Making the Business Operational

Having studied the leadership models that predominate in the SoM and THB trade, the next step consists of examining how the entrepreneurs turn their ventures into operational businesses and maintain them. In this chapter we will focus on the tasks they retain, but also the jobs they give to their associates in the ‘intermediary structures’.

In Chapter 1, we presented the notion of ‘intermediary structures’ (see the analysis of the different levels in the business) and referred to authors who indicated that transport, social capital and obtaining the requisite administrative documents (e.g., visas) were fundamental to the structural and operational approach to THB and SoM taken by criminal entrepreneurs. In this chapter, we will analyse the methodology, specifically certain structural and operational practices, that SEE&R entrepreneurs follow in developing the business. The use of transport firms, tourism and employment agencies, small hotels and safe houses form the structural components that link the countries of origin, transit and destination. Among the operational strategies, the corruption of official bodies to facilitate border crossings is quite fundamental to the process, as is the falsification of documents. There are also some strategies for the recruitment and later control of victims that are related to old cultural traditions – such as the Kanun and the Kumpania – and, when needed, there is always the use of violence.

1. Useful structures

Transport firms (47 files)

A memorandum from the Belgian State Security Service described Mr T., head of a Bulgarian transport company, as ‘actively responsible in a company with a connection with the Bulgarian branch of the mafia,
well-known for violence and providing false documents, visas and labour cards’. According to this memo, T. is active in the Albanian and Turkish sex work mafia. Mr T. has established himself in the Belgian world of freight forwarding and transport companies. His transport company, Komet, previously used by Bulgarian security for espionage purposes, obtained visas in the 1990s from the Belgian Embassy in Sofia. In 1990, the Belgian branch of Komet was set up by Lep International and the German branch of Komet. Several Lep directors were represented in Komet. In the meantime, Lep International changed its name to G-istics (≠ not its real name) and this company still held 30% of the shares when the Belgian branch of the Bulgarian freight forwarding agency Komet was declared bankrupt in 2001. The international branch of Komet is currently still intact as a component of a transport multinational that still specializes in transport to and from the former Eastern Bloc. G-istics is not a small company; it holds shares in some other companies in the transport sector. The American parent company, G-istics Corporation, which specialized in transport with the former Eastern Bloc, is active in 140 countries and has a turnover of 1.5 billion dollars. It is possible that the American parent company is not aware of Komet’s past history.

We were able to interview the partner of one of the former Belgian drivers for Komet. When we asked how her partner came into contact with Komet, she answered: ‘In the middle of 1980s Komet Sofia was a Bulgarian official state company under the communist party with international branches, including Germany. At the end of the 1980s, my partner came into contact with T. via a British transport company.’ When asked what sort of contacts these were, the answer was: ‘Almost all the transport traffic of Komet came from Bulgaria and ran via former Yugoslavia, Italy and France to Belgium.’

Numerous human trafficking cases involving economic exploitation demonstrate that organized crime is trying to infiltrate the transport sector. In the files relating to Turkish criminal entrepreneurs passing via Eastern Europe, we find drugs and arms trafficking using the same transport modalities. It is not surprising that Turkish criminal entrepreneurs may have some contacts with SEE&R criminals, due to the existence of some Turkish-speaking minorities in Bulgaria. The fact that drugs and arms as well as humans may be involved when these transport firms are used will bring us in the first part of Chapter 4 to an analysis of intersections in criminal practices. Besides THB, a transport system can also operate in support of an international drug network, possibly even with Italian mafia connections.