to silence him. His death underscored a new level of violence in Ecuador's fight against organized crime, with criminal groups now directly targeting political figures threatening their influence.

Escalation of Violence and Armed Conflict

By 2024, Ecuador faced a full-blown internal armed conflict. The escape of Adolfo Macías (alias "Fito"), one of Ecuador's most powerful drug lords, from prison in early 2024 triggered a wave of attacks and hostage crises, leading President Daniel Noboa to declare a state of emergency (El Pais 2024). Noboa deployed 22,000 soldiers to combat the drug cartels, which had become so entrenched in the state that they were officially designated as terrorist organizations (Geneva Academy 2024).

This internal armed conflict marked the culmination of Ecuador's long-standing struggle with transnational criminal organizations, deeply entrenched corruption, and a fragmented state unable to regain control from the mega-bands and cartels that dominate the country's security landscape.

Findings

The research question guiding this analysis is: **What explains Ecuador's late integration into the regional trend of powerful non-state armed actors infiltrating government branches and using violence to shape political outcomes?** By examining the evolution of organized crime in Ecuador in comparison with Mexico and Colombia, and analyzing subnational variations in violence during each phase of organized crime development, we can identify the key factors that contributed to Ecuador's delayed yet rapid escalation into organized criminal violence.

Factors Contributing to Ecuador's Delayed Integration

Ecuador's late integration into the regional trend of organized crime is attributable to a combination of structural, economic, political, and geographical factors that initially shielded the country from the early and intense infiltration experienced by its neighbors.

Firstly, *the absence of large-scale coca cultivation* in Ecuador played a crucial role. Unlike Colombia and Peru, Ecuador did not have a tradition of coca leaf farming, primarily due to its geography and the strong military presence in regions where such cultivation might have thrived (Britto 2020). This lack of a domestic coca production base meant that Ecuador was not a primary source for cocaine production, reducing the incentive for powerful drug cartels to establish significant operations within its borders during the early phases.

Secondly, *Ecuador's weaker economy and unstable national currency, the sucre*, made it less attractive to international criminal organizations (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). Throughout much of the late 20th century, the Ecuadorian economy was characterized by instability, high inflation, and political turmoil. The weak currency posed challenges for money laundering and profit maximization, which are essential for large-scale organized crime operations. Criminal organizations favored countries with stronger economies and more stable currencies to facilitate their financial transactions and investments.

Thirdly, *the limited presence of guerrilla movements* in Ecuador contrasted sharply with the situation in Colombia. Ecuador did not have significant insurgent groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) or the National Liberation Army (ELN), which in Colombia became deeply involved in drug trafficking and challenged state authority (Trejo and Ley 2020). The minimal guerrilla activity in Ecuador reduced internal conflict and limited the opportunities for domestic groups to engage in large-scale illicit activities or to collaborate with international criminal organizations.

Additionally, *a strong military presence in vulnerable areas* acted as a deterrent to the establishment of organized crime hubs (Hylton 2010). The Ecuadorian military effectively controlled regions that could have been potential sites for coca cultivation or drug trafficking routes. This military vigilance helped prevent the encroachment of organized crime during the initial phases.

Moreover, *early cooperation with United States anti-narcotics efforts* provided an additional layer of defense. Beginning in the 1980s, the U.S. exerted strong anti-drug pressure on Ecuador, including the establishment of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) operations and the use of facilities like the Manta Air Base for surveillance (Insight Crime 2024). This collaboration enhanced Ecuador's capabilities to monitor and combat drug trafficking activities, thereby deterring significant criminal infiltration during the early stages.

Lastly, *relative political stability and institutional strength* in comparison to its neighbors reduced vulnerabilities. While Ecuador did experience political and economic challenges, it did not face the prolonged internal conflicts that plagued Colombia or the single-party dominance

and subsequent political fragmentation seen in Mexico (Smith 2013). Stronger state institutions made it more difficult for organized crime to exploit governmental weaknesses and establish a foothold.

These factors collectively contributed to Ecuador's delayed integration into the regional trend of powerful non-state armed actors. However, over time, changes in economic conditions, policy shifts, and evolving regional dynamics eroded these protective barriers, leading to increased vulnerability. To understand these changes, it is essential to compare the evolution of organized crime in Ecuador with that of Mexico and Colombia through the three-phase model: predatory, parasitic, and symbiotic. This is given that each phase represents a different level of integration of organized crime into society and state structures, as well as varying degrees of harm inflicted upon social institutions.

Predatory Phase

Mexico (1940s–1980s):

During this phase, Mexico's drug trafficking activities were relatively low-profile, focusing on supplying marijuana and opium to the U.S. market. Small-scale traffickers operated independently, and violence was limited. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) maintained tight control over political and social spheres, including the police and judiciary, which kept organized crime in check (Smith 2013). Subnational variations were evident, with activities concentrated in northern border states like Sinaloa and Sonora, but the overall impact on society was minimal.

Colombia (1940s–Early 1980s):

In Colombia, the predatory phase involved the initial involvement in the marijuana trade, which later shifted to cocaine production due to high global demand (Britto 2020). The emergence of guerrilla groups like the FARC and ELN added a political dimension to the conflict. These groups operated in rural areas with weak state presence, engaging in violent activities against civilians and the state. Subnational variations were significant, with violence concentrated in rural southern regions where the state had little control.

Ecuador (Late 1980s–Mid-2000s):

Ecuador's predatory phase emerged later than in Mexico and Colombia, starting in the late 1980s. The country remained largely a transit point for drugs rather than a production hub (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). The lack of coca cultivation, combined with a weaker economy and limited guerrilla activity, delayed the infiltration of organized crime. Subnational violence was minimal and mostly confined to urban areas like Guayaquil, where street gangs began to form. The strong military presence and cooperation with U.S. anti-drug efforts further deterred significant criminal activities during this phase (Insight Crime 2024).

Reasons for Ecuador's Delayed Integration in the Predatory Phase:

- **Absence of Coca Cultivation:** Without domestic production of coca, there was less incentive for cartels to establish operations in Ecuador.
- **Economic Instability:** The weak economy and currency made Ecuador less attractive for money laundering and investment by criminal organizations.

- **Military Vigilance:** A strong military presence in potential cultivation areas prevented the establishment of drug production.
- **Limited Internal Conflict:** The lack of significant guerrilla movements reduced internal instability and opportunities for organized crime to take root.

Parasitic Phase

Mexico (1980s–Early 2000s):

In Mexico, the parasitic phase saw the expansion of cartels and their infiltration into state institutions through corruption and coercion. The Guadalajara Cartel's rise exemplified this phase, as it formed alliances with government officials to protect its operations (Smith 2013). Subnational variations became more pronounced, with increased violence in regions like Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez due to competition over trafficking routes. Corruption infiltrated local governments, exacerbating regional disparities and undermining state authority.

Colombia (Early 1980s):

Colombia's parasitic phase involved the growth of powerful drug cartels like Medellín and Cali, which corrupted state institutions at various levels (Insight Crime 2023). Guerrilla groups began to engage in drug trafficking to fund their activities, blurring the lines between political insurgency and criminal enterprise. Subnational variations were significant, with urban centers experiencing high levels of cartel-related violence, while rural areas continued to suffer from guerrilla warfare and paramilitary actions.

Ecuador (Mid-2000s–2018):

Ecuador entered the parasitic phase later than its neighbors. During this period, criminal organizations deepened their ties with international cartels, particularly Colombian and Mexican groups (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). They began infiltrating state institutions through corruption, exploiting weaknesses in the political and judicial systems. Subnational variations emerged, with increased criminal activity in northern border provinces like Esmeraldas and Sucumbíos due to spillover effects from Colombia. The legalization of street gangs, intended as a rehabilitation effort, inadvertently allowed these groups to organize and expand their criminal activities (Insight Crime 2024).

Reasons for Ecuador's Delayed Integration in the Parasitic Phase:

- **Continued Structural Barriers:** The factors that delayed Ecuador's entry into the predatory phase persisted into the parasitic phase.
- **Policy Shifts:** The closure of the Manta Air Base in 2009 reduced U.S. surveillance, removing a deterrent against organized crime infiltration.
- **Dollarization of the Economy:** In 2000, Ecuador adopted the U.S. dollar, which made it more attractive for money laundering and financial transactions by criminal organizations.
- **Political Instability and Corruption:** Political upheaval and economic crises weakened state institutions, creating opportunities for corruption and organized crime to infiltrate government branches.

Symbiotic Phase

Mexico (2000s–Present):

Mexico's symbiotic phase is characterized by the deep infiltration of cartels into state institutions, influencing political processes, and diversifying into other criminal activities such as human trafficking and extortion (Smith 2013). Violence became widespread, affecting both rural and urban areas. Subnational variations included extreme cartel influence in states like Michoacán and Guerrero, where groups like the Knights Templar asserted control and even provided social services, acting as de facto authorities.

Colombia (Late 1980s–Present):

In Colombia, organized crime became deeply embedded in society and politics (Hylton 2010). Despite efforts like Plan Colombia, which aimed to dismantle drug cartels and restore state authority, criminal organizations adapted and continued to operate. Subnational variations persisted, with some regions achieving relative peace while others remained conflict zones due to the presence of dissident groups and new criminal organizations that emerged from the demobilization of former guerrilla factions.

Ecuador (2018–Present):

Ecuador's transition into the symbiotic phase occurred rapidly and was marked by the deep integration of organized crime into political and judicial systems. High-profile cases of corruption and violence, including the assassination of political figures and prison massacres, highlighted the extent of criminal infiltration (Ordóñez Arcos 2024). Subnational variations saw violence escalating nationwide, with urban centers facing gang warfare and prison riots. Port cities like Guayaquil became hotspots for drug trafficking and gang activities.

Reasons for Ecuador's Delayed Integration in the Symbiotic Phase:

- **Late Policy Shifts:** The combination of previous factors delayed the onset of the symbiotic phase, but policy changes and weakening institutions eventually allowed organized crime to embed itself.
- **Corruption and Institutional Weaknesses:** Increased corruption within the military, police, and political institutions facilitated the deeper infiltration of organized crime.
- **Regional Spillover Effects:** Pressure on cartels in Colombia and Mexico led to the displacement of criminal activities into Ecuador, accelerating its integration into the symbiotic phase.
- **Economic Changes:** The stabilization of the economy and the use of the U.S. dollar made Ecuador more attractive for organized crime operations.

Subnational Violence Variations in Each Phase

The evolution of organized crime was not uniform across each country; subnational factors played a crucial role in shaping the levels and manifestations of violence during each phase.

Mexico:

- **Predatory Phase:** Violence was localized in border states essential for drug trafficking. The PRI's control limited widespread violence.
- **Parasitic Phase:** Corruption and cartel influence varied by region, with some local governments colluding with cartels. Violence intensified in areas where cartels competed for control.
- **Symbiotic Phase:** Violence became widespread, affecting previously safe regions. States like Guerrero and Michoacán experienced extreme cartel influence, leading to the emergence of self-defense groups as communities sought to protect themselves.

Colombia:

- **Predatory Phase:** Violence was concentrated in rural areas with limited state presence, where guerrilla groups and early cartels operated.
- **Parasitic Phase:** Major cities like Medellín and Cali faced high levels of violence due to cartel activities, while rural areas continued to suffer from guerrilla warfare.
- **Symbiotic Phase:** Some regions achieved relative peace, but others remained hotspots for criminal activities due to persistent weak state control and the presence of new criminal groups.

Ecuador:

- **Predatory Phase:** Violence was minimal and mostly confined to urban centers like Guayaquil, where street gangs began to form.
- **Parasitic Phase:** Northern border regions experienced increased violence due to spillover from Colombia. Criminal organizations began to infiltrate state institutions.
- **Symbiotic Phase:** Violence escalated nationwide, including in prisons and political arenas. Previously unaffected regions began experiencing significant criminal influence, and port cities became central to drug trafficking operations.

Explaining Ecuador's Delayed Integration

To summarize these findings, Ecuador's delayed integration into the regional trend of organized crime can be explained by the interplay of several factors during each phase.

During the Predatory Phase:

- The absence of coca cultivation meant there was less initial interest from major drug cartels.
- The weak economy and unstable currency made the country less attractive for laundering profits.
- Strong military presence and effective early countermeasures, including cooperation with U.S. anti-drug efforts, deterred significant criminal infiltration.

During the Parasitic Phase:

- Structural barriers from the previous phase continued to limit organized crime's growth.
- The dollarization of the economy in 2000 increased Ecuador's attractiveness for money laundering, but initial impacts were mitigated by ongoing military vigilance.
- Policy shifts, such as the closure of the Manta Air Base, reduced surveillance and opened opportunities for criminal organizations.

- Political instability and corruption weakened state institutions, allowing organized crime to begin infiltrating government branches.

During the Symbiotic Phase:

- Accumulated institutional weaknesses and corruption reached a tipping point, enabling organized crime to deeply integrate into political and judicial systems.
- Spillover effects from intensified anti-cartel efforts in neighboring countries pushed criminal activities into Ecuador.
- Economic stabilization and the presence of the U.S. dollar facilitated financial transactions for criminal organizations.
- Policies like the legalization of street gangs unintentionally allowed these groups to organize more effectively and expand their criminal activities.

Conclusion

Ecuador's late integration into the regional trend of powerful non-state armed actors infiltrating government branches and using violence to shape political outcomes is the result of initial structural barriers that delayed criminal infiltration, followed by policy shifts and institutional weaknesses that created opportunities for organized crime to expand rapidly. Throughout each phase—predatory, parasitic, and symbiotic—Ecuador's experience differed from that of Mexico and Colombia due to its unique economic conditions, lack of coca cultivation, limited guerrilla activity, and strong early military presence.

However, over time, factors such as dollarization, political instability, policy changes, and regional dynamics eroded these protective barriers. Subnational variations in violence during each phase highlight the importance of regional dynamics, state capacity, and local political structures in shaping the evolution of organized crime. The comparison with Mexico and Colombia demonstrates that while Ecuador initially avoided the intense early phases of criminal violence experienced by its neighbors, similar patterns of corruption, institutional infiltration, and subnational vulnerabilities eventually led to a comparable escalation in organized crime and violence.

Understanding these factors is crucial for developing strategies to strengthen state institutions, combat corruption, and address the regional dynamics that facilitate the spread of organized crime. Policymakers must consider the lessons from Ecuador's delayed integration to prevent similar trajectories in other countries and to formulate effective responses to the challenges posed by powerful non-state armed actors.

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