

*Original article*

## ***CorsAfrigue: The Corsican Milieu in Africa, between Business and Raison D'état***

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**Abstract:** Compared to its Sicilian counterpart, the Corsican “Mafia” has historically attracted little attention from scholars and decision-makers. Nevertheless, despite clear differences in the level of bureaucratization and of violence employed with respect to the Sicilian mob, in the latter half of the twentieth century criminal organizations from Corsica managed to create networks of power and business which penetrated and partly influenced the French economic and political system. Even if these events never clearly pointed to the existence of structural cooperation between them and (a part of) the French state, the economic activities pursued by the Corsican *milieu* laid the foundations for the development of a transnational network—built on family ties and customary allegiances—able to spread throughout the whole French Empire. In Africa in particular, these racketeers found a fertile ground for their activities. Building on these premises, this article aims to analyse to what extent Corsican criminal organizations shaped the evolving relations between France and its former African colonies. In the existing literature, the term *FrançAfrigue* designates a form of neocolonial dominion based on personal ties and clientelar chains involving the Franco-African political and economic elite. With this article we show that this informal system of power created a hierarchical relation of dependence, where private/corporate and national interests are mixed and blurred, and actors such as Corsican gangsters are contemporarily criminal entrepreneurs, informal state agents, and gatekeepers, influencing perceptions and interests of both French and African decision-makers. In this sense, the Corsican *milieu* is a crucial case, yet largely underexplored, for exploring how practices and forms of control employed in informal/illegal domains can influence and redefine states’ interactions and chains of authority in low-institutionalized contexts.

**Keywords:** Corsican organised crime – transnational network – neo-colonialism

## Introduction

*The basic form of domination is the racket*

Horkheimer, 1985: 287

In the last few years there has been a growing interest in the role of non-state actors, including criminal networks, in foreign policy. However, questions remain with respect to the type of benefits and challenges that states face when involving criminal organisations in their international behaviour. Specifically, current analyses largely overlook the power dynamics at play in the process of stabilisation of these types of ties. It is still surprising, for instance, that the way France has historically encouraged and benefitted from the stabilisation of informal networks of powers between local actors and criminal organisations has been under-addressed. In particular, this article argues that the formation and evolution of so called *FrançAfrique* should be considered as a case in point for shedding light on different and entangled dynamics shaping foreign policy and transnational power relations. In this sense, this article aims to make an initial—and preliminary—contribution, inviting the academic community to investigate the somewhat neglected role played by criminal actors within the system of informal domination and unequal exchange that characterises the relationship between France and its former African colonies. More precisely, different events and criminal affairs that have punctuated French political life since the end of the colonial era seem to suggest the existence of an integrated system of co-management, involving French officials, African elites and members of the so-called Corsican “Mafia”, with the latter acting as informal agents of the French state. The interactions among these actors have created a complex but flexible network, which has partly structured and shaped France’s policies towards its former colonies, influencing at the same time the institutional development and the governmental capacities of the African states. On these premises, we propose to understand the involvement of Corsican criminal actors in the French foreign policy towards Africa as a racket system (Granter, 2017) revealing forms of political control based on the personal interactions and illicit business.

While the term “Corsican Mafia” is in some ways improper, as it tends to suggest a strong similarity between Corsican criminal organisations and the Sicilian *Cosa Nostra*, there is still a certain lack of agreement among scholars, practitioners and investigative journalists on the subject. Nonetheless, it is known that at the moment of the establishment of the Fifth Republic (1958), a few Corsican families dominated the international heroin trade, leading American investigators to evoke the existence of a “*Union Corse*” based on the model of the American *Cosa Nostra*. Although the

hypothesis of the existence of a *Union Corse* has never been demonstrated and must therefore be discarded (Follorou, 2004), we will note that in the case of the Guerini brothers, whose gang could be considered retrospectively as a “minor mafia”<sup>1</sup>, *corsitude*, that is, the feeling of common belonging to the Corsican people, seems to play an important role in the recruitment of associates and in the constitution of each clan’s social capital. With these examples, we identify the “Corsican mafia” as the aggregation of criminal families which, while not bound by rituals of affiliation or by bureaucratic instances for the division of territories to be controlled, succeed in regulating certain illicit markets (first prostitution, and later heroin) on which they provide forms of “private protection” (Gambetta, 1996), thanks to their capacity to use violence and to the social capital built on the experience shared with numerous public policy makers of resistance and/or migration.

Although these families progressively disappeared during the 1980s, some of their associates remained active in Africa, where they continued to operate at least until the 2000s. The case of Michel Tomi and Robert Feliciaggi, which we will outline in the course of this article, also seems to allow a “surprising” connection between the older generation that disappeared in the 1980s, the next, which remained in Corsica and disappeared during the 2000s following a bloody war between gangs, and the latest generation, among whom we can find former nationalist militants who have converted the skills accumulated in clandestinity to the profit of their own personal interest, as shown by the case of the enterprises owned by Charles Pieri in the early 2000s (Briquet, 2008).

Hence, by analysing the case of the economic and political involvement of the Corsican “Mafia” in Africa as an overextension of French foreign policy, this article makes two contributions to the existing literature: first, theoretically, it builds bridges between “racket theory”, as elaborated by the Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School (Stirk, 1992; Heins, 2007; Brocling, 2014) and scholarship on Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) focusing on non-state actors (NSAs) (Baumann and Stengel, 2014). Second, empirically, it provides a first systematic account of the integration of some exponents of the Corsican criminal underworld within a system of power and governance that until recently was directed by prominent members of French officialdom. In particular, in this article we focus our attention on key episodes of French post-colonial politics, trying to sketch the formation and development of what we call a “*CorsAfrica*”, meaning a (sub-

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of “minor mafia” is enforced by the latest jurisprudence of the Italian Court of Cassation to prosecute those criminal groups which, even though they do not present the characteristics of the so-called “historical mafias”, fill the requirements formulated by Article 416 bis of the Italian Penal Code. The latter stipulates that the criminal association is of the mafia type when its members, thanks to the associative tie, succeed in imposing relations of silence, intimidation and subjugation in the context in which they operate.

)system of domination over former colonies based on personal connection between French politicians and personalities of the Corsican underworld.

In order to do so, the paper unfolds as follows. In the first part we introduce the academic debate concerning the roles of different non-state actors in foreign policy, so as to show where our contribution aims to be situated. Here, by referring to “racket theory”, we introduce an innovative framework for studying the role of non-state criminal actors in foreign policy, suggesting that they can be treated as a structural component of a wider system of domination and power exchange driven by state representatives. In the second part, we set the scene for the questions addressed in the article by describing the inception and functioning of *FrançAfrique*. In particular, we underline the informal and personalised nature of the exchanges ruling the relations between France and its former colonies, claiming that they form the ideal context for the co-optation of grey, or even criminal, actors. The subsequent section devotes its attention to *CorsAfrique*, focusing in particular on those actors, such as Charles Pasqua, Nicolas Sarkozy, Michel Tomi and Robert Feliciaggi, who shaped and perpetuated the Franco-Corsican-African system during a period of transition that started in the early 1990s. Finally, in the conclusion, after recapitulating the main argument and contributions of the paper, we propose future avenues for research. Specifically, we make a plea to other scholars and researchers to contribute to our research agenda by investigating this crucial and understudied case.

## **Criminal Organizations as Non-State Actors in Foreign Policy: A State “Racket”?**

### ***Non-state actors and foreign policy***

As is well known, for a long time traditional theories of International Relations (IR) disregarded the role of non-state actors, and the interactions between governmental and informal networks in international politics. However, Keohane and Nye’s work on transnationalism (1973) opened up a new research agenda that focused on NSAs and the analysis of transnational relations and sub-national dynamics (Zangl and Zurn, 1999; Risse, 2002). So far, extensive research has been conducted on the problems and implications of NSAs’ involvement in political affairs and different fields of governance (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992; Liebfred and Zurn, 2005) both at the national level (Aran, 2011) and international level (Yi-Chong and Weller, 2007; Baumann and Stengel, 2014). More interestingly, driven by an interest in disaggregating states’ behaviour in the international arena, Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) today offers theoretical and

methodological approaches that are better suited to account for the role of sub-national networks (see Potter, 2010; Hudson, 2013).

Scholarly debates on NSAs in foreign policy have progressively developed interest in two interrelated questions. The first is the question of “governance”, meaning dynamics of power and responsibility-sharing between different levels of management, involving state and non-state actors on the same issue (Held and Koenig-Archibugi, 2003; Dingwerth and Pattberg, 2006; Ougaard and Leander, 2010; Marchetti, 2016). Specifically, the main idea underlying the concept of “governance” is that individual states are essentially less prepared to manage and solve problems on their own, especially when operating in foreign countries (Reinicke, 1999; Mayntz, 2002; Stone, 2008). To this, a second question was soon associated, namely how to make sense and account for the relationships between public transnational actors and private ones within multilevel governance, and the degree of authority they both exercise (Hall and Biersteker, 2002; Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Pauly and Grande, 2005; Barnett and Sikkink, 2008; Genschel and Zangl, 2014; Zürn et al., 2012).

The question of NSAs in foreign policy is interesting also when considering the diverse nature of the actors involved. Both institutional and other types of NSAs have started occupying a relevant role for policy makers and academics alike, such as lobbies (Jacobs and Page, 2005), international judges (Madsen, 2014), ethnic (Haney and Vanderbush, 1999) and religious (Haynes, 2001) organisations, as well as social movements, whose role has received increasing attention in the recent literature (Hanegraaff et al., 2015; Tarrow, 2011; Catanzaro and Coticchia, 2018). Furthermore, the way states have used private organisations and companies in wars or to control foreign territories and regions of potential interest has also received attention (Singer, 2005; Baumann and Stengel, 2014; Cusumano and Kinsey, 2015; Stanley, 2015). On this, Bigo insists, it would be useful to develop “a socio-historical analysis revealing the practices through which governors have been able to exclude private entrepreneurs of violence from their territory and their legitimacy after having used them for their conquests” (2003: 2).

It therefore seems to be the case that a focus on the interactions between states and non-state actors in the international arena is not only consistent with the expectations and concerns of the existing academic debate, but also leaves additional room for analysis when taking into account power relations and dynamics of control of foreign territories.

***Cooperation with Criminal Organizations in Foreign Policy:  
The French “State Racket”***

Regarding the nature of NSAs involved in foreign policy activities, many cases show that states have not relied solely on *legitimate* and *legal* actors. On the contrary, numerous states have often relied on criminal organisations in the implementation of their interests in foreign policy, ranging from informal contacts to deep-rooted relationships. Criminal organisations, especially when operating as businesses (Gambetta, 1996; Schloenhardt, 1999), might be seen to embody the “underworld as servant” (Pierce, 1976: 124).

Building on the interest in state-criminal organisation relations in foreign policy, but going beyond this, we draw specifically on the Frankfurt School’s<sup>2</sup> “racket theory” (Stirk, 1992; Heins, 2007; Granter, 2017) to make sense of the French informal approach to the management of political dynamics in former colonies through the Corsican “Mafia”. In fact, by drawing on the concept of “hidden connections” (Horkheimer, 2002; Adorno, 2005), racket theory highlights:

[the theory] characterizes social interest groups as rival “racketeers.” They protect their members but demand unconditional subservience. In struggles for shares of the wealth, which are more or less openly conducted, they strive for the maintenance and increase of their living standards, as well as for social dominance, and they divide social influence and increase of their living standards, as well as for social dominance, and they divide social influence antagonistically among themselves (Schweppenhauser, 2009: 61).

Granter (2017: 108), for instance, by relying on the concept of rackets to draw parallels between the business/corporate world and the criminal one, found that:

Rather than episodic cases of politicians colluding with corporations to further their own interests, it is the case that the political-corporate nexus parallels the criminal-corporate nexus in that the abuse of power is built into the dynamics of the system. In the context of business and politics, it is the politician, rather than the gangster, who functions as patron and intermediary.

Hence, through the concept of racket, it is possible to bring together, and account for, three levels of analysis: the political sphere, criminal organisations and business interests. On these premises, we make the argument that through *FrançAfrique*, France installed a series of informal systems of power generating a hierarchical relation of dependence. More interestingly, private/corporate and national interests became mixed and blurred, and non-state actors such as the Corsican gangsters became simultaneously criminal entrepreneurs, informal state agents and gatekeepers, entering in relation with

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of Critical Theory and questions of praxis, see Giacchetti Ludovisi (2016).



both French and African decision-makers. Hence, we expect to shed light on the “murky connections” (Adorno, 2005: 23) between French policy-makers and Corsican mobsters, who developed a functional transnational network, built on stable personal ties and customary allegiances, to exercise control over African territories of interest during and after colonial occupation.

In fact, we argue, the Corsican *milieu* represents a potentially crucial, yet understudied, case for exploring how practices and forms of control employed in informal/illegal domains can influence and redefine states’ interactions and chains of authority in low-institutionalized contexts.

### **Keeping the *rois nègres* under French rule: the grey world of *FrançAfrique***

Relations between France and its former African colonies – which formed the so-called French *pré-carré* on the continent – were structured during the decolonization period, and strongly influenced by interests and strategies identified by first President of the French Fifth Republic, Charles De Gaulle, and his inner circle (Daloz, 2014; Merle, 1979; Vaïsse, 2009). According to the Gaullist vision of world politics, maintaining a “special relationship” with the African continent would be crucial to protect the international role of France, especially during the period of bipolar competition (Charillon, 2011). In particular, African allies would provide three main assets: 1) a pro-France *critical mass* within the United Nations and other international fora; 2) favoured access to strategic mineral and energy resources and a preferential market for French enterprises; and 3) an area of diplomatic, political and cultural influence, useful for supporting France’s role in international affairs. For its part, France would guarantee the survival of loyal regimes through political, economic and military support (Banégas, Marchal and Meimon, 2007; Vaïsse, 2009). On this basis, De Gaulle’s Franco-African relationship was based on three main axes, namely economic and cultural penetration, military presence, and personal and direct exchanges among elites.<sup>3</sup>

The combination of these three conditions generated a specific system of informal domination and a peculiar form of foreign policy, popularised under the name *FrançAfrique*. During a famous trial for offense toward a foreign state leader which took place in 2001, opposing François-Xavier Verschave, activist and president of the French

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth considering here that even if things have changed significantly since General De Gaulle’s era, and Franco-African relations have passed through various crises (Chafer, 2002; Banégas, Marchal and Meimon, 2007), the strategic thought inspiring French policies towards Africa has maintained its essential features. A similar claim can be made concerning the French favoured axes of action, influence and intervention on the continent (see for example Leboeuf and Quénot-Suarez, 2014).

NGO *Survie*,<sup>4</sup> against Omar Bongo (President of Gabon at the time), Denis Sassou-Nguesso (President of the Republic of Congo) and Idriss Déby (President of Chad), Jean-François Médard, scholar and expert of African politics, described *FrançAfrique* as follows:

[T]he relations between France and its former colonies are different compared to the typical relations between states. We can talk about Franco-African clientelism in a double way, firstly looking at the nature of the exchange, and then considering the personalization of this exchange. It is an exchange among unequals, presenting on the one hand a principal owning critical resources for his client, and on the other hand a client, who inversely needs this principal for his own survival. All exchanges are created on this basis. The French and the African states are inserted within this framework of interpersonal relations which link together members of the ruling class and the elites of our countries, both political and economic. [...] All of *FrançAfrique* has been established on relations of friendship, leading to social exchanges between our ruling classes. I think its main characteristic is the fusion of different domains, through personal, private [...] but also public exchanges (Verschave and Beccaria, 2001: 294-95, authors' translation).

This description of *FrançAfrique* captures some of the main elements which characterised the relationship between France and its former African colonies. With regard to the context where Franco-African relations developed, some “vestiges” of the empire persisted (Barrios, 2010), and strongly influenced the institutional environment of *FrançAfrique*. On the one hand, France pursued a policy aimed at maintaining and reinforcing strong cultural ties with former colonies, epitomized by the creation of the International Organisation of Francophonie in 1970. This initiative was both a tool for diffusing French “soft power”, and for furthering a process of political socialisation of African elites mediated by French values and preferences (Hibou, 1995; Vaisse, 2009). On the other hand, economic relations followed a path already fixed during the colonial epoch. As suggested by various authors, Africa was historically a residual market for the more dynamic components of French capitalism (Marseille, 1984; Hugon, 2007). By exploiting public financing and different forms of state protectionism, Africa became a niche for relatively few French enterprises pursuing rentier, extractive, and eventually predatory economic activities (Hibou, 1995; Hugon, 2007). This structure of unequal economic exchange was preserved even after decolonization, mainly through the continuing presence of some French enterprises able to create direct connections with

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<sup>4</sup> *Survie* is a French NGO created in 1984, whose principal aim is to fight corruption in Africa and more widely in the Global South. The organisation is generally recognised as one of the actors most engaged in monitoring and denouncing French policies towards African countries.



African elites and decision-makers, and thanks to the creation of the so-called “zone Franc” (Bayart, 1995; Hugon, 2007). This expression identifies an area currently formed by 14 African countries that adopted the CFA Franc as their common currency. The CFA Franc exchange rate and value was directly linked to the French Franc – now to the Euro – implicitly determining a condition of strong monetary and economic dependence of these states vis-à-vis France (Conte, 1994; Hibou, 1995; Hugon, 2007).

Taken together, cultural and economic policies implemented by France led to the creation of a hierarchical system of power, open to the participation of a narrow group of actors formed by a part of the French and African political and economic elites. Consequently, French policies towards Francophone Africa were implemented through a unique mix of informality, personalisation, secrecy and sometimes even illegality, which blurred the lines between national, partisan and private interests, and made it extremely difficult to distinguish the role and legitimacy of the different actors involved. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that this whole system of policy-making was planned, structured and implemented by French officials, following the direct order of De Gaulle – and his successors – and his nearest advisors, and it seems safe to argue that, at least in its essential features, it has not changed since then.

Starting from decolonization, the main French institutions officially in charge of relations with the African continent were the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, and until 1999, the Ministry of Cooperation.<sup>5</sup> However, in accordance with the desire of General de Gaulle and his inner circle, Africa has always been considered a *domaine réservé* of the French presidency. This means that the president should have the last word on all the most important decisions concerning Africa, that he runs a personal diplomacy vis-à-vis other heads of state, and even more importantly, that he can take authoritative decisions without consulting or even informing his ministries (Lavroff, 1997; Kessler, 1999), bypassing the formal chain of institutional delegation and directly activating the state’s resources and officials.

Central for the creation of this parallel system of policy-making was Jacques Foccart, former businessman and Resistance fighter, leader of the Gaullist militia SAC (*Service d'Action Civique*)—a sort of shadow police force in France between the 1960s and 1980s (see further below)—and one of De Gaulle’s closer collaborators (Péan, 1990; Gaillard and Foccart, 1995, 1997).<sup>6</sup> In 1961 Foccart was appointed Head of the General

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<sup>5</sup> A significant reform of the French foreign policy apparatus was approved at the end of the 1990s, leading to the merging of the Ministry of Cooperation – the so-called “Ministry for Africa” – with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Moncrieff, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> The system of power and decision-making created by and around Jacques Foccart has been described by Foccart himself in the two-volume biography he edited in 1995-1997 with the journalist Philippe Gaillard. Even if most experts and observers remarked that this biography conceals certain essential information and tends to reduce,

Secretariat for African and Malagasy Affairs (*Secrétariat Général pour les Affaires Africaines et Malgache*, also known as the *Cellule Afrique*), a state agency directly attached to the presidency,<sup>7</sup> and in charge of African affairs. Following a suggestion made by Foccart himself, the *FrançAfrique* system was based on two main pillars, namely the everyday and direct access of Foccart to the president, and the personal connections created by the secretary with several African leaders and French actors: state officials, businessmen, members of the army and of the secret service, and other “greyer” subjects (Gaillard and Foccart, 1995, 1997; Péan, 1990, 2014).

As resumed by Stephen Smith and Antoine Glaser (1997: 10-11), two investigative journalists who dedicated most of their careers to French activities in Africa:

Foccart’s networks – which were born out of the common experience [of membership] in *France Libre* [the French Resistance during the Second World War] – were highly personalized and characterised by political alliances and a fully Gaullist loyalty. They were born in a sort of limbo concerning their legality; maybe they were legitimate, but at the same time they were clandestine; they were strong, resistant, and sometimes criminal in nature [...] Maybe we should call it the *Réseau* [Network]: all the Gaullist intermediaries in all sectors who, “beyond official hierarchy”, work for their “historical leader” and his “mission” [...] using the state as a means (authors’ translation).

This original *Réseau* survived until the end of the Pompidou presidency (1974), and played an informal but important—and for a long time unknown—role in the various crises and events which punctuated the African political landscape in the decade after decolonization, including the Biafran secession, the Communist upsurge in Cameroon and the transition to power of Omar Bongo in Gabon (Verschave,<sup>8</sup> 1998; Vaïsse, 2009; Domergue, Tatsita and Deltombe, 2011). Generally speaking, members of Foccart’s network were involved in most of the political, economic and diplomatic exchanges concerning France and its most important African “clients”.

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justify or reevaluate Foccart’s actions, it remains a useful and direct source that can be critically employed by researchers aiming to describe and understand the *FrançAfrique* system. On the other hand, in this article we make reference to different works by Pierre Péan, an important investigative journalist and activist who has worked on Franco-African relations for decades. In this case too we have adopted a cautious approach, and critically evaluated and triangulated the information contained in Péan’s books as much as possible.

<sup>7</sup> The Headquarters of the General Secretariat were located - and still are, even if the agency has changed its name since then - in 2 Rue de l’Elysée, in the building next to the Palais de l’Elysée.

<sup>8</sup> As mentioned previously, François-Xavier Verschave was an economist and activist who published extensively on Franco-African relations. Because of his double role of critical witness and actor in *FrançAfrique*, we applied to his works the same principle of caution as mentioned with regard to Pierre Péan and Jacques Foccart.

The unity and ideological cohesion of the network were weakened, after Pompidou's death, by the choice made by the new president Giscard d'Estaing to substitute Foccart with René Journiac as chief of the *Cellule Afrique*. From this moment onwards, Franco-African relations began to be steered and managed by different and partly competing networks, linked to different political patrons, corporations and organisations. In this sense, Charles Pasqua, Gaullist Minister of the Interior in 1986-1988 and again in 1993-1995, and Jean-Christophe Mitterrand, son of President Mitterrand and advisor for African affairs between 1983 and 1992, are two clear examples of political entrepreneurs, who exploited their political, positional, relational and material resources to create personal and partly autonomous networks that could influence Franco-African relations (Smith and Glaser, 1994, 1997). At the same time, some of the nodal positions within the Franco-African network, and more generally the operational principles dictated by Foccart, continued to inspire French policies towards the continent during the following decades. An indirect confirmation of the resilience of this approach to foreign policy came from the so-called *Affaire Elf*.<sup>9</sup> During the trial, which took place in 2002-3, the former CEO of Elf-Aquitaine, Loïk Le Floch-Prigent, gave this description of the mission and role of Elf within the Franco-African system:

The system was created by General De Gaulle; Elf is not only an oil company, but it is a parallel diplomacy aiming to preserve the French control over African states at the moment of their decolonization. [...] Let's call things by their name. Elf was created for keeping Algeria and the negro kings under France's sphere of influence [...]. With the Algerians it failed, but with the negro kings it is still working. The system was created for favouring this opacity; the president of Elf is a second Minister of Cooperation. This is why General De Gaulle, with his shadow man Foccart, appointed an important member of the secret services to the head [of the enterprise], and this is why Elf always financed the secret services. Elf had three goals: diplomatic, political, and industrial (Lambert and Verschave, 2006, p. 82).

On this basis, it seems fair to suggest that *FrançAfrique* was for a long time a clear example of a state racket. In this sense, racket theory not only accounts for the system of foreign policy implemented by France in Africa, but also captures an evolving feature of the state in Africa. As claimed by Bayart, Hibou and Ellis (1997), new forms of “criminal” governmentalities developed on the continent, legitimizing the presence and

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<sup>9</sup> By the *Affaire Elf* we refer to a politico-financial scandal, uncovered in the middle of the 1990s, which revealed the existence of a complex system of corruption and misappropriation of funds, involving French officials and politicians, captains of industry, the secret services and African elites and head of states, all linked to Elf-Aquitaine, a French oil company operating primarily in Africa.

the implementation in the public space of actors and practices which previously belonged to the informal, illegal, or even criminal domains. Through these lenses it becomes possible to better understand the role of criminal and/or grey organizations within African systems of governance and power management, such as the Corsican “Mafia” or entrepreneurs from the Lebanese diaspora, as part of a process of institutional and practical transformation and rejuvenation affecting the African states.

However, the question of whether the term *FrançAfrique*, interpreted both as a system of domination and as a variety of (informal and personalised) foreign policy, is still able to capture and define the evolutions of Franco-African relations during the last twenty years, remains a matter of debate among experts and scholars (Banégas, Marchal and Meimon, 2007; Bayart, 2011; Leboeuf and Quénot-Suarez, 2014). Nevertheless, for the purpose of this work, we claim that the *FrançAfrique* system is also a crucial framework for exploring and assessing the role of Corsican mobsters within Franco-African relations. In what follows, therefore, we provide an overview of how Corsican criminal organisations have been coopted as informal actors of the French political system, and we then focus on some key actors who represent the connecting points between the Corsican “Mafia”, the French state and African elites.

### **When *FrançAfrique* Meets Corsican Interests**

Africa has been a central field of French politics throughout the Fifth Republic. As mentioned previously, however, Franco-African affairs are based on a series of networks of strong ties (Granovetter, 1973), characterized by a high reciprocity of exchanges among actors which appear to resist, over a medium-long period of time, the evolution of the juridical and political structures in which they have been created. Accordingly, in this part of the paper we devote our attention to two networks, namely the Pasqua and the Sarkozy networks. Both of these are tied to the Gaullist party, and originated in the initial network created by Jacques Foccart. Moreover, the Pasqua and the Sarkozy networks—with the latter in part an evolution of the former—emerged and developed during a period of generational and political transition, characterized by a series of conflicts and ruptures which revealed, briefly, at least a part of their members and the connections with personalities of the Corsican criminal scene. Thus, these two cases allow us to shed a preliminary light on the structure and functioning of *CorsAfrica*, by introducing some of its most important representatives.

#### ***The 1990s and the New Game in Town***

By the end of the 1990s, the balance of power between the French government and African leaders had progressively reversed, thanks in particular to the work of Omar Bongo, President of Gabon who, in the 2000s was viewed as the *dominus* of *FrançAfrica*, as well as Robert Bourgi, a business lawyer in a filial relationship with Jacques Foccart and spokesperson for the various African heads of state in Paris. The reversal in the balance of power seemed to concern the overall relationship between politics and economics in the 1990s. In fact, French politicians have played a critical role since the 2000s in supporting the expansion of French companies in Africa: companies such as Bouygues, Bolloré and Areva occupy the leading role in African procurements thanks to the personal commitment of Nicolas Sarkozy as well (a long-time friend of both Martin Bouygues and Vincent Bolloré) and the afore-mentioned Robert Bourgi. The former President of the Republic denies having received any electoral funding from African countries. However, interestingly, during the closing ceremony of the 2006 primaries, after Sarkozy's victory over Dominique de Villepin, Pascaline Bongo (Omar's daughter) was indeed seated in the front rows, among the sponsors and the Gabonese Minister of Finance. As well as this, it seems relevant to note that one of the first measures taken by President Sarkozy was a 20% reduction in Gabon's foreign debt (Harel and Hofnung, 2011). Moreover, Omar Bongo managed to remove Jean-Marie Bockel from the Secretary of State of Cooperation, who was succeeded by Alain Joyandet, a personal friend of both Nicolas Sarkozy and Claude Guéant.

Within this renewed framework, where personal ties influence political as well as economic careers, the networks built by the long-standing friendships of a few political leaders, both French and African, mostly linked to the Gaullist formations, proved to be precious. In this sense, the Corsican communities in Africa, from which the term *CorsAfrica* is coined, are an informative case. In fact, the share of Corsicans among French settlers is historically very important, particularly in Gabon, where the Corsicans were already over-represented in the first half of the century (Profizi, 2016).

### ***Pasqua, Tomi and Feliciaggi: The Three Men behind the Renewal of CorsAfrica***

The generational renewal of the Corsican community in Gabon was specifically built on the gambling enterprises that Michel Tomi and Robert Feliciaggi opened in several African countries. Among these was the Republic of Congo, where they managed to strengthen ties with President Denis Sassou-Nguesso thanks to the longstanding friendship, cultivated while attending the same French schools, between him and Robert Feliciaggi.



Both Tomi and Feliciaggi made their careers in the world of gambling, but Tomi, considered one of the key treasurers of the Corsican gangs, has risen to the headlines only recently. In particular, on the basis of the judicial acts of investigations still in progress, the French investigative newspapers *Médiapart* and *Le Monde* have not hesitated to present him as the “godfather of godfathers” (*parrain des parrains*) (Davet and Lhomme, 2014). Also underlined is his affiliation to the so called “external Corsicans” (*corses de l'extérieur*), and more particularly to the Corsican groups of the Hauts-de-Seine, the department in which the financial district of La Defense, as well as some of the richest municipalities of France (Neuilly-sur-Seine, Levallois-Perret and others), are located. These Corsican groups, who brandish *corsitude* as an element of their French identity, have been presented as one of the main gears of the Gaullist political machine (Merton, 1997). Other than that, in Africa they have actively participated in the creation of what Sciarrone (2011) would call a “grey area” in the local administrative apparatus, allowing French companies to cultivate their own interests. This same grey area remains particularly complex to identify on judicial grounds: at around the time the initial draft of this article was completed, the conclusion of judicial proceedings against Michel Tomi was announced, resulting in a light sentence thanks to the “comparution sur reconnaissance préalable de culpabilité (CRPC)” which allows the defendant, by pleading guilty to some charges, to avoid taking the trial to court. This procedure was also possible because prosecutors were unable to characterize with precision some of the crimes he was alleged to have committed (Piel, 2018).

On the institutional side, the figure of Charles Pasqua, Foccart’s associate for years and member of all Gaullist formations until the 1990s, when he finally detached himself from the movement following political and personal disagreements with Jacques Chirac, seems to be particularly relevant. Pasqua’s biography offers several pieces of information concerning the structuring, the functioning and the evolution of the Franco-Corsican-African *réseaux*.

Alongside his political career, Pasqua also worked in Marseille as a representative of the Ricard<sup>10</sup> commercial company, and participated in the foundation of the afore-mentioned SAC in 1959, remaining a key personality within it until the organisation’s dissolution in 1981. Directed by Pierre Debizet and overseen by Jacques Foccart, for many years the SAC functioned, in many instances, as a security service dedicated primarily to the safety of General De Gaulle. It was also involved, however, in

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<sup>10</sup> The history of the Ricard company today appears particularly worthy of interest, insofar as its representative in Montreal was Jean Venturi, a member of the SAC, brother of Dominique (known as Nick), the cornerstone of the North American heroin distribution network for the first French Connection (Auda, 2005). One of the follow-ups to this article could be an in-depth study of the role played by the Ricard company in French foreign policy.



several violent incidents during the 1960s, especially against trade unionists, as well as some criminal episodes. According to many testimonies, including that of one of the robbers (Vidal, 2011), the famous robbery at a Strasbourg post office on 30 June 1971, in which robbers stole 11.5 million francs,<sup>11</sup> was carried out specifically to finance the SAC, and more generally the party.

It is also relatively well known that several professional criminals were among the members of the SAC. Among these was Jo Renucci, key figure of the *Réseau méditerranée* (Auda, 2005) and regular correspondent of Lucky Luciano in Naples, and his colleague and “heir” Marcel Francisci (Chairoff, 1975), investigated by American and French authorities as one of the leaders of a heroin trafficking operation to the United States; although the investigation did not result in a conviction, based on subsequent information, his involvement seems quite likely (Follorou and Nouzille, 2004). Francisci had also been a provincial and then a regional councillor in Corsica, and regional secretary of the party Rally for the Republic (*Rassemblement pour la République* – RPR), as well as friend of Pasqua and director of the *Cercle de jeux Hausmann*<sup>12</sup> until his murder in 1982 (Pierrat, 2003). However, despite the alleged membership privileges claimed by many SAC members (Colombié and Diaz, 2015), historians are more cautious about the real impunity guaranteed by the RPR to SAC members (Audigier, 2003). Nonetheless, it is safe to argue that the very existence of the SAC was accompanied by controversy and suspicion from its formal birth until its dissolution, which followed the socialists’ arrival in government in the spring of 1981 and the Auriol massacre<sup>13</sup> a few months later. The parliamentary committee of inquiry named after the massacre violated the code of silence of its members (Audigier, 2003; Collombat, 2007) without, however, digging very deeply, probably due to the new government’s interest in preserving access to the *FrançAfrica* networks. This order service therefore appears to be a form of French “deep state” (Marchant, 2016), i.e. a state factory dedicated to illegal (or at least unpopular) activities, justified, nonetheless, by the national interest.

Interestingly, throughout his entire political career Pasqua was at the centre of various political-criminal scandals involving a series of members of the Corsican

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<sup>11</sup> This corresponds to just under 12 million euros in 2017; the conversion was made using the online converter of the INSEE, available at <https://www.insee.fr/fr/information/2417794>

<sup>12</sup> In France, the only cities authorised to open casinos are those considered to be tourist cities. Therefore, in the Paris region, the only casino is Enghien-les-Bains, a spa town in the Val d’Oise in the northern suburbs of Paris. However, some “Gaming Circles” registered as non-profit charities were created as places where it was possible to play poker, baccarat, and roulette. Historically considered to be banks of Corsican organized crime, these circles were almost all closed between 2010 and 2016. See <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/paris-ile-de-france/paris/cercles-jeu-paris-gros-histoires-troubles-1464941.html>

<sup>13</sup> In an internal settling of scores within the SAC, the entire family of the provincial head of the organization, the brigadier Jacques Massié, was killed on the night between 18 and 19 July 1981.

underworld. Despite his acquittal in the majority of the trials to which he was subjected, he was recognized as one of the protagonists in the events related to the casino of Annemasse. In April 2010 Pasqua was sentenced to 18 months on parole for “illegal financing” the party. According to the charges, in 1994 Pasqua, as Minister of the Interior, facilitated the opening of a casino in Annemasse, of which Michel Tomi was one of the owners together with Feliciaggi. Sold after a year, the pair made a profit of about 15 million euros. According to the judges, it was from these earnings that Tomi’s daughter (Marthe Mondoloni) paid about 1.25 million euros to the RPR to finance its 1999 European election campaign, despite the initial declaration that the funds were granted by another company owned by the duo, the *Congolaise de Gestion de Loterie* (COGÉLO).

Overall, Pasqua—and subsequently Sarkozy—represented the political components of the system. More specific attention will now be addressed to Michel Tomi, the character who epitomises the more recent development of *CorsAfrica*.

### ***From Paris to Africa: Michel Tomi, Gambling Emperor***

Michel Tomi, born in Algiers in 1947 to a family native to Tasso in the upper Taravo, began working in the gambling industry at the end of the 1960s. After starting out as a croupier in Monaco, he was employed in Marcel Francisci’s *Cercle de jeux Haussmann*, then in Jean-Dominique Fratoni’s Ruhl. In the 1980s he started running Bandol’s casino, together with his brother Jean (mayor of Tasso) and Robert Feliciaggi; however, the casino was closed down following a number of financial scandals (Follorou, 2014). Again with Robert Feliciaggi, owner of the Fortune’s Clubs in Congo, Tomi opened the Senegal PMU in the early 1990s. While broadcasting horse races in France on TV, they allowed African gamblers to bet on those same races. Over the years, they also opened branches in a large part of Western and Equatorial French Africa, particularly in Cameroon, Congo, Gabon and Mali.

The suspicion of the investigators, however, was that these companies also served as a means to launder the proceeds of criminal activities, especially those linked to a fellow countryman of Robert Feliciaggi: Jean-Jé Colonna, considered the boss of Southern Corsica. Jean-Jé was alleged to have played a key role in Robert’s election as mayor of Pila-Canale, although this has never been proven (*Le Monde*, 2006). In fact, Tomi and Feliciaggi’s African networks and companies appeared primarily to be *bases arrière* of Corsican criminal organisations, whose members in some cases took refuge to escape vendettas or arrests. Such a role was possible not only because of the ability of Tomi and Feliciaggi to build relationships of exchange with African political leaders

through shared social circles in local capitals, but also because of the participation of some senior officials (diplomatic or police) directly linked to Pasqua, then pro-Sarkozy components within the UMP. One of the enigmas concerned the precise relationship between Pasqua and Sarkozy. Although the latter undoubtedly benefited from the networks of the former, it seems inaccurate to consider him as a simple heir, as their relationship after 1983 appeared to be characterized more by mutual necessity than by trust. The choice of Sarkozy, once he had become President of the Republic, to dissolve the so-called “African Cell” and to appoint Claude Guéant as “Advisor for Africa” was arguably representative of this tendency.

In such a context, the presence of actors such as Michel Tomi allowed the French state to secure intermediaries that could be solicited in the commercial field, avoiding any direct involvement. Besides, these intermediaries could participate in electoral campaigns, as in the case of Tomi and Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, President of Mali, a kind of exchange that, some authors have suggested (Beau, 2014), was also at the basis of Francois Hollande and Laurent Fabius’ management of the Malian crisis.

If we consider *Franç.Afrique* as a system of exchange based on personal relationships, the friendship between Feliciaggi and Sassou-Nguesso or that between Tomi and Keita are thus particularly interesting as hub of several important businesses. Intercepted telephone calls, published by *Médiapart* from the proceedings against Michel Tomi, have shed light on a series of favours made by Tomi to Keita, including yachts, private medical visits, jackets, watches and trips (Arfi and Salvi, 2015a). According to the magistrates, these favours were expected to gain economic advantages for the companies of the Kabi group, Tomi’s holding company, which groups together most of his companies in Gabon and Mali (Carayol, 2015).

These intimate relationships with Presidents Bongo and Keita, described by Tomi as family members, seem to have been useful to other French companies related to the UMP galaxy of Hauts-de-Seine, along with the Pasqua network. In fact, it was also and above all thanks to the mediation of Michel Tomi that the company Gallice Protection obtained a training assignment for the presidential guard of Mali. It has been revealed that the founder of Gallice, Frederic Gallois, who was also former commander of the National Gendarmerie Intervention Group (GIGN), reached Tomi through Bernard Squarcini (Arfi and Salvi, 2015b). On a concluding note, although any clear account of the functionality of these non-state actors in Franco-African politics remains difficult to retrace and demonstrate, Tomi and Feliciaggi’s proximity to crucial political actors both in France and in Africa indicate that the forms of political control exercised through informal channels remained active at least until Sarkozy’s presidency. In other words, the political and criminal ties demonstrated by judicial inquiries concerning the

implementation of French forms of control over a foreign territory, seem to confirm how the grey area of business between state actors and non-state actors might actually be relevant to make sense of certain aspects of foreign policy.

### Some (Preliminary) Conclusions

In this article, we presented an initial account of the complex and frequently underestimated relational system of exchange, cooptation, collaboration and domination that has historically involved French political and economic elites, African ruling classes and some exponents of Corsican organised crime. By focusing on the way personal and social connections among French politicians and part of the Corsican underworld have contributed to and perpetrated a form of political domination that we have called *Cors.Afrique*, the article expected to shed some fresh light on a surprisingly understudied case within the larger system of *Franç.Afrique*. Although this work concentrates on a few specific actors and a particular period of time, we argue that the entirety of the French Fifth Republic has been punctuated by episodes and inquests suggesting that this structure has not been a contingent and deviant phenomenon, but rather an essential feature of French policy towards Africa. This appears to be even more substantial given that the overall *Franç.Afrique* can be considered a type of foreign policy whose main characteristics and principles have barely been tackled by the scholarly literature. Specifically, the contribution this article has made to the existing scholarship is twofold. Theoretically, we found the “racket theory” (Stirk, 1992; Heins, 2007; Brocling, 2014) to be particularly insightful when considering the role of non-state actors (NSAs) as “proxy actors” in the development of foreign policies (Held and Koenig-Archibugi, 2003; Dingwerth and Pattberg, 2006; Ougaard and Leander, 2010; Baumann and Stengel, 2014; Marchetti, 2016). The concept of “racket”, understood as a system of management based on a blurring dynamic between the “legal” and the “illegal”, has been particularly useful to make sense of France’s informal approach to control political dynamics in former colonies through the Corsican “Mafia”. This article, however, also contributed empirically by exploring the interrelations between actors like Jacques Foccart, Charles Pasqua, Michel Tomi and Robert Feliciaggi. By relying on the analysis of secondary sources and journalistic investigations on court proceedings concerning the connections between the French political arena and exponents of the Corsican “Mafia” in Africa, we have pursued a double objective. Firstly, we suggested that all these subjects belong to a system that has been defined by a common perception concerning the idea of acting for a common mission, namely, pursuing the national interest in Gaullist terms. Moreover, within this system an informal but clear distribution of roles and resources has been

fixed and maintained over the decades. Starting from this assumption, we challenged a certain definition of *FrançAfrique*, which tends to see Franco-African relations as an exception created by contingent and predatory factors. Relying on “racket theory”, we suggested instead that the inclusion of Corsican mobsters as informal members of the French foreign policy community resulted from a rational choice made by decision-makers who interpreted their own interests and visions as a general and shared interest.

Consequently, we aim to make a claim for further research able to push the analysis a step further, by also taking into consideration the impact of the changes that have occurred in the international distribution of power with time. While the lack of available public information on the topic has limited the possibilities of this article, we have provided a new and necessary contribution, which, we trust, will open new avenues of research on this subject.

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