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States in transition and their geographies of crime: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania

To study patterns of offence rates over time and space in the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This will involve the display and analysis of the changing levels and composition of a selected group of offences covering the transition period during the 1990's from planned to market economy and including the years of preparation for the integration into the European Union.

There was no need to change the project's objectives. However, we focused the multitemporal analysis on police recorded data from 1993 to 2000. Before 1993 it was difficult to be certain that the data hold their quality over time because of official interference and, after 2000, penal code and territorial changes in these countries have affected the way offences are recorded. The cross-sectional studies covered different time periods, but mostly 2004-2005.

Results

Since the mid 1990s, crime rates in the Baltic countries have tended to become more like those found in Western European countries.

Although acquisitive and expressive crimes (with the exception of homicide) increased significantly in the Baltic countries after the independence according to official statistics, no significant changes were found in the levels and composition of offences declared by victims in the same period. Possible causes for this mismatch are: (1) the growth in crime reporting to police, (2) changes in the socio-economic composition of the victims of crime (3) political and administrative changes, inclusive within the police (this does not include changes in penal code).

By incorporating the spatial dimension using GIS, this study allowed an assessment of how social contexts and land use structures interact at regional and local levels to produce different patterns of crime:

Both expressive and acquisitive crimes are concentrated in urban areas or densely populated regions in the Baltic countries. Economically leading regions are often large urban areas or capital cities, where both the positive and negative sides of the new market economy are experienced: an increase in investment creates new jobs and increases the supply of goods (targets) but also exacerbates income disparities through wage differentials and selective unemployment (increasing the pool of motivated offenders).

Indicators of regions' social structure (e.g., divorce rate), more strongly predict the variation of 2000's crime ratios than land use and economic covariates. One of the mechanisms that links divorce/broken families to offending is the increase in poverty, particularly after the family splits up. Divorce rates had a strong increase between 1990 and 2000 in the Baltic countries. For instance, in Estonia they rose from 49 per hundred new marriages to 77 (the highest within the EU).

There was no evidence that social institutions work as 'moderators' of poor socio-economic conditions on crime in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as previously suggested in the literature.

Organised crime in the region has been assessed by taking Lithuania as a case study. Lithuania's location in relation to Belarus and Kaliningrad oblast also accounts for the high percentage of Lithuania-based organized crime groups dealing in various goods, including illegal weapons, human smuggling and contraband products such as cigarettes, clothes, furniture and technology. Marijampole county, for instance, bordering Poland and Kaliningrad oblast, is known as an important 'transit' region of Lithuania owing to its well-developed transport infrastructure and links both north to south and west to east. In the particular case of Lithuania, there are variations in the level and geography of offences between border regions and the rest of the country. Despite the fact that the highest average increases in recorded criminal offences were found in two border regions, non-border regions had a higher average increase in the 1990s. This partially explains why, out of the six selected offences, only assault shows an increase owing to the 'border effect'.

We examined whether or not levels and patterns of robbery in Tallinn, Estonia, followed similar processes to the ones found in Cologne, Germany. Although robbery rates in Tallinn are higher than in Cologne, their geography and the factors that underlie such geography, are similar for both cities. Robbery is a phenomenon typical of central urban areas or areas of mixed land use. Clusters of robbery are concentrated in the inner city areas for both Cologne and Tallinn, and particularly in the case of Tallinn, they follow main roads, stations and local centres. In both cities, the geography of robbery is more associated with covariates of routine activities (e.g., pubs and clubs) than social disorganisation variables (e.g., welfare recipients) which, however, also have a significant contribution. Results show also that there are no major differences between significant covariates in the day and night time distribution of robbery. Thus, the results presented in this paper provide support for the generalisability of spatial theories of crime from the 'West' to Eastern European cities.

In Vilnius, the concentration of thefts, robbery and to certain extent, drug related crimes to the inner city areas are expected to be related to the daily routine activity of these central areas. Homicides are dispersed but tend to take place in the so called

problematic neighbourhoods. Vilnius is regarded by its residents as an unsafe place to live. Despite being the worse case in Europe, Vilnius is not alone. In all Central-Eastern European cities the majority of respondents in the international victimisation survey felt more frequently unsafe rather than safe even though victimisation levels observed in the Western and Central-Eastern cities were almost identical. At intra-urban level, there is a clear mismatch between the patterns produced by police recorded data (indicating the city centre as highly criminogenic) and those found by surveys on victimisation/perceived safety in Vilnius (pointing out the outskirts as more problematic, and also less safe). Crime prevention initiatives are all part of the strategies for making Vilnius a safer place to live in. One clear trend in this area is participation of residents and 'other agents' in crime prevention programmes. However, this inclusive discourse of urban governance gives way to more top-down approaches in neighbourhoods that are regarded as problematic.

Although this study recognises that the quality and availability of data have improved since these countries' independence (including both crime and socio-economic statistics) much still needs to be done to meet the requirements of a rigorous long-term research design.

New research questions

Findings of this study raise questions to the need for new conceptual models to understand crime at the regional level that go beyond traditional urban criminological theories. The regional scale implies, for instance, that the routine activity theory should be expanded to incorporate notions of mobility across borders for offenders, targets and potential guardians.

A new research project on safety and crime prevention in the Baltic cities of Tallinn, Vilnius, Helsinki, Copenhagen and Stockholm has been submitted to Östersjöstiftelsen (April 2008) as a continuation of this research project. The intention is to look for similarities and/or differences in these cities' crime rates, perceived safety and actions towards crime prevention.

A future area of study that has not been covered by this study is the effect of organized crime on crimes in the Baltic countries. Evidence shows that organized crime contributed considerably to the high number of homicides and other violent crimes in the Baltic countries in the early 1990s but that its influence waned by the end of the decade. It would be useful to investigate whether there are still any links between local/ regional organized crime and levels of violence.

Other outcomes

As initially proposed, we had a one-day seminar to present the project findings in Tallinn, 28th February 2008, at Ministry of Justice, Tonismägi 5a (see appendix 1) with 25 participants coming from the Baltic countries, Finland, Germany and the UK.

The results of this project was also presented both in seminars in Sweden (for example, at CBEES – Centre for Baltic Studies, at Sodertorn University College in Stockholm) and in conferences in Europe (European Society of Criminology in 2005, 2006 and 2007, Krakow, Tübingen and Bologna, respectively) and United States (American Society of Criminology conference in 2006, in Los Angeles). See http://hem.bredband.net/b647031/baltic_project.htm for details.

This project has helped the Vilnius police start cooperating with Vilnius municipality to build a crime database at coordinate level, used in paper 6, which until recently was unavailable. The database (June 2004 to May 2005, total of 25.347 offences) was only made possible by the active input of Gintaras Baguzis (the head of the organizational department at Vilnius chief police commissariat), his colleague Renata Ulpiene, Alvydas Karalius, from the municipal enterprise “Vilniaus planas” (Vilnius plan) and Nijole Lukyte who helped with the co-ordination of the contacts. After two years, the database was ready for use.