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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME



TRANSNATIONAL TENTACLES

Global Hotspots of Western Balkan
Organized Crime

WALTER KEMP

JULY 2020



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SEE-Obs is a platform that connects and empowers civil-society actors in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. It 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. SEE-Obs supports civil society in their monitoring of national dynamics, and wider regional and international organized-crime trends. SEE-Obs was launched as an outcome of the 2018 Western Balkans Summit in London, a part of the Berlin Process.

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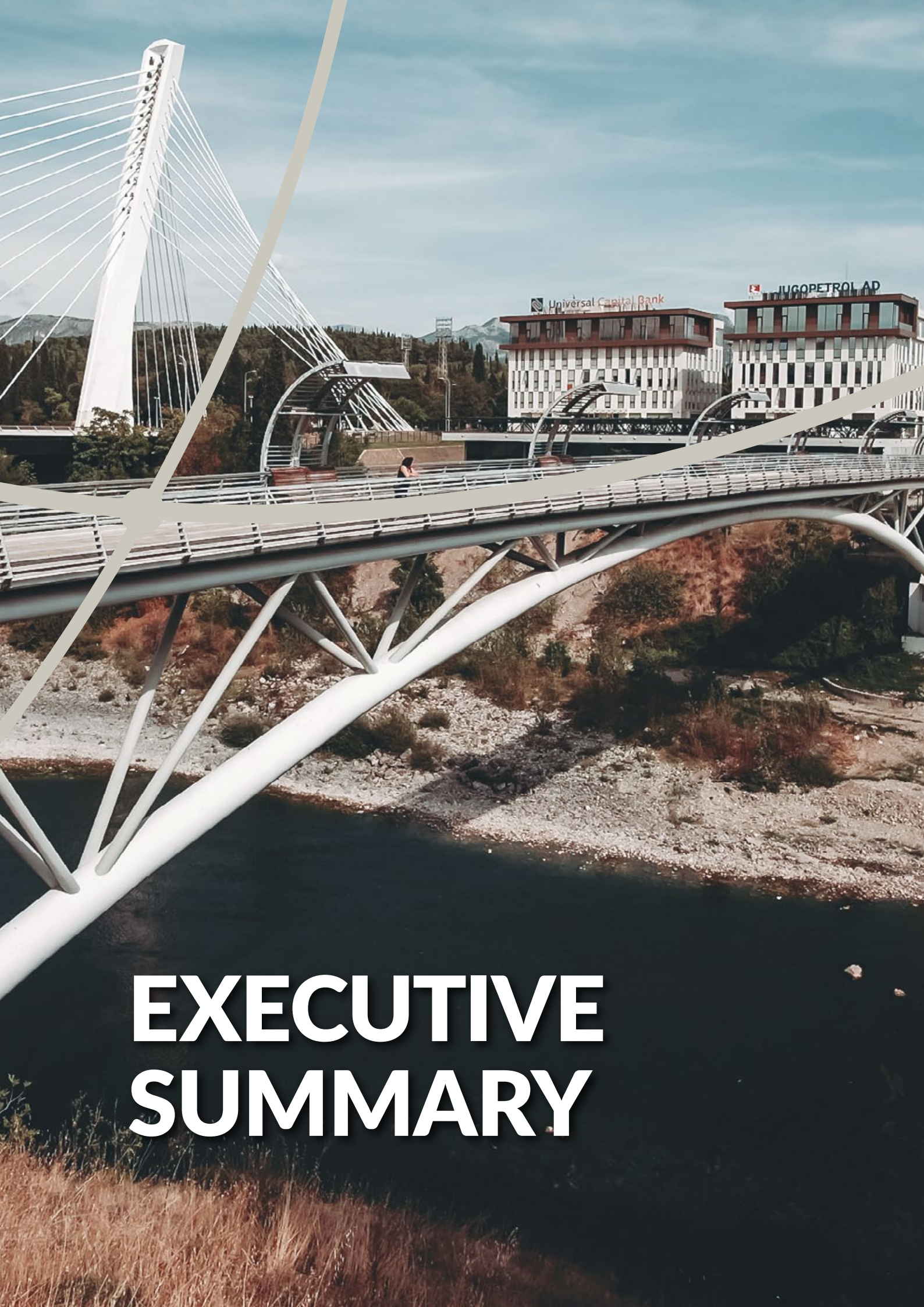
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Pristina, Kosovo. The war in Kosovo between 1998 and 1999 created not only ►
a humanitarian tragedy, but also a fertile environment for organized crime.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Western Balkans region is often portrayed as a hotspot of organized crime. As illustrated in other publications by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), the region is a transit corridor for the trafficking of drugs, weapons and human beings, and suffers from widespread crime and corruption. From a global perspective, however, the Western Balkans is relatively stable. It is a small market for illicit goods and services – the big money, as some groups from the Western Balkans have discovered, is to be made elsewhere.

This report looks at global hotspots of criminal activity carried out by groups from the six countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,¹ Montenegro, North Macedonia² and Serbia). The report does not claim to be comprehensive. Due to constraints, the main focus is on certain countries in Western Europe and Latin America, as well as South Africa, Turkey and Australia. These countries or regions were chosen because they give an indication of the types and variety of groups involved, the criminal markets, the transnational nature of the links, as well as the evolution of activities carried out abroad by criminal groups from the Western Balkans. These are also places where the GI-TOC has local expertise. More attention could be given to criminal groups from the Western Balkans that are active in Brazil, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Romania, the United States as well as northern Africa. This will be the focus of a future report.

The report describes the push and pull factors behind how and why individuals from the Western Balkans established criminal operations in various countries across the globe. It also traces how certain groups from the Western Balkans have moved up the value chain in the past 20 years, from small-time crooks and couriers to becoming major distributors of drugs in networks that stretch from Latin America to Western Europe and South Africa. The report also examines what links these groups maintain with the Western Balkans. However, it should be borne in mind that while this report is focused on criminal groups from the Western Balkans, one should not lose sight of the fact that in most societies where these groups operate they are not the main criminal group: local groups are.

◀ Podgorica, Montenegro. In recent years, Spain has become a key hub for criminal groups from the country. © Aiman Suhaimi/EyeEm via Shutterstock

Most criminal groups from the Western Balkans now carry out their operations in hotspots outside the region.

The report builds on the GI-TOC's efforts to map criminal activity at the global, regional and local levels. It can also be considered a companion to the GI-TOC report *Hotspots of Organized Crime in the Western Balkans* (May 2019). As with the 2019 study, this report is an output of the GI-TOC's Civil Society Observatory to Counter Organized Crime in South Eastern Europe. It is based on data and analyses collected and shared by civil-society actors across the Western Balkans, as well as by experts (particularly investigative reporters) in the countries where criminal groups from the Western Balkans are active.

This report is based on open sources and interviews. Although it has benefited from the local insights of contributors from all of the affected countries profiled in this report, it is limited in its scope by the amount and type of information that is available. What is in the public domain usually reveals what has already happened and what has been reported, which is usually only a fraction of what is really going on. There is also an inevitable time lag in the process of analysis. While reports such as this look at past developments, criminals are constantly adapting to take advantage of new opportunities, discovering new markets and developing new techniques (such as using so-called narco-jets, communicating via encrypted cellphones and laundering their money in cryptocurrencies or in offshore havens). It is up to law-enforcement agencies to be one step ahead.

This report was written at the end of March 2020, and at the time of writing it was not clear how criminal markets would be affected by the COVID-19 crisis and attendant restrictions on movement. Will there be more potential foot soldiers, new hotspots of vulnerability, or perhaps less demand for drugs? The effect of the global pandemic on the operations of the Western Balkans groups will be an issue the GI-TOC's Civil Society Observatory to Counter Organized Crime in South Eastern Europe will be watching closely.

International hotspots

The Western Balkans is a relatively small market for organized crime. Most criminal groups from the region now carry out their operations outside the region, particularly in Western Europe and Latin America. Those hotspots are profiled in this report.

Despite occasional claims in the media, there does not seem to be a single, identifiable 'Balkan cartel', although certain groups do sometimes work with one another, and there are also instances of multi-ethnic groups. Most criminal groups from the Western Balkans tend to operate discreetly and efficiently in the global hotspots, despite their reputation for violence. Most of the violence among the groups seems to be related to the settling of scores either within their own ranks or with rivals.

Groups from the region are modern, dynamic and entrepreneurial, showing an ability to adapt and innovate, and use technology to their advantage (for example, by using encrypted forms of communication; exploring new routes and means of trafficking, such as 'narco-jets' used to smuggle drugs; and laundering their money through

cryptocurrencies, offshore havens and into their home countries). They are reportedly responsible for the financing, transportation and distribution of large amounts of cocaine shipped from South America to Europe. Their ability to work with local criminal groups and access cocaine at source, combined with their presence in major European port cities, means that they are able to control the end-to-end supply of cocaine.

The groups' operational nous has allowed them to move up the value chain in several countries over the past 20 years. In some countries (such as Italy, Spain, Ecuador, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands), they have become major players, particularly in the cocaine trade. The biggest market for the goods trafficked by criminal groups from the Western Balkans is Western Europe.

Criminals moved to many of the hotspots analyzed in this report as a result of conditions triggered by war and instability in the Western Balkans in the 1990s. With the exception of Latin America, criminal groups from the Western Balkans are active in countries where there are sizeable diasporas from the region, including the Netherlands, Italy, Turkey and South Africa. It is important to note that although the problem of organized crime in the Western Balkans has largely moved abroad, the activities of these criminal groups are harmful to the reputation of the countries where they are from, not least in the process of EU accession. In addition, some of the underlying conditions of vulnerability that caused people to leave the Western Balkans in the past still exist – namely, unemployment, lack of opportunities, frustration with their governments and the slow process of EU accession. If these issues are not addressed, the ranks of criminals from the Western Balkans will be bolstered.

Addressing the threat posed by criminal groups from the Balkans will have to come, in part, from the outside, namely in the shape of more effective international cooperation, tracking and seizing of assets, and the sharing of information, not least since perpetrators tend to use multiple identities. Between 2018 and 2020, there have been an increasing number of successful joint counter-narcotics operations, some of them interdicting several tonnes of drugs. However, greater cooperation between law-enforcement agencies in countries of supply and demand, as well as with their counterparts from the Western Balkans, is needed.

Civil society, both in the Western Balkans and the diaspora, also has an important role to play, given that it can strengthen a culture of lawfulness at home, boost resilience among communities, and advocate for a society free from crime and violence.

For the international community – and governments in Western Europe in particular – the biggest challenge is to reduce demand for the goods and services being provided by criminal groups from the Western Balkans and to reduce vulnerability in countries such as Ecuador and Colombia, where the cocaine is produced. Otherwise the tentacles of criminal groups – including those from the Western Balkans – will continue to wrap themselves around the globe.



The aftermath of the NATO bombing of Pec, former Yugoslavia, August 1999.

© Scott Peterson/Liaison via Getty Images

Context: Transplantation due to upheaval

Changes in the strategic environment can cause upheavals that have an impact on criminal markets and actors.³ These changes can give rise to a fertile climate for crime and corruption. As Federico Varese points out in *Mafias on the Move*, ‘mafias emerge in societies that are undergoing a sudden and late transition to the market economy, lack a legal structure that reliably protects property rights, and have a supply of people trained in violence who become unemployed at this specific juncture’.⁴ As will be illustrated in this report, such conditions existed in Albania and many countries of the former Yugoslavia in the late 1990s.

As well as facilitating the emergence of criminal groups, episodes of conflict or humanitarian crisis often result in population displacement, which in turn can lead to what Varese describes as ‘transplantation’ of criminal groups. One classic example of this is the transplantation of the Italian mafia from Italy to the United States in the 1920s. Other examples include the transplantation of the Russian mafia after the collapse of the Soviet Union or Ibos from Nigeria to different parts of the world.

In the process of transplantation, criminal groups originating from the Western Balkans took advantage of the political turbulence in countries that were also experiencing dramatic changes in their strategic environment. Latin America was (and still is) going through turbulent times, not least with the formal cessation of

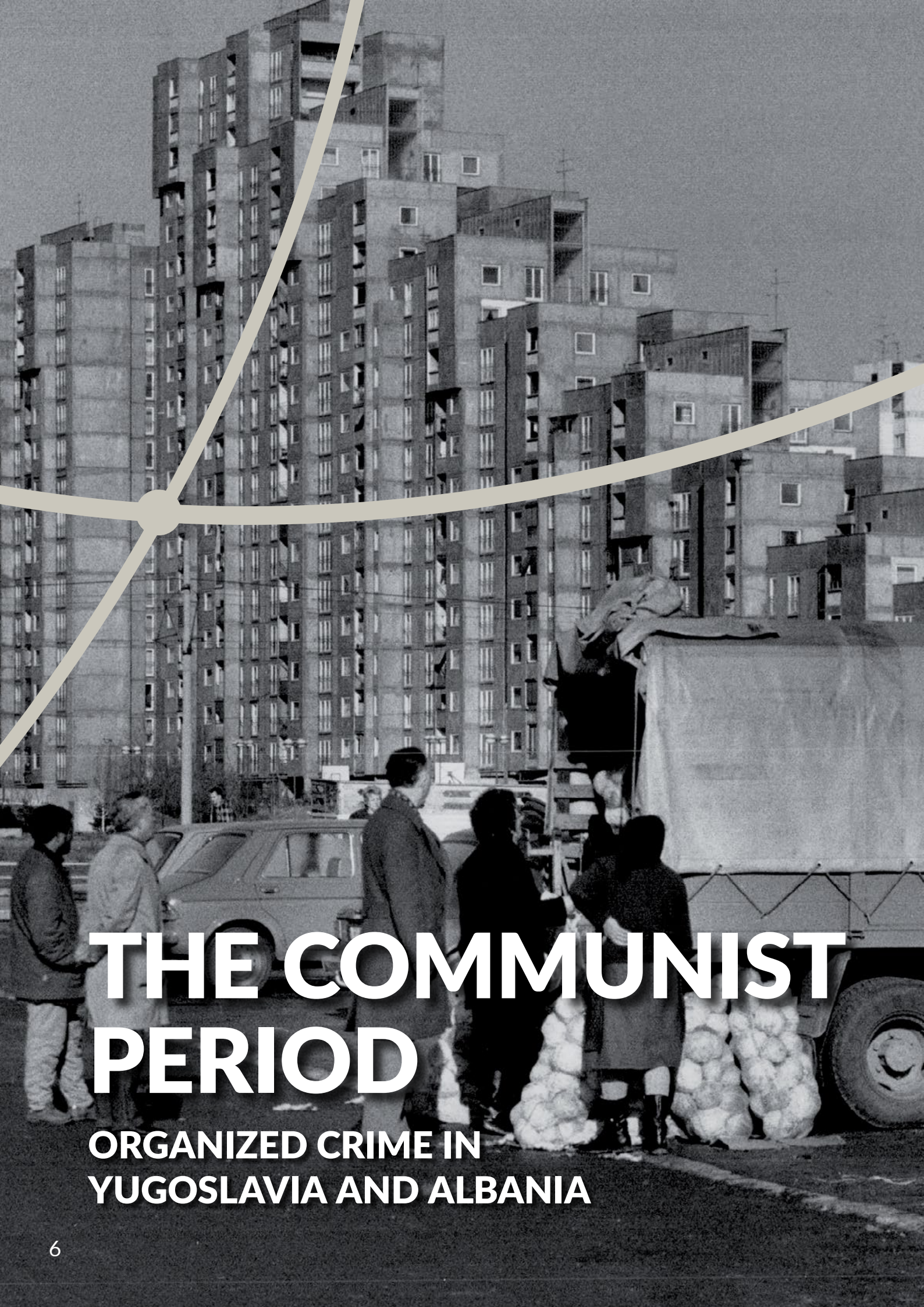
almost 50 years of war in Colombia (the world's biggest producer of cocaine) and unrest in Venezuela. Furthermore, weak governance and institutions in places such as Ecuador and South Africa have enabled criminal groups at home and from abroad to make inroads. This supports Varese's point that it is easier for criminal groups to be transplanted into areas where there are low levels of trust, civic culture/engagement and social capital. In such environments, resilience is weaker and opportunities are greater for criminal protection.⁵

That said, this report also shows that criminal groups can penetrate well-established markets in well-developed countries. This seems to be particularly the case in countries where criminals can take advantage of a sizeable diaspora. In addition, it is important to remember that criminals do not necessarily move abroad as part of a conscious strategy, but often as the result of unintended consequences.⁶ Would the men fighting in the Balkan wars of the 1990s really have imagined that 20 years later they would be negotiating cocaine deals in Brazil, or acting as bodyguards in South Africa? Would young men growing up in some of the poorest villages of Albania or Kosovo in the mid-1990s have imagined that they would be major players in drug markets in London, Amsterdam or Rome?

Furthermore, as well as focusing on hierarchical mafia-style groups, it is important to look at serious criminal activities involving enterprising networks.⁷ This report shows how people from the Western Balkans have created and responded to opportunities to profit from illicit markets. Rather than transplanting well-established operations from the Western Balkans to other countries, many of the individuals and groups featured in this report have started out as small players abroad and then worked their way up to becoming major actors in some of the world's biggest drug markets. The risk is that they transplant some of their operations and influence back into the Balkans, particularly through money laundering, and targeted assassinations. This can have a serious impact on the political economy of the Western Balkans.

This report endeavours to show how, over the past 20 years, criminal groups from the Western Balkans have gone global and are moving up the value chain of criminal activity. The tentacles of this octopus now spread around the world: from the supply of cocaine in Latin America to the streets of Western Europe; from heroin-distribution routes in Turkey into Europe; from cannabis fields in Albania to Turkey and the European Union (EU). The Western Balkans remains the centre of this trade: as a region of transit; as a recruiting ground for the foot soldiers of these groups; and as a safe place to hide out and invest or launder one's ill-gotten gains – but the main action is abroad.

Over the past 20 years, criminal groups from the Western Balkans have gone global.



THE COMMUNIST PERIOD

ORGANIZED CRIME IN
YUGOSLAVIA AND ALBANIA



In order to understand today's hotspots outside the Western Balkans, it is important to recall the history and evolution of criminal structures, markets and actors within the region.

In the 1970s and 1980s, people living in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) had a relatively high standard of living compared to their peers in other communist countries. They could also travel quite freely, and as a result, many went abroad to work. The expectation of both those travelling abroad as well as their employers was that they would only be there temporarily (hence the German expression *Gastarbeiter*, or 'guest worker'). Some even went as far as South Africa, responding to that country's campaign to entice white Europeans with job offers.⁸ In other cases, people went abroad for seasonal employment.

Most Yugoslavs who went abroad were industrious, law-abiding, blue-collar workers who were looking for a better future. But, as often happens when a large group emigrates, this movement also created new possibilities for crime. As former BBC correspondent Misha Glenny explains in his 2008 book *McMafia*, the large *Gastarbeiter* community 'provided the milieu in which less salubrious Yugoslav characters could take refuge and disappear from police if necessary'.⁹ These characters started on a relatively low rung of the criminal-activity ladder, engaging in racketeering and the burglary of luxury goods retailers, homes and safe deposit boxes.

Some of the more notorious characters who came to prominence in this time include Milenko Mikanović Lazin, Rade Kotour, Goran 'Majmun' Vuković, and Ljubomir Magaš, as well as Željko Ražnatović, better known as 'Arkan'. Between 1972 and 1983, Arkan amassed convictions or warrants in Belgium, the Netherlands,

◀ A communist-era scene from Belgrade, the capital of the former Yugoslavia from 1918 to the country's dissolution in 2006. © Toronto Star Archives/Toronto Star via Getty Images

Sweden, West Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Italy, mostly for armed robberies. Remarkably, he escaped from prison in five different countries.¹⁰ This first wave of criminals regularly travelled back and forth between Western Europe and Yugoslavia. When they came back home, they spent or invested their money, and then would go on another 'tour' abroad.

This behaviour did not go unnoticed by the state security services. Indeed, criminals were sometimes encouraged by the authorities to go abroad. They were even helped with the paperwork and sometimes were provided with passports and other travel documents. By facilitating their travel abroad, the security services prevented the criminals from causing trouble at home. Such assistance also provided useful leverage for the security services, and criminals were often used for various assignments, such as the assassination of political emigrants.¹¹ For example, Đorđe 'Giška' Božović, known as the 'king of the Belgrade underworld', was sometimes called on by the secret service to eliminate political dissidents and state enemies. It is alleged, for example, that he was the mastermind behind the assassination of Croatian political dissident and businessman Stejpan Đureković in West Germany in 1983.¹²

Albania

The situation in Albania was different, given that the borders were closed between 1945 and 1990. Indeed, while Yugoslavia was one of the most open communist societies, Albania was one of the most restricted. In this highly controlled environment, any illicit activity would have had to have the knowledge, if not the complicity of, state officials.

Due to limited access to foreign investment as well as poor infrastructure, Albania's economy was one of the weakest in the communist bloc. Looking for opportunities to raise hard currency, it seems that the Albanian regime could not resist an offer made in 1966 to smuggle cigarettes.¹³ The plan was to smuggle US brands of tobacco to Italy and then trade these cigarettes on to other destinations in Europe and the Middle East.

The Swiss traders who made the offer had connections with the Italian mafia who, for their part, were looking for new opportunities, not least when law-enforcement operations in the Tyrrhenian Sea became more effective. According to a former Italian anti-mafia prosecutor, mafia bosses such as Raffaelo Cutolo (head of Nuova Camorra Organizzata) understood that the controls behind the Iron Curtain were strong for political reasons, but not necessarily an impediment to criminal trafficking, including cigarettes.

The Albanian government opened a free economic zone to serve as a transit point for the contraband cigarettes that were arriving from the United States, as well as founding a company called Albtrans, allegedly led by the Albanian Secret Service (Sigurimi), which managed the operation within Albania for a commission of around US\$9 per box. It is believed that the Albanian government accrued around US\$35 million through this scheme between 1968 and 1991.¹⁴ In this way, the Adriatic Sea, which up to that point had been regarded as a 'blue border', became a lucrative new gateway to the east for Italian criminal groups. In return, the Albanian regime gained

valuable networks, trade and hard currency. This was the origin of the 'Balkan route', which would facilitate criminal activities for years to come.

The Turkish connection

Around the same time that the Italian mafia was looking east, Turkish traffickers were looking west. Starting in the 1970s, criminal groups in Turkey established international trade and transportation companies to facilitate heroin trafficking to lucrative Western European markets. The Balkans was regarded as a low-risk route and was used for transit and the temporary storage of drug shipments. Ethnic Albanians (who were considered hard working and reliable) were favoured by the Turkish groups and were often used as drivers and couriers.

For Turkish criminal groups, Yugoslavia was not considered a lucrative market, but it was (like Bulgaria) regarded as a safe and useful meeting point to liaise and trade with Italian and other criminal groups. When purchasing heroin, Italian groups would also sometimes sell weapons and ammunition. Guns were in high demand in Turkey in the 1970s due to the intense and violent rivalry between right-wing nationalists and communists.¹⁵ However, a military coup in 1980 put a halt to the violence and the new Turkish leadership subsequently cracked down on organized crime.¹⁶ Under Operation Godfathers (*Babalar Operasyonu*), many major mafia leaders in Turkey were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms. Some mafia leaders were executed in mysterious circumstances by hitmen thought to be working on behalf of the so-called 'deep state'. Others were able to escape the country, reportedly due to their clandestine relationship with the Turkish state.¹⁷

In the 1980s, law-enforcement agencies in Western Europe also became more vigilant against criminal groups from Turkey. Many Turkish nationals – including politicians, intelligence officers and undercover police officers – were arrested for heroin trafficking in Europe. But while Operation Godfathers in Turkey and more effective law enforcement in Western Europe increased the risks for Turkish criminal groups, they also created opportunities for those from the Balkans. With Turkey-licensed vehicles under international scrutiny, traffickers frequently used vehicles with Yugoslavian and Bulgarian licence plates instead. Turkish organized-crime groups cooperated with passport forgers in Bulgaria to issue false passports for ethnic Albanian drivers and couriers (from Yugoslavia) involved in drug trafficking.

The end of communism brought dramatic changes. In Albania, student demonstrations in Tirana in December 1990 helped to end more than 45 years of isolation which had been defined by the repressive regime of Enver Hoxha (1954–1985). Change brought economic hardship, and political and social unrest, but it also created freedoms that young people had never experienced. Many took the opportunity to flee abroad. One of the most iconic images of the time is of thousands of Albanians on the cargo ship *Vlora* entering the Italian port of Bari in August 1991. But as many Albanians and Yugoslavs hoped for a better future, trouble was on the horizon.



WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH



The dramatic events of 1989 and 1990 in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union also had an impact on Yugoslavia. The Communist Party broke up along nationalist lines, and in 1991 Croatia and Slovenia declared independence. What followed was a period of almost four years of on-and-off fighting, particularly in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, until the December 1995 Dayton Agreement. The region was rocked by further instability with the collapse of a pyramid scheme in Albania in 1997, followed by war in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999. This section looks at the how these events contributed to where, how and why certain hotspots of Balkan organized crime developed outside Yugoslavia and Albania.

Criminals on the front line

When war broke out in 1991, criminals from the SFRY who had operated in Western Europe in the 1980s returned home and were mobilized in paramilitary formations. With the blessing of the regime, they were joined by common criminals, thugs and football hooligans to help the war effort.¹⁸ As John Mueller describes:

The most dynamic (and murderous) Serbian units were notably composed not of committed nationalists or ideologues, nor of locals out to get their neighbors, nor of ordinary people whipped into a frenzy by demagogues and the media, but rather of common criminals recruited for the task.¹⁹

The most notorious unit was the Serb Volunteer Guard, also known as Arkan's Tigers. They fought, raped and plundered, particularly in Eastern Slavonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁰ There were also warlords such as Mladen Naletilić Tuta, a Bosnian Croat who ran the Convicts Battalion, and Jusuf 'Juka' Prazhina, a Bosnian gangster whose paramilitary unit was made up of gang members who helped to defend Sarajevo.²¹ These groups – although relatively small – were often in the vanguard of much of the ethnic cleansing and other atrocities that were perpetrated during the war. Like typical

◀ Inhabitants of Prizren, Kosovo, hide behind a tank of the international Kosovo Force, after Serbian snipers opened fire, June 1999. © Christophe Simon/AFP via Getty Images

criminals, they offered 'protection' to those who obeyed or paid. They wrapped their criminal activities in the national flag, thereby legitimizing their actions in defence of the homeland while fomenting ethnic hatred. As Mueller points out, what often passed for 'ethnic warfare' was something far more banal: 'the creation of communities of criminal violence and pillage'.²²

While these thugs were feared by many, they were idolized by others. As Warren Zimmermann observes, 'the dregs of society – embezzlers, thugs, even professional killers – rose from the slime to become freedom fighters and national heroes'.²³ Talking to *The Wall Street Journal* in 1993, a journalist in Belgrade said: 'the biggest heroes of the war so far are criminals. I would say that there are about 3,000 Belgrade criminals in Bosnia at the front ... They are brave, imaginative and loyal to the people they work for.'²⁴

Some of them nevertheless overplayed their hand and created resentment among their own people. For example, in October 1993, Bosnian Muslims arrested two reputed gangsters within their own ranks for extorting the very people they were supposed to be defending during the siege of Sarajevo. According to a report from the time, the two (Ramiz Delalic also known as 'Celo' and Musan Topalovic known as 'Caco') had led a campaign of murder, robbery and rape. Their gang had apparently monopolized the black market that accounted for the city's only trade, earning fortunes at a time when most of Sarajevo's inhabitants were spending their days scavenging for water and bread.²⁵ In sum, the war made some criminals rich and others infamous. It also gave young men fighting experience of the most ruthless kind, and it created lucrative markets for criminal activity.

Sanctions and the 'factory of crime'

The international embargo imposed between 1992 and 1996 by the United Nations Security Council created hardship in Yugoslavia and had knock-on effects on neighbouring countries, but it also created opportunities. As David Samuels points out: 'the invisible wall erected by the West kept the criminal élites of Serbia rich and the rest of the defeated country poor'.²⁶

The black market assumed a crucial importance in facilitating the exchange of scarce goods. Croats and Bosnians, for example, needed weapons, given that they started at a disadvantage when most of the assets of the Yugoslav People's Army went over to Serbia and Montenegro and a weapons embargo had been imposed by the UN in 1992. Bosnians besieged in Sarajevo needed weaponry, ammunition, fuel and goods to survive; Serbs needed fuel. There was also a vibrant market in stolen cars. Circumventing sanctions often required making deals with one's enemies: Croats bought weapons from Serbs, while Serbs bought fuel from Bosnians and Croats.

As sanctions began to bite, the leadership in Belgrade increasingly turned to criminal markets to keep the country running. As a journalist observed at the time: 'The black market is the main way of preserving the social peace in Belgrade. So the state is looking to work with it.'²⁷ Slobodan Milošević's government merged law-enforcement agencies and security services with organized criminals, not only to create productive relationships, but also to supervise the extensive black market and grey economies. Smuggling was both in the interest of the state, and in some cases run by the state.²⁸ In a way, the illicit business of the black market became legitimized. It is alleged, for example, that the Serbian State Security Service was funded, in part, by money earned from the sale of goods (including drugs) that were seized by the customs agency.²⁹ Furthermore, the leadership in both Belgrade and Podgorica were involved in cigarette smuggling, which was a valuable source of hard currency. It is estimated that the Montenegrin government was making US\$700 million a year from the cigarette trade, mostly to Italy.

Sanctions put a heavy burden on some neighbouring states. As Glennly explains: 'Not a penny of assistance or compensation was offered to Yugoslavia's neighbours – they were all expected to shoulder the costs of the West's moral indignation. So the only way they could pay for pensions, wages and health care was by allowing the mob to shore up its control of the country's main trading routes and claim ignorance, helplessness or both. As the crisis deepened, so did this symbiotic relationship between politics and crime.'³⁰

There was widespread oil smuggling across Lake Skadar between Albania and Montenegro, as well as by land across the border from North Macedonia and Albania. Indeed, sanctions-busting and the fact that the break-up of Yugoslavia created new borders

and therefore new smuggling opportunities had the unintended consequence of developing criminal economies in some neighbouring countries.

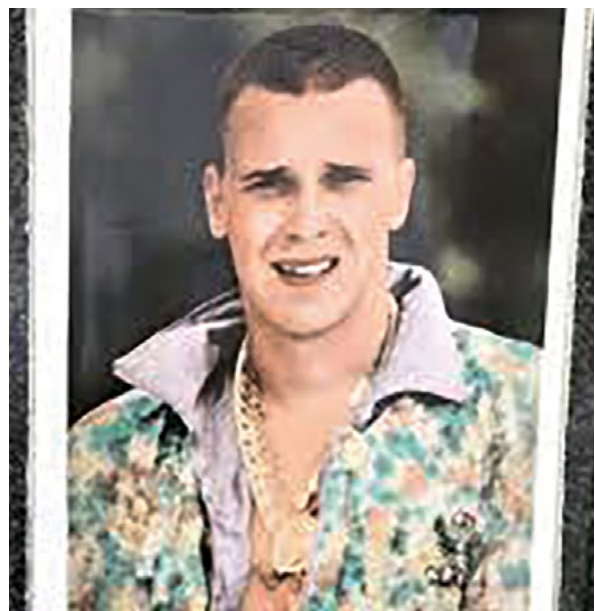
In short, some of the characteristics of the ecosystem of crime that still remain in many parts of the Balkans is the result of the war in Yugoslavia and the international community's response to it. As Glennly writes: 'Somehow this orgy of war and consumer excess had to be paid for ... because the industry of sanctions-busting had now created a huge pan-Balkan network of organized crime ... the easiest way of underwriting the affairs of state was through mafia business: drugs, arms, oil, weapons, women and migrants. The foundations for a factory of crime had been laid.'³¹

An explosion of crime on the home front

On the home front, organized crime flourished. Guns were widely available; war and sanctions had ruined the economy and triggered hyperinflation. In the first two years of the war, 300 000 young people left Yugoslavia; there were few opportunities for those who stayed. As portrayed in *The Wounds*, a 1998 film by Srđan Dragojević, many young men felt abandoned and hurt. The only people with money and power were the gangsters, either returning from the West or profiting from the war economy. As one observer said at the time, 'you can't do anything by honest work. More and more young people are making up their minds: death or glory'.³²

But while many of the gangsters who had made their reputation in the West in the 1980s joined paramilitaries, young thugs had their moment of glory in the big cities. As captured in a documentary called *See You in the Obituary*, criminals, often on drugs, were as bent on violence and notoriety as they were on organized crime.³³ As a result of violence between gangs – particularly from the New Belgrade and Voždovac districts of Belgrade – the number of murders in the capital doubled in the first two years of the war. As one gangster at the time said of Belgrade, 'this is a small pond with too many crocodiles in it'.³⁴

Around 1992, a style developed among the young men engaged in criminal activity characterized by track suits, sports shoes, short hair, sunglasses and garish gold chains. 'Diesel' brand jeans were also popular, inspiring the name of this gangster look: '*dizelaši*'.³⁵ Aleksandar 'Knele' Knežević, who by his teens was already one of Belgrade's most notorious gangsters, was a poster boy of the gangster culture and *dizelaši* style. 'In a country gripped by



Aleksandar 'Knele' Knežević

Cash machines and burglaries

In the early 1990s, criminals from the Western Balkans became notorious overseas for carrying out burglaries. This included bank robberies in Western Europe, and jewel heists. In the United States, police were perplexed by a series of well-organized attacks on jewellery stores and automated teller machines (ATMs).

They started to notice that many of the perpetrators were from the Balkans, and therefore referred to the group as YACS (Yugoslavs, Albanians, Croats and Serbs).³⁸ The YACS were observed as a mobile and loose network of people, whose members would get together to work on what appeared to be ad hoc but well-planned heists. The groups would then disperse and reform for the next break-in.³⁹ A typical YACS heist would involve cutting holes through ceilings⁴⁰ to access a safe or an ATM, and disabling phone lines and security systems.⁴¹

Unfamiliar with cultural characteristics of the Western Balkans and local Balkan languages, the police struggled to understand them. YACS would often use fake identities, which made it even more difficult to track them, and, when arrested, they often carried a telephone number of a person who, after being contacted, would pay their bail.⁴² In the United States, nearly 300 suspected gang members had been identified in 1998, who were generally

Balkan immigrants,⁴³ predominantly ethnic Albanians and some of them illegal entrants to the United States. But the group also recruited people with other ethnic backgrounds.⁴⁴

The group became such a menace that in the mid-1990s, the FBI launched a task force to take down the criminal ring.⁴⁵ While the group seems to have faded away by around the following decade, their name was brought up in 2017 when it was suggested that the theft of US\$9 million worth of jewellery from Kim Kardashian looked much like a technique used by the YACS.⁴⁶ But this has not been confirmed by official statements.

In recent years, a number of burglaries in Western Europe have been attributed to nationals of the Western Balkans, particularly Albanians. The so-called Hawks are a small and mobile group of people, who come together to break into houses before they split again. They regularly travel back and forth between the Western Balkans region and the EU. As noted in the section on Spain later in this report, this technique seems to have been used to rob homes of footballers. Recently, a group of Albanians were caught in Australia after a series of ATM robberies, most of which bore the hallmarks of the YACS and thefts in Western Europe.⁴⁷ The Albanian authorities take the problem so seriously that they have created an anti-Hawk unit.

war and complete societal breakdown, where wages had to be spent immediately because inflation could devalue them by the minute, gangsters such as Knele were idolised because they were the only ones that could be seen living the good life.³⁶ Knele lived fast and died young, murdered in mysterious circumstances in the Hyatt Hotel in Belgrade at the age of 21. He was among a number of young criminals who were murdered in mafia-style killings, the perpetrators of which were almost never found or arrested.³⁷ Most criminals who survived this violent period graduated to the higher echelons of crime after the war or went abroad.

The Albanian pyramid collapses

Although Albania was not directly involved in the war, some Albanians profited from smuggling. The profits, coupled with poor regulation of the banking system and dreams of easy money, fuelled a pyramid scheme in early 1996. Around two-thirds of the population invested in such schemes to the point that liabilities were equal to the half of the country's GDP. The collapse of these pyramid schemes in 1997 created not only economic instability but also social and political unrest. Riots broke out and the state lost control over some cities, particularly those close to ports or along the border with former Yugoslavia and Greece.⁴⁸ Armouries were looted, flooding the country with almost 600 000 weapons, including 226 000 Kalashnikovs.⁴⁹

In this breakdown of law and order (in which around 2 000 civilians were killed), some people organized themselves into self-defence committees to protect themselves from criminal groups.⁵⁰ For others, hierarchically structured criminal organizations filled the void of governance and provided protection. Some criminal groups hired former members of the special forces and secret service to enhance their effectiveness and carry out sophisticated criminal activities.⁵¹

Organized crime boomed in this environment. The number of criminal groups increased in a very short period of time, as did the size of their membership.⁵² Drug trafficking and car theft flourished, as did money laundering.⁵³ Instability at home was also compounded by the growing crisis in neighbouring Kosovo. It is believed that at least 6 000 Kalashnikovs were smuggled from Albania to Kosovo before and during the Kosovo War, while around 465 000 people fled from Kosovo to Albania.^{54, 55, 56}

Crime and conflict in Kosovo

The war in Kosovo between 1998 and 1999 created a humanitarian tragedy and political upheaval, as well as a fertile environment for organized crime.⁵⁷ Because Kosovo was an unrecognized entity, during the war it needed assistance from abroad in order to survive. As a result, in addition to political and financial support from abroad (including from the diaspora), several criminal activities emerged, such as smuggling of arms, oil, drugs and stolen cars, as well as corruption.⁵⁸ These activities built on informal networks and the grey economy, which had developed in response to difficult socio-economic conditions in Kosovo in the 1990s.

Between 1999 and 2008, Kosovo was governed by the UN International Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) – the real shift of governance to local domestic authorities only started in 2005.⁵⁹ Since 2008, Kosovo has been assisted by the EU-supported rule of law mission (EULEX) to build rule of law institutions and facilitate the process of integration of Kosovo into EU.⁶⁰ In this post-conflict context of state-building, weak institutions and poor infrastructure, powerful individuals who had participated in the war and had strong connections with the diaspora enhanced their wealth and influence by drifting between legal and criminal activities.⁶¹ Some also went into politics, and a few of these became involved in extraction of public funds.⁶² Former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army were allegedly linked to some criminal activities (such as petrol stations that were used for money

The foundations for a factory of crime had been laid during the war in Yugoslavia.

laundering).⁶³ Others, particularly those in the so-called 'protection' business, added a veneer of legitimacy to their activities by establishing private security companies.⁶⁴

Despite the progress made in state-building, the central government of Kosovo to this day has very little control over the north of the country, where the majority are ethnic Serbs. The institutions of the north have limited power due to the slow pace of self-administration, while the region is also the subject of a long-running dispute between Belgrade and Pristina about the northern area's status and borders. The result is a grey zone that makes for a fertile environment for illicit activity.⁶⁵ As the 2019 report of the European Commission on Kosovo dryly notes: 'The situation in the north of Kosovo with regards to organised crime continues to pose challenges for law enforcement agencies.'⁶⁶

Mafia state

As described above, during the wars in Yugoslavia, the Milošević regime became involved in smuggling in order to survive and brought a number of leading criminals into its ranks. This model continued after the war as well, including the smuggling of drugs and weapons. As Glenny explains: 'Organized crime and secret police worked hand in glove in Yugoslavia; indeed it was often impossible to distinguish one from the other.'⁶⁷ Unlike in other countries of Eastern Europe, there was no lustration after the war or the end of communism to prevent the continued participation of criminal actors in the new Federal Republic of Yugoslavia government. The old leopards simply changed their spots.

Serbian nationalist and war criminal Željko Ražnatović, better known as Arkan. Between 1972 and 1983, Arkan amassed convictions or warrants in Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, West Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Italy.

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But Milošević's position was unstable, both in terms of political power and control of criminal markets. Assassinations increased, including of criminals such as Arkan and opposition politicians such as Ivan Stambolic. Senior figures in the security services played key roles in the contest for power between Milošević and the opposition between 1999 and 2003. Their involvement was complicated by linkages between the secret police and organized crime as well as the Special Operations Unit (JSO), with it being alleged that members of the JSO were part of the notorious Zemun clan. This criminal group, named after a district of Belgrade, emerged around 1993; by 2001, when they abducted the well-known Serbian business-man Miroslav Mišković, the Zemun clan were described as 'one of the strongest European criminal organizations', which for years had the protection of the state.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the political momentum was shifting. Milošević resigned in October 2000 after a closely fought presidential election. He was arrested in April 2001 and extradited to the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague.⁶⁹

Some of those who had switched allegiance from Milošević to the new Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, such as the head of the JSO Milorad 'Legija' Luković, began to get nervous when Đinđić declared that he would crack down on organized crime, and the ICTY came looking for Luković. As a result, it is alleged that a group of police – some of whom had been paramilitaries during the war, as well as some with criminal connections – assassinated Đinđić on 12 March 2003.⁷⁰

The other half of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, namely Montenegro, was also struggling with the legacy of the war, the crippling effect of sanctions and hyperinflation. One way of surviving was through the smuggling of cigarettes. Between 1994 and 2002, cigarette smuggling was carried out on an industrial scale. The illicit business – estimated to bring US\$700 million of hard currency annually – was done in collaboration with Italian mafia groups. An investigation carried out by the Italian authorities uncovered that the smuggling was state-organized and that at the top of the illicit operation was the then prime minister of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović (now the president of the country). They issued a warrant for his arrest in 2005. While charges against Đukanović were dropped in 2009, the massive smuggling operation opened the door to corruption and empowered local criminal networks and their international ties. It also transformed Montenegro into an attractive destination for Italian criminals. According to a former anti-mafia magistrate in Bari, in the 1990s many major Italian criminals were hanging out in Montenegro: 'Over a hundred of the most dangerous Italian fugitives [are living] in a country of just 600,000. How is that possible?'

Go straight or go abroad

The assassination of Đinđić was a jolt to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In response, a state of emergency was declared and in 2003 a major crackdown on organized crime called Operation Sabre (*Sabja*) was launched. More than 10 000 people were detained, with the investigation uncovering a murky tangle of relationships between political and criminal groups, as well as between the security services and organized crime. Several members of the Zemun clan were convicted for killings and terrorist attacks. As a result, the criminal group was virtually dismantled, or at

Organized crime and secret police worked hand in glove in Yugoslavia; it was often impossible to distinguish one from the other.



CCTV footage of a member of the Pink Panthers gang during a jewellery heist.

© Facebook

The Pink Panthers: smash and grab

Pink Panthers is the name given by INTERPOL to an international network of jewel and watch thieves, consisting of around 200 members and so-called facilitators (and others), almost all of whom are from the Western Balkans. The network is responsible for some of the biggest and most audacious jewel heists ever, and has operated in numerous countries and on several continents. According to different sources, the group is responsible for over €350 million in robberies of gold and diamonds. There are suggestions that some of their operations may have been on behalf of clients in wealthy European countries.⁷²

Many members speak multiple languages, possess numerous passports and have had military training and a violent past dating back to Yugoslavia's wars. According to one person close to the group, part of the original motivation of members of the group was anger and revenge. 'Yugoslavia used to be a country whose passport was worth more than any other in Europe ... Then suddenly it all turned around. We

became third-grade citizens. They considered us savages. All this gives way to spite. And sometimes we are even out for revenge.'⁷³

The Pink Panthers seem to be more of a network than an organized-crime group with a specific leadership or heads. According to someone familiar with the group, 'the Panthers' organizational structure is like an octopus'.⁷⁴ There were more relevant figures within the group who can be understood as 'senior' thieves, but they did not exercise any control over more junior members of the criminal network. The heists were usually committed by local cells already present in the country or in neighbouring areas. However, thieves often returned home to Montenegro (predominantly to Cetinje) or Serbia (particularly the city of Nis), where they remained 'on call' for future jobs. Many seem to have had contacts and apartments in Italy.⁷⁵ A major operation by INTERPOL in 2007 seems to have diminished the network's effectiveness, but there are indications that some members are still active.

least dispersed. According to reports, during Operation Sabre, the number of drug dealers was reduced so dramatically that the price of narcotics increased significantly.

As Varese points out, 'mafias move to new territories in order to escape state prosecution, mafia wars, and internal disputes, or because they are ordered by the state to move away'.⁷¹ Serbia after 2003 was a good example: the message from the government was go straight or go abroad. As we will see in some of the country case studies below, many took the latter option, fleeing to Western Europe (particularly Spain) and South Africa, often with fake documents and identities.

Albanians branch out

After elections in June 1997, the situation in Albania stabilized: a new government was formed and a new president appointed.⁷⁶ The new government started to crack down on organized crime: in 2000, the Albanian government reported that it had indicted 23 criminal groups involved in drug trafficking.⁷⁷ Within Albania, arrests were frequently made for human trafficking, smuggling of migrants, arms trafficking and car theft.⁷⁸

Due to turf wars, more effective law enforcement and more opportunities to move abroad, some Albanian criminal groups began to shift their operations to Western Europe and Turkey. Indeed, by 2000, a large number of Albanians involved in illegal activities had already left the country and established illicit enterprises abroad, particularly in Greece, Italy, Switzerland and Germany. Around 10 600 Albanians, including many criminals emigrated illegally to Apulia, Italy, in the early spring of 1997 alone.⁷⁹ By 2001, Albanian-speaking groups (including groups from Kosovo and North Macedonia) were active in heroin trafficking in several European countries such as the Czech Republic, Belgium, Greece, Austria and Switzerland.^{80, 81} By 2005, they had also begun trafficking heroin in the Nordic countries, mainly in Sweden.⁸² The usual route was to purchase heroin from Turkish organizations and transport it to Western Europe, particularly via Hungary.⁸³

At around the same time (approximately 2001), Albania also became a source country for cannabis sold in Europe after the major planting of cannabis in Albania in the 1990s.⁸⁴ The country also became one of the main sources of herbal cannabis to the Italian and Greek markets, and gradually also an important source of cannabis resin.⁸⁵ Albanian crime groups were also involved in human trafficking in Belgium, France, Italy and the UK, and particularly in Italy, where they worked closely with the Italian mafia.⁸⁶ Some of these collaborations would form the basis for future drug-trafficking networks. There is also evidence that Albanians were involved in armed robberies in Greece as part of mixed criminal groups composed of Greeks, Albanians, Romanians and citizens from the former Yugoslavia.⁸⁷ Within a short period of time, some Albanian groups had moved up the ladder from being foot soldiers of more powerful (Turkish and Italian) groups to becoming key players in the markets for drug trafficking, illegal immigration and trafficking in human beings in some parts of Europe.⁸⁸

By 2001, Albanian-speaking groups were active in heroin trafficking in several European countries.

Displacement and diaspora

A major effect of the war in Yugoslavia that would contribute to hotspots of criminal activity abroad was emigration. As noted, the first wave of emigration from Yugoslavia came during the 1970s and 1980s. The war caused a second bigger wave. In the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of people from the region moved abroad, including those seeking asylum. Tens of thousands went to countries such as Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, and hundreds of thousands to Germany. Similarly, instability in Albania and Kosovo triggered an exodus to Italy, Western Europe and Turkey. Indeed, it is estimated that several hundred thousand Kosovo citizens live abroad.⁸⁹ After the war, the slow pace of reforms in some Western Balkans countries led to a 'brain drain'. There was a further wave of emigration from Kosovo and Albania in 2015 when people from those countries joined the large group of refugees and migrants on the move, mostly from Syria, into Western Europe.

In these large flows of people on the move, a small percentage were criminals. As Varese points out, 'assuming that a given proportion of a population consists of criminals, the greater the migration of individuals from that population, the larger the number of criminals that will reach a new territory'.⁹⁰

Similar patterns have been witnessed in other places in the past, for example Italians emigrating to the US after the Second World War. Diasporas in such countries as Germany, Austria and the Netherlands became a key link for criminal groups from the Balkans, which took advantage of their new surroundings to engage in criminal activity. At the same time, globalization offered new opportunities, facilitating the movement of people, money and goods – a development that was quickly exploited by criminals operating in Latin America and South Africa.

Instability in Albania and Kosovo triggered a large-scale exodus to Western Europe. Here Albanian refugees are seen arriving in Bari, Italy. © Patrick Durand/Sygma via Getty Images





WESTERN EUROPE



Western Europe is the global hotspot where criminal groups from the Western Balkans are most active, since it is the main market for the sale of drugs. This section will provide a profile of their activities in Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic. It will look at why and how criminal groups became active in these markets, and how they have moved up the value chain from street-level criminals to major distributors.

Groups from the Western Balkans are now key traffickers of heroin, cannabis and cocaine. They are particularly concentrated in places where there is a sizeable diaspora, given that organized crime usually exploits its own community first. The so-called Frankfurt Mafia, for example, is notorious for smuggling heroin from North Macedonia to Frankfurt and Vienna (two cities where there is a large diaspora).⁹¹ The group mostly comprises Macedonian citizens from the town of Veles. According to police, the Frankfurt Mafia was able to penetrate the market quickly by selling high-quality heroin at what was described as a reasonable price. Their profit in Vienna alone was estimated at €80 000 (US\$105 000) a day.⁹² Between 2010 and 2013, police in Germany, Austria and North Macedonia arrested some 450 people believed to be part of the ring. In 2013, the Macedonian police arrested a further 60 Macedonian citizens in relation to the Frankfurt Mafia.⁹³ Despite these blows, the group is still active and simply changed tactics.⁹⁴

In another example, criminals from the Western Balkans have worked their way up the crime ladder in Sweden. In the 1970s and 80s, a few – like Arkan – were involved in bank robberies and extortion. The ‘Yugo Mafia’ (*Juggemaffian*, as they were known in Scandanavia) then moved into trafficking of cigarettes, drugs and weapons. Weapons from former Yugoslavia, including hand grenades, are said to be contributing to a growing spiral of violence in

- ◀ Western Europe is the main overseas drug market for criminal groups from the Western Balkans. Here, German police officers crack down on drug dealing in Frankfurt, where there is a large Macedonian diaspora.

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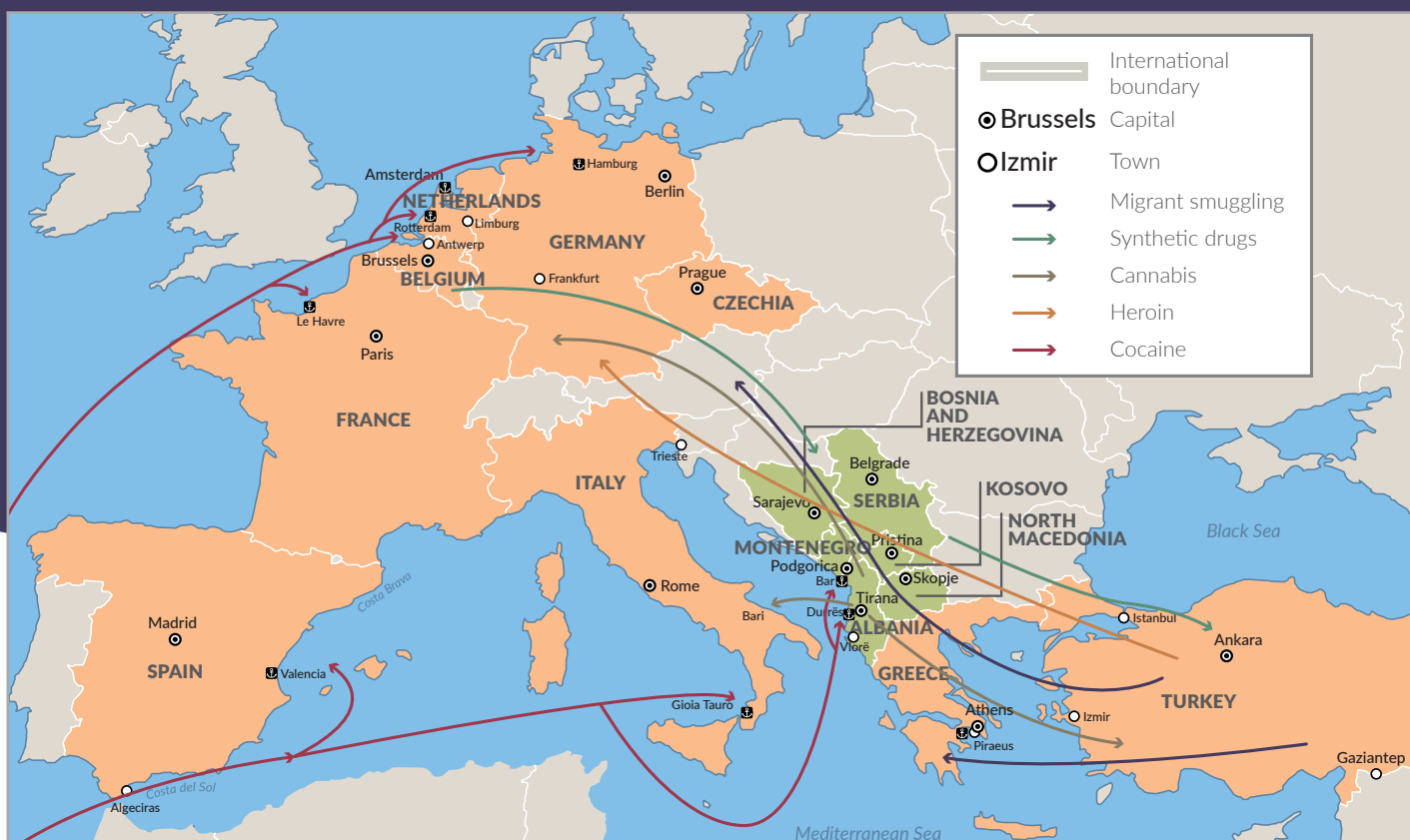


FIGURE 1 Trafficking routes in Western Europe highlighted in this report

some Swedish neighbourhoods.⁹⁵ Some of the ‘ex-Yugoslavs’, as they are sometimes referred to, seem to also have links to biker groups in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. One of the main criminal groups in Sweden was centred around Naser Dzeljilji, an ethnic Albanian from Macedonia. The group, operating out of Gothenburg, was involved in drug trafficking, extortion and armed robbery.⁹⁶

Several heads of the Serbian mafia in Sweden have been killed in bloody feuds. Dragan Joskovic, a close friend of Arkan, who was known as the gangster king of Stockholm, was murdered at a racetrack in 1998 – apparently on the orders of a former associate, Dragan Kovač. The latter was gunned down outside a Stockholm restaurant a few months later. Joskovic was succeeded by Ratko ‘Cobra’ Đokić, who was killed in May 2003. He was succeeded by Milo Sevo, nicknamed the ‘godfather of Stockholm’.⁹⁷ Sevo is reportedly a ‘businessman’ in Serbia today.

There also seems to be a Western Balkans connection to a daring heist of a cash storage building in Stockholm in September 2009 known as the Västberga helicopter robbery.⁹⁸ Such audacious crimes and a colourful cast of characters has inspired a number of Scandinavian crime thrillers and documentaries. More recently, there has been at least one major operation against an Albanian criminal group, smuggling 1 650 kilograms of cocaine and heroin into Sweden and Denmark.⁹⁹

A rather unusual example of criminals from the Western Balkans is the case of the Culum brothers, Armin and Nermis, who emigrated to Germany from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2004 they founded the United Tribuns Motorcycle Club, which is

known to be involved in human trafficking, prostitution and assassinations. In 2014, Germany categorized the United Tribuns as a major threat to national security. Numerous arrest warrants have been issued, leading the brothers to return to Bosnia, from where they continue to run their activities.

In the United Kingdom, thousands of people from Albania and Kosovo (including many from Albania who falsely claimed to be from Kosovo) entered the country in 1999 and 2000. As in other émigré communities, a small percentage became involved

in illicit activities, in this case human trafficking and trafficking of heroin, as well as cultivating and trafficking cannabis.¹⁰⁰ In the early 2000s, Albanians slowly and efficiently took control of London's large cocaine market.¹⁰¹ By 2015, they had clearly become major players in the capital as well as other communities around the country. Not only are they active in distribution, but Albanian gangs have a high profile and formidable reputation in terms of selling drugs, as well as extortion and armed robbery. One in ten foreign prisoners in the UK is now Albanian.¹⁰²

Italy: Partners in crime

As noted in the earlier sections of this report, there have been close links between crime groups in Italy and the Western Balkans since the 1980s. Some of the earliest activities involved cigarette smuggling with Montenegro, Serbia and Albania, and Italy was one of the first countries where criminals from the Western Balkans made their initial steps up the crime ladder. Criminals from Yugoslavia arrived in the 1980s and 1990s, often together with a wave of refugees from the Yugoslav War, and became involved in stealing luxury goods, such as clothes and watches. For example, it is assumed that Milenko Mikanović Lazin started his criminal activities in the 1980s. He left Yugoslavia to work in Italy, where he first started robbing the houses of wealthy Italians. Later he teamed up with other criminals from the region and they started to cooperate in jewellery heists. It is reported that police officers in Bosnia were aware of his activities but never acted against him.

In a second wave, Italy became a key focal point for cigarette smuggling, in particular with Serbian and Montenegrin organized criminal groups. It has been reported that since the 2000s Serbs have been closely cooperating with the Italian mafia, for whom they transport and distribute drugs throughout the country and Western Europe.

Concerning the trafficking of heroin in Italy, it appears that groups from the Western Balkans have consolidated their links with Turkish groups. Indeed, the latter seem to have diminished their direct involvement in trafficking to Italy, leaving more space for

the Albanians. Albanians are also said to be active in the cannabis market, not least the import of cannabis from their own country. But the big market is cocaine. In the 1990s, Albanians were active in human trafficking to Italy before progressing to drug trafficking. Initially the Albanians were the junior partner to the Italians in this enterprise, but over the past two decades – thanks to their links to suppliers of cocaine in Latin America and networks in Western European countries where there is a large Albanian diaspora – they have moved up the value chain to the point where they are, in some cases, equal partners with Italian mafia groups.

Italy's east coast is a significant entry point for drugs, as is evident from the relatively high number of seizures of drugs in cars in Bari and Ancona disembarking from ferries arriving from Durrës. Albanians in Italy who are importing drugs along the coast of Puglia have a double advantage: they have links to their compatriots at the source of supply, and with groups in Albania that can facilitate distribution. This gives them key leverage in terms of organizing major shipments, setting prices, and acting as brokers and mediators. They have become, in effect, route managers and decision-makers. They are also sometimes regarded as the enforcement arm of joint ventures. This is winning them respect among more well-established Italian groups. It is also winning them respect back home and causing concern among the police. According to an Italian investigator, the merger of Italian and Albanian groups is a dangerous mixture: 'The men from the traditional mafia groups, especially



There have been close links between Italian criminal networks and those from the Western Balkans for four decades. Here, Italian Carabinieri seize 800 kilograms of hashish. © Salvatore Laporta/KONTROLAB /LightRocket via Getty Images

the Calabrian mafia, joining with the ferocity of the Albanian bosses, reach an even more devastating dimension.’¹⁰³

Some of these connections have been made in jail. (As of February 2020 there were more than 2 300 Albanians in Italian prisons.) Prison is often a starting point for a life of crime rather than its end. For example, in prisons in the Puglia region, Albanian criminals are coming in contact with the Italian mafia. This was apparently the case with Arben Zogu, who allegedly started the flow of Albanian-controlled cocaine into Rome.¹⁰⁴ He was jailed with Rocco Bellocco, boss of one of the most powerful ‘Ndrangheta families, a situation that formed the basis of a valuable friendship. Indeed, it is alleged that Albanian and Italian groups are not only forming alliances, but even integrated groups. This seems to be part of a trend in which some Italian criminal groups are happy to outsource activities and downsize their personnel, and let others work the streets with their permission.¹⁰⁵ According to a chief prosecutor: ‘Albanians work with any group. They have connections, they know how to get drugs and move

them, they are valuable and no one can touch them because they are under protection of the most powerful mafia groups. They don’t deal street drugs; they are brokers and good ones, trusted ones’.

The links between Italian and Albanian groups have been evident in a number of police operations between 2019 and 2020. In Operation Sabbia 2 in December 2019, nine suspects – seven of whom were Albanian – were taken into custody by the Carabinieri as part of a crackdown on cannabis and cocaine trafficking in Florence. In January 2019, an Albanian and a Montenegrin were arrested along with members of the Rome-based Casamonica Clan as part of Operation Brazil Low Cost, which broke up a group supplying cocaine to Rome and Naples. (The Albanian, Dorion Petoku, is allegedly the lieutenant of Arben Zogu.) The group was planning to move 7 tonnes of high-purity cocaine from Brazil to Europe by private plane. (The original plan was to fly to Rome, but they changed the destination to Sitten in Switzerland.) The Montenegrin, Tomislav Pavlovic, had allegedly been in contact with Colombian groups during several planning visits to Brazil.¹⁰⁶

On 1 August 2019, five Albanians, a Romanian and an Italian were arrested as part of Operation Black Eagle. According to information resulting from the arrests, cocaine from Colombia arrived in Rotterdam and was broken up into smaller packages of between 15 kilograms and 50 kilograms, and then transported to Italy by Albanians in specially equipped double-bottomed cars (modified at a workshop in Madrid reportedly run by Colombians who were paid between €10 000 and €20 000, as well as with cocaine), as well as in vans and SUVs. The drugs were then sold to Italian groups under the terms of established agreements. A similar *modus operandi* was uncovered by Italian police in March 2018 when 15 people, including a number of Albanians, were arrested by police in Bologna for a sophisticated trafficking operation from Belgium and Albania.¹⁰⁷ There are many other similar cases.¹⁰⁸

In December 2019, Italian police carried out a massive operation against organized crime in Rome. It mainly targeted the Italian mafia, but a police officer involved in the case said that 'The new undisputed masters in the Roman drug world are the Albanians. The Roman criminal world turns to buy from them white powder at 28 000 euros per kilo. Unbeatable price.' In February 2020, as part of Operation Erostrato, a group of 11 Albanians and Italians, known as the Mafia Viterbese, were sentenced to a combined 135 years in prison for extortion and racketing in the town of Viterbo. The bosses, apparently an Italian from Calabria and an Albanian, have not been caught.

The links between Italian and Albanian criminal groups have been evident in a number of recent police operations.

An interesting illustration of the power dynamic between Albanian and Italian groups can be seen in a case where Albanians, negotiating a deal with mafia groups in Sicily, apparently took two Sicilian affiliates as hostages to guarantee payment for the supply. According to a member of the financial police, such hostage taking is quite normal between criminal groups, but when Albanians take Italians as hostages, it shows how powerful they have become.¹⁰⁹

A spate of killings in 2019 and 2020 suggests that the lucrative cocaine market in Rome is in the midst of a shake-up. On 7 August 2019, one of the masterminds of crime in Rome, Fabrizio Piscitelli (also known as Diabolik) was shot in the head while sitting on a park bench. In January 2020, Albanian drug dealer Gentian Kasa was gunned down in front of his house in Rome. There is speculation that the murders are an indication of a power struggle among groups involving Albanians and different factions of the Italian mafia.¹¹⁰ It is therefore oversimplistic to see links between Albanian and Italian groups as only harmonious and monolithic: there are clearly some internal dynamics that are causing competition and violence.

An Albanian who has been living in Italy for many years described how his compatriots have moved up the value chain of crime: 'I came when we were new. We all remember a big ship in the port of Bari full of desperate people; today you come to us looking for work. We have become more and more important not because we are strong but because we served. Today there are a lot of drugs in Italy because we know how to bring them in, not only from Albania but from all over Europe. We risk a lot, something that today Italian people don't want to do anymore ... we are in charge, but we always know who is in charge on the ground, we respect the Italians and they respect us because we know how this business works.'

Spain: From thieves to barons

Groups from the Balkans came to Spain after the war in Yugoslavia. Their attraction to Spain seems to have been the same as for other criminals (for example, from the UK and Russia) operating out of places such as the Costa del Sol, Costa Valencia and Costa Brava – namely, good weather, good location, good infrastructure and good opportunities for money laundering. The first criminal activities (in the early 2000s) were mostly assaults and robberies. Some gangs (particularly of Albanians and Kosovars) seem to have specialized in breaking into industrial buildings. Such thieves were referred to as ‘*butroneros*’ (burglars) because they were adept at safe-cracking and evading security systems. Others focused on breaking into and robbing luxury homes, particularly those of professional footballers. Some groups also seem to have been involved in trafficking weapons. As in other global hotspots, it seems the criminals often operate with false documents and multiple identities and go back and forth to their homelands. Indeed, the Spanish police consider them itinerant groups.

Some of these groups then moved up the value chain, becoming involved in drug smuggling (cannabis, heroin and cocaine). As a senior member of the Spanish drugs and crime unit observed, ‘they have gone from being thieves to barons’.¹¹¹ Spain is an important gateway for cocaine smuggled from Latin America, entering in containers at major ports (such as Algeciras and Valencia) – often with ships of the Mediterranean Shipping Company. There are also reports of crews, once their ship is in Spanish waters, throwing specially made bags of drugs that contain a GPS beacon into the sea. The drugs are then collected by sailboats and inflatable dinghies. This technique seems to have been used by the group around Vinetu Cokovic (a Montenegrin citizen), who was arrested by Spanish police in 2015 in an operation that netted 3.5 tonnes of cocaine and €9.3 million in cash.¹¹²

Valencia seems to be a key hub for groups from Serbia and Montenegro. Luka Bojović, the head of the infamous Zemun group (and a former member of Arkan’s Tigers), was arrested there in February 2012 (on the basis of an INTERPOL arrest warrant for several murders) along with two other members of the Zemun clan, Vladimir Milisavljević and Siniša Petrić. Valencia also played a key role in the evolution of the Kotor cartel. It was there that around 200 kilograms of cocaine disappeared from the apartment of Goran Radoman (a Montenegrin citizen) in 2014. A dispute about what happened to the drugs set off a feud within the Kotor clan, dividing them into the rival Škaljarski and Kavacki clans. Radoman was gunned down in February 2015. This started a cycle of revenge that continues to this day.

There is another interesting link between Spain and Balkan criminal groups worth mentioning. In January 2015, a helicopter with around 900 kilograms of hashish on board – reportedly from Morocco – crashed close to Malaga. The pilot was a major in the Albanian armed forces.¹¹³ This was not an isolated



The port of Valencia is a key gateway for cocaine smuggled into Europe by Western Balkan groups.

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incident: there seem to be a steady stream of helicopters and light aircraft moving drugs between Morocco and Spain, although the level of engagement of pilots from the Balkans is unclear.¹¹⁴

There are signs that North Africa is a new frontier for criminal groups from the Balkans. Cocaine trafficking through the region is increasing, as witnessed by two major seizures in Algeria in 2019.¹¹⁵ In August 2018, 11 Montenegrins were arrested on a ship (sailing from the Canary Islands to Turkey) with 20 tonnes of hashish after their vessel was noticed by Italian authorities to be behaving suspiciously off the coast of North Africa.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, there are indications that cigarettes and drugs are being smuggled via Libya to the Balkans,¹¹⁷ as well as smuggling of weapons from Serbia to Libya.¹¹⁸

While Albanians, Serbs and Montenegrins are usually associated with cocaine trafficking, it is interesting to note that in December 2019 two citizens of North Macedonia were arrested as part of an operation that disrupted an attempt to traffic 700 kilograms of cocaine to the Balkans from Madrid. Interestingly, Spanish authorities do not consider criminal groups from the Balkans a high risk. According to statistics from 2017 and 2018, people from the Western Balkans account for only 1 per cent of those involved in criminal activity. It has been suggested that some of the major players have moved their operations to Dubai.¹¹⁹ This may be in reaction to a significant increase in violence in the Costa del Sol in 2018.¹²⁰ That said, despite their relatively small numbers, criminal groups from the Western Balkans seem to be big players in the Spanish underworld.



Netherlands: The ‘Joegomaffia’

In the Netherlands, references to criminals from the Balkans started to appear in police investigations in the early 1990s. Most of the business at that time (particularly between Serb and Dutch criminal groups) revolved around the smuggling of weapons from former Yugoslavia, sometimes in exchange for synthetic drugs such as ecstasy. Some of these *Joegomaffia*, as they are referred to in Dutch slang, had emerged out of the community of refugees who had arrived after the war, while others came in and out of the country. Among the latter category were hitmen from the Balkans. According to crime journalist Wouter Laumans, around the year 2000 organized crime groups in the Netherlands hired people from Serbia to carry out assassinations: ‘In the criminal world their reputation was clear: a “Joego” was a true professional when it came to carrying out a hit job.’ One of the most feared

gangsters was Serbian Sreten Jocić, also known as ‘Joca Amsterdam’. In 1993 he was charged in the Netherlands with attacking a police officer. He fled to Bulgaria, but was eventually caught and served his sentence. In 2010 he was sentenced to 15 years in prison for the 1995 murder of his rival Goran Marjanović.

While some Albanians had been involved in human trafficking in the 1990s and, more recently, the smuggling of migrants (for example from Dutch ports to the UK), after 2010 they became more active in the drugs trade. (It is perhaps no coincidence that 2010 was the year when visa-free travel to the Netherlands was made possible.) As noted in other hotspots profiled in this report, there is a clear trend in Albanians moving up the crime ladder over time. Indeed, while they seemed to have entered the Dutch market on the coat tails of Italian groups, by



The Netherlands has become a hub for the indoor cultivation of cannabis distributed by Albanian groups across Europe © FlickrVision via Getty Images

2020 they appear to be formidable players in their own right. Indeed, some information points to the fact that Albanians are now running transatlantic operations of their own.

The Netherlands is attractive for criminal groups from the Balkans because of its location and facilities as a logistics hub, particularly through the port of Rotterdam and Schiphol airport. As a global distribution point for perishable goods (particularly flowers, fruits and vegetables), Dutch companies are experienced at quickly moving large volumes of trade. But this speed and efficiency also mean that many containers are not controlled. This is an ideal setup for smuggling drugs.

As observed later in the section on Latin America, ports in the Netherlands and Belgium (such as Rotterdam and Antwerp) are often used for importing major cocaine shipments from Ecuador, Brazil and Colombia – in 2017, seven people were arrested and dozens of kilograms of cocaine were seized from a shipment from Ecuador. In the drug business, the Albanian groups in Netherlands are often referred to a '*uithalers*' – literally 'pickers' – in other words, the people who collect drugs, particularly cocaine and heroin, from the ports and distribute them across north-western Europe. Many of the Albanian organized-crime networks operating out of the Netherlands (and Belgium) use their position as a platform for trafficking cocaine to the UK, Europe's biggest cocaine market.

Quiet Albanians

It would be misleading to refer to these groups as an Albanian cartel. Rather, there are thought to be around 15 active Albanian criminal groups in the Benelux countries with ties to three to four Albanian organized-crime groups settled in Latin America with direct access to the wholesale cocaine market. The average group in the Netherlands has around 10 to 15 members. While they tend to prefer to work with people they know (either from the same clan or same city or region), there is a trend in recent years towards multi-ethnic groups. In terms of distribution of cannabis, Albanian organized-crime groups reportedly cooperate closely with Dutch, Italian and Moroccan criminal organizations.¹²¹ They also seem to have benefited from gang wars between Moroccan-origin criminals.¹²² They are said to play a leading role in the Amsterdam underworld.¹²³

In September 2018, two leading members of the Bajri clan were arrested in Rotterdam for drug trafficking, arms smuggling, prostitution, extortion, operating illegal lotteries and gambling.¹²⁴ And (as described above in the section on Italy) in August 2019, the Italian police arrested 17 people who were part of an Albanian gang trafficking nearly 200 kilograms of cocaine from the Netherlands to Italy.¹²⁵

Officially, the number of Albanians in the Netherlands is very small – around 1 200. But it is assumed that there are many more in the country who are there unofficially, some using forged passports from other EU countries (particularly Italy and Greece), as well as others who are seasonal.¹²⁶ According to one study by a public prosecutor, there may be close to 40 000 Albanians in the Netherlands. Most of them are clustered around Amsterdam and Rotterdam, but there is also a large community in Limburg in the south of the country.¹²⁷ This region, which is conveniently close to Belgium and Germany, has become a hub for indoor cultivation of cannabis estimated to worth approximately €200 million per year.¹²⁸ For example, in Operation Albania in May 2019, 30 suspects were arrested in the Limburg area, of whom 25 were Albanians.

The groups operating around Limburg appear well organized and well informed. They bring with them cannabis-production know-how from Albania (which they learned from the Dutch in the first place). Indeed, this seems to be part of a wider trend. As the Albanian authorities crack down on cannabis cultivation at home, Albanian organized-crime groups have shifted their expertise overseas, not only to the Netherlands but also to Belgium, the UK and Turkey. The Albanian groups also seem to arrive with, or have access to, significant funds, judging by the number of houses they have bought in the Limburg area, often using cash. A prosecutor from Limburg observed: 'It surprised me how accurately they can pinpoint the weak spots in our social structures. They know how to use a fake identity card to rent a house illegally. They know how to use Dutch public notaries, they know how to use real estate agents to buy houses, their methods are very refined, they know exactly what they are doing.'¹²⁹

The Albanian groups are not considered violent, nor do they draw attention to themselves since this would be bad for business. According to a public prosecutor, even when arrested, Albanians remain quiet, and very often during their trials 'they don't talk at all'.¹³⁰

Albanian organized-crime groups are said to play a leading role in the Amsterdam underworld.

The Tito and Dino Cartel

One of the most formidable groups from the Western Balkans operating in the Netherlands is the Tito and Dino Cartel. It is led by Edin Gačanin, who left Bosnia during the war together with his family and moved to Breda. His organization involves many family members and persons from his old neighbourhood in Sarajevo, who allegedly still have close connections to politicians and businessmen in Bosnia. Gačanin started out in the drug business by supporting a local criminal, Elvis Hodžić, to organize and transport cocaine from Peru to Europe. Today, the group has close connections to the Colombian and Peruvian cartels. For example, it is assumed that some members of the Tito and Dino cartel are currently present in Truillo, Peru, working with the four local cartels, arranging deals and preparing the shipments for Europe.

They keep their connection to Bosnia through money-laundering activities (although after the money is laundered in Bosnia it is transferred back to Dutch bank accounts). In addition, they have also opened companies in Spain and the Netherlands, probably for the purpose of money laundering. The cartel is deeply rooted in Latin America, the US and Europe, and they have connections to Sri Lanka and Hong Kong (where shipments organized by the cartel were also discovered). Gačanin is understood to be currently living in Dubai.¹³¹ His group is said to have close links with Dutch-Moroccan, Italian and Irish syndicates (some have even called it a 'super cartel') that are reportedly importing 30 tonnes of cocaine annually through the ports of Rotterdam and Antwerp.¹³²

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic is a good example of how countries going through rapid but flawed transitions to the market economy are attractive for mafias on the move.¹³³ The focus of this case study is mostly on economic crime rather than trafficking.

After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the Czech Republic went through a rapid process of post-communist transition, including a voucher privatization scheme. During this process of political and economic transformation, a weak regulatory system and a criminal-justice system unfamiliar with dealing with new methods of organized crime created a market for protection, a vulnerability to corruption and opportunities for money laundering. Although some criminal groups were present in the Czech Republic before 1989, the chaos of the 1990s opened up a vacuum in which it was relatively easy for criminals to use the momentum of system change for their own purposes.

There are several reasons why the Czech Republic was an attractive place for aspiring criminals, particularly from the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Firstly, its geographical proximity to Western European countries. Secondly, the vulnerability of Czech authorities to corruption.¹³⁴ Thirdly, it was very easy for foreigners to open a bank account and register a company in the country – even under the name of a third person.¹³⁵ As a result of this, one could obtain permanent residence in the Czech Republic more readily than in other central European countries, which was a goal for members of organized-crime groups.¹³⁶ Notable figures from the world of Balkan organized crime who have registered companies in the Czech Republic include Darko Šarić, Andrija Drašković, Milan 'Lemon' Narančić, Ismet Osmani and Qazim Osmani, as well as Borislav Plavšić.^{137, 138} Indeed, the Czech Center for Investigative Reporting discovered in 2015 that dozens of companies established in Prague had ties

and were used as money-laundering machines by several powerful Balkan organized-crime groups involved in drug trafficking, murder and the smuggling of cigarettes.

Since the 1990s, Czech authorities have been predominantly focused on tackling the growth of organized-crime groups from the former Soviet Union, which were deemed more dangerous than Western Balkan groups. This meant that criminal groups from the Balkans were able to operate comparatively unnoticed in the Czech Republic.¹³⁹ To this day, knowledge on this topic, even among experts who focus on combating organized crime in the country, remains relatively poor.

Well-connected people from the Balkans established themselves in Prague. A good example is Jordan Mijalkov, the father of Sašo Mijalkov, who became the head of the Secret Service of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia under the government of Nikola Gruevski, which was brought down after accusations of mass wiretapping emerged in 2015. Jordan Mijalkov was the first Interior Minister of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. He was also a representative of the Yugoslav company Makoteks in Prague in 1980s.¹⁴⁰ While little information can be confirmed about Jordan Mijalkov's activities in Prague, his son Sašo, while holding a post of secret police chief, failed to disclose assets, including real estate worth around US\$2 million and links to many construction companies, in which his partners, including the Sparavalo brothers, Dejan and Vojislav, held interests.¹⁴¹

Such individuals developed good contacts in politics and the business community. Indeed, the fact that the position of key people from the Balkans in the narcotics, gambling and real-estate businesses has remained relatively unchanged over the past few decades suggests that these players feel comfortable in Czech society due to their contacts. And the more established they become, the better their connections with local administrations when it comes to, for example, real estate, public tenders and the construction business.

Albanian-speakers, on the other hand (from Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia) have been more involved in street-level crime, including the trafficking of people and drugs, particularly in towns close to the border with Germany.¹⁴² Some such groups are currently under investigation due for VAT and insurance-based scams.¹⁴³ That said, there have also been some big players, most notably Princ Dobroshi. An ethnic Albanian, Dobroshi was a major drug trafficker, moving heroin along the Balkan route via the Czech Republic to the Nordic countries. He was arrested in Prague in February 1999, and deported to Oslo (where he had escaped from prison in 1997). He was paroled and deported for 'good behaviour' in January 2005. It is said that he moved back to Kosovo.¹⁴⁴

Another reason that the Czech Republic has become a hotspot for criminal groups from the Balkans is gambling. Since the early 1990s, the country has been used by organized-crime groups for money-laundering activities through gambling facilities and devices. According to the former Deputy Finance Minister, Ondřej Závodský, gambling in the Czech Republic was not regulated by law until 2017. Before the reform of the gambling sector, the Czech Republic had more than 6 000 gambling spots and more than 70 000 registered slot machines.¹⁴⁵ The industry therefore attracted a broad variety of people with criminal backgrounds, including Qazim Osmani (who helped found the gambling company Banco Casino).¹⁴⁶ However, according to Pavla Holcová, there is currently less of a need to use gambling businesses as money-laundering tools.¹⁴⁷ This is due to the improved position of the Western Balkan organized-crime structures based in the Czech Republic within global organized-crime networks.¹⁴⁸ They can use international networks to launder money instead of keeping it in the Czech Republic.

To summarize, the engagement of criminal groups in Western Europe shows how they took advantage of opportunities and managed to muscle into well-established criminal markets. As the next section demonstrates, they were also moving elsewhere.



SOUTH AFRICA



In 2018 and 2019, South Africa was wracked by a series of assassinations. It emerged that many of the perpetrators and victims were from the Western Balkans, particularly Serbia. This section shows how the legacy of the past can catch up with those who try to flee it. It also suggests that South Africa may be becoming a hotspot for drug smuggling for groups from the Western Balkans.

Importing criminals

The Yugoslav community in South Africa is estimated to number more than 10 000. Some members of the community are descendants of people who emigrated from Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s. Others are part of a second wave that left after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the transition to democracy in South Africa in the mid-2000s. Many of these were skilled professionals, such as doctors or accountants, but others were criminals or former militants on the run. As one local expert put it, 'We literally imported criminals.'¹⁴⁹ A Serbian journalist from *The Telegraph* comments on the ease with which these criminals could establish themselves in South Africa:

Most of them are honest, hard-working people, but also criminals managed to infiltrate them and continued their job abroad. It was easy for them to enter South Africa without any strict control. South Africa was opened for people from Eastern Europe, so they used their chances. They often came with significant sums of money and so it was easy for them to start business. They're highly adaptable, they will not hesitate to get involved [in] any type of crime, with any local organization or a mobster regardless of their religion, skin pigment or nationality. They came with a criminal knowledge of drug smuggling, racketeering, extortion, robberies, murder and theft.¹⁵⁰

South Africa is an attractive environment for criminals from the Western Balkans, given that its distance from their home region makes it hard for law-enforcement authorities to track them down (not least because of weak channels of communication, poor information sharing and a lack of bilateral extradition treaties). At the same time, South Africa is considered to be a good place to do business, whether legal or illegal. It has well-established financial systems, good infrastructure, and is plugged into global supply chains

- ◀ Serbian assassin Dobrosav Gavric at the Cape Town Magistrates Court for proceedings for his extradition to Serbia in February 2012. Gavric was convicted of the murder of Arkan in 2008 and had fled Serbia to live under a new name in South Africa.

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and markets. However, the criminal-justice system is weak, corruption is rife and there is a ready market for protection.¹⁵¹ According to one analyst, corruption and even state capture make South Africa attractive for criminal syndicates.¹⁵² Furthermore, 'the high murder rate enables them to easily get away with planned assassinations as the police are overwhelmed'.¹⁵³ Others point to a lack of controls, for example on

stolen passports, as an enabling factor for the influx of criminals from Eastern Europe into South Africa.¹⁵⁴ Because the majority of organized-crime players who arrive in the country use false identities, it is unclear how many there are in South Africa. Police sources indicate that investigations had homed in on nine individuals as of January 2020, although the network is believed to be 'much bigger'.¹⁵⁵

Krejčíř and Gavric

Two prominent criminals arrived in South Africa in 2007: Czech fugitive Radovan Krejčíř and Dobrosav Gavric from Serbia.

Between 2007 and 2013, Krejčíř established himself as a mafia boss in South Africa, allegedly corrupting low-level and senior commanders in the South African Police Service. He was also associated with numerous underworld assassinations, although he is yet to be convicted of murder. He was finally convicted of attempted murder and kidnapping, and is currently serving a 35-year prison sentence. He has attempted via the courts to be extradited to the Czech Republic.

As a result of Krejčíř's prominence in criminal circles in South Africa, he attracted a variety of fugitives from the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Lebanon and Serbia to work for him. One of them was Veselin Laganin, a Serbian who was murdered in his apartment in Johannesburg in 2013 shortly after Krejčíř's arrest. Krejčíř's ability to manipulate law-enforcement agencies sent a signal to others abroad that South Africa was a potential market for them.¹⁵⁶

Gavric's arrival in South Africa in 2007 was much more low key. Indeed, he lived under the pseudonym 'Sasa Kovacevic' in Johannesburg for four years without intelligence agencies being aware of his presence in the country. He had good reason to hide his identity. According to an affidavit presented to the Western Cape High Court, Gavric was a member of the Serbian Police Force assigned to the Serbian Crime Prevention Unit, which performed duties including the protection of VIPs.¹⁵⁷ Gavric was present when Željko 'Arkan' Ražnatović was assassinated on 15 January 2000 in the lobby of the Belgrade Intercontinental Hotel. He himself was shot in the incident: a stray bullet pierced his spine, leaving him with a pronounced limp. Gavric claimed he was not responsible for the assassination,

but he was later charged with Arkan's murder. It became clear to Gavric that Arkan's allies wanted to kill him and that 'evidence was being manufactured to secure his conviction and imprisonment' and 'he had no choice but to flee Serbia'.

According to intelligence sources, the false identity that Gavric assumed belonged to another Serbian who also used to live in Johannesburg and who also walked with a pronounced limp. Using this false identity, Gavric was able to secure official South African documentation, a business licence, a gun licence and a driving licence. He even opened a restaurant in Johannesburg and was able to set up an import-export business. Gavric apparently developed close relations with local criminals, cashing in on the reputation of violence among Balkan criminals.

Gavric's true identity became public in March 2011 after he was wounded in the assassination of Cape Town underworld boss Cyril Beeka. Gavric was driving Beeka's vehicle at the time of the incident. (It appears that Gavric provided Beeka with protection and information on organized-crime networks from Eastern Europe and Serbia, while Beeka offered Gavric protection from state agencies.) Gavric was arrested for possession of cocaine and for having false documents under the name of Sasa Kovacevic. His application for asylum was turned down and he remains in prison in Cape Town as his protracted fight to avoid extradition to Serbia continues. Gavric's legal process has highlighted the weaknesses in the South African criminal-justice system. A process that should have taken three months has taken nearly nine years – the documentation has disappeared twice and had to be resubmitted.

Another example of South Africa providing a refuge for Serbians on the run is the case of fugitive Darko



Imprisoned Czech organized-crime syndicate kingpin Radovan Krejcir at the Palm Ridge Magistrates Court, Johannesburg, December 2013. © Moeletsi Mabe/The Times/Gallo Images via Getty Images

Šarić. According to media reports and sources within the Serbian community, it is believed that Šarić was hiding in Gauteng province around 2012/2013. At the time, Šarić was one of the world's most-wanted drug smugglers. It is thought he was living under an alias and local crime bosses were helping him to

avoid detection by using their network of contacts with corrupt police. It was also understood that Šarić had a close connection to Krejčír, hence his decision to come to Gauteng.¹⁵⁸ Once authorities got wind of his presence in the area and began investigating, he fled South Africa.

Settling old scores

In the period of 2018–2020 there were at least nine murders and two assassination attempts in the Johannesburg area involving Serbians with backgrounds in organized crime or paramilitary organizations. Most of these incidents bear a remarkable resemblance to one another and share similar characteristics in the way they were carried out. In most cases, the targets have been unsuspecting and often driving vehicles. There are usually two shooters on a motorcycle, both wearing helmets to hide their identities. The shooter is the passenger, carrying an automatic weapon, who opens fire, shooting numerous bullets before speeding off. From CCTV footage of these incidents, the assassins appear to display military training and precision in their execution,

indicating a background in paramilitary or military organizations.¹⁵⁹

The spate of killings seems to be a settling of old scores. As Milica Vojinovic explains, those who came to South Africa came several years ago and their relationships are based on historical networks.¹⁶⁰ 'They are mostly older criminals who were active in Serbia in the 1990s. These are mostly old school guys who were last active in Balkans in the beginning of 2000's.' It has become clear that a number of Serbians who have been killed in South Africa between 2018 and 2020 had an association with Gavric, formed part of his network and originally came to South Africa because of him.

South Africa is an attractive environment for criminals from the Western Balkans.

Most notable is Milan 'Miki' Đuričić, who was shot dead in Strijdom Park (a suburb of Johannesburg) in April 2018. He too was wanted by police in Serbia for participating in Arkan's murder with Gavric. It is believed that Đuričić had been hiding in South Africa for around three years and had a Belgian passport at the time. Reports suggest that he had a small business involving hotels but that he was also involved in human trafficking and the drug trade.

Darko Kulić, who was shot in Randburg (close to Johannesburg) in July 2018, was also associated with Đuričić, and may have been killed because he had information on who murdered Đuričić. Kulić fought in The Serbian Guard paramilitary group during the Yugoslavian civil war in the 1990s before allegedly becoming involved in organized crime and making a life for himself and his family in Johannesburg. He had also been friendly with South African-Montenegrin businessman George 'Hollywood' Milhajevic, who was gunned down in Bedfordview in September 2018. They may have been in business together or may have arrived in South Africa because they already knew their countrymen, who could assist with their integration. In September 2017, a man named Ivan Djordjevic (a friend of Gavric) was shot, but not killed, at a KFC restaurant near Bedfordview. He was assassinated in April 2019 when two masked gunmen tailgated him and opened fire with a semi-automatic assault rifle. There is speculation that his death is related to the disappearance of a shipment of a tonne of cocaine.¹⁶¹ In both the Djordjevic and Kulić killings, the cars used by the shooters had been dumped nearby and set alight. The shooters fled in alternative vehicles.

Some believe that the shooters are brought in from Serbia for each job, coming in and out in a matter of days. Others, however, speculate that the assassins are local. They may have been drawn either from Cape gangs, ex-Zimbabwean or Mozambican military, or from the taxi industry. As documented in Mark Shaw's book *Hitmen for Hire*, there is a vast pool of resources for assassinations within South Africa.¹⁶²

There is no definitive explanation for this upsurge in violence, as there have been no arrests and no court proceedings. Local law-enforcement intelligence is also poor as a result of the erosion of state agencies over the past decade of state capture. However, interviews and media reports suggest two theories. The first is that the murders may be some form of retribution for the 2000 murder of Arkan. This stems from the fact that many of those killed have been hiding in South Africa for several years, often under pseudonyms, and were connected to the network around Gavric. It has been suggested that their true identities were revealed and they were marked for assassination. Some see a link to information peddler George Darmonovic's arrival in Serbia around 2016 and the releasing of intelligence around who was in South Africa and where exactly they could be found. He seemed to have had good relations in the Serbian underworld as well as with intelligence agencies in Serbia and South Africa, and passed information between these communities. This seems to have made him a marked man. In May 2018 he was shot and killed outside a court in the New Belgrade district of the Serbian capital by two men on a motorcycle, less than two weeks after Đuričić was killed.

The second theory is that the murders have been precipitated by the drug trade – either a fight between warring factions of Serbs over control of drug-transport routes or over money not paid for a shipment. Although evidence of this is slim, it has been suggested that it could be an extension of the ongoing war between the two Montenegrin groupings, the Kavacki Clan and Škaljarski Clan.¹⁶³ It could be a combination of both theories – drugs coupled with revenge.

There are considerable doubts about whether the South African Police Service has the capacity and capability to make arrests or break the syndicate. In fact, many of those interviewed said they believed that the police were deliberately failing to act, so that 'the Serbs can kill each other'. The belief is that there is no will to solve the cases because there has been very little collateral damage and it is in the country's

interests for criminals to eliminate one another. But this approach could backfire. Lack of prosecutions and lengthy legal processes, such as in the Gavric case, could send the message that criminals can act with impunity in South Africa. This could well encourage their criminal enterprise and attract other countrymen to a land of opportunity to expand the network.¹⁶⁴

New players in new markets?

It appears that there is a new generation of criminals from former Yugoslavia who are involved in the drugs trade in South Africa. There have been no arrests, no interrogations and no court proceedings, making it difficult to glean any information. However, South Africa has emerged as a key transit point in the established drug routes used by cartels to traffic cocaine, and it is well established that Serbian networks are major players in the continental cocaine trade. A senior police officer suggested that cocaine is brought in through the Port Elizabeth and Durban harbours, moved to Gauteng (where it is repackaged), and is then sent on to further destinations. It might be the case that cocaine travels from South America to South Africa and enters Europe via Turkey.

Alternatively, South Africa may be a transit point on the route to lucrative markets such as Australia. In the past there have been several arrests, which suggests attempts to set up drug routes between the two countries – such as Krejčíř's attempt to ship methamphetamine to Australia in 2013 and a case in 2019 where a cocaine shipment was discovered hidden in construction equipment being sent from South Africa to Australia, with media reports linking this cargo to a Serbian syndicate operating in South Africa. There also appear to be attempts to develop the domestic market for drugs: according to an underworld security boss, Serbians in South Africa are buying cocaine from Colombians and bringing it to South Africa to sell, using locals as runners to distribute the narcotics. There is also intelligence that laboratories have been established in South Africa to manufacture drugs and then export them.¹⁶⁵

With the Colombian cartels under pressure from international policing organizations and trying to establish new routes, they could be looking to step up operations in South Africa. Two examples provide evidence of this trend. In March 2017, a sailboat was stopped by Portuguese coast guards in the Atlantic Ocean, 600 miles from the Azores. During the search, 400 kilograms of high-purity cocaine was found. Information subsequently emerged that the cocaine had been loaded in South Africa. The boat was registered in Trieste and it appears that that was the intended destination. The results of the investigation are still unknown, but it is believed that Montenegrin citizens organized the transport of this shipment of narcotics. In 2019, a Montenegrin, Marko Bozovic, was arrested in South Africa on suspicion of involvement in the smuggling of 807 kilograms of cocaine from Venezuela to Europe. He is now in prison in South Africa. During his arrest, police found a South African passport.¹⁶⁶

In short, the case of criminals from the Western Balkans in South Africa shows the enduring wounds and legacy of war and instability in former Yugoslavia. While the men who emigrated cannot really be considered a criminal group, it shows how they tried to escape justice and a life of crime at home (mostly in Serbia) and how it caught up with them. It also demonstrates vulnerabilities in the criminal-justice system in South Africa that would allow such characters to enter the country, enable them to operate freely, and yet not be able to resolve their murders. Most worrying for the future, South Africa appears to be a hotspot for a new generation of criminal groups from the Western Balkans involved in global cocaine-trafficking networks.



TURKEY

GATEWAY TO THE EAST



Turkey is a key hub for the trafficking of heroin as well as the smuggling of migrants. This section looks at the engagement of Western Balkan criminal groups in Turkey, as well as the interaction between Turkish and Western Balkan criminal groups.

Close ties between Turkey and the Balkans

Criminal groups from the Western Balkans have had links to Turkey since the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, people from the region were used as drivers and couriers to traffic drugs, and the Balkans was a region for transit, repackaging and onward distribution. Several cases show that 'Yugoslav Albanians', as they were described (in other words, from Kosovo and North Macedonia), were involved in helping to traffic heroin and morphine base from Turkey via Yugoslavia and Bulgaria to Italy.¹⁶⁷ As described earlier, there was also smuggling of weapons.

As in some other hotspots, Turkey has a large diaspora from the Western Balkans. Most of this population dates back to displacement and population transfers between the Balkan Wars of the 19th century and the First World War, and in various waves of emigration after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.^{168, 169} According to one estimate, 1.8 million people emigrated from the Balkans to Turkey between 1923 and the early 1990s, followed by several tens of thousands more as a result of instability in former Yugoslavia and Albania in the 1990s.^{170, 171} Some of these immigrants from the Balkans lived in relatively poor neighbourhoods where they made connections with the Kurdish street dealers in metropolitan cities of Turkey, such as Istanbul and Izmir.

- ◀ Turkish armed force members keep guard during a people-smuggling operation in Bodrum, October 2013. Connections with drug-trafficking networks are being used for human trafficking and smuggling of migrants by Western Balkan groups.

© Ali Balli/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

During the war in Yugoslavia, Turkish criminal groups largely avoided the Western Balkans. But by the end of the 1990s, Albania, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged as temporary storage locations for the increased volume of heroin that was flowing through the region towards Western Europe due to increased opium cultivation and heroin production enabled by the war in Afghanistan. Indeed, research has found a 93 per

cent correlation between Afghan opium production and Turkish heroin seizures.¹⁷²

The main interaction between Balkan and Turkish groups was in the Western Balkans (and Bulgaria) rather than in Turkey. The region was regarded as a safe meeting place. Although they were not on their home turf, the Turks were the senior partner in this asymmetric relationship.

From suitcases to trucks

In the early 1990s, Balkan immigrants in Turkey started a 'suitcase trade' between Turkey and their country of origin. They bought licit products at cheaper prices in Istanbul and sold them at higher prices on Balkan markets. They were able to travel between the countries due to Turkey's lenient visa policy towards citizens of Western Balkan nations. This was not serious organized crime, but the suitcase trade was soon exploited by Turkish and West Balkan trafficking groups for the smuggling of cigarettes and drugs.¹⁷³ Indeed, while some used suitcases, others used trucks, and ethnic Albanian apprentices soon mastered the art of illicit trade from their Turkish supervisors. They took advantage of the growing number of Albanian immigrants in Western Europe to expand their underground networks. Soon ethnic Albanians (particularly from Kosovo) were engaged all along the value chain: buying loads from Turkish groups, trafficking the drugs (often via Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia), and distributing them through their diaspora in Western Europe.

One example is Sami Hoştan, also known in the criminal underworld as the Arnavut (Albanian) Sami. His family emigrated to Turkey from North Macedonia. According to Turkish security institutions, Hoştan was smuggling large amounts of drugs between Turkey, South America and Europe. He had shady 'business partnerships' with drug networks in

the Netherlands and Colombia. He made a fortune from the illicit narcotics trade in a very short time. He then invested heavily in the gambling sector and was one of the owners of the Sheraton Hotel Casino in Istanbul. Albanian Sami was convicted and sentenced to four years in prison for establishing and leading a criminal network.

Balkan traffickers have benefited from the heroin boom in Afghanistan over the past 20 years. Turkish and West Balkan criminal groups are known to process the transported heroin to cut down its purity and consequently increase their profits. At the eastern entry points, the purity of heroin is usually over 70 per cent, while it drops below 50 per cent in western provinces.¹⁷⁴ This indicates that the purity of heroin is reduced to make higher profits. In 2015, the total gross profit made by opiate traffickers in South East Europe was estimated to be US\$1.7 billion per annum.¹⁷⁵

At the same time, a growing market for cannabis, ecstasy and synthetic drugs in Turkey created opportunities for Western Balkan nationals to bring these drugs from Europe to Turkey in exchange for heroin. Furthermore, high taxes on cigarettes in Turkey created a large demand for much cheaper illicit cigarettes brought from the Balkans.¹⁷⁶ Indeed, it is said that some heroin-trafficking groups switched to the illicit cigarette trade due to higher profits and lower risks of imprisonment.¹⁷⁷

Attracting trade and investment

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, Turkey was looking for new investments. In the early 1990s, laws were passed to make it easier to travel to and invest in Turkey. One of the side effects was that it became easier for Western Balkan criminals, posing as businessmen, to travel to and trade in Turkey, and even to obtain Turkish passports and launder money. Reciprocally, it got easier for Turkish citizens to get passports and visas from the Western Balkan countries.

As of 2020, citizens of all Western Balkan countries can stay in Turkey for up to 90 days without a visa.¹⁷⁸ They can use their national ID cards, and their passports are valid for five years in Turkey even after their expiration. Reciprocally, Turkish citizens can stay in Western Balkan countries without a visa for 90 days. The free-travel regime creates ample opportunities for criminal groups to carry out trans-regional trafficking schemes. Moreover, many of the immigrants from the West Balkan countries have double citizenship, which allows

them to travel freely between Turkey and their country of origin at will.

In 2018, the Turkish government announced a new citizenship policy that facilitated a further influx of organized-crime networks into the country. According to the new regulation, whoever brings US\$250 000 to Turkey will be granted citizenship without any questioning of the source of the money.¹⁷⁹ This policy is attractive to people with illicit incomes, some of whom have apparently bought luxurious properties, especially in Istanbul and Izmir, which both function as coordination centres for regional illicit trade.¹⁸⁰

In the past 20 years, there has been a big increase in commercial activity between Turkey and Western Balkan countries, thanks to a series of agreements that have liberalized trade (see Figure 2). Some criminal groups, in both Turkey and the Western Balkans, have exploited this openness by setting up shell companies to cover large shipments of drugs, cigarettes and weapons.¹⁸¹

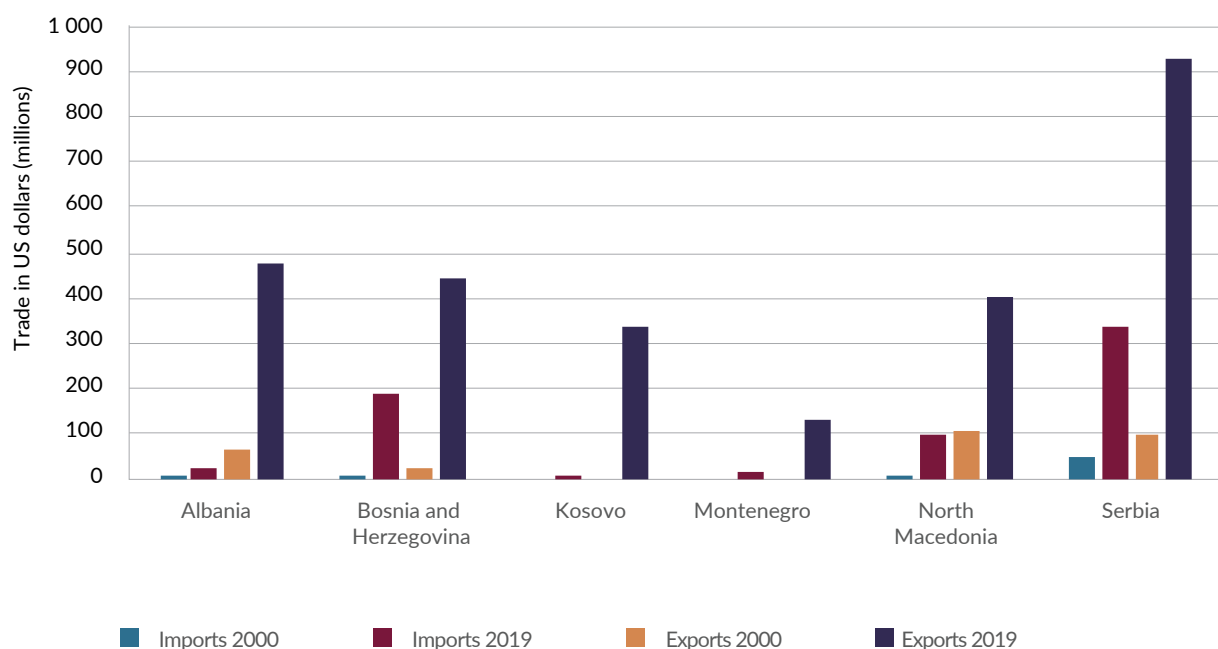


FIGURE 2 Turkey's bilateral trade with the Western Balkan countries (US dollars)

SOURCE: Turkish Institute of Statistics, Foreign Trade Statistics, 3 April 2020, <https://biruni.tuik.gov.tr/disticaretapp/disticaret.zul?param1=4¶m2=0&sitcrev=0&isicrev=0&sayac=5808>

The 'Balkan route' for heroin

The so-called Balkan route is best known for the flow of heroin from Afghanistan via Iran into Turkey and then the Western Balkans. From there, the drugs are sent to the major markets (the Netherlands, Germany, UK, France and Spain). Since the 1970s, large volumes of heroin have been produced in Turkey using morphine base brought from Iran and Afghanistan. The precursor chemical needed to make heroin from opium – namely acetic anhydride – is supplied from the Czech Republic, Russia and Germany.¹⁸² This production of heroin has enabled Turkish organized-crime groups to become the dominant heroin suppliers to Europe.

Turkish groups produced high-quality heroin (70–97 per cent purity) using their intergenerational experience.¹⁸³ Possession of production facilities, transportation companies and distribution rings in Europe allowed the Turkish groups to dominate the European heroin market for decades. It is estimated that the annual turnover of the illicit drug trade was around US\$50 billion in the mid-1990s.¹⁸⁴ Another estimate puts the annual turnover of the illicit drug trade in Turkey at around US\$15 billion by 2014.¹⁸⁵ This number has possibly increased since 2014 given the significant growth of the domestic drug market and transregional illicit trade. The volume of the heroin trade can also be gauged by the high number of heroin-related detentions, cases and seizures (see Figure 3).

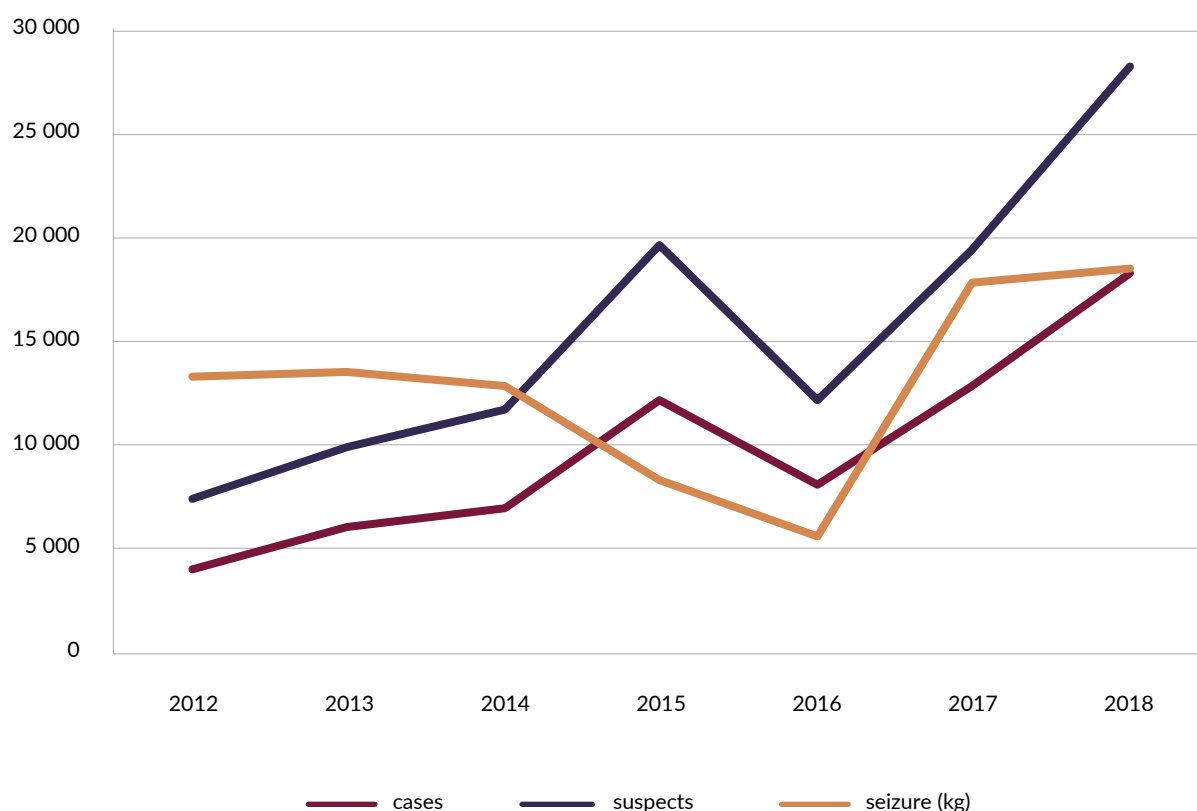


FIGURE 3 Heroin-related detentions, cases and seizure amount (kilograms), Turkey, 2012–2018

SOURCE: TUBIM, Turkish Drug Report 2019, Ankara, 2019

Criminal groups from the Western Balkans mostly make heroin deals in Istanbul, Izmir, Tekirdag, Edirne and, to a lesser extent, in Gaziantep.¹⁸⁶ In many cases, they exchange amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), ecstasy and skunk brought from Europe for heroin brought from Iran.

Often ethnic Albanians do not directly transport heroin to Western Europe. Instead they repackage and reprocess the heroin purchased from Turkish and Iranian syndicates, often reducing the purity before shipping the Afghan heroin to Western Europe.¹⁸⁷ They sometimes temporarily store heroin in warehouses in Western Balkan countries. For instance, the Macedonian Ministry of the Interior reported dismantling a criminal organization in February 2019 in partnership with the United States' Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The group was systematically involved in trafficking of heroin and cannabis from Turkey to North Macedonia, Albania and then to Switzerland and Western European countries. The group was also running labs to produce ATS.¹⁸⁸ There is also evidence of heroin being transported via Kosovo.¹⁸⁹

A recent development suggests a possible evolution in trafficking patterns that may reflect a growing confidence among ethnic Albanian traffickers. It seems that in some cases they have been attempting to bypass Turkish drug networks by establishing direct connections with Iranian heroin suppliers. For example, seven Albanian nationals were arrested along with 250 kilograms of heroin as part of a case against a multi-ethnic syndicate (involving Iranians) that systematically trafficked heroin from Turkey to the Netherlands and Germany. Units from the Turkish Police Department of Anti-Smuggling and Organized Crime (KOM) arrested another group of seven Albanians during five investigations that led to the seizure of 82 kilograms of heroin, 5 kilograms of opium, 6 kilograms of chemical precursors and 450 grams of cannabis.¹⁹⁰ For their part, Iranian networks seem to be trying to establish a foothold in the Western Balkans. This has potentially wider implications for security in the Balkans.¹⁹¹

Heroin traffickers are said to use at least 18 different routes from Turkey to European markets. The primary locations for heroin trans-shipments are the Netherlands, Germany, Albania and Moldova.¹⁹² In addition to land routes, investigations in Turkey, Greece and Albania indicate that Turkish-Albanian networks are taking advantage of Turkey's 174 seaports and thousands of marinas along the coast of the Black Sea, Marmara, Aegean and Mediterranean for trafficking of cannabis and heroin. The primary origin of maritime-based drug transportation has been South America and the Middle East, while the shipments out of Turkey have been destined for the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Italy, the UK, Greece and Italy.¹⁹³ Since 2015, Turkish agencies have seized a large volume of drugs from maritime vessels that were under the control of Albanian crime syndicates. Generally, security control in marinas is limited.¹⁹⁴ Indeed, they appear to be the weakest link of border control between Turkey and EU countries, with luxury yachts and speedboats used by Albanians arriving and departing without proper scrutiny.

Some drugs are also shipped by air. Recently, African groups have started to smuggle drugs through Turkish airports.¹⁹⁵ West African groups have apparently been recruiting West Balkan air couriers to transport heroin and cocaine to European markets via Turkey.¹⁹⁶

While heroin is clearly a problem, Turkey has also become a growing market for European ecstasy since the 1990s, some of which is trafficked through the Western

Groups from the Western Balkans have steadily moved up the value chain of criminal activity in Turkey.



Turkish police officers inspect heroin packages during a seizure in December 2018.

© Kemal Ozdemir/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Balkans.¹⁹⁷ Groups from Kosovo have been involved.¹⁹⁸ There are also indications that some nationals from the Western Balkans are involved in the production of methamphetamine in Turkey. For instance, when the Istanbul narcotics division dismantled a meth lab in Beykoz in 2018, they seized 9 kilograms of methamphetamine, 350 000 ecstasy tablets and 1 100 kilograms of metilamin,

a substance (brought from China) used in methamphetamine production.¹⁹⁹ The multinational crime syndicate was composed of Turkish, Uzbek, Iranian, British and Albanian citizens. Furthermore, there are indications that Turkey is being inundated with new psychoactive substances (NPS).²⁰⁰ It is not clear to what extent Western Balkan groups are involved in the NPS trade.

Cannabis and skunk

Cannabis is by far the most prevalent drug in Turkey's domestic market. Turkish law-enforcement agencies seized 177.5 tonnes of cannabis in 2017 and 80.7 tonnes in 2018.²⁰¹ Skunk, another cannabis-based drug (produced in Albania), is also popular: 11 tonnes of the drug were seized in 2018, an increase of 530 per cent compared to the previous year.²⁰² It is anticipated that demand for skunk will continue to grow in Turkey, especially in big cities.²⁰³

Cannabis trafficking between Turkey and the Balkans generally occurs in large quantities, and Turkish and Balkan authorities have made several cannabis seizures exceeding 1 tonne. There is no official data on the number of cannabis traffickers from Western Balkan countries, but some observations can be made about the involvement of Albanians trafficking cannabis to Turkey. Firstly, Albanians ship large volumes of cannabis on maritime vessels to Turkish ports on the

Aegean coast. They often exchange the cannabis for heroin, which is then transported back along the same maritime route. Secondly, an increasing number of Balkan nationals, mainly Albanians, are involved in trafficking of skunk.²⁰⁴ Turkish authorities have seized record levels of skunk since 2016 and experts believe that a significant quantity of the skunk is supplied by the Albanian networks.²⁰⁵

Indeed, some Albanian groups have turned the Adriatic Sea into a maritime highway of drug trafficking. One of the most notorious traffickers is Albanian Met Kenani, who shipped large quantities of drugs using maritime vessels. In March 2018, a joint investigation of Istanbul and Mugla police departments led to a seizure of around 1 100 kilograms of skunk on two luxury speedboats. A total of 13 arrests were made, including of Kenani.²⁰⁶ This was one of many large drug busts linked to Kenani's network that took place in the space of a couple of years. In 2017, Turkish authorities seized 2.1 tonnes of cannabis, allegedly from the same network. In 2018, a court in Tirana issued an arrest warrant for 18 members of the network for drug trafficking along two routes: Turkey–Greece–EU countries and Turkey–Macedonia–Albania–EU countries.²⁰⁷ On 26 January 2018, Greek police seized 1 586 kilograms of cannabis and apprehended nine Albanians and four Greeks who worked for the same crime syndicate.²⁰⁸ In March 2018, Istanbul counternarcotics police busted a storage facility and arrested a Turkish individual with 24 kilograms of skunk and 214 roots of cannabis.²⁰⁹ Police reported that the Turkish individual was working for Kenani, who also apparently started to produce cannabis and skunk in various locations in Turkey. This indicates that Albanian groups not only trafficked the drugs to the Turkish market but also established greenhouse production facilities in the country.

The arrest of Kenani did not stop the flow of cannabis. In December 2018, Turkish customs officers on the Greek border seized 1.5 tonnes of hashish from a truck that was transporting soybeans.²¹⁰ Three people were arrested, including an Albanian national who was driving the truck. In July 2019, the Istanbul counternarcotics division busted an international organized-crime group that regularly trafficked skunk from Albania to Turkey, and seized 525 kilograms of skunk.²¹¹ In October 2019, Greek police launched an investigation into an Albanian trafficking group that trafficked large quantities of marijuana from Albania to Turkey via Greece. Joint interdictions of Greek police, Coast Guard and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) led to the seizure of 1 172 kilograms of raw opium. The Albanian group was using speedboats to deliver cannabis to several cities on the Turkish coastline. Investigations revealed that Albanians were using uninhabited Greek islands for temporary storage of the drug.²¹² Investigators noted that the Albanian group was exchanging heroin for cannabis in Turkey and transporting cannabis back home along the same route.

Smuggling of migrants

Thus far, most of the hotspots described in this report have focused on the involvement of criminal groups from the Western Balkans in drug trafficking. In the case of Turkey, since 2015 the smuggling of migrants has also been a prominent and lucrative criminal activity.

In the past, there has been some level of irregular migration from the Western Balkans to Turkey: the Turkish authorities identified 4 676 illegal immigrants from Albania and 3 060 from Yugoslavia between 1995 and 2012.²¹³ But this has been far surpassed by the number of refugees and migrants coming via Turkey to the Western Balkans since 2015. As of March 2020, there are around an estimated 4 million Syrian refugees and migrants in Turkey, many of whom would like to move on to the EU. However, Turkey has been under pressure to stem the flow of people reaching EU countries and tighter border controls have been introduced. This has created opportunities for smuggling and trafficking networks, including some from the Western Balkans.²¹⁴

Most of the human smugglers operate out of three cities in western Turkey: Istanbul (21 per cent), Izmir (19 per cent) and Aydin (17 per cent).²¹⁵ These cities are the coordination and transportation hubs for both maritime and land-based human-smuggling schemes. According to information gathered for this report, migrants coming from the Middle East, Central Asia and South West Asia follow six major land and sea routes to access their final destinations in Europe. Three of these routes go via the West Balkan countries:

- Turkey–Greece–Albania–Italy–Western Europe (an old land route)
- Turkey–Bulgaria–Serbia–Bosnia and Herzegovina–Slovenia–Austria–Western Europe (an old land route)
- Turkey–Greece–Albania–Montenegro–Bosnia and Herzegovina–Croatia–Slovenia (a new sea/land route)

In addition, there are reports of a maritime route from Turkey to Italy and Spain, which is apparently facilitated by Albanian groups.²¹⁶ Albanian-Turkish smuggling networks use yachts to transfer well-off migrants from Turkey to Greece and Italy. Only a few of these leisure vessels have been interdicted along the Aegean, Mediterranean and Adriatic maritime routes over the last five years.

Migration along some stages of these routes is done with the help of smugglers from Western Balkan countries.²¹⁷ For example, the Albanian police reported dismantling a network that was smuggling Turkish, Syrian and Iraqi people to Western Europe through Greece, Albania, Montenegro and Croatia across the mountainous terrain in the Balkans. The network was led by a Turkish national who cooperated with Albanian individuals.²¹⁸ There are also apparently Arab networks that rely on Balkan criminal networks to carry out local communications, transportation and criminal procedures beyond the Turkish borders.²¹⁹

Connections among some well-established drug-trafficking networks are being used for human trafficking and smuggling of migrants.²²⁰ Operation Limit by the Albanian police, undertaken in cooperation with Greece and the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC), revealed that an Albanian drug-trafficking group ‘organized and facilitated illegal passage of migrants of Middle East origin from Greece to Albania and then to Montenegro’.²²¹ The Albanian police arrested 57 members of the network on charges of large-scale drug trafficking and human smuggling.

On the western borders of Turkey, Turkish smuggling networks cooperate with Arab, Albanian, Greek and Bulgarian networks who hire trafficking professionals

who specialize in passport forgery, transportation, interpretation and immigration regulations from Moldova, Iraq, Syria, Morocco, Albania, Greece and Macedonia for the transportation of migrants and refugees to the European hinterland.²²² According to experts interviewed for this report, the prices quoted to migrants range between €3 000 and €8 000 for transportation into the Schengen Area, going up to US\$30 000 for the trip to the US and Canada.

Human smugglers exploit the existing loose visa and passport regime between Turkey and Western Balkan countries, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina. As of 2020, Turkish individuals can travel to Bosnia with national ID cards. Many Syrians and Iraqis obtained Turkish ID cards through legal and illegal ways. Some of them have already obtained Turkish citizenship due to foreigner-friendly policies of the Turkish government. Others purchase national ID cards from criminal networks that specialize in forging documents.²²³ An ID card can be obtained for around US\$1 000 on the black market. It has been observed that documented immigrants travel to Bosnia from Istanbul airport as tourists, and from Bosnia they find other channels to move to Western Europe.²²⁴

Established human-smuggling networks in Bosnia facilitate the onward journey of these immigrants. In June 2019, Elbasan Police conducted Operation Tranzit against an Albanian–Turkish migrant-smuggling network. The operation led to an arrest of eight members of the crime syndicate, seven of whom were Albanian and one Turkish. The group was assisting the illegal border crossing of immigrants from Turkey to Greece and then onward to Albania and Montenegro.²²⁵

Albanian human traffickers have also been involved in the smuggling of migrants from Turkey and the Middle East to Italy, Spain and the UK. In March 2019, the Italian Carabinieri arrested seven people, including Italian, Albanian, Colombian and Turkish nationals, on human-trafficking charges in Modena, Italy.²²⁶ The Albanian member of the network was also charged with the possession of drugs and weapons. Investigations revealed that the organization was illegally transporting Turkish citizens to Italy and Europe, charging from €3 000 to €5 000 per individual. Investigators reported that the network transported about 30 people, mainly from Turkey, within a six-month period. In August 2019, the Albanian police arrested 19 Albanian and Turkish citizens who were attempting to travel from Tirana to London with stolen IDs and forged documents.²²⁷ The network was smuggling Turkish citizens to the US, UK and Canada with fake documents.

To summarize, groups from the Western Balkans – particularly Kosovo and Albania – have steadily moved up the value chain of criminal activity, both in Turkey and with Turkish groups that have links to the Balkans. As ethnic Albanian networks spread across Europe, they were able to cut down on the number of intermediaries by purchasing the heroin from Turkey and delivering it to their distribution networks in the UK, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands. More recently, Albanian networks have begun to supply large quantities of cannabis and skunk to the Turkish domestic market using Adriatic and Aegean sea routes. There is also a lucrative market in cigarette smuggling, and groups from the Western Balkans are involved in the smuggling of migrants from Turkey.

Human smugglers exploit the loose immigration regime between Turkey and Western Balkan countries, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina.



LATIN AMERICA



Latin America has become an El Dorado for criminal groups from the Western Balkans. This section traces how a few entrepreneurial criminals from the Western Balkans came to the region around 2008/09 to enter the cocaine business, and how in the decade since they have become successful emissaries between local suppliers and established criminal groups, and more recently major brokers and distributors. A special focus is put on Ecuador and Colombia.

In the period between 2008 and 2020, Latin America became a hotspot for criminal groups from the Balkans. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the world's supply of coca and cocaine has increased and demand remains high, especially in the lucrative European market and Australia. Secondly, there has been a disruption in terms of supply in Colombia in the wake of the 2016 peace agreement with the Colombian insurgent criminal group FARC (which controlled many of the areas where coca is cultivated), creating opportunities for criminals from the Western Balkans to establish connections with new suppliers. Thirdly, there are relatively low risks in trafficking from Latin America due to the pervasive climate of corruption, a number of legal loopholes, instability in some key countries (such as Venezuela) and collusive port officials at both ends of the supply chain. As a result, some entrepreneurial criminals from Albania, Montenegro and Serbia have gone to the source countries of cocaine to become involved in distribution.

Roots of the cocaine groups

The first indications (at least in open sources) of links between mafias in Eastern Europe and Colombian cartels came in 2001. That year, three Albanians were arrested as part of Operation Journey, the DEA's two-year, multinational initiative against Colombian maritime drug-trafficking. That same year, the first criminal cocaine-trafficking group in Albania was discovered. Police arrested six members of the group, including two people who at the time worked in the Prosecutor's Office

◀ A farmer in Bolivia dries freshly harvested coca leaves. Between 2008 and 2020, Latin America became a hotspot for criminal groups from the Balkans, largely on the back of rising demand for cocaine. © Georg Ismar/Picture Alliance via Getty Images

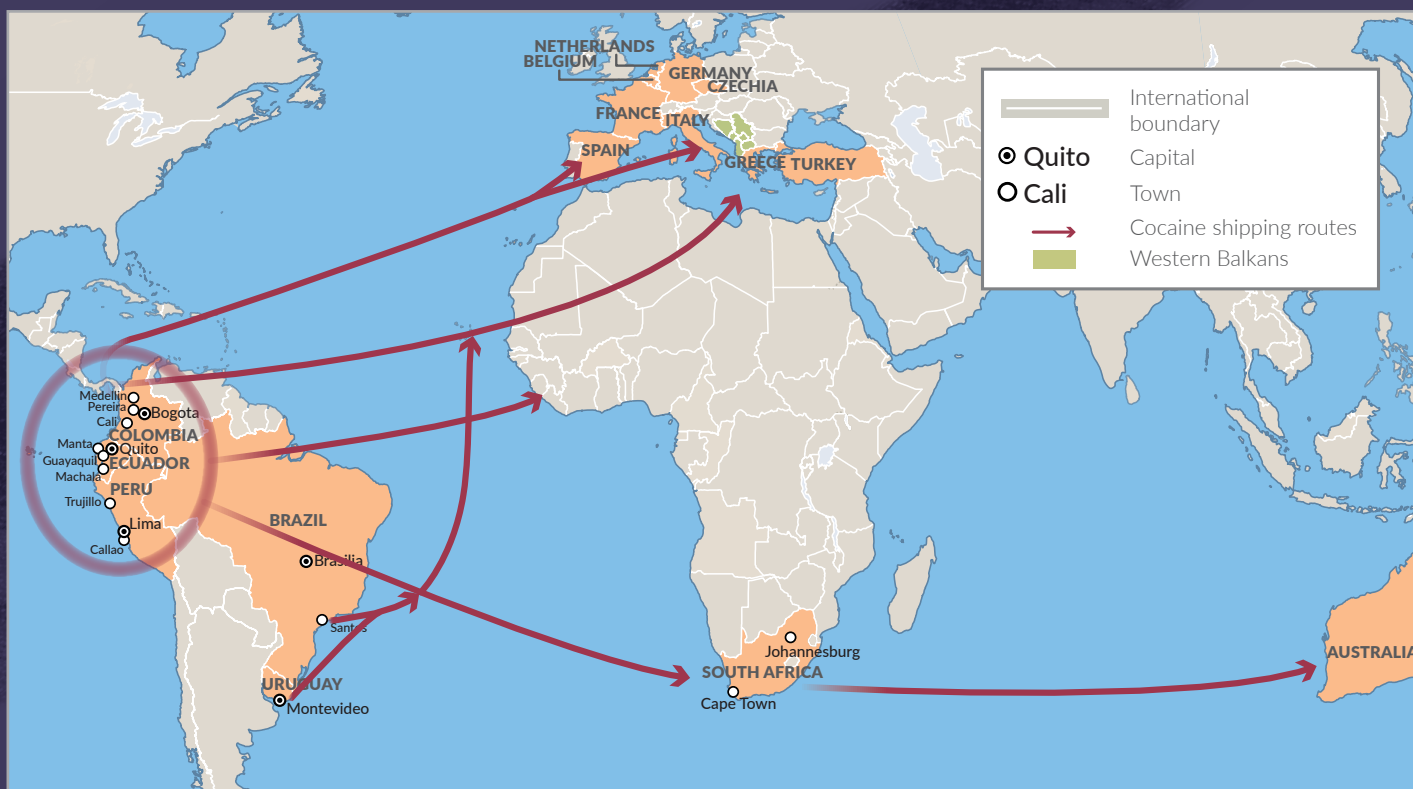


FIGURE 4 Cocaine trafficking from Latin America to Western Europe, South Africa and Australia

in Tirana. Operation Journey confirmed that this group had had contacts with the Medellín Cartel in Colombia since 1999 and was part of a worldwide network of cocaine trafficking.²²⁸ This link may be explained by the fact that the Albanian mafia has close relations with the Italian mafia, which in turn has historical relations with the Colombian cartels.

But the main action seems to have started around 2008/09, when Darko Šarić became involved in drug trafficking from Latin America to Europe. Šarić first attracted attention in 2009 when Uruguayan police, acting on a tip from US and Serbian anti-drug officials, seized a Europe-bound yacht carrying more than 2 tonnes of cocaine on the La Plata river, which separates Uruguay and Argentina. Subsequently, 490 kilograms of cocaine – packed in balloons – was found in a house in Buenos Aires that was connected to Šarić's group.²²⁹ Šarić apparently had good contacts with the Colombian Los Rastrojos group led by Wilber 'Soap' Varela, who was killed in Venezuela in 2008.²³⁰ Some of Šarić's accomplices who were caught confessed that Šarić's network was shipping drugs from Colombia, Uruguay and Brazil to Eastern Europe. This was just the tip of the iceberg in what would be revealed as a multi-million-dollar business that earned Šarić the nickname 'Cocaine King'.²³¹ Two years later, in April 2011, police confiscated a shipment of 2 tonnes of cocaine in Uruguay that came from Colombia and was ultimately destined for Europe. A Serbian citizen was arrested.

In 2008/09, around the same time that Šarić was making inroads in Latin America, Arbër Çekaj, an Albanian, entered Ecuador and established a banana-trading company.²³² This turned out to be fruitful business as, within just a few years, Çekaj became Albania's biggest drug dealer, using

the shipments of bananas to Europe to smuggle drugs.²³³ Others soon followed the example of Šarić and Çekaj, with seizures, arrests and news stories indicating the increasing engagement of people from the Western Balkans in cocaine trafficking from Latin America.²³⁴

The attraction of Latin America

As the source of one of the world's most lucrative drugs – cocaine – Latin America has an obvious attraction for criminal groups from the Balkans. Colombia is the leading producer of coca leaf in the world and the largest exporter of cocaine, followed by Peru and Bolivia. This is, however, nothing new. What is interesting is how groups from the Western Balkans got involved in a business that has long been dominated by Colombian and Italian groups. To better understand how, when and why some countries of Latin America became hotspots for criminal groups from the Western Balkans it is worth looking at the place where Çekaj, among others, seems to have found an entry point, namely Ecuador.

Ecuador

In organized crime, as in real estate, location is everything. Ecuador is situated between Colombia and Peru, which produce around 90 per cent of the world's cocaine. Between 1996 and 2006, Ecuador was considered Latin America's most unstable democracy. This was illustrated by the fact that it had eight presidents within a decade, three of them being ousted by Congress and street protests. Other factors that make Ecuador attractive to international organized-crime groups include its porous borders, weak laws and the ease with which it is possible to change one's identity and purchase fraudulent documents, such as ID cards and passports.

Another contributing factor was the closure in 2009 of the US military base in the coastal city of Manta.²³⁵ For a decade, the US had carried out anti-drug-trafficking operations from the base. According to a former director of intelligence of the Ecuadorian army, the closure of the base facilitated

the arrival of criminal structures from the Balkans, the Middle East and Asia to use this major port.²³⁶

Around the same time, the incorporation of the concept of universal citizenship into the new constitution (amended in 2008) allowed foreign visitors of any nationality to visit Ecuador for up to 90 days without a tourist visa: this period can be extended by an additional 90 days, allowing visitors to be in Ecuador legally for six consecutive months.²³⁷ For those who illegally stay in Ecuador, the maximum fine is only US\$800. This makes it a user-friendly environment for criminals 'visiting' from the Balkans (and elsewhere).

Several sources consulted for this report cited corruption of the judicial system as another enabling factor for the penetration of foreign criminal groups into the country. Indeed, in at least two cases involving criminals from the Western Balkans, traffickers were given reduced sentences or not punished at all. For example, in 2014, eight Ecuadorians, two Albanians and one Kosovar were captured as part of Operation Balkans and accused of storing large quantities of drugs in Guayaquil to send to Europe, but despite the severity of the charges, the Kosovar, Remzi Azemi, was released within a month of his arrest. In November 2018, an Albanian and a Greek were arrested in an anti-narcotics operation on the Ecuadorian coast and charged with drug trafficking, along with six Ecuadorians. When the case went to trial, the First Court of Penal Guarantees convicted the Ecuadorians but let the foreigners go free.²³⁸ A similar situation seems to exist in Colombia, which has one of the highest rates of judicial impunity in Latin America (it appears in fifth place in the impunity ranking of Transparency International).



Cocaine concealed in crates of bananas imported from Colombia is seized in Berlin in January 2014. Arbër Çekaj became Albania's biggest drug dealer, using shipments of bananas to conceal smuggled drugs. © Odd Andersen/AFP via Getty Images

According to the Transparency Organization for Colombia, of every 100 crimes committed in the country, only six are punished (in other words, an impunity rate of 94 per cent). This suggests that Colombia is a safe haven for criminals.

Another feature that makes Ecuador attractive to organized crime is dollarization. Ecuador, which adopted the US currency in 2000 following a banking crisis, therefore now has a strong currency, but it also has a low level of bancarization (the availability of bank services to the general public). For example, in 2018, 48.1 per cent of Ecuadorians did not use any financial services, according to a survey by the Central Bank of Ecuador. In other words, a large amount of cash remains outside the formal banking system, which makes it hard to trace financial flows and easy to launder money (for example, through construction and real estate). In addition, there is no law in Ecuador that provides for the seizure of assets from drug traffickers. As a result, according to a police source, 'criminals serve two or three years in prison and then go out and enjoy their money'.

While foreign criminal groups started to infiltrate Ecuador, the state had few resources to identify them and counteract their activities. According to a former senior Ecuadorian intelligence official, the main focus during the government of Rafael Correa (2007–2017) was political intelligence rather criminal intelligence. Furthermore, the country focused mostly on collaboration with the US in the fight against organized crime (for example, through an agreement renewed in 2019) rather

than international cooperation, mutual legal assistance and intelligence exchange. This problem is not unique to Ecuador. For example, Colombia has no extradition treaties with any of the six Western Balkan countries.²³⁹

Law enforcement is also handicapped by the fact that Ecuador is one of the few countries that does not hold a database with visitor fingerprints and photographs. This makes it very hard to track passports, not least when criminals use more than one alias. A lack of understanding of Balkan languages and criminal groups is another handicap. While many Serb and Albanian criminals operating in Latin America are said to speak fluent Spanish, very few of the national police forces have experts on Balkan crime or languages.²⁴⁰

And it seems it is not only the police who find it hard to identify the ethnicity of people from the Balkans. Apparently Colombian drug traffickers often refer to any Eastern European counterpart as a 'Russian'.²⁴¹ One of the most notorious criminals from the Balkans, Miro Niemeier Rizvanovic, was known as 'El Ruso' ('The Russian') despite being of Bosnian and German origin.

Right place at the right time

Having made inroads into the Latin American market in the early 2000s, criminals from the Balkans had the good fortune to be in the right place at the right time during a shake up in the cocaine market. A major factor was the peace process in Colombia. During negotiations between the Colombian government and FARC between 2012 and 2016, the area of coca crops began to increase significantly after

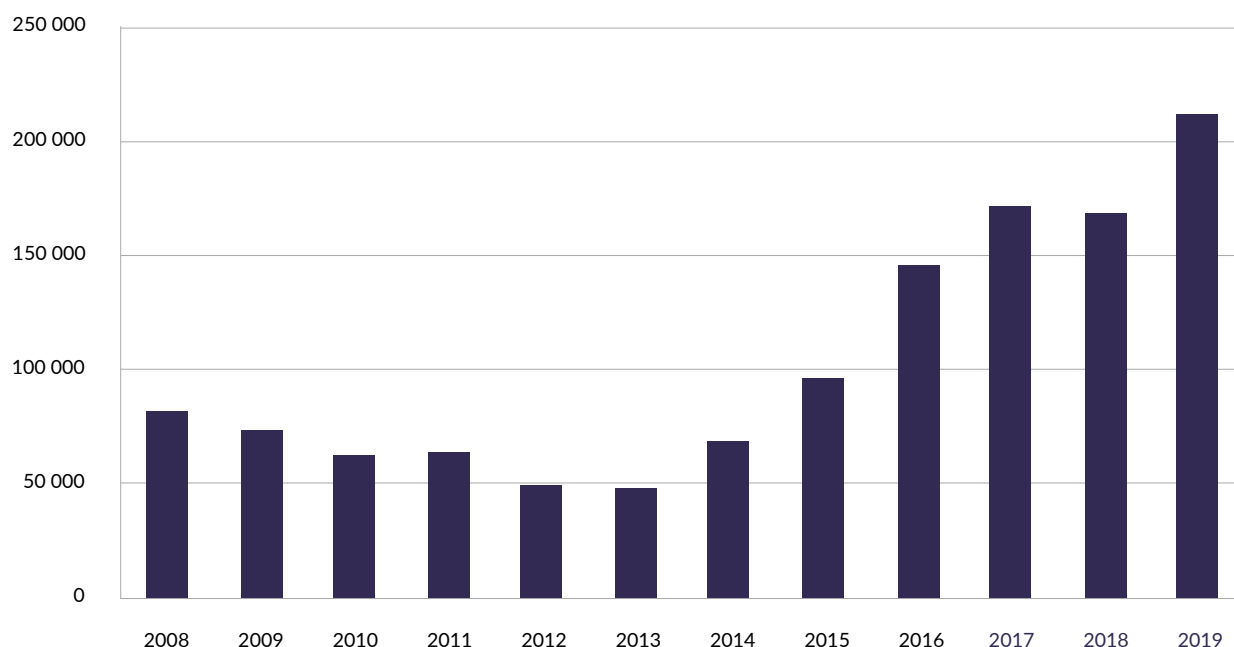


FIGURE 5 Hectares under coca cultivation in Colombia, 2008–2019

SOURCE: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2018*, August 2019, p 22, https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia/Censo_cultivos_coca_2018.pdf.

historical lows had been achieved under a major eradication offensive led by the military (see Figure 5). According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the number of hectares under coca cultivation more than quadrupled between 2013 and 2019, from 50 000 hectares in 2013 to 212 000 hectares in 2019.²⁴² Potential pure cocaine production, meanwhile, rose to a staggering 951 tonnes.²⁴³ This was due to the reduction of the anti-narcotics offensive and the manual eradication of crops; the suspension of aerial spraying programmes by order of the Constitutional Court in 2015; and the increase in planting due to the expectation of voluntary crop-substitution programmes that would bring monetary benefits to farmers.

In 2017, after the signing of the peace deal, the FARC began to withdraw from the territories it occupied. This created a power vacuum that other criminal actors began to fill, attracted by a lucrative business that was left without an owner. Among those new actors were criminal gangs, FARC dissidents who rejected the peace agreement and structures of other small Marxist guerrillas, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN), the 'narco' arm of the nearly extinct Popular Liberation Army.

At the same time, the cocaine that had been kept in stock since the start of the peace negotiations started to flood the market. Given the abundance of cocaine, Colombian cartels and groups in Brazil such as the First Capital Command (PCC) were looking for new markets and partners.²⁴⁴ Groups from the Western Balkans were well positioned to help.

The role of the Western Balkan groups

Authorities have identified at least four groups from the Western Balkans that have connections to Colombian cartels.

As described in the earlier section on Western Europe, by the early 2000s, Serb and Albanian criminal groups had forged close contacts with Italian mafia groups, which were the main distributors of Colombian cocaine in Western Europe. They used these contacts to play a key role as intermediaries or brokers between the Latin American suppliers and the European distributors. Indeed, in some cases they moved up the value chain to become key distributors themselves. Some enterprising Serbs and Montenegrins (such as Darko Šarić) seem to have even tried to cut out the middlemen altogether by trafficking drugs via sailboats or small planes from Latin America to Europe and even Africa.

After the fragmentation of the Colombian cartels in the 1990s, intermediaries who could connect Latin American producers to European consumers and coordinate shipments of several tonnes became key actors in the criminal world.²⁴⁵ Entrepreneurs from the Western Balkans helped to fill that niche. They saw opportunities abroad, were under pressure from law enforcement at home, could tap into growing networks in Western Europe, and had the skill set, brains and guts to do it. A good example of this new wave of criminal entrepreneurs is 'El Ruso', who allegedly developed a close working relationship with Dairo Antonio Úsuga (also known as 'Otoniel'), head of the Gulf Clan, the largest drug-trafficking organization in Colombia. His job became to coordinate drug shipments by sea from Colombia and Brazil to Europe and Asia.²⁴⁶ He helped link Colombian cartels with Albanian, Kosovar and Calabrian mafias.²⁴⁷

Since around 2008, Albanians have been coming to Latin America as emissaries of Italian mafia groups, such as the 'Ndrangheta and the Camorra, as well as representatives of mafia groups from other European countries such as Greece and Spain. They also apparently have their own links with the Turkish and Moroccan mafias for the distribution of narcotics in Europe. Their role, according to a source, focuses primarily on the internal distribution of the drug, especially at the service of Italian and Spanish mafias, which have older links with Colombian cartels.

According to police sources in Ecuador and Colombia, these emissaries usually come 'with a mission that was sponsored and led by the people in the destination countries in Europe'. They usually pose as businessmen and tourists and speak Spanish very well, which facilitates their connections to local crime groups. The job of these emissaries is to make contacts, negotiate deals (including prices), arrange the shipments and dispatch the drugs. The more deals they make, the better their network of contacts. At the same time (if the deal goes well), their value to the group back home increases since they become the eyes and ears of their bosses in Europe. It is not yet clear how the work of emissaries from the Western Balkans has been affected by the COVID-19 crisis, although it can be surmised that restrictions will make it difficult to travel back and forth, and riskier to move money. While cocaine is still being shipped across the Atlantic, lockdowns have apparently created bottlenecks in distribution in Europe as well as difficulties in paying for cocaine deliveries.²⁴⁸

In Colombia, emissaries reportedly meet up with local mafias in cities such as Pereira, Medellín, Cali, Pasto and Cúcuta. Police have also identified a few cases in which Western Balkan brokers have travelled to production areas in Colombia such as Tibú in the province of Norte de Santander (on the border with Venezuela), which is controlled by the ELN, or to Tumaco in the province of Nariño (close to the border with Ecuador) where multiple armed actors converge, among them groups that broke away from the FARC. In an incident in April 2020, a Serb – Dejan Stanimirovic (also known as 'Marcos') – died under strange circumstances in the company of a former Colombian paramilitary leader, Jose Vicente Rivera Mendoza, also known as 'Soldado', in Guamal, Colombia.²⁴⁹ He was apparently known to several Western European police forces, who had been observing him for almost a decade under suspicion of coordinating drug shipments from Latin America to Europe.²⁵⁰

In Ecuador, Guayaquil and the El Oro province seem to be the main meeting places. In Peru, it has been reported that a Serb group has established direct contacts with family clans that produce cocaine in the valley of the rivers Apurimec, Ene and Mataro, and transport it to Lima and the coast.²⁵¹ As noted in the case study on the Netherlands, the Tito and Dino clan has also allegedly been trafficking drugs from Peru.

Police have detected a pattern in the movements of such emissaries: they stay between eight days and one month; they travel frequently in groups of three people, often with Spanish or Italian citizens (who have a history of contacts and understand Spanish better); and often carry fake documents. The reason for travelling as a trio has a practical purpose: when cocaine shipments are negotiated, local cartels often require that a person from the organization remains in Colombia both to verify the quality of the shipment and also to serve as 'insurance' or a guarantee to ensure that the buyer pays the entire amount once the shipment is delivered.

While cocaine is still being shipped across the Atlantic, lockdowns have created bottlenecks in distribution in Europe.

THE GROUPS

It is sometimes said that there is a 'Balkan cartel' operating out of Latin America. Such a description is too monolithic. Rather, there seem to be a wide range of actors from the Western Balkans (particularly Albania, Montenegro and Serbia) involved in cocaine trafficking from Latin America. They sometimes work with each other and occasionally seem to have internal disputes, but generally seem to operate quietly and efficiently.

Grupa Amerika

Grupa Amerika (which started on the streets of Belgrade in the 1990s) apparently specialized in the logistics and transportation of cocaine (and heroin) between Colombia and North America and Europe. The group was led by Mile Miljanić and his second-in command was Zoran Jakšić. In July 2016, Jakšić was captured in Peru and accused of sending drugs from South America to Europe. Investigators say

In the last decade, authorities have identified the existence of at least four groups or cells from the Western Balkans – often with links to families or small towns back home – that have connections to Colombian cartels and cocaine trafficking from Colombia. It is unclear if all of these groups still operate, not least since at least two lost their bosses.

they have evidence that Jakšić created a criminal structure to obtain cocaine in Peru and Ecuador.²⁵² In January 2019, Smail Šikalo (from Bosnia) of the Grupa Amerika was arrested as part of a drug bust that seized 1.5 tonnes of cocaine.²⁵³ In April 2019, a member of the Amerika clan, Veselin Raicevic, was arrested in Belgrade.²⁵⁴

The Šarić Group

The Šarić Group was named after its boss Darko Šarić, who in 2018 was sentenced to 15 years in prison in a Serbian tribunal.^{255, 256} Šarić (who came to public attention through Operation Balkan Warrior in 2009, which seized 2.7 tonnes of cocaine in Uruguay) appears to be one of the first movers from the Western Balkans in establishing contacts in Latin America. His group was responsible for transporting large shipments of cocaine from Latin America to Europe via the Balkans. According to Serbian police, Šarić was organizing two shipments of cocaine a year. Šarić was allegedly able to pay Colombian

criminal organizations in cash for several tonnes of cocaine.²⁵⁷ There also seems to be a link to the PCC in Brazil. Two major drug seizures in August and September 2016 at the port of Santos involved (among others) a Serb called Božidar Kapetanović (also known as 'Judo') who, according to the Brazilian police, is suspected of being part of the Šarić Group. The latter's right-hand man Miroslav Jevtic – also known as Felipe – (also Serbian) was arrested by the Brazilian authorities for drug trafficking and suspicion of money laundering, including using Bitcoin.²⁵⁸ In 2019 he was sentenced to 17 years in prison.

The Sreten Jocić Group

The Sreten Jocić Group is named after its boss, a prominent Serbian mafia figure who is also known as Joca Amsterdam. The group operates in the Western Balkans, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Austria,

Turkey and Germany. It is reported to be responsible for organizing large shipments of cocaine from Colombia and via the Caribbean, especially in Aruba. It apparently enjoys close cooperation with Albanian

groups in Western Europe. Jocić's group is responsible for directly working in Colombia with Colombian cocaine manufacturers and sellers to move cocaine to European ports via routes including the Canary Islands, according to one assessment.²⁵⁹ Jocić is reported to have visited Colombia in 1996. According to one assessment: 'Despite Jocić's strategic control over the group, tactical

operations, including drug trafficking operations from Colombia, are overseen by lesser group authorities and a widespread network of well-organized teams'.²⁶⁰ This seems to have contributed to the group's resilience, even after Jocić was arrested in April 2009 and found guilty in connection with two contract murders.

The Berane Clan

The Berane Clan has been mainly involved in drug trafficking, especially cocaine smuggling from South America particularly Venezuela and Colombia, according to the same previous source.²⁶¹ Very little is known about the group, and it is not known to what extent

they are still active. Several prominent members of the clan were indicted in Montenegro in 2004 for smuggling 200 kilograms of cocaine from Venezuela to Serbia through Italy's port of Gioia Tauro and Montenegro's port of Bar.²⁶²

Albanian and Montenegrin groups

As noted earlier, there are also several Albanian organized-crime groups involved in trafficking cocaine from Latin America to Europe. They have found a niche as key distributors between Latin American cartels and Italian mafia groups, and – as noted in the case of the United Kingdom and the Benelux countries – are increasingly involved in retail. The most successful Albanian groups have now accumulated around a decade's worth of contacts and experience. They generally comprise between 15 and 20 members, are flexible, quick to adapt, politically well connected, have strong financial power, and are reputed to deliver good quality at a competitive price. These groups are relatively autonomous, but interact with wider criminal networks if expedient. Albanian groups operating in Latin America are considered more sophisticated than those operating solely within Albania or that have links to only one organization in a neighbouring country.²⁶³

When mentioning the role of groups from the Western Balkans, it is worth highlighting that seafarers from Montenegro seem to play a disproportionate role in crewing ships involved in drug trafficking. According to one estimate, 7 000 Montenegrin sailors work for global maritime companies. Jobs in international shipping companies are considered attractive to Montenegrins given the difficult socio-economic

conditions within the country. While these jobs are relatively lucrative, some Montenegrin seafarers seem tempted to earn the equivalent of an annual salary in one trip by helping criminal groups to traffic cocaine.²⁶⁴ In February 2020, several Montenegrin crew members were arrested when 5 tonnes of cocaine were seized from a ship off of Aruba. Four Montenegrin sailors were arrested in Philadelphia in June 2019 for their involvement in trafficking almost 20 tonnes of cocaine from Latin America. In 2015, five Montenegrin sailors were arrested after organizing a shipment of cocaine that was dropped from a cargo ship off the coast of Spain and collected by yachts. A year later, another Montenegrin was sentenced to six years in prison for dropping off 261 kilograms of cocaine from a cargo ship that were picked up by fishermen off the Dutch coast. And in March 2020, a Montenegrin crew member was arrested and 500 kilograms of cocaine seized on a Montenegrin bulk carrier (the *Budva*) in Hamburg that had travelled from Santos, Brazil via Casablanca.²⁶⁵ As described in the section on South Africa above, they have also been arrested for trafficking cocaine in yachts.²⁶⁶ In April 2019, it was even reported that 50 kilograms of cocaine was found on a training ship of the Montenegrin navy moored in the Adriatic port of Tivat.²⁶⁷

Some of these emissaries come and go to the region, often using two or more names to enter a country. According to a police intelligence agent in Colombia: 'When they come, they don't touch a gram of cocaine, they only make contact to define the business form.'²⁶⁸ This view was echoed by a top prosecutor at the General Attorney's Office (Fiscalía General de la Nación) who specializes in counter-narcotics: 'They come without money and they leave without drugs. There is no way to catch them in flagrante.'²⁶⁹

That said, some of the emissaries (for example, in Ecuador) seem to spend time in the country and are not afraid to live luxurious lifestyles. One prosecutor quoted by the Ecuadorian media stated that Albanians involved in drug trafficking pose as entrepreneurs, frequent high-end hotels and bars, spend a lot of time in gyms and own luxury goods that cannot be accounted for. If they rent apartments, it is usually in private developments with security services. They receive money through bank transfers and manage large sums. They generally do not own property in the country, but rent high-security houses in expensive areas.²⁷⁰

Over the past decade, groups from the Balkans have inserted themselves into the local criminal networks in Ecuador, particularly in the cities of Guayaquil and Machala where the drugs are stored and from where they are trafficked. They seem to have become the senior partners in the relationship with their local counterparts. That said, there are also apparently partnerships between Albanian and Ecuadorian mafias that have teamed up to traffic cocaine and split the profits. Criminals from the Western Balkans pay Ecuadorians to carry out their orders and undertake the various tasks that their illegal businesses require, like guarding the shipments, transporting the containers, and concealing the drugs in the containers with the complicity of port officials. They also seem to be able to stay out of jail, which suggests that they either keep their hands clean or have enough resources to make significant bribes.

While these emissaries usually belong to the ranks of middle command in their native country, once in Ecuador they are promoted to be leaders of the crime group in that country. Still, they seem to maintain close contacts with the criminal networks in the Western Balkans and with the diaspora in Western Europe, increasingly through encrypted cellphones. When Dritan Rexhepi, a dangerous fugitive wanted by INTERPOL in three European countries, was arrested in 2014, he attempted to smash his cellphone by throwing it to the ground.

The routes and modalities

Most of the cocaine shipped from Latin America to Europe is transported in containers on big ships. Indeed, 90 per cent of the cocaine that enters Europe comes in containers in large merchant ships that dock in ports such as Antwerp, Algeciras, Le Havre, Rotterdam and Hamburg.²⁷¹ Shipments of cocaine are usually concealed in containers of fresh fruit (particularly bananas) as well as frozen fruit pulp from Colombia and Ecuador.²⁷² The drug packages are apparently wrapped in carbon to avoid detection. Because such shipments are perishable and need to be moved quickly, there are fewer controls at the ports of entry.



Sometimes the drugs are concealed in the containers at the farm that produces the agricultural products, sometimes on the way to the port and sometimes at the port. Apparently, the most frequent modality is to break the security seals of the containers carrying licit goods and to place the drugs inside. At the destination, accomplices are told the serial number of the container loaded with the cocaine, the drugs are recovered and false seals are placed on the container doors to cover up the break-in.²⁷³ The fact that this is possible suggests high levels of corruption within the security of the ports, both outbound and inbound. Apparently, a truck driver (in Guayaquil) can earn up to US\$10 000 for re-routing a container, while a forklift operator (in for example Antwerp) can earn between €25 000 and €75 000 for making sure the load is safely unpacked.²⁷⁴ Prosecutors mention that cartels can offer between US\$500 000 and US\$1 million to customs authorities to let a shipment pass without control.

Based on data about seizures, it would appear that the volume of cocaine heading for Europe is considerable. Indeed, the amount of cocaine seized in Europe has reached historic highs. In 2017, there were 104 000 seizures (mostly of small amounts) for a total of 140.4 tonnes. The amount of cocaine seized was 20 tonnes more than the previous historic record of 2006 and doubled the amount seized in 2016. Most of the cocaine seized in Europe in 2017 was in Belgium (44 752 kilograms), followed by

Hamburg: customs officers inspect a container ship; 90 per cent of the cocaine that enters Europe arrives in vessels such as this; only 2 per cent of them worldwide are checked.

© Christian Charisius/Picture Alliance via Getty Images

Spain (40 960 kilograms); France (17 500 kilograms); Netherlands (14 629 kilograms); and UK (5 697 kilograms), according to an EU report.²⁷⁵ Drugs have even washed up on the shores of the Black Sea. Two Serbs were arrested in March 2019 after almost a tonne of cocaine was discovered in an abandoned ship, and in packets along the Romanian coastline.²⁷⁶ The purity of cocaine in the EU market also reached its highest level in 10 years.²⁷⁷ The cocaine that washed ashore in Romania, for example, reportedly had more than 90 per cent purity.²⁷⁸

Venezuela is the ‘most prominent country of origin for direct cocaine shipments to Europe’, according to a 2011 UNODC report, with most of the drugs coming from Colombia. From 2006 to 2008, more than half of all Europe-bound drug shipments intercepted in the Atlantic had departed from Venezuela. There is not much information on the operation of Western Balkan groups in Venezuela. One recent exception is the seizure of 5 tonnes of cocaine on a ship close to Aruba in the Caribbean in February 2020. The ship sailed from Suriname, docked at Guaranao in Venezuela and was heading for Thessaloniki, Greece. Several Montenegrin crew members were arrested for drug trafficking.²⁷⁹

A considerable quantity of drugs is coming directly from Colombia. In the past, most of it has been destined for the US. However, according to an intelligence source with the Colombian police, Europe is now the final destination for 60 per cent of the cocaine that leaves Colombia. Of the total amount of cocaine that enters Europe, almost 70 per cent is trafficked by groups associated with criminal groups from the Western Balkans, according to the same source.²⁸⁰ But this number should be taken with some caution.

Balkan criminal groups are also allegedly involved in drug trafficking in the port of Callao, Peru. Serbian mafia groups are said to be working with local criminal organizations (*‘chalaco’*) to smuggle the drugs in cargo ships destined for Europe.²⁸¹ These local groups, also known as ‘ninjas’ because of their dexterity, are notorious for jumping on trucks and ships to stash cocaine within shipments of wine, nuts or vegetables. In 2019, it was reported that drugs were loaded on a ship (the *MSC Gayane*) when it was off the coast of Peru. The second mate, Ivan Durasevic from Montenegro, told investigators that he had been recruited by the ship’s chief officer to help at least two other crew members and four people

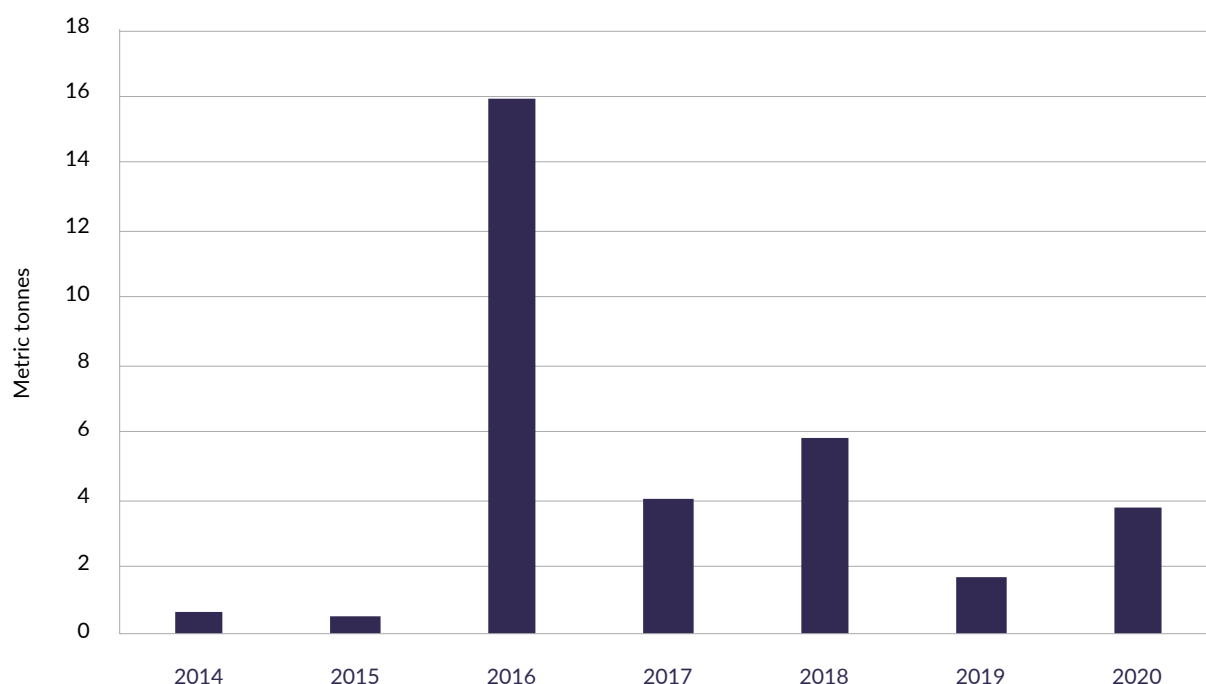


FIGURE 6 Drugs seized in Ecuador bound for Belgium, 2014–2020

SOURCE: Local news and national Ecuadorian police website

wearing ski masks haul bales of cocaine aboard the *Gayane* from smaller ships that approached it shortly after it left Peru.²⁸² He was to be paid US\$50 000 in cryptocurrency for his effort.²⁸³ When the ship, which was heading for Rotterdam, was searched in Philadelphia in June, police found almost 20 tonnes of cocaine (worth more than US\$1 billion) – the second-biggest drug bust in American history.²⁸⁴

As noted in relation to the Šarić Group above, there is also a link between Western Balkan criminal groups and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) smuggling cocaine from the Brazilian port of Santos to Western Europe, including to ports in northern Europe and Gioia Tauro, one of the largest ports in the Mediterranean which is known to be infiltrated by the 'Ndrangheta.

Uruguay seems to be gaining in popularity as a point of departure for drugs. In 2019, the number of drug seizures in the country doubled compared to the previous year. At least three major seizures of cocaine have been made in ships that have originated or stopped over in Uruguay, and a major drug bust on a private jet originating from Montevideo was made in 2019.²⁸⁵

The route from Ecuador to Europe, particularly to Belgium, seems to be popular with traffickers (see Figure 6). According to one analyst, criminal groups operating in Ecuador favour the port of Antwerp due to low tariffs and the ease of onward transport. Indeed, a review of the stated destinations of cocaine shipments seized at Ecuadorian ports revealed that the majority were destined for Antwerp. On 8 January 2020, Belgian authorities reported that in 2019 a record amount of almost 62 tonnes of cocaine had been seized in Antwerp, Europe's second largest port. Of this haul, 17 per cent (10.5 tonnes) originated in Ecuador, which, according to the Belgian Ministry of Finance, ranks as one of the top three exporters of cocaine to Antwerp, along with Colombia and Brazil.²⁸⁶ According to an AFP press report, Antwerp port's general manager, Kristian Vanderwaeren, commented to the VRT public broadcaster that 'Belgian customs can currently only control one to two per cent of the millions of containers arriving at the Flemish port'.²⁸⁷

Ecuador has eight main ports, of which Guayaquil seems to be a hotspot for groups from the Western Balkans. For example, as part of Operation Balkans in June 2014, 11 people, including Ecuadorians,

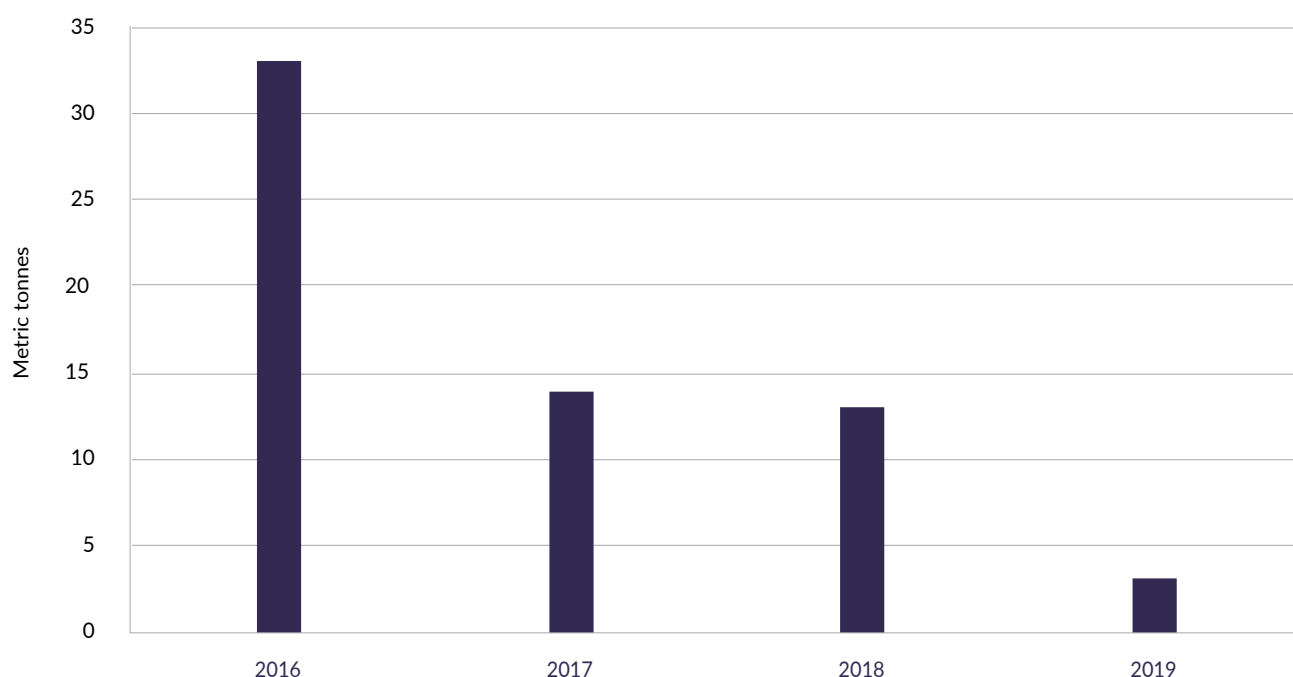


FIGURE 7 Tonnes of drugs seized in Ecuadorian ports, 2016–2019

SOURCE: National Directorate of the Antinarcotics Police of Ecuador

NOTE: Data available until 25 September 2019



Some Balkan traffickers favour yachts for shipping drugs. Here a luxury yacht containing cocaine is intercepted off the Irish coast. © Niall Carson/PA Images via Getty Images

Albanians and Kosovars, were arrested in Guayaquil. The investigation revealed that the gang had its operations centre in that city, from where they planned to ship drugs to Europe. In another case, from May 2019, an Albanian-led gang was arrested in the coastal province of El Oro. From there, the criminal group sent drugs to Europe by hiding the contraband in shipments of agricultural products. According to a local security expert, Ecuador's ports lack scanning equipment. As a result, only 1 per cent of containers are subjected to random police checks with trained dogs.²⁸⁸ Lack of controls is allegedly compounded by high levels of corruption within ports.²⁸⁹

Between 2016 and 2019, police seized almost 63 tonnes of drugs in Ecuadorian ports (see Figure 7). But compared to the estimated volume passing through the port, this is probably less than 10 per cent of the cocaine that is intended for Europe, where one gram of the drug can retail for 20 times as much as in Ecuador.²⁹⁰

Other drug-trafficking methods

Drugs move in other ways as well. Small cargoes are sent with human couriers travelling on commercial flights to Europe, for example from Guayaquil and Quito airports. A relatively new method seems to be charter flights, or so called 'narco-jets'.²⁹¹ For example, in April 2018, two Albanians were arrested after 1 000 kilos of cocaine and more than US\$1.5 million were discovered on a charter flight from Colombia to Madrid.²⁹² In July 2019, Michael Dokovich, a citizen of Montenegro of Albanian origin, was arrested after 600 kilograms of cocaine was seized in a private Gulfstream jet in Basel, Switzerland, that had come from Uruguay (with a stopover in Nice).²⁹³ His right-hand man, Pero 'Pjer' Šarac, was also arrested after visiting South America three times in 2018 to allegedly organize cocaine shipments.²⁹⁴ This operation, known as Operation Familia, which was organized by the US DEA and EUROPOL, resulted in 16 arrests.

Interestingly, five of the arrests were made in Asia, where it is alleged that 'Balkan traffickers' facilitated and coordinated the maritime trafficking of multi-kilogram quantities of cocaine, mostly in Hong Kong and Macao.²⁹⁵

Some Balkan traffickers seem to favour the use of yachts.²⁹⁶ A Greek and an Albanian were arrested in Guayaquil in 2018 for attempting to traffic drugs to Europe and Australia in a sailboat. Darko Šarić used yachts, and the use of yachts has also been noted in the case studies of South Africa and Turkey. A number of people from the Western Balkans (particularly Serbs) have been arrested in recent years for smuggling cocaine on yachts (referred to a *narcoveler*) from Latin America to Europe via the Azores and/or Canary Islands. For example, in May 2015, four Serbs were arrested in the Azores when 1 150 kilograms of cocaine was seized in their boat.²⁹⁷ In July 2019, 797 kilograms of cocaine were seized just off the Azores in a boat apparently chartered by a Serbian criminal group.²⁹⁸ It also appears that, since at least 2018, Australia is starting to be a target destination for cocaine coming from Ecuador.

It is sometimes said that there is a Balkan cartel operating out of Latin America. Such a description is too monolithic.

A winning business model

In short, in the past decade, Latin America has become a hotspot for drug trafficking for groups from the Western Balkans. Recent information suggests that this trend will continue. For example, according to an anti-narcotics source in Ecuador, 160 Albanians entered Ecuador in 2018, of whom 20 were potential drug traffickers, while a Colombian police source said they have detected an 'unjustified increase' in the entry of citizens from Albania to Colombia. Entry points may also further diversify: in January 2020 Albania and Guyana (which borders Brazil and Venezuela) signed a visa waiver agreement.²⁹⁹

Demand and supply of cocaine remain high, although seizures also seem to be rising. It is not clear if this is because of more effective law enforcement or simply a reflection of the increased volume in circulation. The vulnerabilities exploited by the Western Balkan criminal groups in Latin America do not appear to be going away any time soon, nor is the volume of container traffic to Western Europe likely to decline (even in light of the COVID-19 pandemic).

Criminal groups from the Western Balkans have clearly established a reputation for being efficient and reliable. They also have the necessary fear factor. This has enabled them to develop good relations with suppliers in Latin America and increased their leverage in distribution networks, using ports in Western Europe where they have accomplices. Being able to buy straight from the source in Latin America and sell directly to users in Western Europe enables them to control the entire value chain. This allowed them to increase purity, slash prices and corner the market. For example, it has been reported that in the UK Albanian groups were able to procure cocaine from Colombian cartels for about £4 000 to £5 500 a kilogram, at a time when rivals thought they were getting a decent deal using Dutch wholesalers selling at £22 500 a kilogram.³⁰⁰ They are also clearly opportunistic, seeking out new partners, routes and markets; new modes of delivery; and creative ways to launder their money (including through cryptocurrencies). In short, they seem to have found a winning business model.



AUSTRALIA

TENTACLES DOWN UNDER



Australia has the highest per capita consumption of cocaine in the world. It is a lucrative market. In recent years, there has been a marked increase in drug trafficking from Latin America via the Pacific islands to Australia.³⁰¹ There is some evidence of people from the Balkans involved in drug trafficking in the region, as exposed in a major bust of cocaine in New Zealand in 2017.³⁰² It would not be surprising, based on the modalities of groups from the Western Balkans in other parts of the world, that this could be a route that will be exploited.

According to one Australian police source, 'Balkan organised crime is now the biggest threat to Australia, so entrenched and disciplined and influential in local communities, it has made it a serious challenge to crack.'³⁰³ However, according to an expert in Australia's Criminal Intelligence Commission, while there is a small amount of Western Balkan organized crime in the country, 'other ethnic and non-ethnic groups have a much greater presence in Australia'.³⁰⁴

As in other global hotspots, Western Balkans criminal groups in Australia seem to have evolved out of a diaspora that emigrated from Yugoslavia in the 1980s and early 1990s. It is alleged that members of the Zemun clan hung out in Australia for a while, before and after Operation Sabre.

A major criminal group in Australia apparently centred around ethnic Albanian Vaso Ulic (who has dual Australian and Montenegrin citizenship). In its prime, this group is reported to have smuggled six tonnes of drugs a year to Australia, South Africa and China. Like Western Balkan criminals in other parts of the world, Ulic started out as a small-time crook on Sydney's infamous 'golden mile', and within 20 years had become the kingpin of drug smuggling in Australia (known as the Montenegrin Escobar), with close ties to key players in the Australian underworld. Ulic fled Australia in 2005 when Australian police moved to question him about nine unresolved contract killings and a major drug seizure. But it is alleged he remained influential from his home in

◀ Serbian Hells Angels boss and former Bandido gang member Zeljko Mitrovic was murdered by his meth cook in Sydney in 2013. © Getty Images

*'Balkan organized
crime is now
the biggest
threat to Australia.'*

Montenegro. He was arrested in August 2017 on suspicion that from July 2007 to May 2008, he was the leader of a criminal organization that smuggled 60 kilograms of methamphetamine from other countries to Australia. He was released in 2019.

Members of the Serbian community in Australia are also key players in the country's biker (or bikie) gangs. It is alleged that some of the so-called 'Balkan Bandidos' met as children at dances at the local Serbian Orthodox church. Indeed, the son of the former priest is now a key powerbroker in the Bandidos gang.

A leading member of the Hell's Angels in Australia, Zeljko Mitrovic, was of Serbian descent. In 2013, he was killed by his former meth cook – and buried in the cemetery of the local Serbian orthodox church. In 2014, Bosnian-born Senad Catic (also a former member of the Bandidos who had had several brushes with the law) was arrested for allegedly leading a multi-million-dollar methamphetamine syndicate that may have laundered profits through Bitcoin. Another former member of the Bandidos, Bogdan Cuic, was extradited from Serbia to Australia in 2016 to face charges for a drug-related murder. Despite the fact that there is no extradition treaty between Australia and Serbia, the Australian police praised the cooperation that they had with the Serbian authorities.³⁰⁵

Between September 2011 and April 2012, three men with Balkan backgrounds were killed in Wollongong's southern suburbs. All three are said to have been involved in drug trafficking.³⁰⁶ Two of the men (Saso Ristevski and Goran Nikolovski) had known each other and had previously served jail time after the pair were caught by police with a large quantity of cocaine in 2004.³⁰⁷

Ethnic Albanians are also infamous in the Australian drug market. One example is Daniel Kalaja, whose father had emigrated from Albania to Australia in the 1970s. Kalaja moved up from being a cannabis distributor in Melbourne to running a synthetic-drugs empire on the Gold Coast.³⁰⁸ He was a big player until he was arrested in 2010. In 2012, Australian police deported an Albanian man, Leonard Gjeka, who was reputed to be an enforcer for biker gangs in South Australia.³⁰⁹

An aerial photograph of a coastal city, likely Dubrovnik, Croatia. The image shows a winding road through a lush green forested hillside in the foreground. In the middle ground, a dense urban area with red-tiled roofs is visible, along with a prominent white building. The city extends to a peninsula where a large, historic stone fortress (Dubrovnik's Old Fortress) sits. The surrounding water is a deep blue, and the sky is clear. A large, stylized white graphic element, resembling a compass rose or a stylized 'X', is overlaid on the left side of the image.

BALKAN 'MAFIAS ON THE MOVE'



Before concluding, it is worth looking at how the different hotspots in this report relate to the Western Balkans. The main observation is that there is no one single nexus that coordinates the activities of various criminal groups from the Western Balkans that are active abroad. There is no one motherland of crime in the Western Balkans, nor a mastermind from the region behind the activities of different Western Balkan groups. However, the region has a history and socio-economic conditions that have created push factors that have exported criminal activity. And it has a political economy, in some cases even criminal governance, that create pull factors for some individuals and groups to seek or offer protection, develop networks, and to launder dirty money.

One of the main links between global hotspots and the Western Balkans is logistical. The region's location has been an important crossroads, for example for heroin trafficking along the Balkan route, or as a key hub for smuggling migrants. Since around 2010, the region has become a key hub for trafficking of cocaine. In the past decade, there have been a number of seizures in Montenegrin and Albanian ports such as Bar and Durrës that indicate that these ports are being used as trans-shipment points for cocaine coming from Latin America, which is then being sent on to major markets in Italy and Central Europe.

Another major impact is the laundering of the profits of crime through the region. This seems to have a particular impact on real estate and construction – driving up prices despite no increase in incomes. Other popular money-laundering methods are through the tourism industry, gambling, call centres, currency-exchange offices and remittances. This is an issue that requires further study, and one that the GI-TOC will be looking at in a forthcoming report.

Some groups are repatriating cash in bulk shipments hidden in specially made compartments in cars and SUVs. There are also indications that some of the more sophisticated groups are laundering their proceeds directly in Western Europe, in offshore havens or in cryptocurrencies. While the Western Balkan countries have adapted their laws

◀ **Budva, Montenegro. Over the last decade, there have been several drug seizures in various Balkan port towns on the Adriatic.** © Velveteer via Shutterstock

against money laundering and illicit financial flows to meet European standards, the reality on the ground is often described as being very different. It will be interesting to see the impact of this money on economies – not least in the Western Balkans – if there is a liquidity crisis as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the basis of this report, it is hard to judge the impact of global hotspots on the political economy of the Western Balkans. On the one hand, it is clear that the ecosystem of corruption, political impunity and weak criminal justice in the Western Balkans creates a roof that protects some of the big players. On the other hand, some of these actors are undesirable for some political leaders. Conversely, some people interviewed for this report indicate that it is safer and easier for a criminal group to run a business outside of the Western Balkans where they do not have to worry about the control and patronage of local authorities or exposure to locally based criminal groups. It may seem counter-intuitive, but it appears that there are times when the umbrella of political cover, which was identified as being so important in hotspots of organized crime in the Western Balkans, can be a liability for groups that have made it big abroad.³¹⁰

Regardless of how close or intentional the links are between criminal groups from the Western Balkans operating abroad and leading figures back home, the reputation of countries of the Western Balkans suffers from the activities of criminal groups in global hotspots. Many of the clichés that the region had to live with in the 1990s persist today in part because of the activity of Balkan criminal groups abroad. Indeed, the threat posed by Western Balkan criminals in some countries such as the Netherlands has been used as an argument against EU accession.

It is hard to judge the extent to which criminals from the region divide their time between the global hotspots and the Western Balkans. There are indications from several of the case studies that, at a senior level, brokers come and go. Some lieutenants are more embedded in the community where they operate or, as in the case of Latin America, travel the regions as emissaries. There are also indications of seasonal criminality, where members of the group will travel to complete certain assigned tasks and then return home.³¹¹

Some of the most successful criminals from the Balkans (such as Darko Šarić) seem to have taken advantage of networks in the 'Yugosphere'³¹² of the Western Balkans and combined them with the opportunities afforded by global hotspots. Another example is Naser Kelmendi (a Kosovo Albanian with Bosnian citizenship). The Kelmendi organization has allegedly been involved in drug trafficking (particularly heroin), the smuggling of cigarettes, money laundering and loan sharking. The core of Kelmendi's criminal group is composed of his close family members (i.e. sons, cousin and his associates). It is believed that this organization has significant influence in Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in Montenegro, North Macedonia, Croatia, Serbia, Germany and the US.³¹³ Kelmendi was charged by the Basic Court of Kosovo on various counts of criminal activity (including aggravated murder), but sentenced to only six years in prison for drug trafficking in 2018.³¹⁴

Criminals operating in global hotspots tend to return to the Western Balkans. It has been noted that some of the Pink Panthers seem to have retreated to the Western Balkans between their smash-and-grab operations, or the case of hitmen who travel

Some of the most successful Balkan criminals have taken advantage of networks in the 'Yugosphere' of the Western Balkans and combined them with the opportunities afforded by the hotspots.

from the Western Balkans for a hit and then return home again. As illustrated in this report, there are also cases of criminals returning from hotspots to lie low, avoid exposure to law-enforcement agencies in the hotspot where they are active, eliminate their adversaries, or to find a safe haven after being indicted abroad. In an inverse to Varese's argument, some, who have made their careers in the hotspots, have transplanted themselves back to the Western Balkans. Surely more could be done by states in the Western Balkans to make it riskier for wanted criminals to come and go.


In addition, there may be a risk that groups from the Western Balkans operating in global hotspots may bring some of their problems and know-how back home with them, along with their profits. For example, partners from abroad could seek to make inroads into the Balkans – could this attract the wrong kind of foreign investment, and the wrong kind of people?

Furthermore, if some of the money is laundered in the Western Balkans in ways that create businesses that are not highly regulated (for example, the tourism industry, casinos and the entertainment industry), could this create an environment where other players may also follow suit? Could this act as a magnet for criminal groups from Asia, the Middle East, Turkey or Russia? Or murky foreign investors who could take advantage of limited regulation mechanisms – as was noted in the case study of the Czech Republic in the early 1990s? It is also worth asking if cyberspace could one day soon become a (virtual) global hotspot for criminals from the Western Balkans.³¹⁵

Finally, while some criminal groups have profited from the war in the Middle East through the trafficking of weapons and the smuggling of migrants, there has also been a boomerang effect, given that there is popular discontent with the growing number of migrants and concerns about the return of foreign fighters and radicalization. In the future, it will be important to look at not only how organized crime from the Western Balkans is exported globally, but also if (and how) foreign organized-crime groups move into the Western Balkans.



CONCLUSIONS



This report has set out to show where there are global hotspots of activity by criminal groups from the Western Balkans. It has looked at case studies in Latin America, Western Europe, Turkey and South Africa, and touched on Australia.

There are some similarities between these hotspots, but also important differences. Many of the hotspots are linked to a legacy of the dramatic events that took place in Yugoslavia and Albania in the 1990s, but others have more to do with more recent developments and opportunities that have opened up because of political changes and globalization. Most hotspots have sizeable diasporas of people from the Western Balkans, but some do not (such as those in Latin America). Some hotspots have relatively weak institutions and criminal-justice systems, or were attractive to criminal groups during a time of transition, but others (such as Western Europe, Australia and Turkey) do not.

Almost every hotspot identified in this report is linked to the drug economy; either supply (in Latin America), transit (Turkey) or distribution and retail (Western Europe and Australia). Smuggling of migrants and cigarettes has also been highlighted, particularly in the case of Turkey.

South Africa is an outlier. It seems to have been a hotspot in 2018 and 2019 because of a settling of old scores among a small group of people somehow connected to the assassination of Arkan. Yet there are indications that it is becoming a hotspot for the trafficking of cocaine, including with the involvement of groups from the Western Balkans.

In most hotspots, the criminal groups from the Western Balkans have moved up the value chain in the past 20 years. Men from small towns in the Western Balkans (including from hotspots identified in an earlier report by the GI-TOC) are now organizing multiple-tonne shipments of cocaine from the jungles of

◀ The new generation of Western Balkan traffickers have become tech savvy in a bid to evade law-enforcement. © Millenius/Shutterstock

Latin America through some of Europe's busiest ports to the streets of its capitals. Sailors from small Balkan ports are using yachts to ship drugs to South Africa and Australia, or migrants from Turkey to Western Europe. Brokers from the Western Balkans are cutting deals with some of the biggest Latin American cartels, the Italian mafia and well-established Turkish criminal groups. They are now in the premier league of crime.

Most of the criminal activity in the hotspots is non-violent. Again, South Africa is the outlier, but that seems to be because of bloody infighting related more to vendettas than competition over a criminal market. There has also been some recent violence in Italy, which suggests competition with groups that may be taking issue with the ascendancy of Albanian networks in major cocaine markets such as Rome. The other notable exception is violence associated with the bloody feud between the Škaljarski and Kavacki clans. But with the exception of a few hits in Western Europe, this violence mostly occurs in Serbia and Montenegro rather than the hotspots abroad.

Characteristics of the groups

It is difficult to make generalizations about the criminal groups from the Western Balkans operating in global hotspots, partly because there is no uniform model and partly because of a dearth of information. It is clear, however, that there is no Balkan cartel or even an Albanian mafia. Such descriptions suggest a degree of organization and cohesion that does not exist. Rather, there are a number of groups and networks that sometimes cooperate with one another and/or with local partners.

Western Balkan criminal groups operating in global hotspots are seldom ethnically homogeneous, although Albanian groups have traditionally preferred to work with people from their own clan or community. There is also still a tendency for criminals from the Western Balkans to work with others from the region. But cases examined in this report suggest that criminal groups from the Western Balkans operating abroad are highly adaptive and are willing and able to work effectively together with people of a wide range of nationalities.

The lack of violence displayed by groups from the Western Balkans suggests that they are either pragmatic and have found ways to get along with local partners and other groups, or they feel confident in their ability to control certain markets. The latter can be attributed in some cases to alliances with powerful partners, a reputation for violence, sufficient resources to ensure impunity in countries with weak criminal justice systems, as well as a protective umbrella back in their home country.

Some members of these groups – particularly from Serbia and Montenegro – still have a legacy from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, but many of that generation of criminals are either dead, in jail or out of the game. The exception is in South Africa, where there happened to be a cluster of people (mostly over 50 years old) with connections from the early 2000s who, paradoxically, wanted to escape their past.

There are others who are part of a 'second generation' who either left the Western Balkans as children, or who were born abroad. In some cases, they have links to

Today there is a generation of younger, professional criminals who are adept at using technology.

groups from the Western Balkans, but in other cases they are branded as Balkan criminals, even though their only link to the region is their family name.

Today there is a generation of younger, professional criminals who have good language skills, are adept at using technology, park their money offshore or in cryptocurrencies, and profit from globalization. They have gone from the Yugosphere to being citizens of the world. They are the global equivalent of what used to be referred to in the Balkans as 'controversial businessmen'. The new generation of traffickers have become tech savvy to avoid law-enforcement surveillance. For instance, they use GPS for deliveries of drugs or to navigate trafficking routes. They use satellite phones, Voice over Internet Protocols (VoIP), and encrypted internet-based communications that are hard to intercept. And they are active on the darknet and increasingly use cryptocurrencies, such as Bitcoin, that are hard to trace.

An unbeatable business model

One of the most striking conclusions of this report is the upward mobility of criminal groups from the Western Balkans. Within 20 years, they have gone from being small-time couriers or crooks trying to escape instability and underdevelopment to becoming big-time distributors in some of the biggest drug markets in the world. They have positioned themselves close to the source of the world's biggest supplies of cocaine and heroin, and – in the case of Albanians – are sometimes even the producers of cannabis. They are also active in the retail trade, particularly in Western Europe due to access to various ports in the EU such as Antwerp, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Valencia, Algeciras and Piraeus.^{316, 317} They also have links to street-level distributors, including compatriots from the Western Balkans. This allows them to drive down prices, pass the savings on to consumers, deliver good quality at a fair price, and thereby knock out the competition. As a business model, it is unbeatable. If they continue to play it right, this business model will continue to be lucrative because supply and demand for cocaine, heroin and cannabis are high.

The development of this niche as an end-to-end service provider has not developed by chance. Criminal groups from the Western Balkans have shown a willingness to take risks and to seek out and exploit opportunities, for example using new routes and new technologies. They have built the respect of local partners on both ends of the supply chain. They have shown themselves to be innovative, entrepreneurial and adaptive.

Enabling factors

This report has highlighted a number of factors that have enabled criminal groups from the Western Balkans to operate abroad. As noted, in some cases it is weak governance and corruption in countries where they operate. Another factor is their ability to use several identities and therefore avoid detection.

Limited container security is a problem, either due to corruption or the sheer volume of containers going through some ports. It is quite possible that some of the illicit goods are being shipped through free economic zones: this makes them hard to interdict. In some cases, weak border and customs control, as well as lax maritime security, are making smuggling relatively low risk.

As mentioned, technology is an enabling factor for the groups described in this report: for example, the use of encryption, cryptocurrencies and GPS tracking. The financial system also seems to be an enabler for the flow of money of some of these groups. How else could it be possible to move and invest so much money? Do banks and real-estate companies really know their customers?

A key consideration is that some of the underlying factors that made people from the Western Balkans vulnerable to organized crime in the 1990s still exist: lack of employment opportunities, corruption, inequality, frustration with the domestic political situation and the slow process of EU accession. If these are not addressed, there will continue to be a pool of young people in the Western Balkans or the diaspora willing to risk a life of crime.

Law-enforcement cooperation

While criminals from the Balkans demonstrate the benefits of transnational cooperation, this report also shows that law-enforcement agencies can work effectively together. Operation Balkan Warrior was a joint operation between the DEA, the Serbian intelligence agency and police in Uruguay and Argentina that helped take down Darko Šarić in 2010. There have been several other successful operations involving law-enforcement agencies from the US, Western Europe, Latin America and the Western Balkans. SELEC has proven to be a useful coordination mechanism for carrying out joint investigations. Part of SELEC's added value is that Turkey is a member.

There has also been good cooperation at sea, such as the drug bust in February 2020 off the coast of Aruba that was part of a joint operation between Serbian, Montenegrin, Dutch and British law-enforcement agencies. Indeed, between 2018 and 2020, the number and size of drug busts seemed to be increasing, either as the result of greater cooperation between law-enforcement agencies or as a reflection of an increased volume of trafficking, or both.

EUROPOL plays a key role. On 11 March 2020, for example, EUROPOL announced that it had helped to dismantle a large Balkan criminal network that was trafficking drugs, mainly cocaine, from Latin America to Europe. A complex international investigation, launched in 2017, intercepted a catamaran smuggling 840 kilograms of cocaine being shipped from the Caribbean to Europe.³¹⁸ Four crew members of Bosnian, Montenegrin and Serbian nationalities were arrested in 2018, and

several other members of the group were arrested on 10 March 2020. This shows how EUROPOL can facilitate the exchange of information, provide coordination support and analyze operational information against its databases to give leads to investigators. This approach has also been applied to countering the trafficking of human beings and cigarettes, as well as smuggling of migrants in the Western Balkans.

Eurojust is helping countries of the Western Balkans to strengthen capacity and provides assistance in prosecuting cases. More generally, since prosecution is often the weakest link when dealing with cases of serious organized crime, the support of other countries can be helpful, including extradition. In some cases, liaison officers from police departments in the Western Balkans have been placed in countries of origin to help identify suspects and help with analysis. Such cooperation has proven successful.

Bilateral cooperation is also necessary. A good example is the cooperation between Italian and Albanian law-enforcement agencies, including joint operations. Italy, together with the US and a number of EU countries, has also been supportive of the process of reforming the Albanian criminal-justice system. There has also been cooperation in the context of the EU's Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, which provides EU candidates with financial and technical help. In some cases, this has led to successful operations against organized-crime groups as well as seizures of criminal assets. The investigations carried out have covered the entire spectrum of organized-crime manifestations – from

trafficking in human beings, arms and drugs to terrorism and money laundering – and have been conducted both in the Western Balkans and in the countries of the EU, as well as sometimes in other countries. Cooperation with the EU could be even more effective if countries of the Western Balkans had access to the Schengen Information System. This would enhance and speed up the ability of police and border guards to identify persons of interest.

INTERPOL plays a key role in terms of coordinating joint actions. For example, in January 2020 it led a major operation against human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants in the Balkans called Operation Theseus. As a result, 72 suspected traffickers and 167 migrant smugglers were arrested, 89 victims of human trafficking were rescued and 2 000 migrants identified.³¹⁹ INTERPOL's Red Notice system is also crucial for identifying criminals.³²⁰ It is interesting to note that INTERPOL had an entire project devoted to tracking the Pink Panthers.

More could be done, particularly in terms of enhancing cooperation between law-enforcement agencies in countries of supply and demand, and also by involving colleagues from the Western Balkans. There is also a need for a greater focus on maritime security (particularly through intelligence-led operations), and tackling container security, for example,

by making more effective use of the UNODC–World Customs Organization Container Control Program. And there is an urgent need to improve mutual legal assistance between countries of the Western Balkans and global hotspots where criminal groups from the Western Balkans are active.

Since criminal groups are financially motivated, and given that money is the source of their strength, more needs to be done to look at the financial flows of Western Balkan groups operating abroad. To increase risks and reduce benefits, greater cooperation is needed in tracking money laundering and recovering stolen assets. The legal frameworks exist in the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). The key is practical cooperation. Otherwise this money could be used to buy power, or pervert national economies. Indeed, if there will be a liquidity crisis as a result of the COVID-19 virus, the leverage of criminals with significant amounts of cash could have a major influence on business and politics. In short, if Balkan crime has gone from the inside out, a large part of the solution will have to come from the outside in – through international cooperation. As an Italian prosecutor said, 'just as they ally themselves with each other, so we must cooperate together'.

A multi-layered approach

Dealing with the impact of criminal groups from the Western Balkans operating abroad will require responses at different levels. Within the Western Balkans it is important to strengthen the resilience of society against the factors that enable crime to prosper. This would reduce hotspots of crime at home and abroad. The reform of the criminal-justice system in Albania is a good example. It may be slow and arduous, but this is an opportunity to bring in a new generation of criminal-justice officials, and to build greater integrity and trust in the system. More broadly, in all countries of the region, it will be important to have effective institutions, not only good legislation. And it is vital to create more jobs and viable livelihoods, particularly among vulnerable groups (such as the youth) in vulnerable regions. Here

donors have a role to play as well in addressing the factors that cause underdevelopment, marginalization and brain drain. This could become even more acute in relation to the economic fallout of COVID-19.

Western European countries have a key role to play in reducing demand for the goods and services that are fuelling crime in the Western Balkans. Indeed, with the exceptions of Australia and South Africa, all of the trafficking flows that criminal groups from the Western Balkans are profiting from are directed at the EU and the UK. While some critics and sections of the media may sound the alarm about criminal groups from the Western Balkans, few point out that they are the delivery service for Western Europe's illicit markets.



Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Much of Western Balkan organized crime has gone from the 'inside out'.
© Boris Stroujko/Shutterstock

Furthermore, leaving countries from the Western Balkans without a European perspective is not going to improve the situation. People from the Western Balkans who wanted to move to the EU are already there – including criminal groups, as highlighted in this report. If some of them turned to a life of crime because of a system that they feel let them down, why deepen the vulnerabilities of that system? Instead, the challenge should be to address the conditions that created the vulnerability in the first place.

It is a tall order, but more should also be done to strengthen resilience in countries of supply. Countries that are major markets for Latin American cocaine have a self-interest in strengthening criminal-justice systems and sustainable development in countries such as Ecuador, Colombia and Peru. Furthermore, addressing the issue of criminal groups from the Western Balkans without reducing the market forces that keep them in business will simply see them replaced by groups from somewhere else. Indeed, as noted in many of the hotspots examined in this report, they are not the major players in the drugs trade.

The role of civil society

Civil-society actors both in the Western Balkans and abroad have a key role to play. They should continue to push for effective governance and institutions, and promote a culture of lawfulness. And they should work with governments to ensure that there is space and freedom to give a voice to those – particularly in the media, civil society and concerned citizens – who believe in a society free of crime and corruption. Otherwise, disillusionment with politics and a lack of faith in future opportunities in the formal economy will continue to make

young people across the Western Balkans vulnerable to either going abroad or joining criminal groups (or both).

Co-nationals in the diaspora have a stake in promoting a culture of lawfulness because the activities of criminal groups in their midst gives them a bad name too. Most members of the diaspora do not benefit from the criminal activity of their compatriots, and some even suffer from it. Indeed, many of them left the Western Balkans because of crime and instability – they do not want it on their doorstep again.

Violence and silence

Finally, it is important to keep the spotlight on the issue. Criminal groups profit more by silence than violence. Although attention is often focused on criminal groups when there is violence, this is usually a sign of competition or disruption in a market, whereas a highly efficient market is one that operates smoothly in silence.

Thus far there has been little understanding of the role of Western Balkan groups outside of their home region, as well as the links between them. This report has had the advantage of being based on information from experts (including journalists, academics and members of civil society) in the global hotspots, and a wide range of sources.

That said, in many cases the providers of that information noted that there is a lack of data and analysis about the role criminal groups from the Western Balkans play in organized crime. Problems include a

lack of disaggregation of data on the basis of ethnicity, limited knowledge of the Western Balkans, the use of multiple identities by the perpetrators (including through passports from EU countries), and the view that criminals from the Western Balkans are not a major threat to the country in question. Nevertheless, perhaps this report can contribute to a greater understanding of the roots, characteristics and impact of this problem in order to help stimulate remedial action.

In conclusion, this report shows the role of groups from the Western Balkans in hotspots around the world. More action is needed to reduce the supply and demand of the goods that these groups deliver, and to disrupt their activities. Otherwise the tentacles of criminal groups – including those from the Western Balkans – will continue to wrap themselves around the globe.

NOTES

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