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GROWING LIKE WEEDS?

Rethinking Albania's culture
of cannabis cultivation

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The Observatory is a platform that connects and empowers civil-society actors in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The Observatory aims to enable civil society to identify, analyze and map criminal trends, and their impact on illicit flows, governance, development, inter-ethnic relations, security and the rule of law, and supports them in their monitoring of national dynamics and wider regional and international organized-crime trends.

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Cover photo: © Albanian police burn 1.6 tonnes of cannabis seized near Lazarat, southern Albania. Arben Celi/REUTERS

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SUMMARY

The cultivation of cannabis in Albania goes back several decades, but experienced a peak around 2016, at which point the police undertook an eradication operation in an attempt to curtail the country’s widespread cannabis production industry. A more recent resurgence in cannabis cultivation, however, points to the fact that

the underlying drivers of this illicit economy are still in place. Without a concerted effort to address collusion in the cannabis market and the country’s structural conditions, which entice many young people to seek a livelihood in cannabis production, the conditions that enable the market are unlikely to be disrupted.

Key points

- The conditions that enable cannabis cultivation in Albania have been in place for many years.
- Despite police crackdowns on cultivation, the phenomenon continues to be pervasive.
- Cultivating cannabis is seen as a source of income for many, particularly the young.
- Colluding state officials are among the drivers of the Albanian cannabis economy.
- A new approach is needed to break the cycle of reliance that the cannabis economy provides and attract young people into legitimate work.



INTRODUCTION

Under pressure from the international community, the Albanian government engaged in a series of police actions in 2016 to crack down on widespread cannabis cultivation and trafficking. The volume of cannabis under cultivation was dramatically reduced as a result. This was hailed as a victory by both the government and external partners. A resurgence in cannabis cultivation more recently, however, highlights that the underlying drivers for cannabis cultivation remain in place – and may even have been stimulated.

While the efforts at cannabis eradication in 2016 were seen as a direct result of government intervention, interviews with people involved in the cannabis economy, suggest that a number of market factors – most notably a decline in price due to excess supply – may have been equally important. Interviews conducted for this brief suggest that several criminal actors were already exiting the market at the time in search of more lucrative activities, most notably in the burgeoning cocaine trade.

By the end of 2019, however, the picture has once again changed in several significant ways. Although cultivation has not yet reached the peak levels seen in 2016, there is strong evidence of a shift in cannabis plantations to remote forest and mountainous areas in both the north and south of Albania. Overall, there has been a slow resurgence in cultivation in response to internal and external demand. And, significantly, interviews suggest that young people in particular, disillusioned by poor economic prospects and frustrated by the debates on accession to the EU, do not perceive cultivating cannabis crops for what it is – a serious criminal activity. Rather, it is seen as a means to make a living in an economic climate where few other opportunities exist. The crackdown on the cannabis economy has had a further effect – there has been a trend of young Albanians migrating to Western Europe to cultivate cannabis close to lucrative consumer markets.

State police investigate a cannabis plantation in southern Albania, April 2017.

In Albania, police corruption and allegations that the government would prefer the true extent of the cannabis revival to remain under wraps contribute to a conducive environment for this illicit market. The authorities are generally aware that cannabis provides a livelihood, particularly for young people, and as long as the problem remains largely out of public and international view, there are few incentives for another crackdown.

This culture of tacit support for the cannabis economy will need to be reversed in Albania for the country not to become once again a significant exporter of cannabis. It is only one of several criminal economies that are embedded in Albania, and it will be difficult to eradicate it without a concerted change in how such activities are viewed by some as legitimate, and widely ignored or protected by Albania's law-enforcement authorities.

A cameraman watches as Albanian police burn 1.6 tonnes of cannabis seized near Lazarat, southern Albania.
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WHY ALBANIA ACQUIRED A 'CANNABIS CULTURE'

Cannabis cultivation has long been a source of seasonal employment in Albania. First accounts date back to the early 1990s, when Albania emerged from a 45-year period of isolation imposed by the communist regime (see Figure 1). The swift change from the centralized state to a free-market economy, which was accompanied by the closure of state factories and collective farms, led to high unemployment levels, leaving Albanians with reduced opportunities to earn a living. Some turned to cultivating cannabis, which was seen as an easy and lucrative source of income.

Between 2000 and 2014, the rapidly growing mass cultivation industry attracted workers from all over the country, many of them women. The embodiment of this cannabis rush was the village of Lazarat, in the south of Albania and close to the Greek border, which is believed to have produced a remarkable 900 tonnes of cannabis a year, with a net value of around €4.5 billion.¹ Many ordinary workers were employed in planting the seeds and harvesting, drying, processing and packaging until the cannabis batches were ready for smuggling.

By 2000, insiders say, established smuggling lines had been developed both within the region and on to Turkey, but most importantly to the EU. Greece and particularly Italy were major recipients of Albanian cannabis.

By 2016, the Albanian cannabis economy had spread all over the country as criminal groups started to cultivate cannabis in larger volumes. At its peak, the cultivation of cannabis was so widespread in some areas like Vlorë that it was difficult to hire construction workers, electricians, plumbers or similar, because, in the words of one

Cannabis cultivated in a forest in southern Albania, May 2017.

Cannabis cultivation has long been a source of seasonal employment in Albania.

participant, 'they all went to work in the cannabis plantations'.² In addition to those active in the field since the 1990s, two new groups notably joined the cannabis production boom in 2016: a larger community of farmers, who substituted their usual crops for cannabis, and part of the Roma community, who were exploited by large organized-criminal groups and forced to live under harsh conditions and work at different stages in the production cycle.³

The cannabis economy of Albania attracted widespread international attention and was reported in the European and Western media at the time. The BBC,⁴ *Die Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*⁵ and Balkan Insight⁶ (among others) ran investigative stories on the police efforts to tackle cannabis cultivation; contemporary reporting also alluded to the difficulties in light of endemic corruption in Albania and the challenging economic macro-environment.

Owing to increased international pressure on the Albanian government, in particular by the Guardia di Finanza (an Italian law-enforcement agency operating under the ministry of economy and finance), the Albanian authorities doubled their efforts to crack down on cannabis cultivation in 2016. While their efforts should be acknowledged, police interventions and international pressure alone were not the only factors that subsequently contributed to lower levels of cultivation in 2017 and 2018. The falling production rate can also be explained by basic economic dynamics: in 2016, there was over-supply from the glut of producers, with resultant

competition among the groups involved in the illicit cannabis trade and falling prices. The market thus readjusted itself organically. A journalist in Fier described the situation as follows: 'At one point, there were so many groups involved in the cultivation and distribution of cannabis that the market had become saturated. While competition increased, the prices continued to fall ... so far that they practically flooded the market and bankrupted themselves. Many had to stop dealing with cannabis because of the losses they made.'⁷

The price for a kilogram of cannabis had fallen from between €600 and €700 per kilogram in 2015 to approximately €150 in 2016. As a result, suppliers were not keen to continue cultivating; the supply market was saturated and it was not worth the effort.⁸

Young people who had previously worked in Lazarat either left the country to share their experience with in-door cultivators across Western Europe⁹ or continued to work in the Albanian cannabis economy. Originally employed by larger criminal groups, in recent years young Albanians have also created smaller organizations of their own, cultivating cannabis independently (see the case study on page 5).¹⁰

However, despite the 2016 spike in production and subsequent crackdown, the cultivation of cannabis has continued in Albania. Recent reports suggest that cannabis cultivation even increased again during 2019, surpassing 2017 and 2018 cultivation levels.¹¹

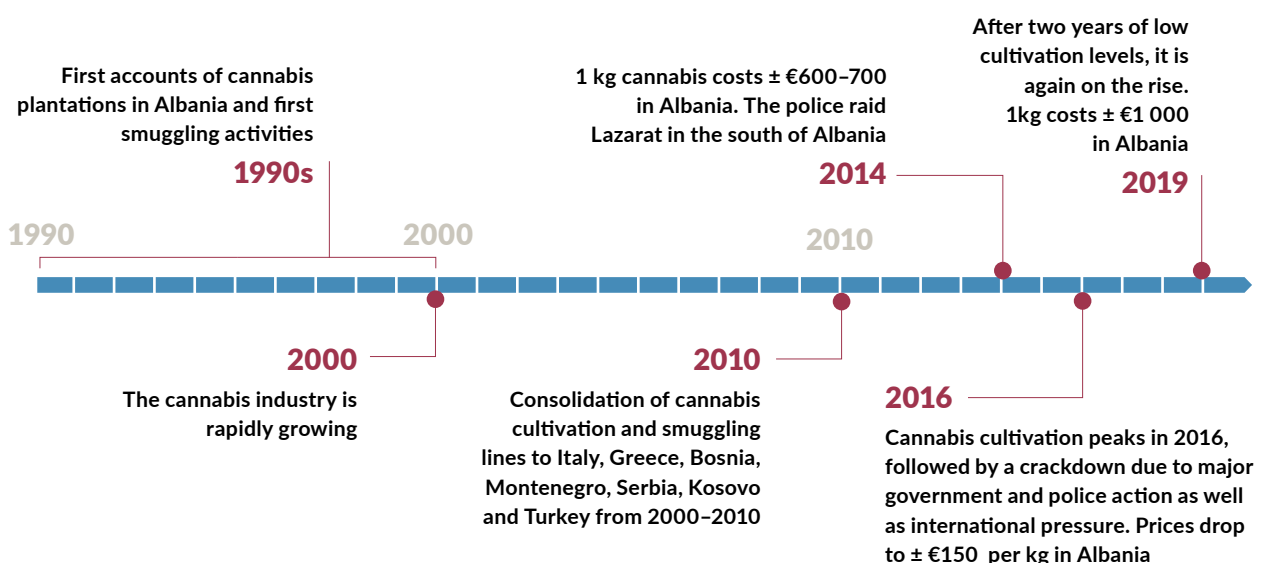


FIGURE 1: Key phases in the cycle of cannabis cultivation in Albania, 1990s to 2019

CASE STUDY

An illicit industry that draws Albanian youth

In a forest that stretches along the coast between Fier and Vlorë in the south of Albania, five young Albanians have felled trees to form a small plot of agricultural land. Here, they began cultivating a hundred cannabis plants in April 2018, fertilizing the soil, irrigating the plants and harvesting their crops. After the drying and curing stages, they produced 20 kilograms of good-quality of cannabis; they then sold the stash to a bigger criminal group for €14 000.

Aldo (all names have been changed to protect the sources) is the 19-year-old leader of the group. He comes from a village nearby. In an interview in September 2019, he described how, after this initial transaction in 2018, they were able to expand their operations in 2019, planting not just one, but two crop cycles of cannabis in the growing season from April to September. For this, they used seeds from the Netherlands that yield good-quality crops in just three months. 'We have been very lucky this year,' said Aldo. 'Our plot is well placed in the middle of the forest and difficult for the police to trace. This does not mean that we are not afraid. But no risk, no gain!'

It was in 2016 that Aldo and a small group of his friends first started cultivating their own cannabis. 'Everybody was doing it, so me and some other friends tried it out too,' he said. They had been working on a cannabis plantation for a bigger organized criminal group in Vlorë. Altin, a 24-year-old member of Aldo's group, described his experience: 'I lived and worked in Vlorë for five months. I would take 5 000 leke (around €41) a day, and the people I worked for made sure that I would receive food and accommodation.' He said that working conditions on the plantation were tough and profits were low because, back in 2016, cannabis was still being produced on a large scale, but this was the only thing he was able to do. 'I believe that following this path is not bad. Besides producing cannabis, I also smoke weed with my friends. Young people all over the world like it too, so I expect demand will remain.'



Cannabis has been increasingly cultivated in remote, inaccessible regions of Albania. This plantation was detected by police in March 2017.

Aldo said that many of his friends have left for Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK, where they cultivate cannabis indoors and make a lot of money. He believes that moving there is also an option for him: 'I hope to save some money, so I can go to the UK or the Netherlands. There, I know people who cultivate cannabis using lamps; I could ask to work for them.'



FIGURE 2: Cannabis cultivation areas in 2019

By late 2019, cannabis appeared to be, once again, a very profitable business: reportedly, one kilogram of cannabis can be sold in today's market for €1 000 in Albania.¹² And, once again, there are many different categories of players involved in the cultivation of cannabis, including farmers who cultivate a small number of plants each year for some extra revenue; small groups of young Albanians taking advantage of the situation; as well large and sophisticated criminal networks who deploy farmers to cultivate large quantities of cannabis. The criminal groups have secured smuggling routes and built contacts in the end-consumer markets, serving as buyers of cannabis from smaller groups.

The main hotspots for cannabis cultivation in 2019 are the areas around Vlorë, Fier, Mallakastër, Tepelene, Memaliaj, Permet, Kurbin, Fushë-Krujë, Dukagjin, Kukës, Dibër, Elbasan and Librazhd (see the map).

Organized-criminal groups often appear to be role models for young Albanians. Recent interviews in Albania show that, disillusioned by the limited opportunities offered by the legal economy, there is a whole generation who are driven underworld to cultivate the illicit drug, and some regard it as the only way of making a living.¹³ Young recruits are attracted to gangs because they offer an alternative to the current every-day reality in Albania.¹⁴

But the fact that many young Albanians are seeking criminal opportunities has become a real problem for the country. Conflicts related to the cultivation of cannabis and smuggling activities have fuelled a new wave of violence in Albania, which flares up when groups steal cannabis from one another or refuse to pay if a smuggling deal goes wrong.

However, it is not only young people who are attracted by the cannabis economy but also civil servants, including police and politicians, some of whom find little motivation to fight organized crime.¹⁵ With an average monthly income of just €498 in 2018, many police officers look to the cannabis market for an additional source of revenue.¹⁶

Albania's state prosecuting authority opened several investigations – one probing Vlorë's chief police officer in 2016, accusing him of collaborating with criminals.¹⁷ Similarly, in October 2017, the unit of the prosecution authority that deals with serious crime opened an investigation into the former Interior Minister, Saimir Tahiri, accusing him of facilitating cannabis trafficking networks to Italy.¹⁸ Although the prosecutors called for 12 years of imprisonment for Tahiri, in September 2019 a court decision cleared him of all drug-trafficking-related charges. He was found guilty only of abuse of power¹⁹ and sentenced to three years' probation.

Such cases and others explain why it is believed that the levels of cannabis cultivation reached in 2016 would not have been possible without the direct compliance of the police. Allegedly, across the whole country, police officers were compromised by criminals cultivating and smuggling cannabis.²⁰ Many journalists who had proof of the widespread cannabis cultivation at that time were threatened by the police; there have also been reports of attacks on journalists.²¹

Disillusioned by the limited opportunities offered by the legal economy, there is a whole generation who are driven underworld to cultivate the illicit drug.



ALBANIA AS PART OF THE GLOBAL ILLICIT ECONOMY

Cannabis is seized by Albanian police, May 2017.

The rising levels of cannabis cultivation observed in 2019 have also been driven by high overseas and domestic demand for Albanian cannabis. For example, the growing tourism population, attracted to Albania's seaside resorts, is reported to be driving up local consumption. Nevertheless, most Albanian-produced cannabis continues to be smuggled out of the country. The map on the following page shows the main cannabis trafficking routes overseas.

In the past, cannabis tended to be smuggled predominantly to Italy and Greece. This was due to strong demand in those countries, and the fact that they are key entry points to other Western European markets. Once in the EU, it is easier to transport cannabis to end consumer markets. Trafficking to Italy was also facilitated by Albanian criminal groups with strong ties to Italian criminal networks that smuggle cannabis across Europe. Cannabis is usually smuggled to Italy in speedboats, while traffickers use mules and horses trained to carry and deliver the product on the other side of the border to transport it to Greece.²²

More recently, however, Albanian traffickers have expanded the sea route to Turkey, which has become a major destination for Albanian cannabis. Since 2016, smugglers have deployed speedboats departing from the Albanian shores heading towards Çanakkale, Izmir and Bodrum with cannabis cargoes of at least a tonne each. Cannabis is sold for around €3 000 per kilogram in Turkey, where it is exchanged for heroin (worth around €9 000 per kilogram).²³



FIGURE 3: Transnational cannabis trafficking routes from Albania

This exchange has not only facilitated recent involvement of Albanian criminal groups in heroin trafficking, but has also proved a lucrative business model, as heroin can be sold to other criminal groups for between €13 000 and €15 000 per kilogram in Albania.²⁴

Demand for cannabis in Turkey also means Albanian cannabis is increasingly transported by land through North Macedonia. Montenegro serves as a transit point for Albanian cannabis on its way north across the region (transiting and remaining in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia), and further on to other central-European countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia.

Kosovo is a destination market as well as a transit point for Albanian cannabis. Given the close collaboration between criminal groups in the two countries, concerns were voiced over a possible 'exportation' of Albanian cannabis cultivation to Kosovo. In September 2019, the Kosovar police found and eliminated 460 cannabis plants in Gjakova, a border town with Albania.²⁵



TOWARDS A LONG-TERM POLICY RESPONSE

A police vehicle passes through Dervician, near Lazarat.

© Arben Celi/REUTERS

Despite strong police-led campaigns to crack down on the cultivation of cannabis, the phenomenon continues to be widespread across Albania. The police, reportedly, receive orders not to release information on the current situation;²⁶ nevertheless, local news agencies have picked up on new trends and reported on cultivation patterns.²⁷

How persistent and pervasive the cannabis economy in Albania continues to be can be observed by the fact that in July 2019, cannabis plantations were once again detected in Lazarat. Although the village continues to be closely watched by the police, cannabis plants were found in September 2019 in the place that was once at the centre of previous crackdowns.

The conditions that enable the cultivation of cannabis across Albania have been the reality for many years, as the timeline shows (see Figure 1). Three decades of cannabis cultivation have left a deep mark on Albanian society. Cultivating cannabis has been a stable source of income for many, particularly the young, in search of viable economic opportunities. Crackdowns reduce the crop for a period but do not entirely eradicate the economy. Colluding law-enforcement officials are either paid off or have family and relatives who themselves rely on the cannabis economy. As emphasized, this makes the culture of support difficult to erode. Interviews also suggest that disillusionment with politics and a failure to map a clear way forward for the inclusion of young people in the economy are major drivers of this illicit economy. There is also marked frustration in Albanian society with the stalling EU integration process, as many believe that, without external pressure, the country will not be able to implement necessary economic and political reforms.²⁸

Large parts of Albanian society have lost faith that the state will remedy the situation, not least because it has been reported that in several cases cannabis money was used to finance political campaigns.²⁹ Many young Albanians struggle to envisage a prosperous future under the current conditions and regard leaving the country as the only solution. Among them is an emerging cohort who regard the cultivation of drugs as the only way of earning a living and who are exporting the activity to Western Europe.

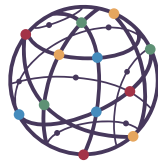
Going forward, it will be important to disrupt the recruitment engine that the cannabis economy provides and instead draw young people into legitimate activities. Any serious attempt to do this would need to entail a severe break with past approaches, which have tended to see young men as perpetrators or potential perpetrators, first and foremost. Law enforcement alone is unlikely to break the cannabis culture cycle. A rethink in approach is needed.

Police burn a cannabis crop in a plantation, May 2017.



NOTES

- 1 This is the estimated street value. See Albanian cannabis growers and 800 police battle in lawless village of Lazarat, *The Guardian*, 17 June 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/17/albanian-cannabis-growers-800-police-battle-lazarat>.
- 2 Interview with a criminal justice official in Vlorë, 29 April 2019.
- 3 Republic of Albania Ombudsman, Special report on problems and situation of Roma minority in Albania, October 2013, https://albania.savethechildren.net/sites/albania.savethechildren.net/files/library/Special%20Reports%20on%20Problems%20and%20Situation%20of%20the%20Roma%20Minority%20in%20Albania_2.pdf; Roger Sevrin Bruland, *Slik skal politiet i Albania knække cannabismafiaen*, NRK, 25 July 2017, <https://www.nrk.no/urix/slik-skal-politiet-i-albania-knekke-cannabismafiaen-1.13572715>.
- 4 Linda Pressly, Europe's outdoor cannabis capital, BBC, 1 December 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-38111945>.
- 5 David Klaubert, *Grasland*, FAZ, 5 September 2017, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/cannabis-anbau-in-albanien-grasland-15161171.html>.
- 6 Elvis Nabolli, *An Albanian war on drugs*, Balkan Insight, 16 November 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/11/16/an-albanian-war-on-drugs-11-15-2016/>.
- 7 Interview with an investigative journalist in Fier, April 2019.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Interviews conducted in the Benelux countries in October and November 2019 suggest that many Albanians are involved in local in-door cultivation, for example in the area of Limburg.
- 10 As a result, cannabis tends to be no longer grown in conspicuous farmland, but on public land in remote mountainous areas and in forests. Besides such locations being secluded and therefore less detectable by the police, cultivating cannabis on 'nobody's land' is convenient because it does not expose the cultivators, even when the plantations are detected.
- 11 Interview with a police officer in Tirana and a cannabis cultivator in Fier, October 2019.
- 12 Interview with a prosecutor in Fier, September 2018.
- 13 Interview with a journalist in Tirana, 13 November 2019.
- 14 Mark Shaw and Simone Haysom, How to steal power from the Cape Flats war lords – without the army, *News24*, 21 July 2019, <https://www.news24.com/Columnists/GuestColumn/how-to-steal-power-from-the-cape-flats-war-lords-without-the-army-20190721>.
- 15 Interview with a journalist in Tirana, 13 November 2019.
- 16 INSTAT, <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/labour-market-and-education/wages/#tab2>.
- 17 Exit.al, Prosecution orders arrests for three of Tahiri's police chiefs in Habilaj–Tahiri affair, 23 November 2017, <https://exit.al/en/2017/11/23/three-of-tahiris-police-chiefs-arrested-in-habilaj-tahiri-affair/>.
- 18 The case was opened after the Italian police officer arrested an Albanian criminal group for smuggling cannabis from Vlorë to Italy. Those arrested were Tahiri's distant cousins and while being wiretapped by the police, they also mentioned the involvement of the former Interior Minister, see Exit.al, Prosecution orders arrests for three of Tahiri's police chiefs in Habilaj–Tahiri affair, 23 November 2017, <https://exit.al/en/2017/11/23/three-of-tahiris-police-chiefs-arrested-in-habilaj-tahiri-affair/>.
- 19 Gjergj Erebara, Dutch vote to reintroduce visas alarms Albania, *Balkan Insight*, 17 April 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/17/albania-and-eu-delegation-downplays-dutch-vote-for-visa-reintroduction/>; Reuters, Albanian ex-minister cleared on drug charges, guilty of abuse of office, 20 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-albania-minister-corruption/albanian-ex-minister-cleared-on-drug-charges-guilty-of-abuse-of-office-idUSKBN1W5005>.
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- 21 Interview with a journalist in Tirana, November 2019.
- 22 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Hotspots of organized crime in the Western Balkans, 20 May 2019, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Hotspots-Report-English-13Jun1110-Web.pdf>.
- 23 Interview with investigative journalist in Tirana, August 2019.
- 24 Interview with a prosecutor in Tirana, November 2019.
- 25 Koha.net, *Në Gjakovë asgjësohen rreth 460 bimë kanabisi, nuk raportohet për të arrestuar*, 4 September 2019, <https://www.koha.net/kronike/182497/ne-gjakove-asgjesohen-rreth-460-bime-kanabisi-nuk-raportohet-per-te-arrestuar/>.
- 26 Interview with a police officer of the anti-drug department in Tirana; interview with a person with extensive knowledge of police operations in Tirana, October 2019.
- 27 ABC News, *Ekskluzive/ ABC News siguron raportet sekrete te asgjesimit te kanabisit*, 29 September, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96j4F8pTH4w>.
- 28 Interviews with a journalist and prosecutor in Tirana, November 2019.
- 29 Interview with a prosecutor in Tirana, November 2019.



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