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Violent and vibrant - Mexico's avocado boom and organized crime

A study commissioned by the Greens/EFA International Cluster

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The growing consumption of avocados globally has increased interest in the social, economic and environmental impacts of avocado production in Mexico, and in the political-criminal networks that have expanded around the industry. However, most studies tend to present organized crime and the use of violence as barriers to the market economy, arguing that criminal actors are only an obstacle to legal economic accumulation and trade. These assumptions have led to narratives of ‘state vs drug cartels’ and ‘avocado producers vs drug cartels’ in Michoacán, the Mexican state that has become the world's leading producer of the fruit. These narratives ignore the complex history of agro-industrial development, state interventions and the growth of criminal markets in the region.

Over the past decades, the legal market’s exponential growth has been accompanied by rising levels of violence and insecurity. Between 1994, the first year that the North American Free Trade Agreement was applied, and 2021, avocado production increased by 213% and value increased by 7 071%, in a market that has included the European Union since 2000, when the first EU–Mexico free trade agreement was signed. Contrary to studies that suggest market growth and violence are mutually exclusive, homicides increased as avocado business boomed. Between 2005 and 2015, homicides fluctuated between 17 and 24 per 100 000 people per year in Michoacán. However, between 2016 and 2021, as the production value of avocados exploded, homicides increased as well, reaching 54 homicides per 100 000 people (2 628 in total).

Moreover, in a region that experiences economic booms and high levels of insecurity, violence is a valuable political and economic tool. It enables new territories, markets, and value chains to be conquered and agricultural borders to expand, which happened systematically with avocados. Numerous studies have shown that in Mexico, and Michoacán in particular, public support for the agro-industry, private sector and organized crime tends to maintain unstable yet constant relationships that are characterized by confrontation and collusion. Therefore, the idea that crime is expanding to the detriment of the private sector is partly misleading. In fact, as this policy report shows, connections between public authorities, local elites and violent groups are particularly strong at the local level and central to the expansion of the market.

Most studies on avocado production and violence focus on the relationship between Mexico and the USA because Mexico consolidated its position as the leading trading partner and supplier of the US in the first half of 2023. However, in 1997, Mexico became the first Latin American country to sign an Economic Partnership, Political Coordination and Cooperation Agreement (Global Agreement) with the EU. Since the agreement came into force in 2000, bilateral trade has more than tripled and the EU is now Mexico's second-biggest export market. In 2013, leaders committed to update the EU–Mexico Global Agreement and final negotiations are in process, with ratification possibly in 2023.

In recent years, the EU has published various regulations aimed at improving vetting practices over imported goods. In particular, the 2023 EU's deforestation regulation requires companies trading in cattle, cocoa, coffee, oil palm, rubber, soya and wood, as well as products derived from these commodities, to conduct diligence on the value chain and to certify that the imported goods do not result from recent deforestation, forest degradation or infraction of local environmental and social laws. Although not included in the list of commodities, avocados and their production are heavily linked to environmental harm and organized crime, which is involved in the entire production and export process, and at the core of the gray area between licit and illicit markets.

In spite of the avocado industry's contribution to trade and local development, social organizations in Mexico and the EU have called for human rights and environmental protection to be placed at the heart of the discussions. Avocado production and exports – both to the US or the EU – display many worrying signs, of criminal organizations being involved in the market, documented violence, and environmental and health impacts.

As the EU and Mexico continue discussions about 'modernizing' the Global Agreement, this report highlights the complex relationships that exist between organized crime, public authorities and the private sector in the production of avocados. To better understand these links, this report argues that the illegality of certain activities and actors (for example, drug trafficking and drug cartels) are not a 'parasitic phenomenon', but are deeply embedded practices in local society and integral to the history of local and regional capital accumulation. For example, since the 1970s, local and international growth of Michoacán's drug economy was connected with public and private investments in infrastructures supporting the region's agricultural development. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, large-scale organization of drug trafficking was facilitated by the connections built between Michoacán and foreign consumer markets, initially the USA and then the EU.

The region is both attractive to and dependent on fluctuations in international legal and illegal demand. The

booming avocado industry has expanded in parallel to criminal organizations. Like limes, Michoacán avocados are a prime example of a flourishing legal market deeply infiltrated by criminal actors – and the free trade agreements acted as catalyzers for profit and market expansion, while violence has continued to rise. The avocado industry is also synonymous with serious environmental damage. In Michoacán, the increased international demand led to an expansion of land dedicated to avocado production, to the detriment of forest cover, resulting in deforestation and the subsequent degradation of soil, water and biodiversity. This agricultural expansion relied on the use of violence by multiple actors interested in turning forests and protected areas into agricultural land. According to governmental sources, 80% of the avocado orchards in Michoacán were established illegally, initially through unauthorized land use that was then turned into legal parcels thanks to corruption of public authorities.

According to the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR), between 2001 and 2018, gross deforestation occurred on 269 676 hectares (ha) in Michoacán (14 982 ha per year), of which 70.69% were transformed into grasslands and 28.16% into cropland. The substitution of forest by orchards is also associated with a reduction of fauna species, while studies found traces of chemical pesticides in the aquifer, resulting contaminated water for human consumption and associated health diseases. These impacts are directly tied to international demand, between 2012 and 2019, avocado trade from Mexico to Europe went from less than €10 million to a record €282 million.

This policy report presents how international demand, flourishing capitalism and organized crime groups have shaped the functioning of a multi-billion-dollar industry in which politico-criminal relations play a crucial role. It also shows the extent to which the search for a solution to deforestation – in the context of the EU 2023 regulation, for example – cannot be satisfied solely through environmental certifications. Even if public security and judicial measures were effective in prevent illicit agricultural expansion, which is not the case, illegal deforestation cannot be tackled without addressing the systemic corruption and inability of state agencies responsible for protecting the environmental and overseeing agriculture to carry out their missions. Similarly, the fight against criminal groups' involvement in avocado production would require a decisive commitment by the public prosecutor's office, something which is only a distant project, given the levels of impunity in Michoacán.

To understand the dynamics of violence that accompanied the avocado boom, and the potential impact of further liberalizing trade between Mexico and the EU, this report takes a political economy approach that combines fieldwork, interviews, and quantitative and spatial analysis. It presents the history of violent, rural capitalism in Michoacán, disentangles the social, economic and environmental impacts of the avocado trade, and proposes potential solutions.

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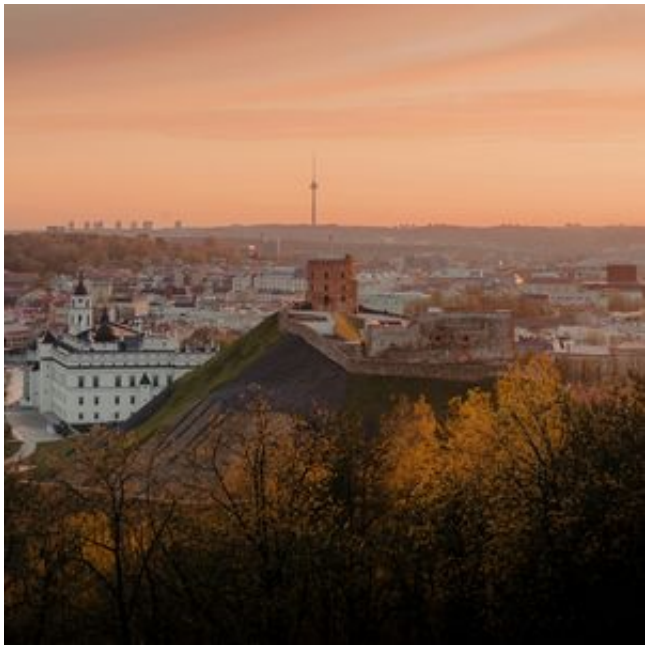
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