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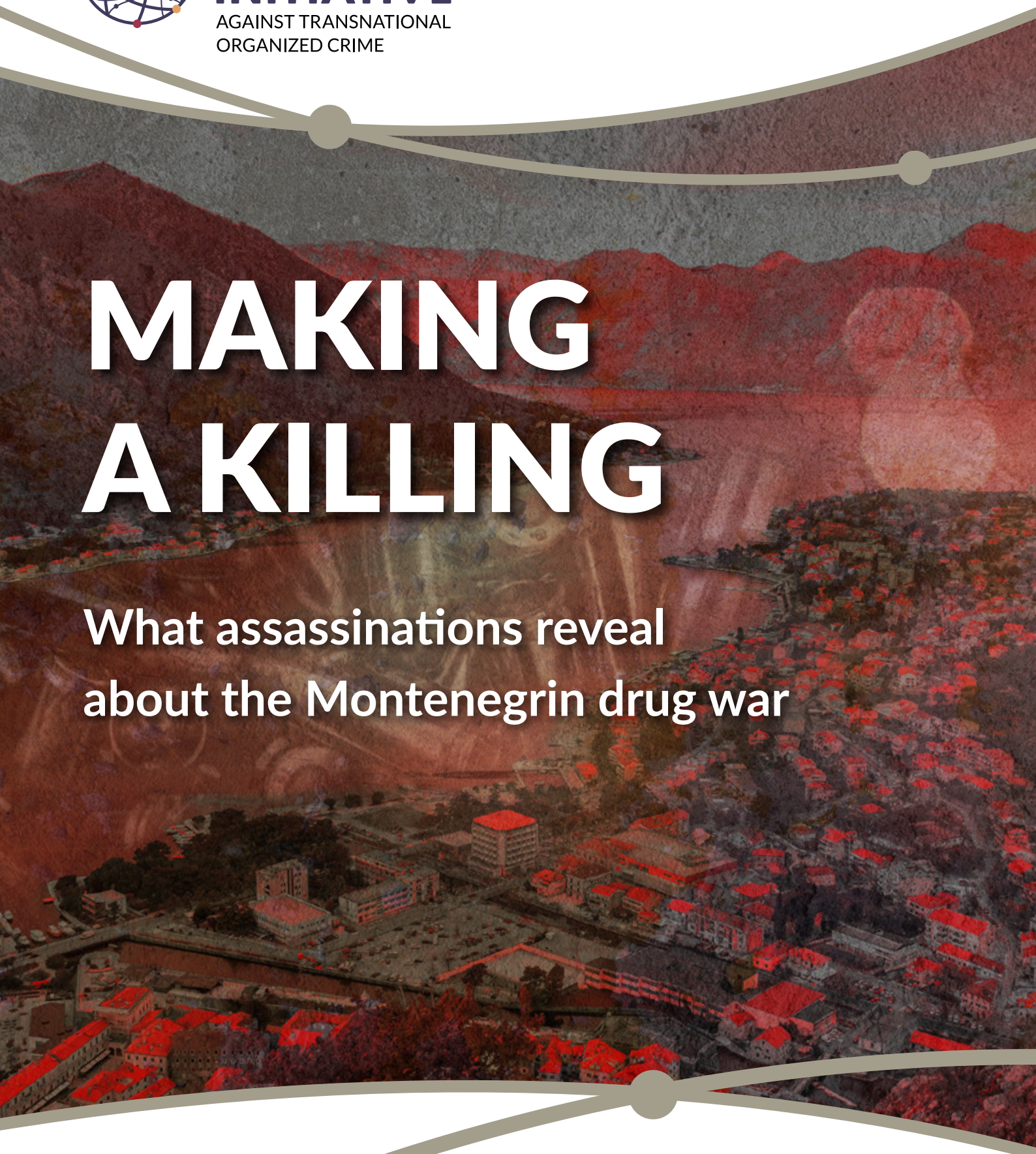

MAKING A KILLING

What assassinations reveal about the Montenegrin drug war

Walter Kemp

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Cover photo: Adapted photo of Kotor bay (Boka Kotorska) and Kotor city, Montenegro.
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SUMMARY

Since 2014, several dozen Montenegrins and Serbians have been killed in a bloody feud between two criminal groups from the same small Adriatic town of Kotor, located on the beautiful Montenegrin coast.[1] In the same period, criminal groups from the Western Balkans have quietly and efficiently become major players in the global distribution of drugs, particularly the supply of cocaine between Latin America and Europe. These trends raise a number of critical questions. If Western Balkan criminals can co-operate or at least co-exist abroad, why are they killing each other at home? What does the violence tell us about the evolution of the feud, and the criminal ecosystem in Montenegro and Serbia? Is there a pattern to the hits, and how could the conflict end? These are among the key questions explored in this policy brief.

Organized-crime groups use violence strategically. Police investigators work at the scene where Bulgarian drug lord Zlatomir Ivanov was shot in Sofia in January 2013.
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THE USE OF VIOLENCE IN CRIMINAL MARKETS

In criminal markets, violence does not happen by accident – and it is seldom a first resort. The most efficient and controlled markets are those where violence is not even necessary, since one group has a monopoly. Violence can also be bad for business, since it attracts the attention of law enforcement, which increases risks. It can also trigger a deadly spiral of tit-for-tat killings.

Specific factors are necessary to generate violence.[2] Violence becomes more visible and frequent when groups compete. A group entering a drug market will use violence, or the threat of force, to signal its resolve. Violence may also be used to try to eliminate the competition. It is sometimes used within or between groups for punishment, or to solve disputes. Indeed, many drug wars are started by intra- or inter-group disputes over stolen drugs or disputed payments. Violence can also be a symptom of an internal struggle for power or succession; or because a splinter group is doing business on the side. And it is sometimes deployed to warn the state, or terrorize a population (as witnessed in Mexico or Colombia).

Highly visible violence is often an indication that the state security structure is either weak or compromised. After all, criminal groups who worry about being caught usually maintain a low profile. At the same time, if they collude with the state, they would not want to jeopardize such protection by obliging law-enforcement officials to respond to the potential public outrage generated by visible violence.[3] Nor would they need to use violence if they have reached some sort of deal with the state. By contrast, as explained by Angelica Duran-Martinez, '… if criminals do not have credible protection, or do not fear state

Drug smuggling off Montenegro's Adriatic coast has been controlled by a number of groups centred on the town of Kotor.
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action, they lose incentives to hide and gain incentives to signal their power and pressure their rivals through visible violence'.[4]

Another interpretation, which is particularly relevant where the state is corrupt, is that violence can be viewed as competition for access, which Duran-Martinez describes as 'the rights to pay those corrupt officials who control specific channels'.[5] Violence is used strategically to gain attention as a service provider in the market for protection. The winner gets to operate under the protective umbrella of the criminal state, while the political elite can draw on the services of the criminal group when it needs favours.

In short, violence is more likely when there is greater competition in a criminal market and where the security apparatus is either weak, fragmented or looking for allies. Next, this policy brief will consider how this applies to the bloody war between criminal groups from Montenegro.

Law-enforcement officials present evidence from a cocaine bust in Philadelphia in June 2019, which led to the arrest of four Montenegrin sailors.
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COCAINE IN KOTOR

Since 2014, there has been a cycle of violence between the Skaljari and Kavac clans, named after two villages in the Kotor municipality on the Montenegrin coast. What began as an internal dispute over a shipment of cocaine has mushroomed into a war that involves most major figures of the criminal underworld in Montenegro and Serbia. Since 2018, members of the two groups have even been assassinated in a number of Western European cities.

In the 1990s, drug smuggling on Montenegro's Adriatic coast was controlled by a number of groups, centred particularly around the town of Kotor. The most powerful group in Kotor was the local branch of the network led by Darko Saric, the so-called 'cocaine king' of the Balkans.[6] His group was closely linked to cocaine suppliers in South America, as well as the Italian mafia. Drugs would be shipped from Argentina and Colombia (sometimes via Brazil) to the ports of Valencia and Gioia Tauro in the Italian Calabria (which is controlled by the 'Ndrangheta), and the Port of Bar in Montenegro. From there, other members of the Saric group would take over the consignment and ship the drugs to other destinations in Europe. The Saric group was known for its efficiency and reliability.

A major shake-up occurred in the Western Balkans cocaine connection in 2009, when more than two tonnes of cocaine was seized in Uruguay as part of Operation Balkan Warrior. The operation – a joint operation between the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Serbian Intelligence Agency and police in Uruguay and Argentina – ultimately dealt a death blow to the powerful Saric gang. In the wake of the operation, several alleged members were arrested. In May 2010, one of Saric's main associates, Dragan Dudic, was shot dead while sitting at a café in Kotor, while another one of his associates, Rodoljub Radulovic, went on the run.[7]

In 2014, Saric turned himself in, and a year later he was convicted to 15 years in prison for smuggling five-and-a-half tonnes of cocaine from South America to Europe in 2008 and 2009. He also faces charges of laundering approximately US$22 million of drug money, although the true amount is speculated to be far higher.

As the Saric gang weakened, the Skaljari clan used the opportunity to take over Saric drug routes.[8] But the clan became more fractured in 2014, as infighting was sparked over a 200-kilogram cocaine shipment in Valencia. This led to a volley of internal accusations and threats: as the saying goes, there is no honour among thieves. Later that year, several members of the Skaljari group broke off and formed the Kavac clan.[9] This was the beginning of a bloody feud between the Kotor-based groups, which continues to this day.

The intensity of the rivalry can be explained, in part, by the amounts of money at stake. Coca cultivation and cocaine production have been booming in the past five years. Since 2018, there have been a number of seizures of cocaine involving groups from the Western Balkans. Many of the shipments have been between 500 kilograms and a tonne, while others have been even bigger. In February 2020, several Montenegrin crew members were arrested after five tonnes of cocaine were seized from a ship off the coast of Aruba. In June 2019, four Montenegrin sailors were arrested in Philadelphia for their involvement in trafficking almost 20 tonnes of cocaine from Latin America. These seizures are probably just the tip of the cocaine iceberg.

Over the past decade, groups from the Western Balkans – particularly Albania, Montenegro and Serbia – have worked their way up the value chain in a number of global hotspots of criminal activity. In the process, they have positioned themselves as key players in the cocaine business between suppliers in Latin America and distributors, such as the Italian mafia, in Western Europe.

These groups are reportedly responsible for the financing, transportation and distribution of large amounts of cocaine shipped from South America to Europe. They are able to work with local criminal groups and access cocaine at source, which – combined with their presence in major European port cities – means that they are able to control the end-to-end supply of cocaine.

As described in a forthcoming report[10] by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), most criminal groups from the Western Balkans tend to operate discreetly and efficiently in the global hotspots, despite their reputation for violence. Groups from the region are modern, dynamic and entrepreneurial. They have shown an ability to adapt and innovate, and use technology to their advantage. (Examples include using encrypted forms of communication; and laundering their money through cryptocurrencies, offshore havens and into their home countries.)

If these groups work efficiently and relatively peacefully abroad, controlling an increasingly large slice of a lucrative market, why are they killing each other in the Western Balkans – where the market is so much smaller?

Montenegrin police investigate a crime scene in the capital, Podgorica, following a spike in gangland violence in 2017.
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REVENGE AND SIGNALLING

The first wave of violence occurred in 2015 and 2016, and seemed to have been motivated by revenge. On 20 February 2015, Goran Radoman (who was a central figure in the dispute over the missing 200-kilogram cocaine shipment) was murdered in an ambush in the New Belgrade district of the Serbian capital. A few hours earlier (in the middle of the day), the car of Radoman's best friend, Milan Vujotic, was attacked with a bomb. This set off a series of violent tit-for-tat incidents in Kotor, Budva and Podgorica. There were also fights and violent incidents between rival clan members in jails.[11]

Since the clans tend to recruit mostly family and friends – and since fathers, brothers, and cousins have been killed – the desire for revenge runs deep. As in Albania or parts of Italy, vendetta is part of the cultural anthropology of organized crime in Montenegro. This stems from an ancient system of managing relations in remote mountainous communities where there was little central authority, as well as a more recent instrumentalization of these cultural norms for the sake of criminal expediency.[12]

One should bear in mind that the two criminal groups are named after small villages close to a town that itself has only a population of around 13 000 people. As with inter-ethnic conflict, this appears to be a demonstration of what Sigmund Freud, and political philosophers, refer to as the narcissism of minor differences. As author Michael Ignatieff has pointed out (referencing the biblical story of Cain and Abel), there is a paradox that 'brothers can hate each other more passionately than strangers can; that the emotions stirred up with commonality are more violent that those aroused by pure and radical difference'.[13] As a character says in *The Godfather:* 'Don't let anybody kid you. It's all personal, every bit of business.'

Vendetta is part of the cultural anthropology of organized crime in Montenegro.

The violence was also strategic; designed to show who the new bosses were. One would-be assassin, allegedly recruited by the Kavac clan to carry out a hit in 2015, was reportedly instructed to shoot his victim at least five times, so the murder would 'send a message to everyone in Montenegro who are in the business of selling drugs'.[14] The problem was that the rival Skaljari clan was intent on conveying precisely the same message, which resulted in a retaliatory escalation of violence. In that respect, the targeted killings did not succeed in achieving their objective. In the first two years of the conflict, neither side seemed to have gained a strategic advantage.

Darko Saric at the start of his trial in Belgrade on 24 March 2014.
© Oliver Bunic/AFP via Getty Images

Red Star supporters throw flares during the Serbian Cup semi-final football match in Belgrade on 10 June 2020.
© Oliver Bunic/AFP via Getty Images

THE CONFLICT WIDENS

In the autumn of 2016, the violence spilled over from Montenegro to Serbia. The situation became messier and more complex when drug clans became entangled with football tribes.

As in other countries, in Serbia (and particularly in Belgrade), there are close links between criminal groups and some groups of football supporters.[15] Furthermore, some football hooligans have been used to provide protection for political leaders, break up protests and to do some dirty work. Analysts have described how government officials and security agencies use these groups of young men as political proxies. In return, they are given a long leash to carry out criminal activities.[16] In the past few years, members of both FK Partizan and Red Star Belgrade have been killed in mafia-style shootings. This appears to have more to do with crime than football.[17]

In 2016,[18] Aleksandar Stankovic, a high-profile leader of one of the Partizan Belgrade fan clubs (known as the Janissaries), was killed. (Stankovic was also known as 'Sale the Mule'.) At the time, a finger was pointed at Montenegrin criminals.[19] A day after the killing, the Serbian police minister, Nebojsa Stefanovic, declared 'war on the mafia', and warned 'all criminal groups entering Belgrade and Serbia, that Belgrade and Serbia are not training grounds for their showdowns'.[20]

According to one theory, the assassination of Stankovic was related to a power struggle over control of the Belgrade drug market. The Janissaries are known to have connections to the drug scene in Belgrade, and their leader, Stankovic, was alleged to have links with the Kavac clan.[21] While nobody has been arrested for the murder, there are allegations that the hit was ordered by the Skaljari clan.[22]

But the story gets even more complicated. In December 2017, during a football match between Red Star Belgrade and Partizan, a group of thugs (including kick-boxers and mixed martial arts fighters from Split, Croatia) was hired to attack a sector of the Partizan fans in an attempt to target the leaders of the Janissaries.
As one close observer explained: 'The logic is simple: whoever controls the south stand of the stadium can use that mass whenever he needs them to cause chaos in the streets, clash with the police, participate in violent demonstrations or achieve other goals – the most important of which is street drug sales.'[23]

It is also alleged that Filip Korac was somehow behind the attack.[24] Korac is said to be associated with Luka Bojovic (who is currently in prison in Spain),[25] whose own group was built on the ruins of the Zemun clan. It has been suggested that they are cooperating with the Skaljari clan. If Korac was indeed behind the attack, it would demonstrate how different factions and groups within the underworld in Montenegro and Serbia have become embroiled in this conflict.

In short, the number of players, their complex backgrounds and web of contacts, and the shape-shifting nature of alliances and rivalries suggest that the volatility in the drug market exceeds the feud between the two Kotor-based clans.

Gang boss Luka Bojovic attends his extradition hearing in Madrid on 12 February 2013.
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Hits against Skaljari clan members have taken place in major European cities such as Athens, although never twice in the same city.
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TAKING THE WAR ABROAD

The war reached a new level in 2018 when assassinations of clan members began to occur abroad. The first was a hit against a member of the Kavac clan in Vienna in December 2018. This was followed by hits against Skaljari clan members in Malaga (April 2019), Berlin (May 2019), Amsterdam (October 2019), Athens (January 2020) and the head of the Kavac clan in Kiev (May 2020). It is notable that no two hits ever took place in the same city.

The GI-TOC's extensive research on assassinations shows that the majority of hits occur in the victims' personal environment – at home, at the workplace or on a route often used. One reason for this is the degree of predictability around the movement of the prospective victim. Another is that it affords the perpetrator an opportunity to draw on local logistics and capacity, as well as some paid protection from within the state itself.[26]

That a significant and growing number of hits in the Montenegrin clan war have taken place outside the Western Balkans tells us a number of things. It suggests that members of the groups, particularly of the Skaljari clan, were going abroad to escape pressure at home – either from their rivals, or the state, or both. Indeed some of the victims were wanted men, including for murder. It also suggests that members of these groups felt safe in these locations, either because there are sizeable diasporas of Montenegrins and Serbs (such as in Vienna and Berlin), or a criminal milieu (as in Amsterdam, Malaga, Athens or Kiev).

The fact that members of these clans are operating abroad could also reflect the growing globalization of criminal activity of groups from the Western Balkans. As revealed in a forthcoming GI-TOC report,[27] criminal groups from the Western Balkans have become well-established in Latin America, Western Europe, Turkey and South Africa over the past decade, and move their money through global markets.

That these murders occurred abroad suggests that the targets' patterns of behaviour must have become predictable to somebody watching them, that they are able to find each other better than the police, or that the hitmen were tipped off. Interestingly, several of the hits took place in restaurants.

Some hits have been well planned, well financed and executed by highly professional gunmen.
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THE HITS

Some of the hits have been highly professional, and snipers were used in at least two cases. On 27 October 2015, Goran Djurickovic, a member of the Skaljari clan, was shot by a sniper from the walls of the old town in Budva, Montenegro.[28] Another member of the Skaljari clan was killed by a sniper in September 2016, while in prison.

In several cases, the hitmen fired a hail of bullets. The first casualty of the war, Goran Radoman, was killed gangland style by 25 bullets from a Kalashnikov. The killer was never caught. Aleksandar Stankovic's car took nearly two dozen bullets when he was assassinated in October 2016. In this case, too, the killer was never caught.

A murder in a garage in Belgrade in January 2018, that was captured on surveillance cameras, shows two men firing multiple rounds into a car. As seen on the video, their demeanour was highly professional. A member of the Kavac clan was killed, while a police officer sitting beside him was unscathed.[29]

When one of the leaders of the Skaljari clan, Igor Dedovic, was murdered in Athens in January 2020, local media reported that surveillance cameras had recorded the entry of four masked gunmen into a restaurant where two members of the Skaljari clan were dining. A police source said: 'The gunmen were professionals. They shot their victims calmly and accurately, firing about 20 bullets to kill two people. They immediately went to Stamatovic's and Dedovic's table and fired, with no other victims'.[30]

In some cases, the assassin has worn a very lifelike silicone mask, which makes identification of the perpetrator difficult. Cars or mopeds used for many of the hits had been stolen ahead of time, and were then burned afterwards. The most recent

The high number of hits suggests that there is a commercialization of violence in the region.

hit, at the time of writing, was against one of the heads of the Kavac clan, Radoje Zvicer. The attack occurred in Kiev and was captured on video.[31] In this and other cases, it seems that some of the weapons used had been coated in flammable paint, so that the evidence could be more easily destroyed after the hit.[32]

That said, other operations have been rather amateur. In August 2017, two young men died when an attempt to prepare an explosive device for an assassination in Tivat, close to Kotor, appears to have backfired.[33] This followed a spate of bombings in 2016 and 2017, mostly through explosive devices detonated under cars, killing and injuring people linked to both clans. In a few cases, the wrong person was killed – either due to mistaken identity, or because they were close to the intended target. As of 24 May 2020, some 17 assassination attempts are believed to have failed.[34]

Based on observations from similar situations in the past and in other parts of the world, it is possible that some of the more professional hits have been well planned and well financed, following orders from the top, whereas others were the result of freelancing lower down the ranks. Furthermore, internal hits are not unusual in such protracted drug wars.

Despite the killings, it is notable that the Montenegrin groups did not attack each other in an all-out, full-frontal conflict, as has been seen in other cases of frequent, visible and lethal violence related to organized crime. Rather, the data points to a relatively calibrated series of responses.

Nevertheless, the high number of hits suggests that – as in other parts of the world – there is a commercialization of violence in the region: a market within a market that determines the shape of illicit activities.[35] This could have repercussions beyond drug-related competition.

A Montenegrin police officer guards workers as drugs are incinerated at an aluminium plant in Podgorica, 6 July 2011. *© J Savo Prelevic/AFP via Getty Images*

RELATIONSHIP TO THE STATE

Montenegro is a small country with a population of around 600 000 people. The same party has been in power for 30 years. Serbia is a relatively centralized state, with an effective security sector.

Freedom House has recently dropped both Serbia and Montenegro from its list of democracies.[36] This presents an interesting question for the states' ability to respond to organized crime. If the leadership in both countries is that autocratic, why are they not able to crack down on criminal groups – especially when it hurts their image in relation to tourism, as well as the process of EU accession?

To be fair, leaders of both groups have been arrested. Slobodan Kascelan, one of the Kavac clan leaders, was arrested in Prague in December 2018 after close cooperation between the Czech and Montenegrin police.[37] Similarly, Jovan Vukotic, head of the Skaljari, was arrested in Turkey in 2018, deported to Serbia and then extradited to Montenegro in February 2020. (At the time of writing, Vukotic awaits trial.) But considering the large number of violent incidents and significant number of arrests, there have been very few prosecutions.

President Aleksandar Vucic of Serbia has promised to take tough measures. As recently as January 2020, he said: 'The only thing that interests me is that drug dealers and killers end up behind bars. Fighting organized crime in Serbia will be difficult, but the state will certainly win in the end.'[38] The Serb authorities are believed to have drawn up a list of Montenegrin citizens who are not allowed into the country.

Serbia has seen three concerted crackdowns on organized crime in the last 30 years: once in the early 1990s, when crime plagued Belgrade;[39] a second time in Operation Sabre, following the assassination of former prime minister Zoran Djindjic in 2003; and the third in 2009, when Operation Balkan Warrior dismantled Darko Saric's gang.

Are the political elites allowing the situation to play itself out, standing back and letting the groups destroy each other?

Could there be a fourth wave? So far, there has been little to indicate that this may be the case. Since the government declared 'war' on the mafia in October 2016, there have only been more killings and almost no arrests.

Are the political elites allowing the situation to play itself out, standing back and letting the groups destroy each other – or even infiltrating them? After all, the number of deaths has been relatively low, and there is little threat to the general public or to state officials.

In some cases, the criminals seem to be one step ahead of the police. One theory is that Kotor was being monitored by surveillance cameras that were installed by the criminal groups, rather than the police. (Indeed, the cameras were allegedly used, in part, to monitor the police.) It has also been reported that a senior commander of the Kotor police – who was arrested in September 2016 – was passing information to the Kavac gang.[40]

The Serbian criminal-justice system seems to go after members of the Skaljari clan rather than the Kavac clan – an allegation denied by the Serb authorities.[41] The leader of the Skaljari clan, Jovan Vukotic, has alluded to the use of informants. After his arrest in Turkey in 2018, he told the court that he'd been using a false passport from North Macedonia because Montenegrin police were supplying information about him to criminals.[42] After the killing of his cohort, Dedovic, in Athens, Vukotic wrote in the obituary: 'It is difficult, *kum* [godfather/best friend], to fight against human downfall, against informants, false accusations and rigged warrants'.[43]

If that is true, is the state playing one group off against the other? Or is it taking sides? Conflict between groups creates opportunities for law enforcement to manipulate the situation and to increase distrust, for example by planting information or recruiting sources.

In a country as small as Montenegro, where criminal groups move in relatively predictable circles, it is quite easy for police to know what is going on. On the other hand, in communities where everybody knows everybody, criminals may also have good contacts with the police. In short, it is not always clear who is playing whom,[44] and both sides may have an interest in manoeuvring where organized crime is not the target of the police or judiciary, and vice versa. Such patterns of exchange, deference and agreement between police and mafias are certainly common in other parts of the world.[45]

That said, since 2018, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of sizeable cocaine seizures. These have resulted in the arrest of Montenegrin crew members on container ships, as well as Montenegrins and Serbs using yachts and catamarans to smuggle drugs from Latin America. Could these busts be the result of tip-offs? What is clear is that Montenegrin and Serbian authorities are conducting effective joint operations, particularly in cooperation with EUROPOL and the DEA.

Since 2014, several dozen Montenegrins and Serbians have been killed in a bloody feud between criminal groups from Kotor.
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HOW WILL THE FEUD END?

The war between the Kavac and Skaljari clans has been going on for more than five years. How will it end? There are at least three possible scenarios.

State crackdown

Since the state is supposed to have the monopoly on the use of violence, in theory the state should crack down and end the war. But neither Montenegro or Serbia seems willing or able to do that, either alone or together. Furthermore, as long as prosecution rates remain low and there is no change to the ecosystem that enables crime to flourish, the elimination of one or two groups will simply be followed by the creation of others. To be successful, authorities would have to make more effective use of financial intelligence. There would also have to be better cooperation between Montenegrin and Serbian law-enforcement agencies, and more effective use of seizing and confiscating assets.

Truce

Is it possible to end the violence? In similar feuds in other parts of the world, it can happen that someone – usually a powerbroker from the underworld or a neutral third party (such as a respected community leader or church group, who is trusted by all sides) – brokers a truce. This usually occurs when both sides acknowledge that the violence is exacting too high a cost. At the moment, there does not seem to be such a hurting stalemate, nor is there an obvious unifying figure who could broker peace.

One side wins

A likely scenario is that one side will win, and the other will lose. According to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), the situation may be approaching this point. With one of its leaders dead and the other one in a Montenegrin prison awaiting trial, the OCCRP explains that 'the Skaljari are thought to be largely a spent force'.[46]

Protracted conflict?

Sadly, another possibility is that the conflict will continue, perhaps with less frequent violence. Or that other players may enter the fray, resulting in new alliances and vendettas. As a result, the conflict will become protracted. The attack on the leader of the Kavac clan in Kviy in May 2020 suggests that, at least in the short term, this scenario is highly possible.

What is clear is that this is not a winner-takes-all game. While they get a lot of attention, the Kavac and Skaljari clans are only two of many criminal groups in Montenegro and Serbia that are involved in cocaine trafficking and other illicit activities. While they have been squabbling, plenty of others – particularly groups from Albania – have been capturing a significant stake in the cocaine distribution business.

Therefore, even if the Kavac and Skaljari clans were able to peacefully co-exist, or even reunite as a Kotor clan – which seems unlikely – they would have plenty of competitors. And even if one group were to 'win' this war, any attempt to create a monopolistic position would probably generate new violence with others who have well-established networks. Furthermore, with political tensions being what they are between Podgorica and Belgrade at the moment, it would be quite a coup for one criminal group to achieve hegemony in both places.

In conclusion, there is nothing inevitable about crime-related violence in the Western Balkans. The violence happens for different reasons, and its frequency, visibility and duration are the result of specific factors, including a high degree of competition between the two groups (and others), a stake in cocaine trafficking that is worth fighting for, a sufficient pool of young men who are willing to die for it, and a degree of criminal governance that enables the conflict to continue. Until these factors are addressed seriously, groups from the region will continue to make a killing.

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