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RESEARCH

Ordinary vulnerabilities and antimafia intervention. A case of municipal dissolution beyond mafia strongholds

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Abstract

The dissolution of municipal councils for mafia infiltration is a key instrument of Italian antimafia policy. While most dissolutions have occurred in regions of long-standing mafia presence, less attention has been paid to cases emerging in territories not traditionally associated with mafia dynamics. This article examines the 2020 dissolution of the municipal council of Saint-Pierre, a small municipality in the Aosta Valley (Italy), as a revelatory case for understanding how exposure to mafia influence can take shape in such contexts. Drawing on documentary sources, administrative records, judicial materials, media coverage, and semi-structured interviews, the analysis shows that the conditions leading to dissolution did not stem from consolidated criminal control. Rather, they developed through the accumulation of ordinary administrative and political vulnerabilities, including limited capacity, organizational instability, and weak political oversight. These vulnerabilities created conditions of exposure that later acquired institutional relevance when subjected to preventive scrutiny. By showing how ordinary governance fragilities both enable forms of mafia influence and are redefined through antimafia intervention, the article advances a context-centred understanding of the dynamic interplay between mafia exposure and preventive state action in settings newly recognized as exposed.

Keywords Mafia presence · Antimafia policy · Municipal dissolution · Institutional vulnerability · Local governance · Preventive state intervention

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Introduction

Over the past decades, the dissolution of municipal councils for mafia conditioning has become one of the most distinctive instruments through which the Italian state seeks to counter the influence of organized crime within public institutions. Introduced in 1991 and currently regulated by Article 143 of the Consolidated Law on Local Authorities (Legislative Decree No. 267/2000, hereafter TUEL), this extraordinary administrative measure allows for the removal of elected councils when *concrete*, *univocal*, *and relevant* elements point to mafia conditioning or serious interference with administrative decision-making. Formally distinct from criminal proceedings – although frequently triggered by judicial investigations – municipal dissolution is conceived as a non-sanctioning intervention aimed at restoring administrative autonomy and impartiality rather than establishing individual criminal responsibility.

A growing body of scholarship has analysed municipal dissolution as a core component of Italian antimafia policy, highlighting its reliance on administrative discretion, its comparatively low evidentiary thresholds, and its preventive orientation (Mete 2006, 2009, 2016). Unlike criminal law, the dissolution procedure does not require proof beyond reasonable doubt, but operates through risk-oriented assessments grounded in indicators deemed capable of compromising the proper functioning of local administrations (Avviso Pubblico 2025). Socio-institutional and legal analyses have further pointed to the uneven territorial and temporal distribution of dissolutions, linking their activation to broader institutional dynamics, including prefectural discretion, political context, and shifting configurations of judicial and administrative attention (Mete 2016; Rolli 2013; Magri 2018).

In empirical terms, the large majority of municipal dissolutions have occurred in areas of long-standing mafia presence and historical settlement of mafia-type organizations. Since the introduction of the measure in 1991, a total of 402 dissolutions have been adopted, involving 294 local authorities. Eighty-nine per cent of these interventions have concerned municipalities located in Calabria, Campania, and Sicily – regions of historical genesis of Italian mafia organizations – with a strong concentration in a limited number of provinces. A smaller number of dissolutions have instead occurred in regions not traditionally associated with mafia presence, namely Northern and Central Italy (Avviso Pubblico 2025).

The activation of such an extraordinary administrative measure in contexts where the conditioning of public administration is neither consolidated nor self-evident poses a significant analytical challenge. In regions of historical genesis of mafia organizations, existing research has shown that administrative dysfunction may also be deliberately produced, sustained, or exploited by criminal organizations as part of broader strategies of institutional capture, aimed at securing control over resources, decision-making processes, and enforcement (Sergi and Vannucci 2025). In these settings, weaknesses in public administration are not merely a background condition, but may form an integral component of intentional criminal strategies.

Outside the regions of historical mafia genesis, however, the relationship between mafias and local public institutions has been described in different terms. Here, mafia actors tend to insert themselves into pre-existing environments characterized by opaque practices, maladministration, corruption, and other illicit arrangements, which function as opportunity structures for infiltration.

This article advances a further analytical step by focusing on a dimension that has received less systematic attention: the role of ordinary, non-intentional vulnerabilities in the functioning of local public administration. It argues that, in non-traditional mafia contexts, exposure to mafia influence may also emerge through the cumulative effects of routine administrative and political difficulties – such as limited administrative capacity, organizational instability, and weak political oversight – without presupposing either deliberate strategies of capture by criminal actors or pre-existing patterns of widespread maladministration and corruption. These vulnerabilities, while not exceptional in themselves, may nonetheless acquire institutional relevance once they are formally assessed and acted upon within an antimafia framework.

Against this background, the central research questions guiding the article are: how do ordinary institutional and political vulnerabilities structure local governance contexts in ways that render them exposed to mafia influence, and how are these configurations interpreted by state authorities as warranting municipal dissolution in settings not associated with the historical genesis of mafia organizations?

By addressing these questions, the article makes two main contributions. First, it advances a context-centred perspective on mafia infiltration, showing how exposure emerges from the interaction between ordinary features of local governance and the institutional assessment of local conditions, rather than from structurally embedded criminal control alone. Second, it sheds light on the interpretive processes through which institutional vulnerabilities come to acquire relevance under conditions of heightened attention, helping to explain why similar administrative configurations may lead to different institutional outcomes.

The empirical focus of the article is Saint-Pierre, a municipality in the Aosta Valley, a small alpine region in north-western Italy bordering France and Switzerland. In 2020, Saint-Pierre became the first municipality in the region to be dissolved for mafia infiltration. This development marked a critical turning point in a territorial context long regarded as marginal to mafia presence and often described, in public and institutional discourse, as largely immune from such dynamics. The dissolution took place in the context of the first major judicial investigation into mafia presence in the Aosta Valley. For decades, the region had been characterized by the absence of consolidated judicial evidence of mafia-type organizations, despite periodic warnings raised by investigative journalism, parliamentary debates, antimafia institutions, and civil society organizations. These alerts, however, rarely translated into criminal proceedings and were often framed as episodic or residual (Dagnes and Storti 2015). This perception began to shift with the *Geenna* investigation, which culminated in 2019 and brought to light ’ndrangheta-related networks operating in the region (Dagnes 2020). The investigation involved individuals suspected of mafia affiliation as well as local political actors, all current or former members of municipal councils, one of whom held an executive position as councillor responsible for finance and assets in the municipality of Saint-Pierre. [1]

[1] Several individuals were later convicted for participation in a mafia-type association. By contrast, judicial outcomes concerning local political actors – charged with forms of indirect involvement, including

The dissolution of Saint-Pierre unfolded in parallel with this broader judicial and institutional process. Following the developments that emerged from the *Geenna* investigation, between April and October 2019 a commission of access was appointed in Saint-Pierre under Article 143 TUEL to assess possible mafia influence on the local administration. At the conclusion of this procedure, the municipality was dissolved by presidential decree on 10 February 2020.[2]

According to the Minister of the Interior's report attached to the decree, the access commission attributed the dissolution to a combination of interrelated factors operating at different levels. First, the assessment referred to forms of electoral support provided by individuals linked to the 'ndrangheta in relation to the councillor under investigation in the *Geenna* case, contributing to her election. Second, the report highlighted the subsequent conduct of the same councillor once in office, describing a pattern of active interference in administrative management, in breach of the principle separating political direction from managerial responsibilities. Finally, at the organizational level, the commission described a municipal administration characterized by administrative disorder, structural weaknesses in internal controls, failures in revenue collection, and a tendency to favor specific economic operators, not always in full compliance with applicable regulations. This disordered administrative environment was considered to have generated opportunities and benefits for a range of actors, including – but not limited to – individuals and enterprises directly or indirectly connected to the mafia organization. Taken together, these elements were deemed capable of compromising the autonomy and proper functioning of the local administration.

Building on this case, the article investigates how the conditions under which municipal administrations become exposed to mafia influence take shape through the accumulation of ordinary institutional and political vulnerabilities within a local administration. The analysis draws on a qualitative research design combining documentary sources, media materials, and semi-structured interviews with institutional actors and local observers.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on mafia presence in non-traditional contexts and on local governance, bringing it into dialogue with scholarship on public administration to develop an analytical focus on institutional vulnerability. Section 3 outlines the data and methods employed. Sections 4 to 7 reconstruct the local political and institutional context of Saint-Pierre, tracing the emergence of administrative vulnerabilities, political dynamics, and their institutional reappraisal leading to dissolution. Section 8 discusses the broader implications of the case, highlighting how context-specific vulnerabilities intersect with discretionary state intervention in settings traditionally considered peripheral to mafia pres-

external participation – have been more complex and differentiated. In one case, the proceedings concluded with a full acquittal after a prolonged period of pre-trial detention; in the case of the member of the executive of the municipality of Saint-Pierre, at the time of writing the judicial proceedings are still ongoing following multiple appellate reviews.

[2] Following the developments of the *Geenna* investigation, commissions of access under Article 143 TUEL were appointed in both the municipality of Saint-Pierre and the municipality of Aosta, the regional capital. While the commission operating in Saint-Pierre led to the dissolution of the municipal council, the procedure concerning the municipality of Aosta did not result in dissolution.

ence. Section 9 concludes by summarizing the main contributions of the article and outlining implications for future research and institutional prevention.

Mafia, local governance, and institutional vulnerability

In recent years, scholarship on Italian mafias has increasingly questioned explanations that treat territorial expansion as either a straightforward replication of organizational models developed in areas of origin or as a process that necessarily results in stable and visible forms of criminal control. Research on mafia expansion has instead emphasized the adaptive, selective, and context-dependent nature of these processes, showing how the establishment of mafia presence in non-traditional areas is shaped by local conditions rather than by the simple transfer of pre-existing organizational patterns (Sciarrone 2019, 2021; Varese 2011; Calderoni et al. 2016; Sergi and Lavorgna 2016; Sergi 2025; Sergi and Storti 2021).

Within this perspective, analytical attention has progressively shifted from the internal characteristics of criminal organizations to the institutional, political, and economic configurations of destination contexts. Several contributions have highlighted how the ability of mafias to operate beyond their traditional territories depends to a significant extent on local governance arrangements, regulatory processes, and the quality of public institutions, rather than on the coercive capacity of criminal actors alone (La Spina 2005; Sciarrone 2025). Mafia expansion thus appears as a relational process, unfolding through selective interactions with political, administrative, and economic actors, and finding more favourable conditions in contexts marked by institutional fragility, opaque decision-making, or limited administrative capacity (Sciarrone 2012, 2019).

These dynamics have been extensively documented in studies focusing on Northern Italy, a set of territories long described as marginal or immune to mafia presence. Empirical research on these contexts has shown how mafia actors adapt their strategies to local opportunity structures, engaging with existing political and administrative configurations and exploiting discretionary spaces in local governance, without necessarily establishing direct or exclusive control over local institutions (Sciarrone 2019; Belloni and Vesco 2018; see also dalla Chiesa and Panzarasa 2012; dalla Chiesa and Cabras 2019). This literature has contributed to dismantling representations of mafia expansion as either episodic or externally imposed, highlighting instead the role of locally embedded institutional and relational dynamics.

Comparative and transnational studies have further reinforced this view by showing that mafia mobility and expansion are characterized by significant variation in organizational forms, degrees of visibility, and modes of interaction with local actors across different contexts (Allum 2016; Sergi 2025). Rather than following a single model, mafia presence outside areas of origin tends to intersect with pre-existing governance arrangements and regulatory practices, producing heterogeneous and often ambiguous configurations of influence. Within this framework, the distinction between mafia presence, attempts at institutional infiltration, and effective institutional control becomes analytically crucial. As several authors have noted, in non-traditional contexts mafia influence frequently operates alongside local dynamics that predate the arrival of criminal actors, as well as modes of governance characterized by high levels of discretion (Sciarrone 2019; Sciarrone and Storti 2014, 2019; Dagnes et al. 2020). Rather than representing an exogenous force disrupting otherwise "sound" institutional settings, mafia actors tend to insert themselves into relational and administrative configurations already marked by limited transparency and low levels of institutional awareness and scrutiny.

In this strand of research, local public administrations are therefore primarily approached as part of the opportunity structures within which mafia actors operate. Empirical attention has concentrated on contexts characterized by clientelism, corruption, and other illicit practices that facilitate mafia penetration. Thus, the functioning of public administrations is considered mainly in relation to these forms of illegality, rather than as an object of analysis in its own right.

Scholarship on state capture, for example, has emphasized the capacity of organized actors to deliberately shape rules and institutional processes in order to secure private advantages (e.g. Sergi and Vannucci 2025). Similarly, the literature on institutional corruption has highlighted how public institutions may be systematically diverted from their intended purposes through practices that, even if not always formally illegal, undermine their integrity and functioning (Thompson 2018).

While these approaches focus on intentional forms of influence, to explore a different configuration of exposure, however, it is useful to shift analytical focus from illicit practices to the ordinary functioning of local public administrations. This requires drawing on scholarship on public administration to examine how routine organizational constraints, capacity limitations, and politically strained governance arrangements may generate institutional vulnerabilities even in the absence of deliberate misconduct.

A substantial body of scholarship on public administration has emphasized that the performance of public institutions is shaped more by ordinary conditions of administrative capacity than by exceptional events or individual misconduct. In this literature, capacity is understood as a multidimensional property of public organizations, encompassing the availability of resources, professional competences, organizational routines, and coordination mechanisms (Painter and Pierre 2004; Wu et al. 2015). Rather than being evenly distributed, administrative capacity varies significantly across institutional settings and territorial contexts, producing uneven abilities to plan, implement, and monitor public action.

These variations are particularly evident at the subnational level. Research on local government has shown how administrative performance is often constrained by structural factors such as small organizational size, limited professionalization, and restricted access to specialized expertise. In such settings, difficulties in administrative management tend to emerge not as isolated failures, but as persistent conditions affecting service delivery, regulatory oversight, and financial management (Goldsmith and Page 2010; Kuhlmann et al. 2025). Capacity deficits thus take shape as systemic features of local governance arrangements, especially in small or peripheral jurisdictions.

Scholars have also highlighted how increasing institutional complexity can further strain administrative capacity (Christensen and Lægreid 2011). Processes of decentralization, functional fragmentation, and the layering of reforms have expanded the responsibilities of public administrations while often leaving coordination mechanisms underdeveloped. As a result, public organizations are frequently required to operate across overlapping institutional arenas, cope with ambiguous mandates, and reconcile competing logics of action (Ansell et al. 2017; Christensen and Lægreid 2011). Under these conditions, maintaining coherent oversight and procedural consistency becomes an ongoing challenge rather than a stable organizational achievement.

Within this context, the gap between formal rules and everyday administrative practice has been a central concern of implementation research. Classic studies have shown how policies are routinely reshaped as they move from formal design to practical execution, through processes of interpretation, prioritization, and adaptation that reflect organizational constraints and situational pressures (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984). More recent work has further emphasized how administrative actors engage in "policy work" through pragmatic adjustments and informal routines that allow institutions to function despite limited resources and managerial overload (Brodkin 2011; Hupe 2019). From this perspective, discretion and informality do not necessarily signal deviance, but often represent ordinary responses to structural capacity constraints.

These processes have been exacerbated in many public sectors by long-term processes of fiscal restraint and reform. Analyses of public administration in contexts of austerity have documented how budget cuts, staffing reductions, and organizational restructuring tend to increase procedural burdens while simultaneously weakening monitoring and control functions (Di Mascio and Natalini 2014; Mascio and Natalini 2015; Pollitt 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). Over time, such pressures may contribute to the normalization of minimal-compliance practices, the routinization of emergency solutions, and a growing reliance on informal coordination to sustain everyday administrative activity.

Importantly, scholarship on local governance has also emphasized that administrative capacity is closely intertwined with political capacity. Weak leadership, fragmented political arenas, and unstable patterns of representation may undermine the ability of elected officials to provide strategic direction and effective oversight, thereby exacerbating administrative strain. Rather than operating as separate domains, political and administrative fragilities tend to reinforce one another, contributing to cumulative governance difficulties in which problems of coordination, prioritization, and control become particularly acute (Pierre 1999).

Taken together, this literature suggests that difficulties in public administration are frequently generated within ordinary institutional dynamics rather than through exceptional breakdowns or external shocks. Administrative fragility emerges as a cumulative condition, shaped by capacity constraints, organizational complexity, and implementation pressures. Approaching governance through this lens allows for an analysis of institutional vulnerability that is analytically independent from questions of criminal intent or illegality, while remaining attentive to the structural conditions under which public administrations operate.

In these terms, ordinary administrative and political vulnerabilities can be understood as configurations that may generate concrete openings for external influence. Limited administrative capacity and staffing limitations may reduce the ability of public administrations to ensure continuity, monitor procedures, and enforce rules consistently. Under such conditions, delays, backlogs, and procedural uncertainties can create pressures for pragmatic solutions, increasing reliance on informal practices and discretionary adjustments. Organizational instability and weak political oversight can also blur the boundaries between political direction and administrative execution, weakening the capacity of institutional actors to resist external requests or to uphold procedural constraints. These conditions do not necessarily involve intentional misconduct, but may nonetheless contribute to environments in which access to decision-making processes becomes more permeable and forms of influence can more easily be exercised and normalized.

When considered alongside the literature on mafia expansion in non-traditional contexts, these insights into the ordinary functioning of local public administrations acquire particular relevance. If mafia actors tend to insert themselves into environments characterized by pre-existing opportunity structures, the conditions under which such structures take shape cannot be reduced to illicit practices alone. The organizational constraints, capacity limitations, and routine modes of operation discussed above therefore constitute a crucial part of the institutional environments within which mafia influence may emerge, even in the absence of deliberate collusion or widespread corruption.

Data and methods

This article adopts a qualitative case study design centred on the municipality of Saint-Pierre, which was dissolved in 2020 for mafia infiltration. The case is approached not as representative of mafia-affected local governments, but as analytically relevant for observing how institutional weaknesses arise, accumulate, and acquire relevance within a territorial context traditionally considered marginal to mafia dynamics. Saint-Pierre is treated as a revelatory case (Yin 2018), insofar as it allows for close observation of institutional dynamics that are often less visible in contexts of long-standing mafia presence.

The analysis draws on documentary and institutional sources, media materials, and semi-structured interviews. These sources are used to reconstruct the sequence of events preceding the dissolution and the everyday functioning of the municipal administration.

Documentary analysis focused on institutional and administrative materials related to the dissolution of Saint-Pierre and to the functioning of the municipal administration in the years preceding it. Given the confidential nature of the access commission report appointed under Article 143 TUEL, the analysis draws primarily on the report of the Minister of the Interior attached to the presidential decree ordering the dissolution. While containing several redactions, this document represents the formal institutional output through which the findings of the access commission were translated into an administrative decision, and thus constitutes a key source for reconstructing how vulnerabilities and procedural anomalies were officially interpreted and justified. As the formal justification accompanying the decree, the report is treated as a situated and purposive document, reflecting a specific institutional framing of local dynamics. It is therefore analyzed not at face value but as an interpretative construction through which heterogeneous administrative and political elements are assembled into a coherent narrative of institutional vulnerability, and its claims are contextualized and, where possible, contrasted with other sources.

This material was complemented by the systematic examination of municipal administrative acts available through open administration and transparency portals in the period preceding the dissolution (2013–2019), including council resolutions, executive decisions, budgetary documents, contracts, and related administrative acts. These sources made it possible to reconstruct patterns of administrative functioning and to situate the commission's assessments within the routine activity of the municipality.

The analysis also draws on judicial documents produced in the context of the *Geenna* investigation, including the precautionary custody order and the judgments issued at different stages of the proceedings. These materials are not used to assess criminal responsibility, but to contextualize the administrative intervention within a broader institutional environment marked by heightened attention to possible mafia presence in the region.

In addition, the study relies on local press coverage from 2019 to 2025, including reporting on the *Geenna* investigation, the appointment of the access procedure, the dissolution of the municipal council, and the subsequent extraordinary administration. Media sources are used to trace the public framing of the case over time and to situate the administrative intervention within shifting narratives in a region long described as peripheral to mafia dynamics.

The empirical analysis is further informed by 18 semi-structured interviews conducted between August and December 2025. Interviewees include former mayors; current and former councillors and assessors from both majority and minority groups; current and former municipal civil servants, including municipal secretaries; local observers such as journalists; representatives of civil society organizations active in the antimafia field; and institutional actors involved in the access phase to the municipality and in the subsequent phase of extraordinary administration.

Interviewees were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Initial access to the field was established through key informants, who helped identify further relevant participants. Subsequent interviews were guided by two main criteria. First, attention was paid to covering different institutional positions, including political actors across different electoral cycles, administrative personnel, and external observers. Second, interviewees were selected on the basis of their involvement in, or proximity to, key events and processes identified through documentary analysis. Particular effort was made to include a range of perspectives, including both actors aligned with dominant local configurations and those described by others as dissenting or marginal within local political dynamics. Interviews were conducted iteratively until a point of thematic saturation was reached, whereby additional interviews did not substantially alter the interpretive framework emerging from the data.

These interviews are used not to establish factual truth or individual responsibility, but to reconstruct key events and the meanings attributed to them by actors occupying different institutional positions.

Interviews lasted between 46 and 121 min. All interviews were recorded with the consent of participants, with the exception of two cases in which interviewees explicitly requested that the conversation not be recorded. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed alongside documentary and media sources.

The analysis of the empirical materials as a whole follows an iterative qualitative strategy combining the reconstruction of temporal sequences with the identification of recurrent patterns across sources. In line with a process-tracing approach, the study reconstructs the sequence of political, administrative, and institutional developments leading to the municipal dissolution, paying particular attention to how different elements accumulated and interacted over time. The analysis proceeds through the alignment of documentary evidence, interview accounts, and media sources, allowing for the gradual clarification of how specific configurations of administrative strain and political dynamics came to be interpreted as indicators of institutional vulnerability.

The local political and institutional setting of Saint-Pierre

Saint-Pierre is a small municipality of approximately 3,300 inhabitants located in the Aosta Valley, a mountainous region in north-western Italy characterized by a high degree of institutional autonomy and a fragmented territorial structure. After a long phase of demographic stability lasting well into the second half of the twentieth century, Saint-Pierre experienced sustained population growth from the 1970s onward, accelerating during the 1980s and 1990s,[3] driven by residential expansion and its proximity to the regional capital. Over time, this growth increasingly reshaped Saint-Pierre into a residential "commuter town," accompanied by significant changes in the composition of the local population.

From an economic standpoint, the municipality is characterized by a mixed local economy combining agricultural activities, small-scale commerce, and services, closely intertwined with its residential function. Agricultural production, particularly fruit cultivation and viticulture, represents a relevant component of the local economy and is supported by cooperative structures operating at the regional level. Unlike many municipalities in the region, Saint-Pierre has not historically been a primary tourist destination, although it hosts some tourism- and hospitality-related activities. The area also presents a locally embedded associational fabric, including a range of voluntary organizations active in areas such as social support, civil protection, and community life. While relatively small in scale, this network reflects forms of civic engagement that are typical of comparable local contexts.

From 1994 to 2010, Saint-Pierre was governed by the same mayor, affiliated with the Union Valdôtaine (UV), the dominant regional autonomist party. This long phase of political continuity coincided with intense urban and infrastructural development,

[3] According to official census data, Saint-Pierre's population remained relatively stable until the early 1970s and then increased steadily over the following decades, rising from 1,473 inhabitants in 1971 to 1,797 in 1981, 2,199 in 1991, 2,615 in 2001, 3,112 in 2011, and 3,240 in 2021.

largely oriented toward residential expansion. The mayor, whose professional background was in technical fields, played a central role in shaping this development strategy and proved effective in securing regional funding aligned with broader demographic and territorial trends within the Aosta Valley. During this period, local governance was characterized by a relatively stable political environment and a strong personalization of leadership.

This phase came to an end in 2010 due to mayoral term limits, but also against the backdrop of increasing internal tensions within the UV, both locally and at the regional level. These tensions reflected a broader process of fragmentation of the autonomist political field, marked by splits, the emergence of new political formations, and growing electoral volatility. In the 2010 municipal elections, the UV's local section nominated its own coordinator as mayoral candidate, assuming electoral victory. This assumption proved unfounded: a civic list composed largely of politically inexperienced candidates won the election, benefitting from internal divisions within the UV, opposition from the outgoing mayor, and a more general climate of political disaffection.

The 2010–2015 council thus entered office without prior governing experience and without having anticipated electoral success. This political discontinuity marked a clear shift in local governance. While the new mayor and council sought to provide a new political direction to municipal offices, their limited governing experience made interactions with an administrative apparatus accustomed to a high degree of autonomy and informal self-regulation particularly difficult. These difficulties were further compounded by limitations in the functioning of the municipal secretary, the senior administrative official responsible for coordinating municipal offices, appointed in the aftermath of the political turnover. This configuration strained relations with municipal offices and contributed to the emergence of internal organizational tensions.

The political landscape further evolved in the run-up to the 2015 elections, which took place amid intensified regional political conflict and continued fragmentation of the autonomist camp, and resulted in the council term later dissolved for mafia infiltration. The list that eventually won the 2015 election was a heterogeneous coalition led by a mayoral candidate affiliated with the UV, bringing together candidates associated with different regional autonomist movements as well as a group of so-called "independent" figures. The opposing list, formally civic in nature, was closely connected to a newly formed regional autonomist party that had recently split from the UV. Its mayoral candidate was the regional leader of this new political formation, highlighting the direct reverberation of regional autonomist conflicts within local electoral competition in Saint-Pierre. The narrow margin of electoral victory, with a difference of only 70 votes, and the presence of strong internal divisions within the governing majority would later shape the dynamics of local governance, but at the time the council took office, these features primarily reflected a broader crisis of political representation and leadership at both the local and regional levels.

Institutional vulnerabilities and the erosion of administrative control

By the time the council elected in 2015 took office, Saint-Pierre's municipal administration was operating under conditions of significant institutional strain, as noted by former municipal secretaries and elected officials. These conditions did not emerge abruptly, nor can they be attributed to a single cause. Rather, they were the cumulative result of a phase of political turnover beginning in 2010 and unfolding over the following years, its organizational repercussions within municipal offices, and increasing pressure on a structurally small administrative apparatus. Over time, these dynamics progressively weakened the municipality's capacity to monitor procedures, ensure continuity in administrative practices, and enforce ordinary rules.

A first source of vulnerability stemmed from the limited size and low redundancy of the municipal administration. In a small municipality such as Saint-Pierre, administrative functions were concentrated in a restricted number of offices and individuals, making the system particularly sensitive to turnover, absences, and internal conflicts. In the years following 2010, several key positions were affected by retirements, prolonged absences, and unresolved competition over responsibilities, as consistently reported by former administrators and civil servants.

> Basically, the administration was running on fumes, mainly because the financial office had no head, so it had to be managed by the municipal secretary. The technical office, my God… the technical office had the opposite problem. […] I was elected in May. In one of the first weeks, the head of the technical office came to see me and said: 'Look, my appointment as head of the technical office expires on June 30. You should know that I have no intention of continuing; on the contrary, I'm doing everything I can to leave Saint-Pierre.' […] So if the financial office was already wobbling, the technical one… I then started to realize that there were internal rivalries […]. And that's when I became aware of this internal conflict. (Former mayor, dissolved administration)

These disruptions undermined the continuity of administrative knowledge and practices, requiring repeated adjustments and informal solutions. Interviewees across different institutional roles emphasized that each change in personnel entailed a partial "restart" of procedures, with limited opportunities for sedimentation and institutional learning.

These dynamics were particularly consequential in relation to financial administration. Throughout this period, according to administrative documentation and interview accounts, the financial office operated with a severely reduced staff and, for extended phases, without a formally appointed head. Interview accounts indicate that the responsibility for overseeing financial procedures increasingly fell on the municipal secretary, further concentrating decision-making and control functions. This configuration generated a systemic bottleneck: delays in commitments, payments, and liquidations accumulated, while the monitoring and enforcement of municipal revenues – such as local taxes and fees – became increasingly sporadic.

> Municipal administrations stand on two pillars: the financial service and the technical service – they really are the fundamental pillars. Having a municipality like ours with a financial service in such poor shape was, objectively, a huge problem. Because if the technical service is understaffed, at worst things just don't get done. But if the financial service is stalled, everything comes to a halt, because the technical service depends on the financial one for commitments, payments, liquidations, VAT… but also for staff costs, for revenues. That's the core. (Municipal secretary)

As a result, significant amounts of municipal credits remained unclaimed, and ordinary mechanisms of financial control were partially suspended, with repercussions for the functioning of the administration as a whole.

Institutional strain was further exacerbated by broader policy developments and external pressures. On the one hand, during this period, local administrations were operating under conditions of fiscal constraint linked to the repercussions of the global financial crisis on state–region fiscal arrangements (Vesan 2012). On the other hand, in a territorially fragmented setting marked by a prevalence of small local authorities, administrative rationalization policies had been progressively introduced by the regional government. Specifically, Regional Law No. 6/2014 introduced mandatory associated management of key local government functions among municipalities, including financial administration, technical services, and organizational functions, with the aim of enhancing administrative capacity through shared resources. Following the entry into force of the reform, the municipality of Saint-Pierre established a five-year convention with the neighboring municipality of Sarre, the second-largest municipality after the regional capital, designating Sarre as the lead authority. Despite its objectives, this arrangement did not eliminate formal lines of responsibility and further increased the workload of already strained offices.

> It was a convention between two municipalities, two municipalities that each kept their own organization, mayor, deputy mayor… so every office formally became a single shared office, but in practice it was constantly being pulled in different directions by one municipal administration or the other. […] Staff had to do double the work: the financial office had to prepare the budget of Saint-Pierre and the budget of Sarre. And since Sarre was the lead municipality, its budget always came first, and only afterwards Saint-Pierre's. And we […] were always a bit in a subordinate position. […] The secretary used to say: 'damn it, you can't ask me to start drafting Saint-Pierre's budget when Sarre's still hasn't been done'. Managing the offices was not easy. (Former mayor, dissolved administration)

Rather than simplifying procedures, the arrangement required the parallel management of two distinct administrative systems, contributing to delays and reinforcing perceptions of subordination and loss of control on the part of Saint-Pierre's administration, as reflected in administrative records and interview accounts. Although designed to enhance administrative capacity through resource sharing, this reform introduced additional coordination burdens and organizational complexity, thereby exacerbating existing constraints, and pointing to a broader paradox whereby capacity-building measures, when implemented in contexts of structural fragility, may contribute to the production of new vulnerabilities.

Taken together, these conditions did not amount to illegality or deliberate misconduct. They did, however, significantly erode the municipality's capacity to exercise effective administrative oversight. By the mid-2010s, Saint-Pierre's administration showed a growing inability to clearly delimit responsibilities, ensure procedural compliance, and respond to emerging issues in a timely and coordinated manner. This loss of control created an institutional environment in which exceptions became easier to tolerate, informal practices more difficult to contain, and deviations from ordinary procedures increasingly normalized.

Political dynamics and the active use of institutional vulnerabilities

The institutional vulnerabilities described in the previous section did not unfold in a political vacuum. As already outlined above, in the run-up to the 2015 municipal elections Saint-Pierre's local arena was marked by heightened uncertainty and competition, in a context of regional autonomist turmoil and realignments that reverberated at the municipal level.

Within this setting, candidate recruitment followed pragmatic assessments of electoral mobilization rather than prior experience or programmatic alignment. Interview accounts indicate that, ahead of the 2015 elections, both competing lists sought individuals perceived as capable of mobilizing votes within specific segments of the local electorate. In this context, the candidate who would later be elected and appointed to the finance and assets portfolio was approached by both lists, despite being personally unknown to the list promoters and having no previous involvement in local politics. Her candidacy was not rooted in established political relationships, but in her identification as a representative of families of Calabrian origin residing in Saint-Pierre, and in the expectation that she could mobilize electoral support among them. As one former local administrator recalled:

> […] "someone from their group should really get involved in the administration" […] because in the end most of them are Calabrian. And talking like that, "my wife might be interested," and voilà. […] I mean, she really fit what we needed: a female figure, representing a large family, and she had also studied a bit, which could be important for understanding things like the budget and finances. (Former local administrator 1, dissolved administration)

Once elected and appointed to office, the councillor entered a municipal administration already marked by significant organizational strain. In this context, the weakened functioning of administrative offices created opportunities for individual political actors to assume informal but influential roles in the management of everyday governance. Several interviewees recalled how, in the face of stalled procedures and unresolved administrative issues, the councillor holding the finance and assets portfolio increasingly inserted herself directly into the everyday functioning of administrative offices. As one former local administrator explained:

> For me, municipal civil servants were municipal civil servants, and my relationship with them was a working one. I would never have gone there and – well – I would go there and say, “listen, I need this thing done, can you move it forward for me?” and that was it. I would never have sat there in her place, going through things together, looking at files side by side. There is a boundary between administrators and civil servants, and perhaps she went a bit beyond that – yes, that’s true.
>
> Because when it emerged that she had obtained employees’ passwords, […] maybe there was also some good faith involved, but you just don’t do that, you don’t do that! The relationship between civil servants and administrators has to be just that, a relationship between civil servants and administrators, full stop. Perhaps on that point she went a bit too far….
>
> I mean, I would go there every day, stay for an hour, an hour and a half, and then leave – check things and go. She, on the other hand, might stay there all day. On the one hand you think, “damn, what a committed administrator!” You think, “damn, she has all this time… well done! Chapeau!” And how do you tell someone like that to stop? (Former local administrator 2, dissolved administration)

Her interference in administrative domains was not initially perceived as problematic; rather, it was often framed as a pragmatic and welcomed response to an administration struggling to function under conditions of strain. This assessment was echoed by another former local administrator, who described the situation they found in the municipal administration upon taking office as follows:

> A complete mess! We found a municipality that was disorganized, barely functioning, and […] the atmosphere inside the offices was one of deep dissatisfaction. […] There was a serious administrative and bureaucratic situation, with extremely long processing times […] there was a very long list of creditors… and that, I have to say, was a really good job that [the councillor holding the finance and assets portfolio] did personally, personally stepping in to clear outstanding payments where they were due. (Former local administrator 3, dissolved administration)

Political intrusiveness into administrative domains was thus normalized as a way to “get things done,” especially in areas where delays or inaction risked generating visible discontent among citizens.

These dynamics were particularly evident in policy domains characterized by high discretion and weak procedural insulation, such as financial management, procurement, and the provision of local services. As later documented by the access commission and recalled in interviews, political interference in ongoing administrative processes increasingly took the form of informal requests, anticipatory communications to selected economic operators, and selective involvement in specific administrative procedures, in some cases also involving actors connected to mafia networks as identified in the Geenna investigation. While such practices did not always translate into direct violations of formal rules, they contributed to a progressive blurring of boundaries between political direction and administrative execution. Over time, this blurring reduced the capacity of offices to resist external pressures or to reassert procedural constraints.

From procedural erosion to state intervention

The reconstruction developed in the previous sections helps to clarify how practices initially tolerated as pragmatic responses to administrative strain gradually acquired a different meaning. Within Saint-Pierre, deviations from ordinary procedures had become embedded in everyday governance routines and were commonly justified by reference to urgency, effectiveness, and responsiveness to local demands. Over time, however, the accumulation of such practices produced a pattern of procedural erosion that could no longer be read as episodic or incidental.

This shift became visible when the municipal administration was subjected to external scrutiny. The access commission appointed under Article 143 TUEL documented a prolonged condition of administrative disorder and recurrent procedural anomalies across key areas of municipal activity. While the commission's mandate was limited to assessing the presence of concrete and relevant indicators of mafia infiltration or undue interference with administrative decision-making, its findings highlighted a systematic weakening of procedural safeguards and internal controls. These findings subsequently informed the institutional evaluation that led to the dissolution of the municipal council. In articulating this assessment, the commission explicitly linked the institutional relevance of individual irregularities to their cumulative and generalized character, situating them within the broader conditions of municipal governance:

> A condition in light of which the Commission reads the findings concerns the general conditions of the municipality of Saint-Pierre […], whose administrative management is characterized by improvisation and disorder […]. In this context, anomalous management practices were identified […], including the allocation of contracts repeatedly to the same economic operators, in breach of the principle of rotation of assignments […]. The explanation provided was the intention to promote local entrepreneurship: an intention which, although abstractly understandable, must nevertheless always be grounded in legality and in respect for the rules. (Access Commission findings, as incorporated into the Minister of the Interior's report annexed to the Presidential decree of dissolution)

From this external perspective, practices that had been sustained locally through political accommodation and organizational fragility were reclassified as indicators of compromised administrative autonomy and reduced capacity to resist external influence. Importantly, the assessment did not rest exclusively on the identification of actors connected to organized crime. As emphasized in the commission's report, several of the documented anomalies benefited individuals and economic operators with no links to criminal investigations, underscoring that the issue at stake concerned the overall integrity of municipal governance rather than isolated instances of illicit conduct.

From the perspective of local actors, however, the same practices were framed as widespread and non-exceptional, and were not necessarily associated with intentional criminal designs. As one interviewee put it:

> When the commissioners came and, for six months, rummaged through everything they could possibly find… In the other seventy-three municipalities in the Valley […] they would have found borderline situations everywhere, but not cases where there was necessarily some criminal scheme behind them. Because very often it takes more effort to get everything perfectly in order than to just keep things moving, even if there is some small hitch… but a hitch that really isn't one… because if you run a tender and only one person takes part and you speed things up a bit, you haven't harmed anyone, there was only that one bidder! Maybe you accept a guarantee that arrives two days late, well, so be it! In the end, if they had gone into the other municipalities, they would have found the same things. (Former municipal secretary)

The divergence between local perceptions of ordinariness and institutional criteria of acceptability marks a critical threshold, at which practices sustained through everyday governance cease to be tolerable from a preventive state perspective. In this sense, the dissolution of the municipal council reflects an institutional reaction to the cumulative weakening of procedural boundaries, beyond a direct response to specific criminal acts. The intervention of the state operated as a reassertion of formal authority over a local administrative environment in which the capacity to enforce ordinary rules had been progressively eroded. What had remained governable within the local context through informal adjustments and discretionary practices was redefined, at the institutional level, as incompatible with the requirements of administrative impartiality, transparency, and autonomy.

The case of Saint-Pierre thus illustrates how sustained administrative vulnerability, when combined with fragmented political oversight, can transform localized governance arrangements into grounds for exposure to criminal influence, including mafia influence, as evidenced here by elements emerging from the Geenna investigation, and, consequently, for extraordinary institutional intervention, once a threshold of institutional tolerability is crossed. Rather than arising abruptly, the conditions leading to dissolution were produced through a gradual process in which organizational fragility and political dynamics reinforced one another over time. Reconstructing this process is essential for understanding the rationale of state intervention in cases of municipal dissolution and for situating such measures within a broader framework of institutional and administrative prevention, beyond a narrow focus on mafia alone.

Discussion

This article has approached the dissolution of the municipal council of Saint-Pierre not as a representative case of mafia infiltration, but as an analytically informative one. Saint-Pierre does not stand for a typical local government affected by organized crime, nor is it meant to be generalized in a comparative sense. Rather, its analytical value lies in the way it renders visible a set of institutional dynamics that often remain opaque in larger or more structurally "noisy" contexts. The small size of the municipality, its location in a region traditionally considered peripheral to mafia dynamics, and the absence of long-standing criminal domination allow the processes preceding dissolution to be observed with unusual clarity.

Precisely because Saint-Pierre lacked the features commonly associated with mafia-affected territories, the case makes it possible to disentangle mafia influence from more ordinary forms of institutional vulnerability. The findings show that the conditions leading to dissolution were not the result of a sudden criminal takeover, but of a gradual erosion of administrative capacity and procedural safeguards, closely intertwined with political fragmentation and weak forms of local leadership, within which actors identified in the Geenna investigation as connected to 'ndrangheta networks were able to operate. Over time, organizational strain and limited professional resources contributed to the routinization of emergency-oriented administrative practices, while political dynamics normalized informal interventions as functional responses to institutional weakness, thereby creating conditions in which forms of mafia-related influence could more easily take shape.

The administrative crisis was inseparable from a crisis of the political field at both local and regional level. Fragmentation, unstable coalitions, and weak steering capacity shaped the municipality's ability to provide oversight, define priorities, and sustain procedural discipline. Rather than appearing as an external factor acting upon an otherwise stable administration, political instability contributed to producing and amplifying administrative vulnerability, further weakening the capacity of local governance to contain external influence, including that associated with mafia-linked actors. As noted by Martone (2015) with reference to the dissolution of Rome's X Municipality, political fragmentation and the personalization of local power may constitute a critical precondition for dissolution, insofar as they weaken oversight and render administrative dysfunctions institutionally legible as indicators of exposure, even prior to the consolidation of criminal control.

Analytically, this suggests that political and administrative fragilities did not operate as separate domains, but reinforced one another over time: short-term political accommodation and the normalization of discretionary interventions made everyday governance increasingly dependent on informal arrangements, thereby weakening institutional safeguards against illicit influence. This intertwining of political and administrative fragilities is crucial for understanding why vulnerabilities accumulated and how they came to be recognized as indicative of institutional exposure once subjected to heightened scrutiny.

The revelatory nature of the case also stems from its capacity to expose how the boundaries between acceptable governance practices and problematic conduct are not fixed, but context-dependent and institutionally negotiated. Saint-Pierre thus does not illustrate “how mafia infiltration works” in general, but rather how institutional environments that appear ordinary and low-risk can nonetheless become exposed, ultimately triggering extraordinary state measures.

Against this background, a central implication of the case concerns the way antimafia intervention relates to ordinary governance vulnerabilities. Under Article 143 TUEL, municipal dissolution is formally framed as a preventive and non-sanctioning measure, grounded in an assessment of risk rather than in a criminal-law determination of individual responsibility (Avviso Pubblico 2025). In practice, the Saint-Pierre case suggests that the activation of this instrument cannot be fully understood by reference to legal criteria alone. While conceived as a preventive measure, dissolution also operates as a classificatory intervention that reorganizes a dispersed set of signals – criminal, administrative, and political – within a single institutional frame of vulnerability.

From an analytical standpoint, this means that the intervention does not simply “correct” a set of irregularities. It produces a formalized reading of local governance through which heterogeneous practices and relationships are reinterpreted as incompatible with acceptable standards of public administration once viewed through an antimafia lens. This classificatory effect becomes particularly salient when the underlying vulnerabilities are not reducible to intentional illegality. As Mete (2016) has argued with reference to municipal dissolution more broadly, antimafia intervention may operate as a lever not only against mafia actors, but also against forms of illegality embedded in local political and administrative practices, including clientelistic arrangements and broader informal systems of illicit exchange that undermine the proper functioning of local governance. The Saint-Pierre case adds a further step to this argument by showing how even non-intentional, ordinary conditions of administrative fragility – capacity deficits, procedural erosion, reliance on informality as a coping strategy – can become consequential once they are scrutinized and interpreted as potential enabling conditions for mafia influence.

More broadly, the case points to a pattern of state intervention that resonates with analyses of governance under constraint. When public administrations operate with limited problem-solving capacity – a condition not necessarily resolved by institutional reforms aimed at rationalization, and which may in some cases even be paradoxically exacerbated by them – extraordinary interventions tend to concentrate and simplify complex governance failures within single institutional responses, especially under conditions of heightened risk sensitivity (Lodge and Wegrich 2014). In this sense, municipal dissolution can be read not only as a response to specific irregularities, but also as an instrument through which the state manages situations in which ordinary governance mechanisms appear insufficient.

From this perspective, the dissolution of Saint-Pierre can also be read as an intervention with effects extending beyond the immediate administrative sphere. In a region long perceived as marginal to mafia dynamics, the dissolution functioned as a high-salience institutional signal: it marked a shift in the public and institutional framing of risk and indicated that certain modes of local governance – while not necessarily exceptional in themselves – were no longer acceptable under conditions of intensified scrutiny. This dynamic is consistent with assessments that emphasize the co-constitutive relationship between mafia and antimafia, whereby policies aimed at combating organized crime also contribute to defining how mafia presence becomes visible and actionable (Sciarrone 2025).

The case thus illuminates the territorially differentiated operation of municipal dissolution as a tool of state intervention. While formally governed by uniform legal criteria, the application of dissolution under Article 143 TUEL unfolds in practice within uneven institutional and political landscapes. What triggers intervention is not solely the presence of specific irregularities, but the way in which they are interpreted within a particular set of factors. Beyond the preventive orientation of the instrument, which sets the general framework for such assessments, the crossing of the threshold for intervention is shaped by a combination of context-specific drivers, including the emergence of judicial indications of mafia presence and a shift in institutional attention within territories previously perceived as low-risk. In settings such as the Aosta Valley, even limited or ambiguous elements may acquire heightened significance precisely because they are evaluated against this changing background. As noted by an institutional actor involved in the post-dissolution phase with reference to Saint-Pierre, similar situations would likely not have led to dissolution in municipalities located in areas of entrenched mafia presence, yet were deemed sufficient in this case precisely because they were interpreted within a context newly recognized as exposed.

> My assessment is that there was certainly a part of the community [referring to local ’ndrangheta-related networks] that attempted to gain access to the inner workings of the municipal administration – this, without doubt. […] So the attempt was there. What I am skeptical about, however, is whether this attempt actually succeeded. I cannot say that I found a municipality dominated by the ’ndrangheta, absolutely not. And I specify this because if you look at other Italian contexts, in other geographical areas, you will find that the Camorra, the mafia, the ’ndrangheta are effectively inside the municipal administration – this was not the case in Saint-Pierre. […] So the question is: was dissolution justified? The answer is yes, if we contextualize the facts within the local reality; no, if we adopt a comparative assessment with other Italian contexts. (Institutional actor, post-dissolution phase)

This observation does not imply a lower tolerance for irregularities as such, but rather a recalibration of institutional attention in response to changing assessments of vulnerability. Practices such as informal communications with economic operators, prolonged reliance on emergency procedures, or persistent failures in revenue collection – widely documented in the ministerial report that formed the basis for the dissolution decree – tend not to be exceptional in themselves within small local administrations. These practices are often tolerated, despite being recognized as operating at the margins of procedural acceptability, insofar as they are perceived as enabling the continuity of essential services and the day-to-day functioning of the administration. One illustrative example from Saint-Pierre concerns the extension of a school transport contract for children living in remote mountain hamlets, granted at the expiry of the tender instead of launching a new procurement procedure, in a context of severe administrative constraints marked by limited staff capacity and by the risk of interrupting an essential public service if a new procurement procedure could not be initiated in time. The relevance of this practice stemmed from the way weakened administrative capacity intersected with heightened concern about criminal infiltration, given the existence of familial links between the contractor and an individual later convicted for mafia association, producing a configuration perceived as incompatible with the standards expected under intensified scrutiny.

Crucially, this logic points beyond individual actors or singular acts. The differentiated application of dissolution reflects structural conditions affecting many small municipalities, including limited administrative resources, organizational fragility, and constrained political oversight. In contexts where mafia presence is more explicit, visible, or institutionally recognized, intervention relies more directly on evidence of criminal influence, while administrative vulnerabilities remain less central in the institutional justification for intervention, even when they are significant. In cases such as Saint-Pierre, where signals of mafia presence were still emerging, these same vulnerabilities assumed a prominent role in the institutional construction of risk, contributing to the crossing of the threshold for antimafia intervention.

In this sense, Saint-Pierre does not stand out because of the uniqueness of its governance failures, but because it became the site where ordinary administrative conditions were brought to the foreground as part of a broader assessment of exposure.

Conclusion

This article has examined the dissolution of the municipal council of Saint-Pierre as a case that allows close observation of how ordinary vulnerabilities of local governance may generate conditions of exposure to external criminal interests, including mafia-related interests, and how these conditions are subsequently institutionally reinterpreted as grounds for extraordinary antimafia intervention. Rather than approaching municipal dissolution as a proxy for structurally embedded mafia control, the analysis has shown how the measure can operate at the intersection between routine administrative fragilities, political instability, and shifting institutional assessments of governance vulnerability in a territorial context not traditionally associated with mafia presence.

The findings highlight that exposure to mafia influence does not necessarily develop from deliberate collusion or overt criminal capture of public institutions. In the case of Saint-Pierre, it was the accumulation of ordinary conditions – limited administrative capacity, procedural erosion, reliance on informality as a coping strategy, and weak political steering – that produced an institutional environment increasingly vulnerable to external interference. These conditions were neither exceptional nor unique, but acquired institutional relevance once they were subjected to intensified scrutiny within an antimafia framework.

By conceptualizing municipal dissolution as an institutional device that renders such vulnerabilities visible and actionable, the article contributes to a context-centred understanding of antimafia intervention. The analysis suggests that what triggers extraordinary state action is not solely the presence of specific irregularities, but also their interpretation in relation to broader expectations about governance capacity and institutional credibility. In this regard, antimafia policies do not simply respond to mafia presence; they actively participate in defining how and when such presence becomes institutionally relevant. Read through this perspective, the Saint-Pierre case speaks directly to approaches that view mafia and antimafia as mutually constitutive processes, in which policies designed to contrast mafia also contribute to shaping the forms through which mafia influence is identified, framed, and acted upon (Sciarrone 2025), as well as to analyses that emphasize the role of antimafia action in rendering mafia presence visible (Lupo 2007), particularly in contexts newly framed as exposed.

In this respect, the post-dissolution phase in Saint-Pierre offers a further perspective on the effects of antimafia intervention. While extraordinary administration contributed to restoring procedural clarity and stabilizing internal administrative practices, these improvements did not fully address underlying structural constraints, particularly those related to limited administrative capacity and staffing. In parallel, on the civic side, no sustained forms of locally rooted mobilization emerged. Although some initiatives promoted by regional and national actors took place within the municipality, these did not consolidate into stable engagement, with initial participation gradually declining,[4] despite the presence of a locally embedded associational fabric, pointing to a gap between existing forms of civic engagement and their activation in relation to issues of mafia presence and institutional vulnerability.

Overall, these elements suggest that, while antimafia intervention plays a significant role in redefining the institutional visibility of mafia influence, it is not in itself sufficient to transform the structural conditions within which such influence can take shape, nor to generate the forms of sustained civic engagement that would be necessary to counter it over time.

More broadly, the analysis developed in this article points to implications that extend beyond the specific case examined here. They call for greater attention to the ordinary functioning of local public administration as a critical site for understanding mafia exposure, particularly in small municipalities and peripheral regions. The framework developed here provides a way to examine how similar configurations of administrative vulnerability acquire institutional significance across different contexts, depending on how they are combined with and interpreted in relation to signals of mafia presence. Future research could build on this approach by comparing how these configurations are constructed and addressed across different territorial and institutional settings, and how variations in political capacity and oversight shape the activation of antimafia instruments. From a policy perspective, the analysis suggests that addressing administrative fragility and political instability may be as crucial as targeting criminal actors, insofar as these conditions shape the environments within which mafia influence can emerge and operate.

In conclusion, shifting the analytical focus from criminal control to institutional vulnerability allows for a more nuanced understanding of mafia presence and antimafia intervention in non-traditional contexts. By examining how ordinary governance

[4] It should be noted that the post-dissolution phase overlapped with the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions, which constituted an exogenous constraint on opportunities for civic mobilization and collective initiatives.

difficulties become entangled with preventive state action, this article contributes to rethinking the conditions under which local institutions are deemed exposed, and the ways in which antimafia policies shape both the visibility of mafia occurrence and the boundaries of acceptable governance.

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