



# PREVENT

## Social Economy Policies for Combating Organised Crime

| A mapping of frameworks and  
practices across the EU



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practices across the EU**



The social economy is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of Europe’s resilience, combining economic weight with a unique capacity to generate social trust and democratic participation. With 2.8 million enterprises—10% of all EU businesses—it contributes 6.3% of GDP and engages nearly 20 million people, including volunteers. Its defining features—collective interest, reinvestment of surpluses, and participatory governance—make it a driver of cohesion and sustainable development while offering corrective mechanisms where markets and states fall short. Crucially, the sector also acts as a counterweight to organised crime by regenerating social capital, restoring trust in public institutions, and enabling the social reuse of confiscated assets. Recent EU policy frameworks, including the Social Economy Action Plan, the Transition Pathway, and the 2023 Council Recommendation, have positioned the sector at the core of Europe’s green and digital transitions. Yet, despite this momentum, scaling up remains uneven across Member States. Strengthening enabling conditions and ensuring long-term political commitment are critical to unlock the sector’s full potential as both an engine of sustainable growth and a barrier against high-risk criminal networks.

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## Executive Summary

According to the European Commission<sup>1</sup>, the social economy sector encompasses approximately 2.8 million enterprises, representing 10% of all businesses in the European Union. Collectively, these entities contribute around 6.3% to the EU's GDP, generating an estimated turnover exceeding €912 billion. Beyond salaried employment, the sector provides jobs for 13.6 million individuals (equivalent to 6.2% of the EU workforce) and further engages volunteers whose contribution corresponds to 5.5 million full-time equivalents. Altogether, this reflects a socially committed workforce of nearly 20 million people across Europe.

In the European context, the vast ecosystem of the social economy, which includes cooperatives, mutual societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises, stands out for the primacy given to people and social and environmental objectives over profit and the reinvestment of most of the profits and surpluses to carry out activities in the interest of members and/or the users ("collective interest") or society at large ("general interest") and democratic and/or participatory governance<sup>2</sup>.

These entities reinvest their profits in activities of collective or general interest and adopt democratic and participatory governance models. These characteristics transmit trust to citizens through transparency and generate participatory mechanisms useful for overcoming problems of state<sup>3</sup> and market failure<sup>4</sup>.

As a result, the social economy stands out as a pillar of cohesion and sustainable development and in some European countries it also represents a tool for fighting organised crime thanks to the role that the organisations operating within it can play in regenerating the social capital that the mafias use for their criminal purposes. In this sense, the social economy sector has demonstrated, and continues to demonstrate, a remarkable generative capacity on an economic,

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<sup>1</sup>European Commission, n.d.(a)

<sup>2</sup> Galera, G., Carini, C., Tallarini, G., & Franchini, B., 2024, September 10

<sup>3</sup> Weisbrod, B., 1988

<sup>4</sup> Hansmann, H. B., 1979

entrepreneurial and social level, helping to prevent, combat and repair the damage caused by high-risk criminal networks (HRCN) practices and the criminal culture they sustain.

Building on this consolidated role, the European Union has progressively recognised the social economy as a strategic pillar for inclusion, resilience, and sustainable growth. In recent years, this recognition has translated into a structured policy framework aimed at strengthening and scaling up the sector. The *Social Economy Action Plan* (2021), the *Transition Pathway for the Proximity and Social Economy ecosystem* (2022), and the *Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions* (2023) together outline a coherent trajectory: they not only reaffirm the sector's contribution to social and territorial cohesion, but also position it at the core of the green and digital transitions, innovation, and community resilience to react to the economic and social transformations of local communities.

These initiatives represent an important step towards consolidating the social economy as a structural component of the European project, while at the same time enhancing its capacity to counter the economic and cultural influence of organised crime through inclusive, democratic, and sustainable alternatives supporting all those activities such as the public and social reuse of confiscated assets from organised crime, which restore trust in public institutions and prevent the spread of criminal phenomena.

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## 1. Introduction and context<sup>5</sup>

Organised crime is one of the most persistent and pervasive threats within the European Union (EU)<sup>6</sup>. Over the last two decades, criminal organisations have shown a remarkable ability to adapt, exploiting globalisation, digital technologies and new socio-economic vulnerabilities to expand their markets and establish themselves in increasingly large territories. According to Europol's *Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment* (SOCTA), in 2025 more than 7.000 organised crime groups are active across the European Union. Most of them are relatively small, often made up of fewer than ten members, but they are highly adaptable and well-connected. Their activities destabilize society and include a wide range of criminal markets that generate billions of illicit proceeds annually. Unlike the traditional image of mafia-style organisations, today's groups operate more like flexible networks that form, dissolve, and cooperate depending on opportunities.

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<sup>5</sup> EUROPOL, 2025, December 7

<sup>6</sup> Eurojust, 2024

Council of the European Union, n.d.

European Commission, n.d. (b)

European People's Party Group, 2022

European Parliament, 2024, September 18

One striking feature is their multinational nature: around 70% of these groups bring together members from different nationalities, making them truly transnational in character. This allows them to move easily across borders and exploit differences in national legal systems.

Their activities span almost every profitable crime area, but drug trafficking remains the most lucrative market. At the same time, online fraud, cybercrime, human trafficking, smuggling and environmental crime are all expanding. Technology plays a central role: groups make extensive use of digital platforms, cryptocurrencies, and even artificial intelligence for recruitment, coordination, money laundering, and concealing their operations. The EU has recognised this challenge as a priority, including the fight against organised crime among the pillars of the *European Union Security Strategy 2020–2025*<sup>7</sup>.

For these reasons, the fight against organised crime requires increasingly effective and efficient counter-crime policies and the involvement of stakeholders beyond the public institutions that repress criminal behaviour. It is necessary to develop policies that, alongside repression, also prevent unlawful conduct. In this area, the social economy makes an enormous contribution, and the existing positive experiences in Europe can be strengthened and shared across Member States, since the fight against high-risk criminal networks (HRCN) is a challenge that concerns Europe as a whole rather than individual countries.

The social economy has been recognised as a driver of social and economic inclusion both locally and at the EU level; a driver of community resilience and sustainable development; a concrete tool for combating inequalities and promoting the human rights economy; and an active player in post-pandemic recovery, creating quality jobs, and supporting vulnerable groups. The social economy acts also concretely as a tool for social intervention and inclusive development capable of undermining criminal organisations.

Social economy is characterised by fundamental elements:

1. social purpose before the profit (serving members and the community, promoting inclusion, employment and solidarity of disadvantaged people);
2. budget constraint distribution (the primacy of people and labour over capital in the redistribution of profits, with limited profitability, encouraging the reinvestment for the development of the business);
3. democratic decision-making processes often involving multi-stakeholders' governance (workers, beneficiaries, citizens, etc.);
4. local roots tailored to the specific needs of communities and their inhabitants, frequently engaging with the most vulnerable and marginalised groups;
5. institutional and operational autonomy from public authorities.

These elements make the sector particularly well suited to combating the effects and roots of HRCN. In vulnerable areas, where HRCN tends to recruit labour from the most fragile sections of

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<sup>7</sup> European Commission, 2020



society and take root through control of the informal economy, the presence of cooperatives, associations and social enterprises can offer legal and sustainable alternatives, both economically and socially. Furthermore, in certain contexts, organised crime tends to present itself as a benefactor or “job-maker”<sup>8</sup>. It favours collusion, corruption and economic influence, embedding itself within politics and the economy. Resorting to a “gentle use of violence”, with coercion as a last measure, it simultaneously seeks to gain social legitimacy. This adaptability challenges traditional anti-mafia strategies, making it essential to develop new tools both to analyse Criminal Network Resilience<sup>9</sup> and to strengthen the social economy as a concrete alternative to prevent mafia consensus.

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<sup>8</sup> Castiello M., Mosca M, & Villani, S., 2018. The article presents the multifaceted nature of violence employed by Italian organised crime groups, with a particular focus on the Camorra, a criminal organisation based in the Campania region which has dominated a vast territory for over seventy years.

<sup>9</sup> Criminal Network Resilience (CNR), is the capacity of mafia type organisations to adapt, maintain legitimacy and persist through subtle coercion (“gentle use of violence”) and strategic use of human and social capital.

**Table 1 - Criminal economy vs Social economy**

CRIMINAL ECONOMY	SOCIAL ECONOMY
<p><u>Profit before people</u>: This model focuses on illicit profit maximisation at the expense of human rights, safety, environment, well-being. People are perceived either as instruments for achieving the objectives of the criminal organisation, as the very objects of its illicit goals, or as victims of the organisation itself.</p>	<p><u>People before profit</u>: This model centers economic activity on human and social needs rather than capital accumulation. It redefines success as the well-being of communities, environmental sustainability, and long-term resilience.</p>
<p><u>Wealth of few people</u>: Concentrates economic benefits in the hands of a small elite of the (criminal) groups, fostering social inequality and injustice (with no equal distribution, even among the organisation), they generate 'positional goods' (Mosca M. <i>et al.</i> 2012). Criminal economies are highly segregative and hierarchical.</p>	<p><u>Profit returns to the community</u>: Generates wealth for more people. Any surplus generated is reinvested locally (in social services, jobs, training, or infrastructure). This helps build collective wealth rather than individual fortunes, strengthening local economies over time.</p>
<p><u>Economic and territorial control</u>: Uses coercion, violence, and corruption to dominate markets and regions, often undermining legitimate authorities or trying to corrupt them. This also includes <i>omertà</i>, within which criminal organisations act with popular consensus based on fear and coercion. It transforms the pure social capital (citizen's trust, social relationship, etc.) into "a-social capital", turning it into a strategic tool for illegal finalities. (Villani, S., Mosca, M., &amp; Castiello, M., 2019).</p>	<p><u>Create opportunities and perspective</u>: It focuses on inclusion (creating jobs for marginalised groups, offering training, or filling service gaps). It can restore dignity and open new life paths, particularly in areas marked by previous failures at the social, economic, or even enterprise level.</p>

<p><u>Flourish in contexts of social injustice:</u> Criminal groups often launder money through legitimate businesses, blurring the lines between legal and illegal sectors. This erodes market integrity, distorts competition, and can compromise public institutions if corruption takes root.</p>	<p><u>Solidarity, participation and social justice:</u> These principles are not just ethical slogans, they shape how organisations are governed. Workers, users, and community members often have a voice in decision-making, which builds trust, transparency, advocacy and democratic culture. This could be implemented with democratic building activities such as civic spaces.</p>
<p><u>Infiltration of legal economy:</u> Criminal organisations thrive where State presence is weak and people lack access to basic rights, services, or economic opportunity. Desperation and exclusion become fertile ground for recruitment, manipulation, and normalisation of violence or criminal behavior. In this situation, companies may directly ask for help from the criminal organisation, despite the fact that this is ultimately disadvantageous (loan shark's rate).</p>	<p><u>Social and economic innovation:</u> This is a paradigm shifting model. The social economy challenges the traditional capitalist framework, experimenting with cooperatives, mutual aid, circular economies, and commons-based governance. It seeks long-term systemic transformation, moving beyond the sum of isolated initiatives towards a profound change in economic and social behaviour.</p>
<p><u>Interest based on organisation issues:</u> Rather than serving a public good, criminal economic systems prioritise internal stability, secrecy, and loyalty. Their sustainability depends on controlling information, maintaining fear-based order, and undermining rival groups or state actors.</p>	<p><u>Find solutions to complex problems of general interest:</u> Rather than profiting from problems, social economy actors design models to solve them (such as affordable housing, food insecurity, unemployment, or environmental degradation) with locally rooted, adaptive solutions.</p>

The most emblematic and well-documented example of the unique role played by the social economy in countering organised crime comes from Italy, the first country to confront widespread mafia violence across several regions and to experiment with innovative solutions aimed both at combating criminal phenomena and at repairing the damage inflicted on local communities<sup>10</sup>. This innovation originated within civil society when *Libera. Associations, Names and Numbers Against Mafias*, the largest Italian anti-mafia network, collected one million signatures in support of the first popular legislative initiative. This was subsequently presented in Parliament by Giuseppe Di Lello (former member of the anti-mafia judicial pool and, at the time, a Member of Parliament), and it led to the adoption of Law 109/1996 on the public and social reuse of assets confiscated

<sup>10</sup> Massari, M., & Martone, V., 2019

from mafias. The law was later incorporated into Legislative Decree 159/2011, the so-called Anti-Mafia Code, and represents a tool for fighting organised crime. It also paved the way for the establishment of hundreds of non-profit organisations and cooperatives operating on land and properties seized from criminal organisations<sup>11</sup>.

Among the most prominent examples are the *Libera Terra* (Free Land) cooperatives, gathered under the *Libera Terra Mediterraneo* consortium (which brings together numerous social cooperatives in Calabria, Campania, Sicily, and Apulia) as well as the network of cooperatives established in Campania on the so-called *Terre di Don Diana* (Lands of Don Diana)<sup>12</sup>. These social and entrepreneurial actors have demonstrated, and continue to demonstrate, how symbols of mafia power (as well as the objects and the results of their criminal activities) can be transformed into productive and inclusive resources. Through their activities, these initiatives foster inclusive labour opportunities, institutionalise legality and anti-mafia values within the social fabric, and enhance community resilience, and create a sort of “social antibodies” to resist new criminal infiltrations and to safeguard local territories<sup>13</sup>.

Comparable, though contextually diverse, positive dynamics generated by the social economy can be observed in other European countries included in our case studies. In Spain, networks of cooperatives and associations, such as *Fundación Cepaim*, are dedicated to the social inclusion of migrants and victims of trafficking, thereby reducing the marginalisation that often creates fertile ground for criminal exploitation. In Belgium, the social economy sector is very active and oriented towards innovation, both in the production of goods and the provision of services with explicit social finalities. This includes professional-integration enterprises, reuse and recycling centres, cooperative of workers, as well as organisations operating in sectors such as social care, environment, food production, and construction. The strategic value of the social economy is reflected in sustained institutional investment. Incubator programmes such as *Coopcity* in the Brussels Region and *IES!* in Wallonia not only stimulate the creation of new social economy actors but also reinforce the financial sustainability and governance capacity of existing ones. These initiatives illustrate how public policies can consolidate the sector as a structural component of socio-economic development and resilience to the new economic challenges.

The EU has gradually recognised this potential, promoting the social economy sector as a lever for sustainable development and territorial cohesion. As early as 2011, with the *Social Business Initiative*, the Commission outlined a framework for supporting social enterprises. More recently,

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<sup>11</sup> Libera-Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie, 2025, February 24

<sup>12</sup> The designation “Le Terre di don Peppe Diana” is intrinsically linked to Father (don) Giuseppe Diana, the parish priest brutally murdered by the Camorra on 19 March 1994 in his church at Casal di Principe (Province of Caserta, Italy) as he prepared to celebrate morning Mass. The assassination took place on his name day.. In the aftermath, his reputation was unjustly tarnished by certain local newspapers. Following years of investigation and judicial proceedings, both the instigators and perpetrators were convicted, and it was conclusively established that don Diana was assassinated because of his uncompromising opposition to organised crime, expressed through his daily pastoral work and his leadership within the Scout movement.

<sup>13</sup> Consorzio Libera Terra Mediterraneo Cooperativa Sociale ONLUS, n.d.

the *Communication on the Social Economy Action Plan 2021–2030* (COM/2021/778 final) confirmed the centrality of the sector, identifying access to finance, visibility and institutional recognition of social enterprises as priorities.

This convergence of factors, namely the growing threat of HRCN and the transformative power of the social economy sector, lays the foundations for an innovative approach that conceives of the social economy not only as a sector of welfare or economic development, but also as a security and justice policy capable of effectively countering the mafia culture. The central idea is that creating decent work, strengthening community ties and returning assets and resources stolen by crime are not only social measures, but also preventive and structural countermeasures. They act upon social capital, understood as social networks, shared knowledge among individuals, and trust in public institutions, by regenerating it for lawful purposes and contributing to the repair of the harm caused by crime.

This perspective highlights the potential of the social economy to function as a strategic ally in the prevention and mitigation of organised crime. By addressing socio-economic vulnerabilities, generating inclusive employment, and reclaiming assets for collective benefit, the social economy provides tools that extend beyond welfare or local development, reaching into the realms of security and justice.

Building on the Italian experience of social reuse of confiscated assets, the following chapters will examine how European policies can reinforce and scale such practices, enabling the social reuse model to operate as a multiplier across the European Union. In doing so, the report will show how the social economy can become a cornerstone of European strategies to prevent organised crime, repair the damages it causes, and strengthen democratic resilience.

## 2. Methodology

This report was developed using a methodological approach that combines documentary analysis and academic research. The objective was twofold: on the one hand, to provide an up-to-date overview of European policies and instruments related to the social economy sector and the fight against organised crime; on the other hand, to demonstrate the effectiveness and limitations of existing practices through real-life experiences.

### 2.1 Desk research

The first phase involved extensive desk research, i.e. the collection and analysis of official European Union documents, including:

- European directives (e.g. Directive 2014/24/EU on public procurement; Directive 2014/42/EU on the freezing and confiscation of assets, Directive (EU) 2024/1260 on asset recovery and confiscation; Directive (EU) 2024/1203 on the protection of the environment through criminal law);
- Regulations and framework programmes (e.g. Horizon Europe, ESF+, AMIF, CERV, etc.);
- Communications from the European Commission, in particular the Action Plan for the Social Economy 2021–2030 (COM/2021/778 final);
- EU Social Economy Gateway, the official platform launched by the European Commission to serve as a single point of access for social economy actors in Europe;
- The main reports from Europol (Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment - SOCTA 2021 and 2025), Eurostat (data on employment and the social economy sector);
- Comparative studies published by international bodies such as the OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the ILO - International Labour Organisation were also consulted.

### 2.2 Comparative analysis

The second phase involved the construction of a comparative analysis of national experiences in seven Member States: Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, Spain, The Netherlands.

For each country, the following were considered:

- regulatory and institutional framework of social economy;
- policies supporting the social economy sector;
- transposition of Directive (EU) 2024/1260, national legislation against organised crime, and prevention of infiltration in the legal economy.

The analysis was conducted using a qualitative comparative approach (QCA), aimed at highlighting not only differences and similarities, but also success factors that can be transferred from one context to another.



### 2.3 Collection and use of secondary sources

To strengthen the validity of the analysis, the following were also used:

- articles and academic studies published in scientific journals, universities and research centers (e.g. Socio-Economic Planning Sciences: the International Journal of Public Sector Decision-Making, Rassegna Economica: Rivista Internazionale di Economia e Territorio, etc);
- reports and analysis from NGOs and European networks (e.g. Libera contro le mafie, Solidarité des alternatives wallonnes et bruxelloises SAW-B, Social Economy Europe, etc);
- informational materials produced by national and local authorities (e.g., the National Agency for the Administration and Destination of Assets Seized and Confiscated from Organised Crime - ANBSC).

### 2.4 Methodological limitations

It is worth noting a few limitations:

- Availability of data: information is not always up to date or broken down by country;
- Comparability: legal systems and definitions of “social economy” or HRCN vary significantly from country to country;
- Temporality: some policies or programmes are too recent to fully assess their impact.

Despite these limitations, triangulation between different sources and approaches provides a solid and reliable picture, which is useful not only for scientific reflection but also for guiding policy and operational recommendations.

### 3. EU policy and regulatory framework

Over the past two decades, the European Union has progressively developed a comprehensive regulatory and policy framework to tackle organised crime and its infiltration into the legal economy. While some of these policies were primarily created as security and justice tools, they have, from the outset, raised critical questions regarding their cross-cutting social and economic impact. This has enabled an interesting convergence with the social economy sector, understood not only as a productive sector, but also as a lever for community resilience and structural prevention.

The challenge lies on the one hand, in creating consistency between policies for preventing and combating organised crime and those for the social economy and, on the other, in strengthening the social economy sector itself, which requires a solid legal framework. Indeed, although initiatives in this field may arise without specific legislation, they frequently face obstacles in legal systems that privilege profit-oriented enterprises or undervalue their economic contribution<sup>14</sup>.

Recently, there has been a positive shift towards recognising it as a legitimate economic model capable of addressing sustainable development challenges and demonstrating greater resilience in times of crisis. Regulating the social economy is not only a matter of promoting inclusive and sustainable growth but also a strategic tool for countering organised crime. Criminal networks frequently operate as sophisticated business structures, establishing parallel economies that entire communities come to rely on for jobs, goods and services. This dependence generates a dangerous sense of normalcy around illicit activities, eroding citizens' trust in institutions and weakening their willingness to report crimes or cooperate with authorities. In such contexts, organised crime exploits economic vulnerability to infiltrate legitimate markets, distort competition and undermine governance. A robust legislative framework for the social economy helps to reverse these dynamics<sup>15</sup>. By fostering transparent, community-driven enterprises that prioritise social value over profit maximisation, the social economy creates legitimate alternatives to the economic and social voids that criminal groups exploit. It reinforces social capital, restores trust in public institutions and promotes resilience within communities most exposed to criminal infiltration. Regulating and supporting the social economy at national and EU level is therefore not merely an economic or social policy choice, but an essential component of crime prevention strategies and of the broader effort to safeguard democratic governance.

With the aim of developing a broader and more integrated response to organised crime, this section explores those EU policy and regulatory frameworks which, through the promotion of preventive, resistance, and reparative strategies grounded in the social economy at the territorial level, enable us to recognise and affirm that combating organised crime requires not only

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<sup>14</sup> Jenkins, H., Yi, I., Bruelisauer, S., & Chaddha, K., 2021

<sup>15</sup> EUROPOL, 2025, December 7

effective repression, but also the development of sustainable, high-impact alternatives that foster long-term social and economic transformation.

The framework can be divided into three main dimensions: prevent, resist, and repair, which represent complementary phases of an integrated approach to tackling criminal networks. This division, however, is not rigid, as in practice all the instruments described contain elements of each dimension; the classification is made according to the aspect that is most predominant. Moreover, these three dimensions must intersect and operate in synergy to be effective, as none of them can function in isolation from the others.

### 3.1 Prevent

Prevention is the area in which the social economy sector demonstrates its greatest added value. The EU has gradually recognised that repression alone is not enough to reduce the impact of organised crime: it is necessary to take action upstream, reducing the vulnerability of territories and strengthening social and cultural capital. Drawing also on the experience of other countries, including Italy, where laws against mafias and terrorism have been developed for decades, it has been recognised that it is necessary to develop anti-crime policies that are complementary to repressive ones and act on social capital.

Key instruments include:

- European Action Plan for the Social Economy (2021) explicitly identifies social enterprises as actors capable of fostering local development, creating employment opportunities, and promoting inclusive growth.
- The 2023 Transition Path for the Proximity Ecosystem and Social Economy identifies priority areas of intervention, aimed at making the social economy a fully integrated actor in European industrial and territorial policies. The proposed measures go beyond the simple regulatory framework, with an emphasis on the practical implementation and concrete impact of social enterprises in the different areas of development. This approach builds on the specific Transition Path for the “Proximity and Social Economy” ecosystem, launched by the European Commission in 2022, which already set out strategic objectives in the fields of the green transition, digital transformation, and territorial development. The 2023 measures therefore represent a continuation and deepening of that roadmap, translating long-term ambitions into more concrete and operational initiatives.
- Socially Responsible Public Procurement (SRPP) is a European policy framework that encourages public authorities to use procurement not only to buy goods and services but also to deliver positive social outcomes such as job creation for disadvantaged groups, social inclusion, fair working conditions, accessibility and respect for labour rights. Rooted in Directive 2014/24/EU and part of the EU’s broader “Strategic Public Procurement”

- agenda, SRPP provides tools like the “Buying Social”<sup>16</sup> guide and a compendium of 71 good practices<sup>17</sup> to help public buyers integrate social criteria at every stage of the tendering process. By leveraging public procurement, representing around 14% of EU GDP, SRPP strengthens social cohesion, supports social enterprises and contributes to sustainable development while addressing global challenges such as inequality and the social impact of crises.
- EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 aims to promote civic participation, social inclusion and employment opportunities for young people, who are often at risk of deviant behaviour. Initiatives such as the European Youth Dialogue encourage active citizenship and raise awareness of rights.

These policies highlight how the EU conceives prevention not only as a police intervention, but above all as a social investment, in line with the vision of “human security” promoted by the United Nations since the Human Development Report of 1994<sup>18</sup> and further consolidated in UN General Assembly Resolution 66/290<sup>19</sup>, which frames security as people-centred, comprehensive and prevention-oriented.

### 3.2 Resist

One of the cornerstones of the European Union’s strategy against organised crime is the principle of “following the money”<sup>20</sup>. Criminal organisations thrive on illicit profits, which they systematically reinvest, launder, and conceal through complex financial schemes, often involving cross-border transactions and opaque corporate structures. Traditional approaches centred solely on prosecuting individual offenders have proven insufficient, as they leave untouched the economic power that sustains and perpetuates criminal networks. By shifting the focus to the tracing, freezing and confiscation of assets, the EU recognises that weakening the financial foundations of organised crime is essential to disrupt its operations and limit its capacity to corrupt markets, infiltrate the legal economy and undermine democratic governance. This principle underpins key legislative and policy instruments, from the Anti-Money Laundering Directives to Regulation (EU) 2018/1805<sup>21</sup> on mutual recognition of freezing and confiscation orders, and more recently Directive (EU) 2024/1260 on asset recovery and confiscation. “Following the money” is thus more than a technical investigative method: it is a strategy aimed at restoring fairness in the economy, protecting social trust, and ensuring that illicit wealth is

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<sup>16</sup> European Commission. Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, May 2021

<sup>17</sup> European Commission. Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, May 2020

<sup>18</sup> United Nations Development Programme, 1994

<sup>19</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 2012

<sup>20</sup> The phrase “follow the money” is associated with antimafia Judge Giovanni Falcone, the famous Italian magistrate who pioneered financial investigation as a key strategy to dismantle organized crime networks. Falcone emphasised tracing financial flows to uncover the structure and operations of the Mafia. Tragically, he was assassinated by the Sicilian mafia (Cosa Nostra) in 1992 for his relentless fight against organised crime

<sup>21</sup> European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2018

redirected towards the public interest, including through the social reuse of confiscated assets. In this perspective, financial investigations and robust asset recovery frameworks are not only tools of law enforcement but also instruments of social justice and community resilience.

However, resisting organised crime requires more than repression: it calls for the creation of institutional and economic frameworks that reinforce legitimate actors and reduce the opportunities for criminal infiltration. Furthermore, it is crucial to re-establish relations of trust between citizens and public institutions in those territories where criminal organisations have effectively positioned themselves as alternative or anti-state authorities.

Within this perspective, the social economy emerges as a strategic actor of resistance. By promoting inclusive business models, collective ownership, and community participation, social economy organisations transform legal and administrative instruments of repression into virtuous processes of socio-economic development, thereby undermining the power base of organised crime.

This model was formally enshrined already in the Stockholm Programme of 2009, in which the European Council invited the Commission and Member States to strengthen rules on the identification of criminal assets and to “consider reusing them wherever they are found in the EU common space”<sup>22</sup>. The European Parliament echoed this concern in 2011, urging the Commission to propose European legislation on the reuse of crime proceeds for social purposes, in order to reinject criminal wealth into lawful economic circuits<sup>23</sup>.

The European Union has progressively embedded this vision into its regulatory framework through a set of legislative measures:

- Directive 2014/24/EU<sup>24</sup> on public procurement introduces the possibility of including social clauses and reserving tenders for social cooperatives or enterprises promoting labour inclusion. If applied systematically, this lever reduces the space from companies infiltrated by crime and channels opportunities toward transparent operators oriented to the common good.
- Directive 2014/42/EU<sup>25</sup> on the freezing and confiscation of assets expanded this approach by introducing only a modest step forward. Its Article 10(3) merely invited Member States to “consider taking measures allowing confiscated property to be used for public interest or social purposes,” without imposing binding obligations. The Directive also required Member States to collect statistical data on the value of assets destined for social purposes but stopped short of harmonising standards or ensuring uniform practices across the Union.
- Directive (EU) 2024/1260<sup>26</sup> on asset recovery and confiscation sets EU-wide minimum standards on tracing, identification, freezing, confiscation and management of property

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<sup>22</sup> European Council, 2010

<sup>23</sup> European Parliament, 2011

<sup>24</sup> European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2014

<sup>25</sup> European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2014, April 29

<sup>26</sup> European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024

- within the framework of criminal proceedings. Crucially, it incorporates the principle of the public and social reuse at Article 19, affirming that the fight against organised crime is not only punitive but also restorative, aiming to repair the harm caused by illicit economies and to foster sustainable alternatives<sup>27</sup>.
- The EU Strategy against Organised Crime 2021–2025. In line with the EU’s broader strategy of *“following the money”*, these measures demonstrate that the fight against organised crime is not limited to law enforcement. It emphasises the need for multidisciplinary approaches, including judicial cooperation, financial prevention and innovative use of confiscated assets. The Strategy underscores the social reuse of confiscated assets as part of the fight against organised crime. While reuse has a preventive and reparative dimension, its combating function lies in demonstrating the tangible reversal of criminal power: property once used to generate illicit profits is visibly transformed into assets serving the public good. This not only weakens the material base of criminal groups but also symbolically undermines their social legitimacy, showing that *“crime does not pay.”*

Taken together, these instruments illustrate how EU policy enables the social economy not only to “resist” criminal infiltration but also to “reclaim” economic spaces for inclusive, transparent, and democratic development. These can be considered the first steps from the EU to shift from a purely punitive model towards a holistic approach where resistance to organised crime is inseparable from the promotion of fair and sustainable economies.

### 3.3 Reparation: redress, restore and rebuild

The dimension of reparation concerns the set of actions aimed at the recovery of the communities and victims affected, through instruments of social justice and reintegration. This is a crucial aspect, since organised crime not only generates illicit profits but also leaves deep social wounds. The harms produced by criminal organisations are as extensive and severe as the scope and profitability of their illicit activities and the violence and unscrupulousness of their structures. Their impact spans multiple dimensions of social life: economic damage through money laundering and unfair competition, social and cultural harm through the entrenchment of mafia-type norms, health and psychological consequences for individuals and communities, environmental degradation through illicit waste management and toxic dumping, and systemic damage to democratic institutions through corruption and infiltration of public administrations. For this reason, reparative measures must adopt a multidimensional approach, encompassing the restitution of victims’ rights, the restoration of environments and territories degraded by criminal economies, the rehabilitation of socio-cultural and welfare systems, and the safeguarding of democratic governance. While the European Union has not yet articulated a fully holistic strategy of reparation, several legal instruments and policy frameworks already point in this direction,

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<sup>27</sup> Directive (EU) 2024/1260 will be deeply analysed in Chapter 6 - Social Reuse: a tool for social innovation and economic transformation



each seeking, albeit in a sectoral manner, to repair territories and communities from the wide-ranging and incalculable harms inflicted by organised crime.

In the following section, these instruments and policies will be categorised into three domains: mechanisms for direct victim redress, measures for environmental remediation, and initiatives targeting societal-level restoration.

### Redressing Victims

The question of how to effectively allocate confiscated proceeds has been a recurring concern in the European Union's policy agenda over the past decades<sup>28</sup>. Already in a 2008 communication on the proceeds of organised crime, the Commission acknowledged the diversity of Member States' practices regarding the destination of recovered assets and stressed the need to promote effective models<sup>29</sup>. One cited example was the Italian system of social reuse, introduced by Law 109/1996, under which confiscated assets can be entrusted to local public authorities, NGOs and associations for social purposes. This model is designed to restore to society the goods, opportunities, and rights that organised crime had unlawfully appropriated, turning symbols of criminal power into tangible resources for collective well-being and community development.

The new Directive (EU) 2024/1260<sup>30</sup> goes significantly further. Article 18 establishes a binding framework to ensure that victims' claims to compensation and restitution are systematically considered in asset-tracing, freezing and confiscation proceedings. Member States must enable competent authorities to provide information on assets relevant to compensation claims, including in cross-border cases, and ensure that asset recovery offices are empowered to trace and identify property that may become subject to restitution.

In addition, where victims are entitled to the restitution of property that is subject to confiscation, States must take the necessary measures to ensure its return under the guarantees already provided by Directive 2012/29/EU on victims' rights. Importantly, confiscation measures under the new Directive cannot prejudice victims' rights to obtain compensation, which must always take priority where offenders' lawful assets are insufficient. This victim-oriented approach is further reinforced by Recital 37, which explicitly recognises that organised crime causes profound harm to victims and that their rights to compensation and restitution must be safeguarded. The recital highlights the need to facilitate the tracing of property and the exchange of information between asset-tracing authorities and those responsible for deciding on victims' claims. In this way, the Directive strengthens the link between asset recovery, justice, and reparation. Confiscated assets are no longer conceived merely as a means of depriving criminals of illicit profits or as revenue for the state. Instead, they are redirected towards repairing the harm caused by crime, both directly, through compensation to victims, and indirectly, through the social reuse of assets in the public interest.

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<sup>28</sup> Montaldo, n.d.

<sup>29</sup> European Commission, 2008

<sup>30</sup> European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024

## Restoring the Environment

When addressing the concept of reparation, it is crucial to recognise that organised crime itself is often a direct or indirect source of grave environmental harm and public health risks. Criminal organisations engage in illegal practices such as the manipulation of public procurement, illicit waste trafficking, and the infiltration of industrial sectors where hazardous waste is deliberately discharged into ecosystems. Such practices not only degrade natural resources but also undermine the conditions of social well-being. For this reason, environmental restoration must be considered an integral component of reparation policies. The Directive (EU) 2024/1203 on the protection of the environment through criminal law, replacing Directives 2008/99/EC and 2009/123/EC (the Environmental Crime Directive) reflects this principle by introducing offences comparable to ecocide and embedding restorative obligations within its framework<sup>31</sup>. Article 5 requires offenders, where feasible, to restore the environment to its original state or, where restoration is not possible, to provide adequate compensation. Articles 6 and 7 extend liability to legal persons, coupling financial sanctions with restorative measures such as remediation duties, exclusion from public funding, and withdrawal of permits. Moreover, Article 17 obliges Member States to adopt national strategies for prevention, enforcement, and reparation, thereby ensuring that territories and communities affected by environmental crime are afforded effective remedies. This framework thus combines punitive and reparative functions, aiming to both deter large-scale environmental offences and repair the ecological and social harms inflicted.

## Rebuilding Society

Other initiatives encompass the use of ESF+ funds to finance integration programmes, reducing recidivism. The *European Social Fund Plus* (ESF+) is the EU's main financial instrument for investing in people. It supports employment, education and social inclusion initiatives, with a particular focus on disadvantaged groups. In the context of crime prevention, ESF+ resources can be mobilised to finance reintegration programmes for former offenders, thereby reducing the risk of recidivism and fostering social cohesion.

Through the *Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund* (AMIF) and corresponding national programmes, numerous social economy organisations across the EU provide protection, support, and reintegration pathways for exploited women and minors, particularly victims of human trafficking and gender-based violence.

The European political and regulatory framework therefore highlights that the fight against organised crime cannot be separated from a holistic approach. While directives and strategies strengthen repressive instruments, educational and inclusion programmes show how the social economy sector can play a decisive role in prevention and reparation.

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<sup>31</sup> European Commission, 2024, February 29

## 4. EU funding framework

Over time, the European Union has developed a comprehensive system of funds and programmes that supports social cohesion, territorial development and labour inclusion. Although not specifically designed to combat organised crime, many of these instruments can be used directly or indirectly to prevent, combat and repair the damage caused by criminal networks.

The following overview analyses the main funds, highlighting their relevance to the social economy sector and integrated security policies.

### 4.1 Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)<sup>32</sup>

The *Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund* - AMIF (2021–2027) has a budget of approximately €9.88 billion and supports the management of migration flows, the integration of migrants and assisted voluntary return. Organised criminal networks are often involved in human trafficking and the exploitation of migrants, and in this regard, AMIF projects finance protection and inclusion pathways for victims, reducing their vulnerability.

In Spain there was a Transnational Workshop on “*Migrant Children’s Transition to Adulthood*” organised by *Fundación Cepaim* with the aim to raise awareness and strengthen knowledge among professionals working with unaccompanied migrant minors transitioning into adulthood, in Madrid. It was co-funded by AMIF and the Council of Europe. The project focused on practical strategies, such as legal support, rights access, accommodation, and multi-agency cooperation<sup>33</sup>.

In Italy, the *Rural Social ACT project* (funded by the AMIF 2014-2020 fund), promoted by the *Confederazione Italiana Agricoltori* - CIA with institutional and third sector partners, involved 12 regions in central and northern Italy. The initiative aimed to promote social agriculture as a tool for the inclusion of migrants and the fight against illegal hiring and agromafias. The main actions concerned:

- the creation of multi-sector territorial networks;
- mobile units and local assistance centres;
- training and practical workshops for job placement;
- awareness campaigns aimed at citizens and agricultural businesses.

The *Rural Social ACT project* combined social inclusion and rural regeneration, while strengthening legality and community cohesion.

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<sup>32</sup> European Commission, 2025, May 16

<sup>33</sup> Council of Europe, Division of Migration and Refugees, 2022, November 24

One of the main critical issues of this programme (AMIF/FAMI fund) is that calls for proposals are often very much geared towards managing migration emergencies and less towards building structural pathways for long-term inclusion.

## 4.2 Cohesion Policy (CF, ESF+, ERDF)

Cohesion Policy targets all regions and cities in the European Union to support:

- job creation;
- business competitiveness;
- economic growth;
- sustainable development;
- improvements to citizens' quality of life.

In order to reach these goals and address the diverse development needs in all EU regions, €392 billion, almost a third of the total EU budget, has been set aside for *Cohesion Policy* for the period 2021-2027<sup>34</sup>. This includes the CF, ESF+ and ERDF.

### 4.2.1 Cohesion Fund (CF)<sup>35</sup>

Cohesion policy funds have been increasingly applied to reinforce legality, inclusion and sustainable development in territories most exposed to criminal infiltration. Through targeted national and regional programmes, these resources contribute to:

- strengthening institutional capacity to prevent and combat mafia-type systems;
- generating economic and social opportunities in vulnerable communities;
- converting confiscated assets into drivers of regeneration and sustainable growth.

The impact of such measures can be assessed through indicators including number of confiscated assets restored and reused, jobs created or safeguarded, social enterprises and community organisations involved, beneficiaries of social and training services and long-term viability through revenue models or stable partnerships.

For instance, the *Italian National Department of Cohesion Policies* has outlined a strategy for the efficient reuse of confiscated assets from organised crime, focusing on institutional management, infrastructure development and supporting businesses. This strategy includes specific objectives with priority actions and indicators to measure success, with multiple projects aimed at enhancing community services and creating job opportunities.

The Italian government has also integrated the reuse of confiscated assets into the *National Recovery and Resilience Plan* (PNRR), which focuses on “Inclusion and Cohesion” (Mission 5, Component 3). This integration ensures that at least 40% of the resources allocated territorially

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<sup>34</sup> European Commission, n.d. (c)

<sup>35</sup> European Commission, 2024

are directed towards the regions of the South of Italy<sup>36</sup>, promoting balanced development and social inclusion<sup>37</sup>. Additionally, access to detailed data on projects involving the reuse of confiscated assets ensures transparency and enables civic monitoring. Such data also supports the implementation of the National Strategy for the Valorisation of Confiscated Assets<sup>38</sup>, which seeks to maximise the social and economic impact of these properties<sup>39</sup>.

Examples include the transformation of seized buildings and farmland into youth centres, cultural hubs and organic farms employing vulnerable groups; the conversion of a confiscated villa once linked to criminal networks into a cooperative space for education and social services; the rehabilitation of other properties into “houses of legality” and incubators supporting youth and social enterprises<sup>40</sup>.

One important EU Co-funded project is *Good(s) Monitoring Europe!* coordinated by *Libera contro le mafie* (Italy) and involving four European associations: ACDD (Romania), BASTA! (Belgium), CSD (Bulgaria), and FIADYS (Spain). Its goal was to promote European strategies of social inclusion towards the most vulnerable sectors of the population through the public and social reuse of goods confiscated from organised crime groups in Europe and the activation of participatory processes starting from the ground up. In fact, the fight against organised crime depends also on a community’s capacity to generate a collective awareness. It becomes strategic, then, to adopt multidisciplinary measures to promote social inclusion, giving priority to Cohesion Policies, a crucial tool to enforce communal practices<sup>41</sup>. *OpenCoesione* was a partner of the project, funded by the *Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy* (DG REGIO) of the European Commission which administers Cohesion Fund<sup>42</sup>.

These experiences illustrate how cohesion policy can turn symbols of criminal control into engines of inclusion, employment and resilience, offering a replicable model for other Member States.

#### 4.2.2 European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)<sup>43</sup>

*European Social Fund Plus* - ESF+ (2021–2027) is the main European lever for social inclusion and employment. With a total budget of around €142.7 billion, it aims to strengthen skills, support employment, and promote the inclusion of vulnerable people. It funds work integration projects for ex-prisoners, young people at risk, migrants, and other disadvantaged groups.

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<sup>36</sup> Southern Italy, which covers the regions of Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise and Puglia, together with the insular regions of Sardinia and Sicily.

<sup>37</sup> OpenCoesione, n.d.(a)

<sup>38</sup> European Court of Auditors, 2022

<sup>39</sup> OpenCoesione, n.d.(b)

<sup>40</sup> OpenCoesione, 2022, March 21

<sup>41</sup> CHANCE – Civil Hub Against organised Crime in Europe, n.d.(a)

<sup>42</sup> OpenCoesione, 2021, April 9

<sup>43</sup> European Commission, n.d.(d)

One implemented project in Italy is the *National Operational Programme on Legality*, funded by ERDF (*European Regional Development Fund*) and ESF (*European Social Fund*). Main areas of intervention are the fight against organised crime and corruption; the security in industrial areas; the reuse of confiscated assets (approx. 11,000 m<sup>2</sup> dedicated to social inclusion, including for migrants and refugees); and the support for public administration reform and social inclusion<sup>44</sup>.

At the same time, European policies aim to stimulate the innovation capacity of social enterprises, supporting start-ups and networks with targeted tools. Through *Horizon Europe*, research and social innovation projects receive funding, while the ESF+ strand provides €762 million for microfinance, capacity building, and impact market development. The European Commission has also developed operational toolkits for social innovators and promoted the creation of National Competence Centres to encourage peer learning and the scaling up of successful initiatives.

However, the administrative complexity of calls for proposals and increasing competition among applicants often limits access for small cooperatives and local NGOs, which are frequently the actors most deeply rooted in vulnerable areas.

#### 4.2.3 European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)<sup>45</sup>

*European Regional Development Fund* - ERDF supports territorial cohesion and economic development, with a budget of €392 billion for the period 2021–2027, financing urban regeneration projects, social infrastructure and participatory local development. In areas affected by crime, these actions can become tools for resilience.

In Italy, the Women's Anti-violence and Refuge Center, located in Casalnuovo di Napoli was funded by both the ERDF and the ESF (Legality Programme 2014–2020). This project was allocated in the structure cleared of illegal occupations by some members of the Camorra clan, entrusted to the Municipality of Casalnuovo di Napoli by the National Agency for seized and confiscated assets. The project was born from the initiative of the Anti-violence Office of the Municipality of Naples. Aiming at renovating confiscated properties to host, the project created a refuge and anti-violence center for women; promoting inclusion and training programmes, supporting autonomy; child-friendly facilities (such as a playroom and a bistro area); and spaces providing support for survivors, children, and vulnerable groups<sup>46</sup>.

One of the main critical issues of the ERDF programme is that its calls for proposals often favour infrastructure and “major works”, which are not always compatible or reconcilable with the needs of small communities and social economy networks.

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<sup>44</sup> European Commission, n.d.(e)

<sup>45</sup> European Commission, n.d.(f)

<sup>46</sup> OPENCOESIONE, 2022, March 21



### 4.3 Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV)<sup>47</sup>

*Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme* - CERV (2021–2027) aims to promote active citizenship, the protection of fundamental rights and democratic participation by funding awareness-raising, civic education and human rights promotion initiatives, which are essential for strengthening the resilience of communities against criminal infiltration.

Numerous European consortia have already developed projects co-financed by the CERV programme to promote the social economy as a tool for prevention, territorial economic transformation, and civic engagement. A significant example is the RESTART Project<sup>48</sup>, implemented within the CHANCE network by associations from across Europe (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Malta, Romania, etc). In particular, in Belgium, during the capacity-building camp, participants actively worked on a draft of a national law proposal for social reuse of confiscated assets based on Directive (EU) 2024/1260 and Italian legal framework<sup>49</sup>. What's more RESTART also provides the possibility to the CHANCE Network to map social realities that reuse abandoned or confiscated assets in the countries of the network itself.

### 4.4 Erasmus + Projects<sup>50</sup>

*Erasmus+* plays a complementary role in promoting social inclusion, legality and civic participation across Europe. While primarily focused on education, training and youth exchanges, the programme also supports initiatives that strengthen community resilience and prevent criminal infiltration. In addition to university exchanges, *Erasmus+* funds non-formal education, volunteering and youth cooperation projects.

Through the *Erasmus+* funding, several transnational initiatives have addressed the prevention of radicalism, deviance and criminal behaviour, thereby highlighting the potential of education as a key preventive tool.

Its objectives include:

- fostering civic engagement and cross-border cooperation;
- promoting democratic values and awareness of legality;
- creating opportunities for disadvantaged groups through education and social economy projects;
- encouraging civil society to address the root causes of criminality.

One project implemented in Italy, *Social Entrepreneurship in Confiscated Asset* by Giosef Italy under the *European Solidarity Corps* (related to *Erasmus+* youth volunteering), involved six

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<sup>47</sup> European Commission, n.d.(g)

<sup>48</sup> CHANCE– Civil Hub Against organised Crime in Europe, n.d.(b)

<sup>49</sup> European Commission, n.d.(h)

<sup>50</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, n.d.

volunteers from Spain, Greece, and Portugal. The initiative supported social inclusion activities within confiscated assets in the Agro-Aversano area, promoting awareness, community engagement, and asset management.

The *CHANCE Network*<sup>51</sup>, under *Libera contro le mafie* coordination has also implemented several *Erasmus+* projects addressing the social reuse of confiscated assets and involving numerous European civil society organisations (CSOs), from Albania (ENGIM), Belgium (BASTA), Bulgaria (Open Space Foundation), Germany (Eine Welt and Mafia nein danke), Malta (Repubblika) and Spain (Fiadys), Romania (ACDD). The following projects can be mentioned:

- EU YOUTH IN POWER (2025), boosting engagement of EU young citizens in democratic process to fight corruption and organised crime. Among the main initiatives of the EU Youth in Power project are the support of activities in memory of innocent victims of the mafias, held on March 21st – the Day of Remembrance and Commitment; the organisation of workshops on anti-corruption and civic monitoring; and the implementation of three international training sessions on i) youth participation and civic activism, ii) social reuse of confiscated assets in Europe, iii) freedom of information. The project will conclude with a final event in Brussels on the occasion of International Anti-Corruption Day (December 9th). Its objectives are to promote the active involvement of young people in decision-making processes, fostering active citizenship, and addressing challenges such as organised crime and corruption in line with the goals of the EU Youth Strategy; to strengthen the CHANCE network’s capacity to engage stakeholders at the local, national, and European levels; and to develop a shared youth engagement strategy within the network, thereby contributing to building an Europe increasingly based on rights, participation, and democracy<sup>52</sup>.
- EU YOUTH IN CONNECTION (2024) - *Empowering Youth Engagement and Promoting Social Justice*. The project, implemented within the CHANCE Network, aimed to: i) empower CHANCE’s action at a local, national and EU level in the field of youth by upgrading the expertise of its members and fostering connections among diverse stakeholders, thereby facilitating the exchange effective of effective approaches to promoting social justice, youth engagement, and combating organised crime and corruption; ii) enhance citizens’ participation in democratic life by encouraging discussion and debate on EU values and democratic processes, with a particular focus on 2024 European Elections, and to involve civil society and institutions in evaluating MEP candidates’ commitment to the priorities outlined in the CHANCE Manifesto, with the goal of preventing organised crime and corruption action and promote social justice.
- EU YOUTH IN ACTION (2023) - *Advocacy strategy for strengthening youth entrepreneurship and enhancing civil Economy and inclusive Business in Europe*. The project involved the members of the CHANCE Network and pursued to i) strengthen cooperation between the associations of the informal CHANCE network in the field of

<sup>51</sup> CHANCE– Civil Hub Against Organised Crime in Europe, n.d.(c)

<sup>52</sup> Libera-Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie, 2025, July 22

- youth; ii) raise awareness on the impact of social entrepreneurship on youth employability, with a particular focus on social enterprises developed within confiscated assets at the EU level. This was achieved through the exchange of best practices and a continuous interaction with relevant stakeholders and institutions for the implementation of youth-related policies.
- EUROPE HUB (2022) - *Strengthening youth entrepreneurship for improving the civil economy and enhancing inclusive business*. The project, involving 10 EU partners, aimed to increase youth participation in civic engagement and social entrepreneurship through the social and public reuse of confiscated assets, providing a concrete response to the EU's economic and social situation, both affected by organised crime activities and exacerbated by Covid-19 pandemic. As a part of its outputs, the project realised a Workbook and a Toolkit "*The Power of Social Enterprises in Confiscated Assets*".

#### 4.5 European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)<sup>53</sup>

*European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development* - EAFRD finances the development of rural areas, with a particular focus on sustainable agriculture and innovation in the agri-food sector. Its relevance to the topic lies in the fact that many assets confiscated from the mafia in Italy and Spain are located in rural areas. The use of EAFRD funds to support social agricultural cooperatives makes it possible to transform territories controlled by crime into areas of legality and development.

In particular, the *EAFRD Co-Financing Programme for Extremadura 2023–2027* in Spain (approved in June 2025) co-finances investment schemes under the *EAFRD*, in line with the Spanish Partnership Agreement 2023–2027. It supports the implementation of the *Common Agricultural Policy's Strategic Plan* to enhance long-term competitiveness, employment, and sustainability in rural economies. This project stands out for its focus on empowering the rural agricultural sector and infrastructure; creating employment opportunities and economic resilience; supporting social cohesion via local development initiatives, such as LEADER projects<sup>54</sup>.

However, a critical issue is the competition with established farms and the difficulty faced by small cooperatives in accessing calls for proposals, which limit the potential of the EAFRD in this area.

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<sup>53</sup> European Commission, n.d.(i).

<sup>54</sup> European Investment Bank, 2025, March 31

#### 4.6 Horizon Europe<sup>55</sup>

*Horizon Europe* (2021–2027), with a budget of over €93.5 billion, is the main European research and innovation programme. It funds social research, inclusion and innovation projects in social economy models. It has also been used for comparative studies on the impact of anti-mafia policies and the reuse of confiscated assets.

In this regard, one of the most interesting European initiatives is the *SIRIUS project*, funded under the *Horizon 2020 programme* (2018-2021). The project involved 11 academic partners and civil society organisations from different European countries with the aim of conducting a comparative study of strategies for integrating third-country nationals (in particular refugees, asylum seekers and regular migrants) into the European labour market. The analysis covered various employment sectors (such as construction, agriculture, services and manufacturing) and considered the institutional, legal and cultural barriers that hinder labour inclusion. The project produced guidelines and operational recommendations for policy makers, public administrations and third sector actors, with the aim of strengthening social and occupational inclusion policies and enhancing the skills of migrants. In this sense, SIRIUS highlighted how effective integration into the labour market not only promotes social and economic cohesion, but also reduces the risks of marginalisation and vulnerability, conditions that can be exploited by organised crime for labour exploitation, trafficking or illegal parallel economies.

Another project implemented thanks to this fund is the *European Ports Alliance*. A 2024 initiative supported by *Horizon Europe & security-related funds*, aiming to fight drug trafficking and smuggling at ports using electrochemical drug detectors, AI-powered tracking systems, and underwater drones<sup>56</sup>.

Among the potential critical issues of this measure, it should be noted that Horizon projects require strong project design skills and international partnerships, elements that often exclude smaller social economy organisations.

#### 4.7 Internal Security Fund<sup>57</sup>

The *Internal Security Fund - ISF* (2021-2027), with a budget of approximately EUR 1.93 billion<sup>58</sup>, is dedicated to reinforcing a high level of security across the EU. Its priorities include preventing and combating terrorism, radicalisation, serious and organised crime and cybercrime, while also protecting victims and improving the Union's ability to manage security-related crises. The Fund works through three main strands: i) boosting information exchange among Member States and international partners, ii) reinforcing cross-border cooperation, and iii) enhancing the operational capacity of national authorities.

<sup>55</sup> European Commission, n.d.(j)

<sup>56</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2024, July 23

<sup>57</sup> Government of Flanders, n.d.

<sup>58</sup> European Commission, 2025, May 15

It supports the development of interoperable IT systems, joint training and specialised law enforcement networks, often in connection with the EU's EMPACT framework, which targets key areas of organised and transnational crime. Beyond law enforcement, ISF funding also contributes to initiatives aimed at countering radicalisation and fostering collaboration between public institutions, civil society and private actors. In this way, it complements cohesion and social policies; while those address the socio-economic roots of exclusion, the ISF provides the operational and technical backbone needed to ensure security and resilience across the Union.

In particular, the *PREVENT project* seeks to promote the social reuse of confiscated assets as an innovative tool for crime prevention, engaging stakeholders at the local, national, and European levels. Running from 1 January 2025 to 31 December 2026, and coordinated by the Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD) in Bulgaria, the project consortium comprises nine partners including universities, public institutions, and civil society organisations from six EU member states, and is further supported by 13 associated partners, including law enforcement agencies (LEAs), asset recovery and management offices (AROs and AMOs), and local authorities:

Its key objectives are:

1. strengthen intelligence on HRCN: foster collaboration among scholars and institutions to improve data collection and analysis on criminal networks and their resources;
2. promote administrative approaches: identify and share effective national and EU-level administrative measures to combat criminal networks;
3. encourage social reuse of confiscated assets: promote innovative ways of using confiscated criminal assets socially, engaging stakeholders at all levels;
4. enhance cooperation in asset confiscation and reuse: boost cross-sector cooperation to ensure more effective asset forfeiture and reutilisation<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Libera-Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie, n.d.(a)

## 5.0 Social Reuse, a tool for social innovation and economic transformation

The fight against organised crime in the EU has historically been approached through repression, prosecution, and law enforcement cooperation. However, in recent decades, the social reuse of confiscated assets has emerged as one of the most innovative tools. Beyond its repressive value, it represents a form of social innovation and economic transformation, capable of reshaping territories affected by criminal infiltration, while promoting a culture of legality, civic engagement and sustainable development.

The Italian experience since the 1990s, driven by the social antimafia movement, has been pivotal in demonstrating how civil society, local authorities and economic actors can jointly contribute to preventing HRCN and rebuilding social trust.

At the intersection of social economy, civic engagement and anti-crime policies, social reuse of confiscated assets represents a paradigm shift, transforming the proceeds of crime into resources for the public good and producing social gains. It embodies a holistic approach that not only disrupts criminal networks' economic foundations, but also builds resilient, inclusive and empowered communities.



## 5.1 The Social Antimafia<sup>60</sup> Movement



The social antimafia movement, born in Italy in the 1990s, marked a turning point in the history of the fight against organised crime. With the foundation of *Libera, Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie* in 1994<sup>61</sup>, for the first time, citizens, local authorities, academia and economic actors were placed at the centre of an integrated response to mafia-type associations. This movement brought about three main transformations:

1. Forming the mentalities that fight organised crime:
  - a. raising awareness on the causes of criminal organisations and corruption;
  - b. increasing knowledge on transnational organised crime phenomena and corruption;
  - c. understanding of the mechanisms underlying criminal systems and the effective tools to dismantle them.
2. Transforming society's relationship with organised crime:
  - a. promoting cultural prevention, active and responsible citizenship, and awareness of collective and individual responsibility;
  - b. building bridges to counteract current fragmentation in fight against organised crime and corruption (institutions, civil society, academia, policymakers, education systems) and to strengthen coordinated responses;

<sup>60</sup> In this report, we adopt a stylistic distinction between adjectival and substantive uses of the term. When used as an adjective, we write anti-mafia (e.g., “anti-mafia legislation”), in line with common English usage where the hyphen clarifies the compound modifier. When referring to the movement opposing the Mafia, we use antimafia as a noun (e.g., “the Antimafia Movement”), following the Italian convention of a single word to indicate a social, political, and cultural phenomenon. This distinction allows us to maintain both linguistic clarity and conceptual accuracy, reflecting the dual dimension of antimafia as policy on the one hand and as civic movement on the other.

<sup>61</sup> Libera - Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie, n.d.(b)

- c. building and promoting national and international networks (for example SHOC - Scholarly Hub on Organised crime in Belgium<sup>62</sup>, CHANCE Network at European level<sup>63</sup>, the African network PLACE - Peace and Liberation in Africa through Change and Engagement, and the network ALAS - América Latina Alternativa Social, in Central and South America);
  - d. encouraging the development of long-term collaborative strategies across Europe through Building networks and political momentum.
3. Demanding tools, instruments and resources to effectively fight against HRCN, through:
- a. a collaborative, coordinated long-term strategy (for examples social antimafia actors are participating to European or national consultations);
  - b. popular legislative initiatives. For instance, in Italy Law 109/1996 on the public and social reuse of assets confiscated from the mafia-type associations, later incorporated into Legislative Decree 159/2011 the so-called *Antimafia Code*, originated from a petition promoted by the association *Libera contro le mafie*, which gathered one million signatures and was subsequently submitted to Parliament. In Belgium, the association *BASTA! Belgian Antimafia: Steps Towards Awareness*, is currently collaborating with a wide range of actors from civil society and the social economy in drafting and advocating for a legislative proposal inspired by the Italian model, with the involvement of institutional stakeholders as well;
  - c. promoting an EU common approach coordination on the fight against organised crime. For instance, at the European level the CHANCE Network launched the CHANCE Political Agenda (2019) and the CHANCE Manifesto (2024) to promote EU framework on the fight against HRCN, corruption, eco-mafia, human trafficking, the protection of the victims and the public and social reuse of confiscated assets as a cornerstone of social inclusion and social justice.

## 5.2 The Public and Social Reuse of Confiscated Assets

Confiscation is a crucial mechanism for dismantling criminal organisations by targeting their economic base, whether directly obtained through illegal activities or indirectly used to facilitate them. However, its potential goes far beyond repression.

Social and public reuse of confiscated assets transforms a punitive legal tool into a constructive and symbolic instrument for community regeneration. It operates under three guiding principles:

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<sup>62</sup> BASTA! – Belgian Antimafia: Steps Towards Awareness!, 2024, November 2

<sup>63</sup> CHANCE – Civil Hub Against Organised Crime in Europe, n.d.(d)

- Prevent: preventing criminal influence by both stripping organisations of the assets that sustain their power and fostering inclusive socio-economic growth, essential to making territories impervious to criminal infiltration;
- Resist: creates opportunities for social innovation, cohesion, and economic empowerment through social economy initiatives. This undermines the visibility and “display of power” that criminal networks establish in local communities;
- Repair (redress, restore, rebuild): sends a strong societal message that the state is present and responsive, providing moral and material reparation to victims, the environment, and the communities harmed by organised crime.

Confiscated assets, whether movable, immovable, or enterprises, are allocated for public or social purposes:

- *public reuse* involves allocation to public administrations and local authorities for uses such as social housing, schools, or public services;
- *social reuse* supports civil society organisations, NGOs, and actors in the social economy sector (e.g., social cooperatives and social enterprises) that reinvest these assets into inclusive and sustainable development.

Examples of Social Reuse:

- movable assets: a confiscated boat repurposed for youth summer camps aimed at crime prevention;
- immovable assets: seized real estate transformed into housing for vulnerable families or spaces for social enterprises;
- companies: former criminal-owned companies converted into cooperatives managed by former workers or community groups.

This model is now gaining traction across Europe, thanks to the efforts of networks like CHANCE. Beyond promoting the social reuse of confiscated assets, CHANCE also advances anti-corruption initiatives, strengthens civil monitoring, and promotes cooperation between law enforcement and civil society.

### 5.3 Directive (EU) 2024/1260 on on asset recovery and confiscation

The growing recognition of the importance of social reuse has contributed to significant developments in EU legislation. As discussed in Chapters 3.2 and 3.3, Directive 2014/42/EU on the freezing and confiscation of assets, in particular Article 10(3), represented an initial and cautious attempt to promote the model of social reuse. A more robust and ambitious legal framework was only established with Directive (EU) 2024/1260 on asset recovery and confiscation, which entered

into force on 22 May 2024 and must be transposed into national law by 23 November 2026<sup>64</sup>. The Directive establishes EU-wide minimum standards for the tracing, identification, freezing, confiscation, and management of property within the context of criminal proceedings. In particular, it introduces the following key provisions:

- *Article 19 – Further use of confiscated property: §1 Member States are encouraged to take the necessary measures to allow the possibility of using confiscated property, where appropriate, for public interest or social purposes [...].* Article 19 introduces a significant policy shift by encouraging Member States to promote the social re-use of confiscated property, as an alternative to immediate liquidation or disposal. This provision reflects a growing awareness that asset recovery is not only about depriving criminal organisations of their illicit gains, but also about transforming those assets into instruments of public value. Social re-use, as envisaged by the Directive, allows confiscated property to be redirected towards public interest purposes, provided such use is consistent with the safeguards set out in Article 19(2). By incorporating the principle of social re-use, the Directive moves beyond a narrow economic understanding of asset management. It recognises that the fight against organised crime is not only punitive but also restorative, aiming to repair the harm caused by illicit economies and to foster sustainable alternatives. In this way, Article 19 establishes a direct link between asset recovery policies and broader strategies for community development, democratic governance, and the consolidation of the social economy.
- *Article 20 – Asset management and planning: § 1 Member States are encouraged to take appropriate measures to prevent property from being acquired, in the course of its disposal further to a confiscation order, by persons convicted in the criminal proceedings in which the property was frozen.* Closely linked to the principle of social re-use is also Article 20, which addresses the management of frozen and confiscated assets. The effectiveness of confiscation measures depends on how assets are preserved, administered, and eventually reallocated. Poor management can result in significant value losses, higher costs for the State, or even the risk of assets returning to criminal hands. Article 20 obliges Member States to adopt measures ensuring that the goods are preserved, preventing the dissolution or devaluation of productive structures that could otherwise contribute to legitimate economic activity. It also introduces a safeguard against the reacquisition of confiscated property by convicted individuals or their associates, which would undermine both the deterrent and restorative purposes of asset recovery. The Directive further stresses the need for efficient interim management of frozen property, requiring competent authorities to carry out assessments aimed at minimising costs and preserving value from the moment a freezing order is executed. The Directive further consolidates this framework by strengthening the role of specialised structures in charge of managing confiscated assets.

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<sup>64</sup> European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024

- *Article 25 – National strategy on asset recovery: § 1. Member States shall by 24 May 2027 adopt a national strategy on asset recovery and update it at regular intervals of no longer than five years; 2. The strategy referred to in paragraph 1 shall include: (a) elements concerning the priorities of national policy in this area, and the objectives and measures to achieve them; (b) the role and responsibilities of the competent authorities, including arrangements for coordination and cooperation among them; (c) resources; (d) training; (e) measures to be taken, where applicable, on the use of confiscated assets for public interest or social purposes; (f) activities to be undertaken on cooperation with third countries; (g) arrangements allowing for regular evaluation of results.* Article 25 obliges Member States, by May 2027, to adopt a national asset recovery strategy, to be updated at least every five years. Such a strategy must set clear national priorities in this area, define objectives and concrete measures to achieve them, clarify the roles and responsibilities of competent authorities, allocate sufficient resources, and provide for training of people involved in the process of asset recovery. Importantly, it must also include measures concerning the use of confiscated property for public interest or social purposes, as well as actions for cooperation with third countries and mechanisms for the regular evaluation of results.

In practice, an ambitious implementation of the Directive may involve assigning assets for community projects, public services, or initiatives supporting vulnerable groups, thereby ensuring that the proceeds of crime are reinvested in strengthening the very social fabric that organised crime seeks to undermine. The rationale for encouraging social re-use is threefold. First, it can serve as a tool for victim restitution, enabling resources to be channelled towards compensating or supporting those directly affected by crime. Second, it ensures the preservation of value, since assets may be repurposed for long-term benefit rather than sold rapidly at diminished market prices. Finally, it generates public benefit, as confiscated property is converted into tangible goods or services that contribute to social cohesion, trust in institutions, and resilience in communities vulnerable to criminal infiltration.

This legislative framework offers an unprecedented opportunity to institutionalise the principles of social reuse across the Union, reinforcing it as both a preventive and restorative pillar in the fight against organised crime.

## 5.4 Implementing Article 19: Social Reuse in the Transposition of Directive (EU) 2024/1260

This section examines five European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands) focusing on their legislative and institutional responses to organised crime and the role of the social economy in the social reuse of confiscated assets. The analysis is situated within the broader policy context of Directive (EU) 2024/1260, which emphasises transparency, anti-money laundering, and enhanced cross-border cooperation in asset recovery.

**Belgium** has not yet transposed Article 10 of Directive 2014/42/EU nor the Article 19 of the Directive (EU) 2024/1260. The management of confiscated assets is entrusted to the *Central Office for Seizure and Confiscation (COSC)*<sup>65</sup> under the authority of the Public Prosecutor, while the public sale of movable and immovable assets is handled by *Fin Shop* and *Fin Immo*, branches of the Federal Public Service (FPS) Finance. Safeguards concerning the identity and background of asset purchasers, as required by Article 20 of Directive 2024/1260, have not been clearly defined. Examples of public reuse include: the allocation of movable assets, such as vehicles, to the Federal Police by the COSC; the distribution of goods to municipalities affected by floods by the FPS Finance; and the transfer of valueless real estate to other federal authorities. Noteworthy cases of social reuse comprise *Les Ateliers du Midi*, a work and training center for vulnerable individuals, and the historic *Agusta-Dassault* case (1990).

Legislation in this field is evolving: Bill 0236/001<sup>66</sup> (2024) specifically addresses the social reuse of confiscated assets; the *Drugs Fund* (2024) and the Government Agreement of 2025 both refer explicitly to the public and social reuse of such assets.

Belgium's social economy sector, supported by incubators, funding mechanisms, and training programs, represents a powerful tool for local development and the fight against organised crime. The country's experience with the temporary reuse of unused assets, coupled with European recognition (Directive 2024/1260 and the 2021 SE Action Plan), highlights the potential of integrating social reuse practices into the broader framework for managing confiscated property

**Bulgaria's** social economy remains weak ( $\approx 1\%$  of GDP), data collection is fragmented, and no dedicated law links confiscated assets to social reuse. While organised crime is recognised in the Penal Code (Art. 93) and partially addressed in cybercrime frameworks, Directive (EU) 2024/1260 has not yet been transposed. Governance shortcomings such as corruption risks, lack of transparency, and underdeveloped cooperation across sectors, undermine preventive and reparative strategies.

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<sup>65</sup> Belgium, n.d.

<sup>66</sup> Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 2024, September 18

Bill 0236/001 amending the law of 4 February 2018 containing the missions and composition of the Central Organ for Seizure and Confiscation, aimed at socially affecting real estate confiscated in connection with offences referred to in Article 324bis of the Criminal Code, for the benefit of associations or legal persons defending the general interest.



Externally, a strength is the active presence of associations supporting youth in different fields, creating potential for mobilisation around social projects, including those connected to confiscated assets. Yet a key weakness is poor communication: initiatives are rarely well disseminated, often competing for attention with other campaigns, and remain highly concentrated in Sofia. Rural regions lack experts and structures to inform and support young people, while emigration abroad further reduces local capacity.

From an opportunity perspective, Bulgaria offers favourable conditions for entrepreneurship: low taxation, simplified company registration, and accessible funds or programs for youth start-ups. Limited competition makes financing relatively attainable, even for less polished proposals, and social media provides channels for good practice transfer. However, threats include low awareness of EU initiatives (particularly in rural areas), poverty that pushes many youths into early full-time employment, and lack of skills to transform ideas into projects, leading to frustration and dropout<sup>67</sup>.

Overall, Bulgaria remains at a foundational stage. Despite economic incentives for entrepreneurship and a network of youth associations, there is still an absence of a coherent legal architecture; a limited transparency; and a weak institutional capacity hinder the development of a confiscation-to-community pipeline. Developing these issues would be essential to transform confiscated assets into drivers of social innovation, empower youth, and make territorial justice.

**Italy** represents the most mature model, embedding confiscation within a codified practice of social reuse. This framework is supported by a dense civil-society ecosystem (notably *Libera- Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie*) and a specialised agency (ANBSC - *Agenzia Nazionale per l'amministrazione e la destinazione dei beni sequestrati e confiscati alla criminalità organizzata*). The model emerged in response to systematic mafia strategies of money laundering and market capture (construction, health care, real estate, public tenders), including the “ecomafia”. Despite its sophistication, transposition of Directive (EU) 2024/1260 is still pending, while slow administrative procedures and uneven local capacities hinder timely allocation and sustainability. Nevertheless, Italy offers a high-impact, community-oriented paradigm. The scale of practice is considerable: more than 23,000 assets have been confiscated, with around 14,000 allocated for social purposes. Since 1982, over 36,600 real-estate units have been seized (48% assigned to public or community use), alongside 4,384 companies, of which one-third have been repurposed through liquidation, sale, rental, or cooperative management, while the remainder remains under ANBSC administration<sup>68</sup>. Italy thus illustrates how confiscation can be transformed into a vehicle of territorial justice and civic legitimacy, though efficiency and procurement integrity remain challenges.

**Spain** presents a well-developed social economy, underpinned by active networks of civic associations engaged in social justice and community projects. These networks create significant “social muscle”, enabling collaboration, knowledge transfer, and the sharing of best practices in

<sup>67</sup> Palomo Martínez, J., Giordano Mederos, F., Militello, M., Vantorre, S., Beshai, S., Giubilo, M., Delia, E., Grech, M., Murgia, G., Perronin, A., Pedro Madeira Gato, R., & Nicolae, R., 2022, December

<sup>68</sup> Libera – Associazioni, nomi e numeri contro le mafie, n.d. (c)



social reuse initiatives. Existing projects, such as accessible sailing programs or community centers, serve as demonstrative models for other associations seeking to start new initiatives. Despite these strengths, Spanish associations face internal weaknesses. Communication with target groups is often ineffective, limiting public awareness of social reuse projects. Additionally, there is a lack of youth-specific entrepreneurship training, mentoring, and funding programs, which constrains the capacity of young entrepreneurs to implement ideas and scale projects successfully. Externally, Spain benefits from a highly educated youth population (39.7% of youth with higher education) and a civic culture historically supportive of social inclusion. Favourable legislation, including the ability to seize assets without prior conviction in specific organised-crime cases (Law 5/2010) and the allocation of proceeds from confiscated assets to a public fund supporting NGOs, municipalities, and anti-drug agencies (Law 17/2023)<sup>69</sup>, enables the social reuse of assets. European programs for youth entrepreneurship further supplement national initiatives, although these often target broader entrepreneur populations rather than focusing specifically on young people.

However, the model faces several threats. Social reuse initiatives risk discontinuation if societal support wanes or public perception of criminal culture glamorises organised crime among youth. Economic volatility, including high youth unemployment and geopolitical shocks, can further discourage entrepreneurial engagement and reduce the sustainability of social reuse projects<sup>70</sup>. Overall, Spain demonstrates a hybrid approach combining robust legal mechanisms with an active civil society network. Its governance framework aligns with the spirit of Directive (EU) 2024/1260, though uneven enforcement and economic vulnerabilities remain challenges to scaling and sustaining youth-focused social reuse initiatives.

The **Netherlands** has a robust tradition of asset recovery. Ongoing reforms aim to embed confiscation mechanisms firmly within criminal law to strengthen compliance with Directive (EU) 2024/1260 and improve cross-border cooperation<sup>71</sup>. Significant investments between 2010-2012 were released to confiscate the proceeds of crime (exceeding €634,1 million<sup>72</sup>), reflecting the principle that “*crime must not pay*” and tighten punishments to organised crime<sup>73</sup>. Yet, outcome evaluations highlight limited transparency and below-expected returns relative to expenditure<sup>74</sup>. However, the results of the additional budgets have not matched the Minister of Justice and Security’s expectations. The Netherlands Court of Audit found that a lot has been sown in the past 10 years, but the results are not the ones expected, moreover there is a lack of transparency regarding these funds<sup>75</sup>.

Unlike Italy or Spain, the Netherlands has not institutionalised social reuse: the focus remains on asset deprivation and sanctioning, particularly for high-harm drug-related crime. The strategic

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<sup>69</sup> Council of Europe, 2022

<sup>70</sup> Libera, 2025

<sup>71</sup> Government of the Netherlands, Ministry of Justice and Security, 2024, March 22

<sup>72</sup> Netherlands Court of Audit, 2022, June 8

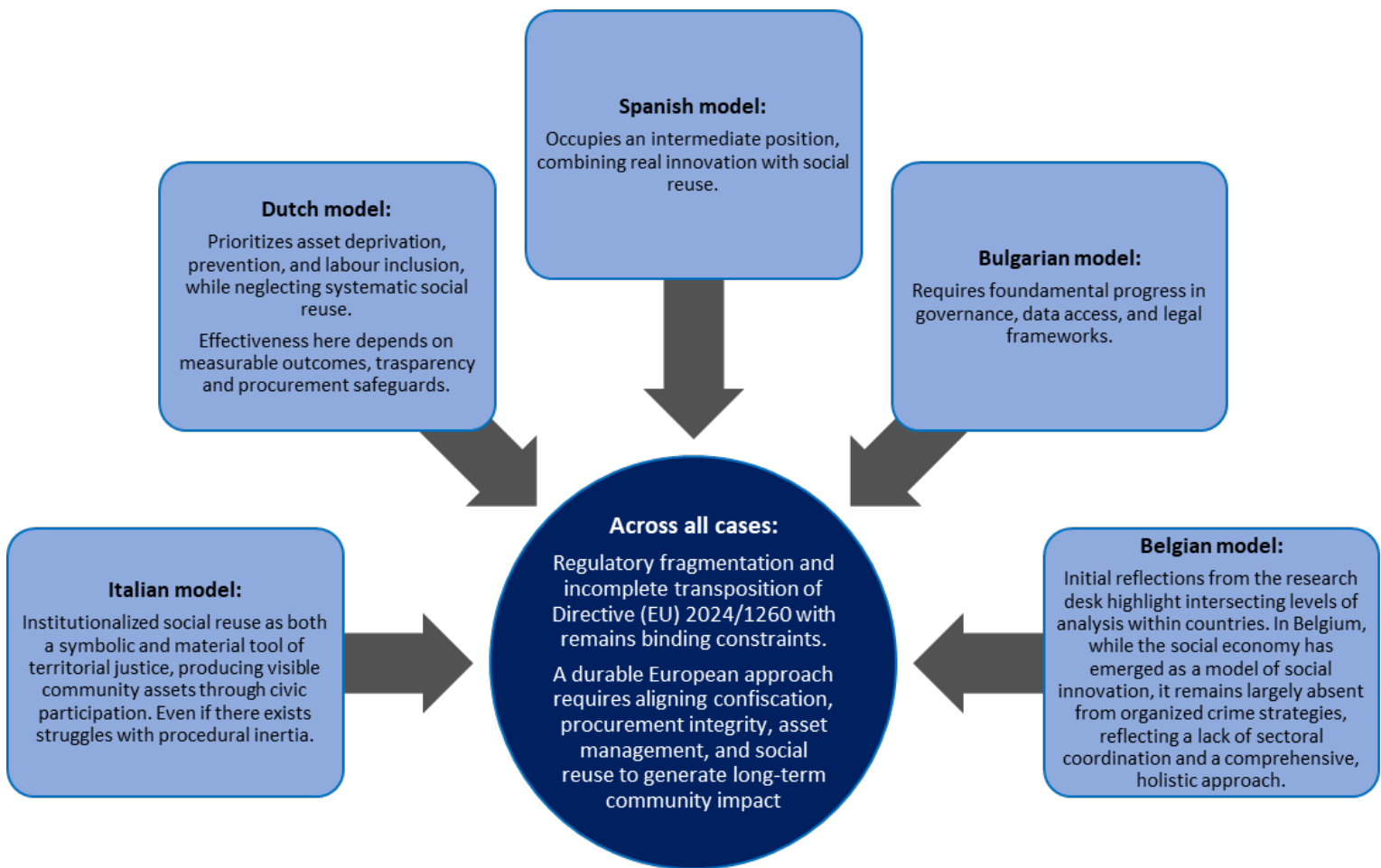
<sup>73</sup> Government of the Netherlands, Ministry of Justice and Security, 2023, July 3

<sup>74</sup> Nyssens, M., & Huybrechts, B., 2020

<sup>75</sup> Netherlands Court of Audit, 2022, June 8

challenge is to complement strong recovery mechanisms with a clearer community-benefit dimension to enhance legitimacy and visibility.

## 5. 5 Comparative Synthesis



## 6.0 Concluding remarks

This report has demonstrated that the social economy, defined as a network of cooperatives, associations, social enterprises, and community-led initiatives, plays a crucial role in hampering social and economic structures that sustain organised crime. Far from being a peripheral actor, the social economy has proven capable of producing sustainable, inclusive, and community-based alternatives to criminal influence, particularly in regions historically affected by mafia-type organisations, thanks to the activities implemented that impact on the regeneration of social capital. In doing so, it contributes to rebuilding trust in public institutions, promoting active citizenship, and fostering a sense of justice that is restorative rather than purely punitive. Collectively, these actions exert a positive influence on the struggle against organised crime by eradicating the conditions that enable its persistence.

Organised crime thrives in contexts of social exclusion, economic vulnerability, and institutional mistrust. The social economy, by contrast, reinforces community cohesion and creates public value, often in areas where the state is weak or absent. It also generates employment and opportunities for marginalised groups. Moreover, it engages in symbolic actions that reclaim spaces and assets previously dominated by criminal networks, transforming them into visible signs of civic resistance and justice. In this way, the development of a strong social economy does not merely support victims and affected communities; it actively erodes the cultural, economic, and political legitimacy on which criminal power depends.

In this context, social reuse of confiscated assets emerges not just as a policy innovation but as a strategic reorientation of justice policy, one that bridges punitive, restorative, and transformative approaches. By reclaiming criminal assets and converting them into tools for economic inclusion, education, housing, and public services, social reuse challenges the economic foundations of criminal organisations while building collective resilience and a “pure social capital”. It embodies the core values of the European Union: solidarity, inclusion, participatory democracy, and social justice.

The Italian social antimafia movement has shown how civil society, local authorities and social economy actors can turn confiscated assets into housing, cooperatives and public services that rebuild trust and promote active citizenship. These initiatives demonstrate that combating organised crime requires not only repression, but also awareness, prevention and civic engagement, transforming the symbols of criminal power into opportunities for collective renewal.

Over the past two decades, the European Union has developed a comprehensive policy and legal framework to combat organised crime, recognising that repression alone is insufficient. At the same time, the EU increasingly regards the social economy as a strategic tool not only for inclusive and sustainable development, but also for crime prevention and community resilience. This report reveals that the two policy domains — the fight against crime and the strengthening of the social

economy — converge, and underlines the need for their future translation into genuinely cross-cutting and integrated European policies:

- **Prevent:** social economy initiatives reduce vulnerabilities that organised crime exploits, through policies like the *European Action Plan for the Social Economy* (2021), the *Transition Path for the Proximity Ecosystem* (2023), socially responsible public procurement, and the *EU Youth Strategy*. These policies reflect a shift toward human security, aimed at building stronger and more resilient communities, particularly against the abuses of criminal organizations.
- **Resist:** the EU targets the financial foundations of criminal networks with tools such as anti-money laundering directives, asset confiscation laws (e.g., Directive 2024/1260), and public procurement rules that favour social enterprises. Confiscated criminal assets are increasingly being repurposed for social use, undermining the legitimacy and power of criminal groups while reinforcing lawful economic actors, freeing them from the constraints imposed by organised crime.
- **Repair:** the EU promotes reparation for victims, environmental restoration, and social reintegration. New laws, like the Directive (EU) 2024/1203 on environmental crime, and funding tools like the ESF+ or the AMIF support victim compensation, ecosystem repair, and the rehabilitation of individuals and communities harmed by organised crime.

Together, these policies demonstrate a growing EU consensus that fighting organised crime requires not only law enforcement, but also long-term social and economic transformation, with the social economy playing a vital role in fostering prevention, resistance, and reparation. These are the capabilities that social economy organizations have demonstrated over the years through their work in the communities in which they operate, which has regenerated social capital, freeing it from the power of organized crime.

In parallel, we also assist, always at European level, to the growing recognition of the social economy's potential to contribute to crime prevention, asset reuse, and community resilience. The current EU funding framework provides a diverse set of instruments, such as the *European Social Fund Plus* (ESF+), *Cohesion Funds*, and the *Internal Security Fund*, intended to support Member States in building social and economic capacity to counter organised crime.

However, despite the existence of these tools, the effectiveness of EU support is limited by three major structural challenges:

- **Accessibility:** funding procedures are often overly bureaucratic and administratively complex, making it difficult for smaller, locally embedded organisations, those most connected to the community and often most effective in resisting organised crime, to access resources. This barrier disproportionately affects grassroots actors and undermines efforts to build local resilience.
- **Sustainability:** EU funding is typically project-based and short-term, whereas social transformation processes, such as building community capacity, rehabilitating

confiscated assets, and developing social enterprises, require continuity, long-term vision, and stable financing. The lack of long-term structural funding creates a precarious environment for social economy actors.

- Integration: there is a fragmentation of responsibilities and a lack of coordination between different funding streams and policy areas. As a result, social economy initiatives related to security, justice, regional development, and social inclusion often operate in isolation, limiting their cumulative impact. The absence of a coherent multi-level governance strategy hampers the capacity of the EU and Member States to fully integrate the social economy into broader crime prevention strategies.

Moreover, recent EU policy developments pose emerging challenges. In particular, the European Commission’s communication and legislative proposal<sup>76</sup> on the modernisation of Cohesion Policy foresees a reallocation of resources to accommodate new defence priorities in response to growing geopolitical instability. Such a shift, coupled with the potential underfunding of the social economy sector, risks weakening social resilience and diminishing the capacity of civil society to counter organised crime through socio-economic pathways. From a long-term perspective, diverting funds away from community-based prevention and reintegration initiatives may ultimately undermine the very foundations of sustainable security and social cohesion.

To address these limitations and enhance the strategic coherence of EU action, a comprehensive and integrated European strategy is needed—one that explicitly integrates the social economy as “the economic model” that seeks to promote a more equitable and sustainable society, grounded in social justice and long-term resilience. This would position the social economy not as a peripheral actor in crime prevention but as a central pillar of European resilience.

The absence of a comprehensive and integrated strategy at the European level is reflected at national level, where Member States implement diverse approaches to social economy and social reuse:

- Belgium’s social economy has increasingly distinguished itself as a model of social innovation. Although the sector is not yet embedded within structured frameworks for anti-organised crime strategies, notable progress has been achieved in recent years. The draft law 0236/001<sup>77</sup> on social reuse presented to the Justice Commission of the Chamber of Representatives, together with the inclusion of social reuse in the 2024 Government Agreement, the growing interest from the CSOs illustrates this emerging trend.
- Bulgaria is at an earlier stage of development and continues to face significant challenges in governance, transparency, and the effective transposition of EU directives. Weak

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<sup>76</sup> European Commission, 2025, April 1

<sup>77</sup> Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 2024, September 18

Bill 0236/001 amending the law of 4 February 2018 containing the missions and composition of the Central Organ for Seizure and Confiscation, aimed at socially affecting real estate confiscated in connection with offences referred to in Article 324bis of the Criminal Code, for the benefit of associations or legal persons defending the general interest

institutional capacity and a lack of reliable data further impede progress in establishing effective asset management and reuse systems.

- Italy has long been a pioneer in institutionalising the social reuse of confiscated assets, both as a symbolic tool of justice and as a material strategy for social regeneration. Civil society, local authorities, and social economy actors have played a central role in transforming assets seized from mafia organisations into cooperatives, youth centres, agricultural projects, and public services. These initiatives, often coordinated through antimafia associations such as *Libera*, have demonstrated the potential of social reuse to not only recover illicit wealth but to reinvest it in community development and democratic participation.
- Spain represents an intermediate approach, incorporating legal innovations to facilitate confiscation and beginning to explore models of social reuse, often inspired by the Italian framework. Still, efforts remain uneven across regions and face resistance from both political and bureaucratic actors.
- The Netherlands tends to focus on asset deprivation, prevention, and labour market inclusion. This country prioritises measurable outcomes, legal efficiency, and transparency in public procurement, but they often neglect the systemic social reuse of confiscated assets. As a result, while crime control may be efficient in a technical sense, it lacks the participatory and transformative elements found in the Italian experience.

A key obstacle across all Member States is the persistence of regulatory fragmentation, which threatens to undermine the effectiveness of Directive (EU) 2024/1260, the new legal framework for asset confiscation, management, and social reuse in the EU. Unless national systems move towards more consistent implementation, there is a serious risk of perpetuating a patchwork of practices insufficient to address the increasingly transnational nature of organised crime. For Directive (EU) 2024/1260 to achieve its objectives, it will require adequate resources, strong institutional coordination, and robust monitoring mechanisms. National strategies should prioritise social reuse as a core component of asset management, with safeguards against re-acquisition by individuals connected to the same criminal context, and systems for ensuring transparency and civic participation.

Nowadays, given the cross-border nature of modern organised crime, no single Member State can effectively address the problem in isolation. Criminal networks are increasingly sophisticated, financially savvy, and transnational in scope. In response, the EU must continue to strengthen a unified and strategic approach, building on existing instruments of mutual recognition and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, such as Regulation (EU) 2018/1805 on the mutual recognition of freezing and confiscation orders and Directive (EU) 2024/1260 on asset recovery and confiscation. At the same time, further efforts are needed to combine resources, legal frameworks, and knowledge across borders. Mutual learning, shared best practices, and joint investments in the social economy are also essential to build a resilient Europe capable of withstanding the threats posed by organised crime.

As highlighted in this report, organised crime is fundamentally a social phenomenon, deeply rooted in economic structures and cultural practices. As Giovanni Falcone famously asserted: *“The mafia is a human phenomenon, and like all human phenomena, it has a beginning, an evolution, and will therefore also have an end.”* His legacy reminds us that mafias can be defeated, not solely through repression, but through strategic, systemic, and social responses.

To fully realise this mission, Member States must integrate social reuse into national strategies, ensure cross-sectoral coordination, and invest in social economy actors as essential partners in the fight against organised crime. The Directive (EU) 2024/1260 provides the framework for this shift, requiring safeguards against re-acquisition, effective asset management and national strategies prioritising social reuse. Its success, however, will depend on adequate resources, strong monitoring and genuine cooperation across sectors.

In the same way that the social economy should be recognised not only as an economic actor but as an infrastructure for social justice and community safety, social reuse must be understood not merely as a mechanism for recovering assets from criminal networks but, above all, as a means of returning them to society. Both embody a vision of justice that is restorative and transformative—repairing harm, strengthening democracy, and proving that solidarity and legality prevail over criminal subjugation and power.

Also the European Court of Human Rights, in its recent Cannavacciuolo judgment<sup>78</sup>, reaffirmed the importance of civic engagement and social justice in the fight against organised crime. Civic participation, alongside legal innovation and institutional integrity, forms the backbone of an effective response. Furthermore, Falcone’s methodological insight *“Follow the money to find the mafia”* continues to resonate. It underscores the importance of integrating economic analysis, asset tracking, and social reinvestment into a single, coherent strategy.

In conclusion, to combat organised crime effectively, the EU and its Member States must advance a paradigm shift: moving from fragmented, punitive approaches towards a holistic, integrated model that combines law enforcement with social and economic transformation. Counter-crime policies rooted in the consolidated experiences of the social economy should complement repressive policies, making them more effective. Finally, social economy, together with the social reuse of confiscated assets, should be recognised as a cornerstone of this strategy, an antidote to the criminal economy, a vehicle of restorative justice, and a foundation of a fair, inclusive, and resilient Europe.

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<sup>78</sup> European Court for Human Rights, 2025, January 30

This is an historical statement since the ECHR - European Court for Human Rights underlines that a State (Italy) should afford the problem it caused because of non managing mafia pollution of the territory between Caserta and Naples (phenomenon of ecomafias). The Court pointed out the importance of social engagement and knowledge for facing this national problem, as it is for the social economy.



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