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HOW THE PANDEMIC CHANGED THE MILAN DRUG SCENE

The pandemic and ensuing lockdowns revealed a lot about humanity's ability to evolve. In Italy, the mafia and others in organized crime surely adapted. Now law enforcement officials are scrambling to figure out how to catch up.



MILAN, Italy — A party at Alberto Genovese’s lavish apartment in Milan last October resulted in an accusation of rape from an 18-year-old. In her account, she had been drugged to the point of unconsciousness and sexually abused for 24 hours while a bodyguard stood at the door of his bedroom to ensure privacy. The 43-year-old serial entrepreneur is Milanese by adoption, a multi-millionaire since 2014 and a credibly accused rapist since Oct. 13, 2020.

What used to happen on the street was now happening inside. What used to happen in nightclubs was now happening in private homes.

the author writes

This steamy sex-and-drug fueled scandal in the autumn of 2020 encapsulates changes in the drug scene of Milan that have been taking place over the last year. What used to happen on the street was now happening inside. What used to happen in nightclubs was now happening in private homes. All of which is self-evident in this especially salacious case.

Drugs circulating at parties in cosmopolitan urban centers are nothing new. That organized crime – whether the Mafia of Sicily or the lesser known but equally infamous *Ndrangheta* <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/10/italian-mafia-ndrangheta/615466/>> of Calabria, *Camorra* <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camorra>> of Naples or *Sacra Corona* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacra_Corona_Unita> of Puglia – is behind their distribution in Italy is well known. That rich consumers have the widest assortment of drugs is patently obvious. For the record, the three main categories here are marijuana/hashish, cocaine/heroin and synthetics such as Ecstasy and ketamine, with the latter typically found at parties like Genovese’s.

As the richest city in the richest region of affluent Italy, Milan has plenty of money to spend on vices. In that sense, Genovese was doing what many other wealthy Milanese have been doing for decades. But one of the things that changed during the pandemic was the venue: countless drug-related sexual activities — what the Italian press dubbed “*chemsex*” < <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2018/08/11/chemsex-cose-luso-di-droghe-per-migliorare-le-prestazioni-sessuali/4549684/>> — that had taken place in nightclubs, hotels and private rooms in restaurants shifted to personal homes.



Photo by Ouael Ben Salah

Milan is a “very diversified, polyvalent consumer of narcotics. It has a frenetic nightlife under normal circumstances,” observes Marco Calì, *dirigente della squadra mobile di Milano* (head of Milan’s mobile team, aka the investigative unit of police headquarters). “This city is open, socially sophisticated, extremely diverse, wealthy, dynamic, and amenable to all kinds of drug cocktails.”

Calì knows something about freneticism. He led the raid on Genovese’s apartment in the wake of the rape accusation. He prevented one of Genovese’s henchmen from destroying video evidence that apparently supported the victim’s claim — “apparently” only because the case has not yet come to trial.

A second change resulting from the pandemic has been drug delivery, Calì tells *The News Station* < <https://thenewsstation.com/>>. In the first months of strict lockdown between March and May 2020, drug dealers in Italy found it hard to procure certain components of synthetic drugs they previously sourced from China.

Even during the worst of the pandemic, cocaine supply was never an issue. Organized crime ensured the entry ports of Genoa in the North and Gioia Tauro in the South. Others continued to operate, and drugs continued to arrive from South America, the Balkans and elsewhere, Calì says. Demand was not a problem, either.

While a mix of synthetic drugs can cost up to €500 (almost \$600) a gram in Milan, cocaine goes for about €100 (about \$120) a gram. The comparison isn't completely fair because a gram of synthetics can be used several times while a gram of cocaine is a one shot, but the point is cocaine is no longer only for rich stockbrokers. Lots of Milanese can afford it.

The problem instead was getting the product to the final consumer. During the lockdown, the once super-busy, crowded city of Milan had empty streets, and police checked the few souls who ventured out. Dealers had to find new ways to deliver drugs without the usual urban meeting points — parks, restaurants and nightclubs.



Photo by Mikita Yo

They managed. One of the outstanding characteristics of Italy's *malavita* (organized crime) is its ability to adapt, according to Antonio Nicaso, a professor and author who has written extensively

about organized crime, especially the ‘Ndrangheta.

“What happened during the pandemic shows this clearly,” Nicaso points out to The News Station.

Dealers took advantage of social networks to take orders. They used chats — including WhatsApp — and, of course, the Dark Web to ensure identities were hidden.

Consequently, *cybercrime increased dramatically* <
<https://www.innovationpost.it/2021/03/02/cyber-crime-nel-2020-danni-per-oltre-3-000-miliardi-di-euro-i-dati-del-clusit/>>, he notes, in Italy and worldwide.

Drug lords used pizza and other food delivery workers, Amazon drivers, and couriers to carry the goods to users’ homes. These carriers were sometimes clueless and unwitting, though sometimes recruited and knowledgeable. They were also creative: recent arrests included carriers with cocaine in their surgical masks, tennis bags, backpacks, cellphones and underpants.

Customers paid with PostPay (prepaid cards issued by the Italian Postal Service) or cryptocurrency, and bank accounts were used to obfuscate the account holder’s identity.

Another change wrought by the lockdown was the increase in fraud and cheating <
<https://tg24.sky.it/cronaca/2021/04/10/covid-reati-crimini-informatici>> across the country, according to Cali. Products were delivered without being inspected first by the consumer, so they were more likely to be misrepresented or poorly cut than they would have been under normal circumstances. Therefore, final customers took a greater-than-usual personal risk, he underscored.

Criminal strategy changed during the first and strictest lockdown between March 9 and May 1, 2020. When the streets were empty and alternative drug delivery channels had not been fully developed in the initial period, organized crime sought other ways to generate revenue. They immediately turned to promising new COVID-related product lines – *selling cheap, substandard masks, hand sanitizer, surgical gloves and other medical supplies.* <
<https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2020/Global-operation-sees-a-rise-in-fake-medical-products-related-to-COVID-19>> Law enforcement began at once to monitor these sectors and have continued to focus attentively on them. Earlier this year a *nurse in a hospital in Milan* <
https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2021/02/09/news/traffico_droga_arresti_milano_monza_torino_bergamo_sassari-286670482/> was arrested for selling masks, disinfectant and even COVID-19 vaccines to a crime syndicate in exchange for cocaine.

Increased infiltration into legitimate businesses by organized crime was another change accompanying the first lockdown. Businesses of all sizes suffered when the pandemic closed everything, but the pain was especially great for small, mom-and-pop shops that had little to no

access to bank loans to keep them afloat. The then-Minister of the Interior, Luciana Lamorgese, issued a [directive to her chief magistrates on April 10, 2020, < https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/lamorgese-controlli-piu-serrati-pasqua-non-vanifichiamo-sforzi >](https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/lamorgese-controlli-piu-serrati-pasqua-non-vanifichiamo-sforzi) to protect these small and medium enterprises, which found themselves short on cash and in desperate need of loans that the *malavita* (organized crime) was eager to provide.



Photo by Alex Vasey

The results reinforced a trend already a staple of organized crime — a trend familiar to anyone who has seen *The Godfather* films. The criminals survive by investing their illegal money into lawful businesses.

“This always happens when a society passes from a subsistence economy to one based on capital reinvestment,” Nicaso notes. “Money recycling today is oxygen for legitimate business. In other words, the drug economy is not parallel to but an integral part of the national economy.”

By April 2021, with [rotating restrictions labeled red \(the strictest\), yellow \(a little less strict\), or orange lockdown \(looser still but venues like theaters and nightclubs still closed\), < https://www.regione.puglia.it/web/speciale-coronavirus/zone-rosse-arancioni-gialle >](https://www.regione.puglia.it/web/speciale-coronavirus/zone-rosse-arancioni-gialle) the economy of Italy slowly began to return to normal. As of this June, venues are largely open. People and traffic are on the streets again, and life feels more like pre-COVID levels. So does police work, according to Call.

Large-scale drug shipments are again making headlines, and the *squadra mobile* is making arrests

daily. *The criminal dynamic has returned,* <https://www.comune.milano.it/documents/20126/991419/31032102%2B06+Bilancio+Previsione+-++Economia+Urbana+e+Lavoro.pdf/85c69b33-7d68-a576-a0cf-f87bb4a6907c?t=1618480472627> he says, “with the difference that they have focused on entering the legitimate economy (through Covid loans) and changed the equilibrium with increased threats to businesses, bidding for government contracts, etc.”

Nicaso expresses the same concerns. The consequences are evident, he claims, with companies that are ending up in the hands of the Mafia, the ‘Ndrangheta, etc.

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“Entrepreneurs are accepting bank guarantees in exchange for the sale of company shares,” he says. “Once again organized crime may wind up arriving first not only in Italy but also in many other parts of the world, by developing that mechanism I describe as ‘financial doping.’”

Accused rapist Genovese might have been one of those. He is currently being investigated for financial irregularities among his many business interests, as well as additional sexual crimes committed at his rented villa in Ibiza. His summers at the latter location, pre-COVID, were always in the company of young women . . . *and* a man about whom he boasted, “My friend can get you anything you need within 24 hours. Let me know.”

Maybe not these days for him. But as Milan returns to pre-pandemic normalcy, CalI cautions, “It will be months before we see what has really changed in drug dealers’ operations, after we are fully open again.”



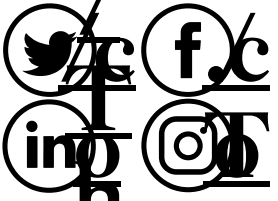
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