

Paolo Di Giannantonio

Journalist working for the RAI 1 news service

“Why informing and communicating also means fighting and preventing fraud”

[digiannantonio@rai.it](mailto:digiannantonio@rai.it)

I would like to share with you a personal experience that is - I feel sure – highly relevant to this discussion. It concerns my investigations into smuggling, a problem that had reached alarming proportions in Italy in the 1990s but was generally underestimated by the general public, the media, political circles and the State.

The first indications emerged in articles published in regional newspapers reporting that Apulian smugglers were using 4x4s with homemade but effective armour in real battles against the *Guardia di Finanza* vehicles attempting to prevent cigarettes being landed on Italian shores. The first example of collaboration occurred when I asked the *Guardia di Finanza* press office for permission to be present at the “on-the-ground” investigations and enforcement operations. I was somewhat sceptical because, like the armed forces engaged in operations abroad, Italian police forces rarely allow the press to be present when operations are being conducted. The usual reasons given are safety and caution, but there is another reason. The journalist in me will not allow me to mince my words here and so I must say that there is a broadly held conviction that that it is better to avoid problems with journalists, who are generally viewed as ‘interfering and troublesome’.

However, I found the officers to be open and courageous. It was decided to open up all possible information channels, accepting the risks involved. I was given the green light to go to Apulia to cover the investigations, the ambushes and the chases overland and at sea (as were others). On several occasions, we accompanied officers in the provinces of Bari and Brindisi and managed to take truly unique photos, not only of arrests but also of cars being overtaken and rammed. In other words, alongside the *Guardia di Finanza*'s officers we tasted the risks of fieldwork. A couple of times, it is true to say, that we were lucky to get out in one piece.

What were the results? Firstly, we obtained top-quality photographs that not only made it possible to illustrate smuggling operations in the newspapers but also provided a source for a series of special in-depth operations. Then, we had direct contact with an activity that had, until that point, seemed less of a series of serious, organised crimes and conspiracies and more a romantic attempt by picturesque characters taken from some or other history of Naples to make ends meet. Those days and nights taught us that we were not dealing with Sophia Loren-style smuggling; we were locking horns with the mercenaries of the Sacra Corona Unita and the Camorra.

There were “normal” people, and lots of them. But the embrace of criminal organisations threatened to become suffocating. It covered all aspects of the investigations. I met smugglers and, with the *Guardia di Finanza*, I pursued them overland and at sea. I discovered how many people were involved in the fast, synchronised operations to unload the speedboats. Some evenings a hundred and more people went off to earn between €50 and €100 in just a few minutes. These were normal people, not criminals. They were students, unemployed persons or pensioners, all of whom finished up being sucked into a criminal economy that was having a highly alarming social impact. Ultimately, these smuggling operations further highlighted the poverty and backwardness of the area, effectively offering itself as a possible solution.

We knew that behind the whole problem was corruption at all levels, connivance on the part of other countries, a lack of scruples on the part of broad swathes of the business and financial community, as well as ambiguity and shortcomings on the part of the major tobacco multinationals. And this was the point: I realised that those nights spent in Apulia with the *Guardia di Finanza* were only the start of an investigation that would reach out well beyond Italy's borders. Clearly, in addition to the willingness and cooperation of the *Guardia di Finanza* we needed other, more broadly based cooperation. And so our second step was to contact the judiciary, the Anti-Mafia section of the Public Prosecution Service, which was able to second some top-grade "brains", and OLAF, which gave us a European perspective and a general overview.

Thanks to contacts with judges in Bari and Naples and with Brussels officials, we succeeded in finding out the extent of the involvement in smuggling of the highest echelons of the Governments of Yugoslavia at first and Montenegro subsequently. It had even become one of the key components of the budget in certain countries that were struggling to survive the turbulence of the war-torn Balkans. The second stage took us to Montenegro, where blood had been spilled at the hands of leading members of the Sacra Corona Unita.

We met the Minister of the Interior. It was a tough meeting but finally we obtained permission to film the quays at the port of Bari. It was unbelievable. We arrived to meet with an atmosphere of the greatest tension and found dozens of smugglers' speedboats filled to the gunnels with cases of cigarettes ready to set off for Apulia. The crews were hiding in some sheds. At that very moment, I received a call on my portable phone from Bari. It was a highly agitated smuggler friend in Bari phoning from the Italian shoreline. "How long do you plan to stay there in Bari?" he asked me, "Because we're going to lose all today's load and that means billions of lire ..."

Montenegro was not the only Balkan State involved in the smuggling. The others included Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania and Serbia. It seemed that the whole of Eastern Europe had become a haven for traffickers of all kinds. And it was possible to shed light on the situation only by working closely together with other journalists, public prosecution services and police forces, some from the Balkans States in question.

I became convinced, and I would like to stress this point, that it would never have been possible for a television company or newspaper, however important it might be, to conduct such an extensive investigation. The operations were transnational. They were 'global' and this is why they were so successful: they could extend their tentacles beyond their own borders. We journalists had to get used to this.

This is what we did, working together with Montenegrin, Croatian, Serbian, English, German, Swiss and French colleagues. It was a complicated puzzle to put together but, once the initial difficulties had been overcome, the network began working well for all concerned. We could tell the story of the unloading and shipment of the cigarettes; we had the low-down on the criminal organisations in Italy. Our colleagues from the Balkans had the task of establishing the details of their Governments' involvement. Our Swiss counterparts were indispensable when it came to arriving at the "third level": the financial transactions.

Switzerland was the third stop on my smuggling tour. This was where the "brains" of the organisations met the financiers and cigarette suppliers. This is where contracts were concluded, payments made, banking operations transacted and money exchanged. I do not think it any exaggeration to say that there was a time when the smugglers effectively enjoyed full rights of

citizenship in Switzerland, simply because the offence was not recognised as such there. It was just one of many lawful operations.

This fundamental question proved to be an economic, political and legal battlefield. And this is where OLAF and Brussels played a key role, explaining, demonstrating and encouraging. We were able to show how the contraband was at the centre of large financial flows and how the people behind it, who were wanted in EU countries, enjoyed privileges and facilitations of all kinds. We learned how the business transactions could be concluded without any problems. I will not mention any names but the roles of extremely well-known moneychangers, banks and companies became clear. Light was shed on that twilight zone where the world of crime intersects with the world of business.

But this was not enough. There was a fourth stage, the most difficult one. It involved the relationship between the smugglers and the tobacco multinationals. This relationship is anything but transparent, and much still needs to be done and said on the subject. It is fraught with risks because the economic and legal power of the companies, whose turnovers are greater than the GDP of certain third-world countries, can be intimidating.

In general, we can say that it has been established that the giant multinationals are able to control both the lawful and illegal markets as a type of continuum, and even the most important players in the press have experienced real difficulties in their attempts to shed light on the situation.

There has been a sea change, however, thanks to measures taken by the EU, which has gone as far as to take the case to the Manhattan court. We have identified a number of major players in the network, some of whom are Italian businessmen who used to work for the multinationals and were entrusted with dealing with the “grey-zone traders”. They enjoyed and still enjoy support in the highest places, including at federal level. But we had arrived at a far more rarefied atmosphere and were working in terrain where it was far more difficult to conduct investigations. It is one thing to see smugglers in armoured vehicles but quite another to detect the near invisible threads of financial and banking transactions.

This is the point the press has reached in its dealings with the smuggling operations: the world of finance and the tobacco multinationals. Without the network consisting of journalists, investigators, courts and international bodies (most notably OLAF) I have sketched out, the extent of the operations would not have emerged and its ramifications would have remained hidden. As we know, large-scale crime is increasingly white-collar crime, where the colours have become shady. It worms its way into niches in business and civil society, benefiting from the neutrality of paper and documents.

To combat it we have, first and foremost, to bring it to light, drawing it to the attention of the public and raising awareness of its impact. We have to make it clear to everyone that – in the case of cigarettes – buying a packet on a street corner means helping a complex criminal operation that has tentacles at all levels, that the money is used to finance other criminal activities, and so on.

This is why we cannot go back. This is why, in fact, we need to step up cooperation between the press and the international bodies involved in the fight against fraud. OLAF has always been an attentive and willing partner, and we are all aware of our respective roles.

What is happening with regard to cigarette trafficking and other fraud operations can serve as an example and a model for everyone in Europe.

I would just like to say a very sincere thank you.