

THE CIVIL SOCIETY OBSERVATORY TO COUNTER ORGANIZED CRIME IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE



RISK BULLETIN

SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

1. Profiting from the pandemic: COVID-19 and corruption.

A second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is sweeping through the Western Balkans. Many countries are in lockdown. This has made public-procurement processes more opaque and has reduced the space for civil-society organizations and the media to report on issues of corruption and organized crime. Criminals and corrupt officials have been quick to spot an opportunity. We look at how the pandemic has exposed weaknesses caused by poor governance and corruption, and how it risks exacerbating already vulnerable socio-economic and health conditions.

2. Heavier traffic on Corridor 10: smuggling of migrants through North Macedonia.

In 2015, almost 700 000 refugees and migrants travelled from Greece through North Macedonia, heading north to Serbia and the EU, along Corridor 10. Although the Balkan route was closed in March 2016, the flow of people on the move through North Macedonia continues. This article maps the main routes and explores how migrants are smuggled particularly via hubs around the southern border with Greece and Serbia in the north.

3. Building bridges among police and customs in south-eastern Europe.

Since its founding in 1999, the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC), headquartered in Bucharest, has been improving cooperation among police and customs officials to fight against transnational,

serious and organized crime in the region. Director-General Snejana Maleeva of Bulgaria explains SELEC's activities including training, joint operations and analysis, as well as improving cooperation among prosecutors.

4. The promises we keep: monitoring anti-corruption pledges in the Western Balkans.

In 2014, the Berlin Process was launched with the aim of facilitating regional cooperation among the countries of the Western Balkans and boosting European integration and security. In July 2018, at the London Summit, five Western Balkan countries (followed by Serbia in 2019) signed anti-corruption pledges. We review how corruption has been addressed within the Berlin Process and assess the extent to which countries are living up to their commitments to fight corruption.

5. Strengthening resilience and reconciliation in Mostar.

The city of Mostar, in the south of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is a hotspot for organized crime, particularly for drug trafficking and arms smuggling. Due to weak policing, the city has become a refuge for criminals from the region who are hiding from other criminal groups or fleeing the law. Hooliganism is also a problem in the city. We interview Almir Denjo, president of a local non-governmental organization called Mutual Action for Strengthening Alternative, about its work in promoting resilience and reconciliation in the community, particularly among youth and people on the margins of society.



ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This edition of the Risk Bulletin produced by the Civil Society Observatory to Counter Organized Crime in South Eastern Europe continues our focus on the impact of COVID-19 on the political economy of the Western Balkans. As a second wave of the pandemic sweeps through the region, we look at how criminals and corrupt officials are seizing the opportunity to make money at the expense of citizens and how COVID-19 is exposing weaknesses in the healthcare systems and governance in countries of the Western Balkans.

Following the summit of the Berlin Process in Sofia on 10 November 2020, we recall the anti-corruption pledges made at a similar summit in London in July 2018 and note that, although there has been some progress in the implementation of these commitments, there has also been backsliding in some countries. The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) will soon issue an assessment of countries' implementation of the anti-corruption pledges made in the framework of the Berlin Process.

Five years ago, in 2015, hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers and migrants passed through the Balkans on their

way to the EU. While the Balkan route was declared closed in March 2016, migrants are still being smuggled through the region. In this issue, we focus on where and how they are being smuggled through North Macedonia.

While the focus of this Bulletin is mostly the risks posed by organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans, we also profile what is being done to manage and reduce them. For example, this month we focus on the work of the SELEC, which, for two decades, has been improving cooperation among police and customs officials to fight transnational, serious and organized crime in the region. In our series on resilience, we talk to the head of the NGO Mutual Action for Strengthening Alternative – supported by the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund and based in the divided and crime-torn city of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina – about how they see the problem of organized crime in their community and what they are doing to empower youth and integrate people from the margins of society.

As always, if you have feedback or ideas for the Risk Bulletin, or would like to contribute to it, please contact Kristina.Amerhauser@globalinitiative.net.

1. Profiting from the pandemic: COVID-19 and corruption.

A second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is sweeping through the Western Balkans and many countries are again in lockdown. Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the GI-TOC's regional network has reported numerous incidents regarding secretive tendering processes for the purchase of protective equipment, coronavirus tests, medical supplies and other health equipment. There are serious concerns that the pandemic has further enabled possible misuse of state funds.¹

During the first wave, it was evident that public-procurement processes across the region had already become more opaque, and that space for civil-society organizations and the media to report on issues of corruption and organized crime was shrinking.² That trend has continued during the second wave, with criminals and corrupt officials being quick to spot opportunities while citizens suffer.

Some procurement processes are not only opening the door to corruption, but also creating risks to public health. In a notorious case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a senior official in charge of procuring medical equipment was suspended after ventilators that were imported from China by a raspberry-processing firm (for US\$5.84 million in public funds) turned out to be defective.³ As of mid-November 2020, none of the ventilators had been used and no one had been charged. There are also reports, for example from Serbia,⁴ of people buying and selling negative PCR tests for €30 to €100 to facilitate border crossings.⁵

As in other parts of the world, consumers in the Western Balkans are vulnerable to fraudsters selling counterfeit medicines and masks, particularly online – a risk that could increase when a vaccine becomes available. There is also a fear that government compensation schemes to private businesses aimed at cushioning the economic costs of the pandemic could be abused by criminals.



A football referee gets tested for COVID-19 in Pristina, Kosovo. © Armend Nimani/AFP via Getty Images

The situation in Kosovo is symptomatic of concerns expressed in other countries of the region. In the past few months, public criticism in Kosovo has been directed at allegations of corruption around private testing services and political interference in the country's pharmaceutical market.

Testing concerns centre on the licensing of private medical laboratories to provide testing, in addition to public hospitals. A few laboratories were initially permitted to operate as of August 2020;⁶ however, only one was licensed to perform real-time PCR (RT-PCR) testing services to diagnose COVID-19. Other licensed laboratories were only allowed to perform serological (antibody) tests.⁷

According to Kosovar media, the sole laboratory licensed to perform RT-PCR tests is owned by a private company with close links to the ruling parties and a history of trying to monopolize certain services, like car registration.⁸

The main complaint by concerned citizens is that this company is charging around €200 for a rapid test from its laboratory, although it usually costs around €65.⁹

The Ministry of Health was heavily criticized for enabling a company to abuse its position as the sole private provider of such testing services.¹⁰

Given the negative effects of the pandemic on the already weak Kosovar economy,¹¹ critics have pointed out that the state should have prevented a private company from acquiring a monopoly on an essential service and that it should have intervened to set price limits for testing. Yet, the Ministry of Health has stated that 'it does not fix the prices of these services'.¹² Nevertheless, in response to fierce public criticism, the government granted licenses in early September to two other private medical laboratories able to carry out RT-PCR testing, thus ending the monopoly.¹³

The Kosovar government has also come under fire for interfering in the pharmaceutical market to the detriment of the population. In August 2020, the government abrogated a by-law that determined and regulated the prices of medicinal products for wholesale and retail in the private sector.¹⁴ This set off a heated debate in which the Minister of Health was strongly criticized for a decision people feared could lead to a significant increase in the cost of essential medication, as well as hoarding and price gouging of medical products related to the pandemic or even the creation of a black market.

Indeed, the pharmaceutical community in Kosovo labelled the abrogation a criminal act and demanded that the minister resign,¹⁵ and Kosovo's opposition parties said that the move paved the way for organized crime and corruption networks to profit from the pandemic.¹⁶

Under this heavy pressure, the minister reversed the abrogation and ordered the ministry to amend the current by-law to more effectively determine the pricing of pharmaceutical products.¹⁷

The pandemic has exposed weaknesses caused by poor governance and corruption, risks exacerbating already vulnerable socio-economic and health conditions, and has created opportunities for organized crime and corruption. As COVID-19 cases rise for a second time in the Western Balkan countries, lessons learned from the first wave need to be applied, particularly in monitoring procurement processes, ensuring fair pricing and competition and maintaining institutional integrity. In this extraordinary situation, controls must be increased on how public money is spent. Otherwise, public institutions will be further weakened by corruption.

2. Heavier traffic on Corridor 10: smuggling of migrants through North Macedonia.

In 2015, more than half a million refugees and migrants came streaming through the Western Balkans, particularly from Greece, through North Macedonia, into Serbia and then Hungary. Although this so-called Balkan route was declared closed in March 2016, the flow never fully stopped; in recent months, it has again increased. Migrants are still being smuggled along Corridor 10 – the main transportation route from Thessaloniki through North Macedonia and Serbia to Budapest, as well as west from Belgrade via Croatia and Slovenia, to Graz and Salzburg in Austria.

In 2015, dramatic images were broadcasted worldwide of asylum seekers and migrants trying to cross the border from Greece into North Macedonia, in an effort to head northwest along the Balkan route into central Europe. After the Balkan route was closed, the number of irregular crossings plummeted from 694 674 in 2015 to just over 4 000 in 2017.¹⁸

Since early 2016, increased border security, like the erection of fences and the deployment of Frontex border guards and joint border patrols, have caused migrants to shift to the Adriatic route that passes from Greece into Albania, through Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then into Croatia. The closure of the Balkan route also led migrants and asylum seekers to rely more on criminal networks to provide smuggling services and fraudulent travel documents.¹⁹

However, the number of people trying to cross from Greece into North Macedonia – and from there into southern Serbia – has been growing since 2019. Corridor 10 has regained popularity as an artery for smuggling migrants: in 2019, there were almost 25 000 reported irregular crossings into North Macedonia.²⁰ Most of the asylum seekers and migrants are young men coming from the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan.²¹

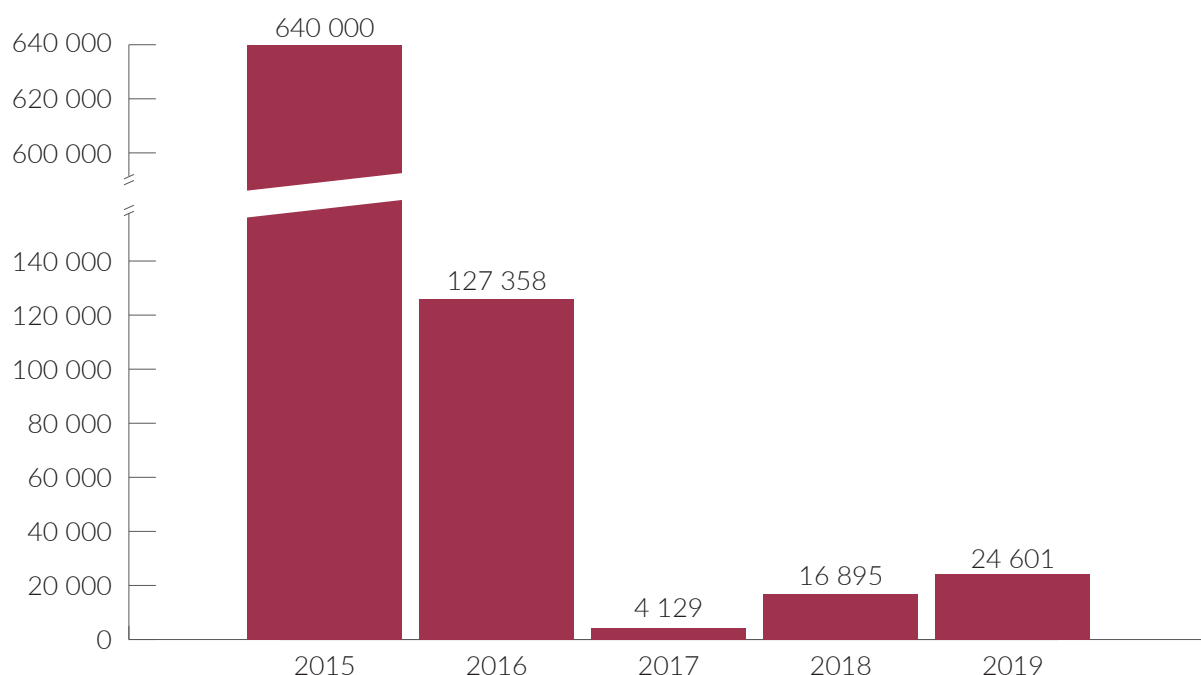


FIGURE 1 Statistics on irregular crossings through North Macedonia.

SOURCE: Ministry of Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia, Annual reports for 2017, 2018 and 2019 and Report for risk assessment on organized and serious crime (2017–2019).

ENTRY POINTS AND SMUGGLING ROUTES

Migrants are smuggled through North Macedonia in three main steps: crossing from Greece into North Macedonia, transiting through North Macedonia, and crossing from North Macedonia into Serbia. The smuggling of migrants from Greece into North Macedonia takes place along two main routes: one from the village of Idomeni (Greece) to Gevgelija (North Macedonia), and another along unmarked paths over Belasica mountain, near the city of Strumica (North Macedonia).

In 2015, Idomeni was the main crossing point for hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees on their way to central Europe. Today, it remains a hub, but at a significantly lower level. Migrants are picked up by smugglers in the vicinity of the Hara hotel, which is located on the E-75 highway that connects Thessaloniki and Skopje. Most smuggling is conducted by Afghans and Pakistanis, often in cooperation with North Macedonian citizens. The most common routes pass through the border village of Moin, west of the Vardar river, and the villages of Stojakovo, Prdejci, Selemli, Negorci, Miravci, Miletkovo and Bogorodica.

Migrants are often smuggled in cars and trucks through the Bogorodica border crossing. There have also been several cases of migrants trying to cross the border by passenger or freight train at the Gevgelija railway border crossing. This can be dangerous: migrants have been injured or killed while trying to jump onto moving trains or coming into contact with high-voltage cables.²² In 2015, 14 migrants who had fallen asleep on the tracks were killed by a train travelling from Thessaloniki to Belgrade.²³

The second route runs across the mountain at Belasica and through the Dojran region, where North Macedonian police regularly discover migrants.²⁴ For example, in July 2020, police found 12 Syrian migrants near the village of Davidovo in a personal vehicle with Serbian license plates, which was driven by a Serbian citizen from Vranje.²⁵

After having crossed into North Macedonia, migrants head north along Corridor 10 from Gevgelija through Veles to the capital, Skopje. Improvement of the highway between Demir Kapija and Smokvica has increased the speed of traffic and reduced the number of controls, thereby making it easier to smuggle migrants. An alternative route used by smugglers to avoid police patrols runs from Gevgelija to Kumanovo through Bogdanci, Valandovo, Strumica and Stip.



FIGURE 2 Migrant entry points and smuggling routes via North Macedonia.

To reduce their risks, smugglers often use vehicles with lost or stolen license plates and accommodate migrants in abandoned or empty houses. Smugglers often wear masks and gloves to avoid leaving any DNA traces or fingerprints in the vehicles – a practice that does not arouse much suspicion because of COVID-19 precautions.

Close to the Serbian border, migrants are usually dropped off near Kostriuk, the Makpetrol gas station on highway E-75 or the Tabanovcerring road. From there, they are picked up and brought to the villages of Lipkovo, Lojane or Vaksince in the Lipkovo region – muslim-majority villages that provide a safe haven for smugglers and migrants alike. Then, the migrants are smuggled to the village of Miratovac in Serbia, where Serbian criminal groups take over. In response, Serbia is erecting a fence along its border with North Macedonia, to stem the flow.²⁶

In southern Serbia, many asylum seekers and migrants congregate in camps around Preševo, Bujanovac and Vranje. As of 9 November 2020, there were an estimated 900 asylum seekers and migrants in these three camps. From there, they try to head north.

SMUGGLING METHODS

The smuggling of migrants via North Macedonia is facilitated by criminal networks that have connections in the countries of origin and destination, as well as in neighbouring countries, thus ensuring continuity along the entire route. They offer a full range of services including accommodation, the provision of fraudulent documents, and information on contact points in countries farther along the route.

These criminal networks have a vertical structure with clearly defined roles for each member, such as host, spotter, transporter, facilitator and cashier. For example, the responsibility of the host is to take care of the migrants once they enter North Macedonia, while the spotter's job is to identify police patrols, checkpoints or ambushes along the route and inform the remaining members of the network.²⁷

To communicate in a way that avoids detection, smugglers use social-media messenger applications like WhatsApp, Viber or Telegram. They also rely on social media and use online platforms to arrange the facilitation of services.²⁸ In addition, they track the migrants using GPS devices. Communication tools are often changed or combined; for example, it is not unusual for smugglers to initiate communication via mobile phones or over the internet and continue on work phones or radios.

The fee charged for smuggling migrants from Greece through North Macedonia and into Serbia is between €300 and €1 500, depending on the transport method, the quality of accommodation and other services. It is worth noting that this is around the same price charged in 2015 and until early 2016. Fees apparently jumped to as high as €3 500 in the period immediately after the Balkan route was closed.²⁹ Fees are usually paid either in advance in cash in one of the big Greek cities, to the driver or to the guide, or using money transfer services like the *hawala* system.³⁰

There are indications that smugglers sometimes cooperate with police officers, who give them information about police patrols and checkpoints. For example, in 2016, as a result of a sting operation codenamed Coyote, 19 people were arrested and five police officers were investigated for migrant smuggling, selling drugs, abusing their position and false identification in the regions of Veles, Negotino, Gevgelija and Skopje. The police officers were charged with providing information, logistics and even police uniforms to a criminal group.³¹

In another case, in 2018–2019, the North Macedonian police apprehended 17 members of an organized-crime group, including a senior police officer from Stip who had been involved in smuggling migrants. Members of the criminal group had used an accomplice in the police to receive tip-offs about anti-smuggling operations and how to cover up their criminal activities.³²

But police have also had success in breaking up smuggling rings. In October 2019, police officers in North Macedonia, as part of operation Reflex, prevented the entry of 252 migrants along the borders with Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia.³³ The criminal network was organized by a father and son from Bogdanci who, between December 2019 and October 2020, smuggled around 100 migrants into the country for a significant profit. The remaining group members were transporters who moved the migrants across North Macedonia. Most of the migrants were originally from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Iran, Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries.³⁴

While the number of people on the move diminished significantly between March and May 2020 as a result of pandemic-related restrictions,³⁵ the numbers started increasing again in June and have been rising ever since: during the first nine days of October, North Macedonian police apprehended 878 migrants close to the border with Greece. This increase is not only creating a bigger market for smuggling migrants, but it is also exacerbating a humanitarian crisis in southern Serbia where camps housing asylum seekers and migrants are growing.

3. Building bridges among police and customs in south-eastern Europe.

The Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), founded in 1999, is the only international organization in south-eastern Europe that fosters synergy between the police and customs agencies, working together to fight transnational serious and organized crime in the region. It brings tangible results: for example, in

March 2020, Bulgarian police and Turkish customs officials seized 72 kilograms of heroin and arrested four people, two of whom were wanted by INTERPOL. The operation was facilitated by information exchanged between police and customs officials via SELEC's headquarters in Bucharest.



Snejana Maleeva, SELEC's Director General since 2017 and Director for Legal and Internal Affairs from 2011 to 2017, discusses the centre's work in the region, including training, joint operations and analysis, and cooperation among prosecutors.

In a nutshell, what does SELEC do?

SELEC is a key player in the fight against transnational serious and organized crime in south-eastern Europe. It can harness the resources of 11 member states and 25 partner countries and organizations.

Albania	Montenegro
Bosnia and Herzegovina	North Macedonia
Bulgaria	Romania
Greece	Serbia
Hungary	Turkey
Moldova	

FIGURE 3 SELEC member states.

SELEC is focused on operational matters, offering a platform for real-time exchange of information and assistance requests. It also offers a secure connection through the new Operational Centre Unit, to support and coordinate joint investigations and regional operations, and develop analytical reports. SELEC contributes to the capacity-building of its member states and partners through organizing expert missions, task force meetings, regional conferences, workshops, study visits and trainings, and by facilitating networking and other means of cooperation.

Can you point out some of SELEC's concrete achievements?

SELEC is focused on operational matters. Its main achievements over the past 21 years are reflected in the

significant results made in fighting organized crime in south-eastern Europe. There is an ever-growing number of joint investigations carried out by SELEC member states under the organization's auspices, as well as an increasing number of information exchanges that contributed to the success of those investigations.

To give you an idea of the growing role of SELEC, in 2001 there were 315 exchanges of information and requests for assistance made through the organization; in 2019, 30 222 such exchanges were registered. From four joint investigations registered in our first year, we now average more than 100 joint investigations per year that are carried out with SELEC's coordination and support.

To enhance the support we provide to the member states, we opened a state-of-the-art, highly-secured Operational Centre Unit. The Unit enables member states to exchange data, including audio and video communications, quickly and securely 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

To increase our effectiveness and efficiency, we have also implemented a customized SELEC intelligence-reporting application tool. The tool's operational platform includes a geographic information system, real-time situation awareness, incident management, reporting and data analytics. It ensures the rapid collection, analysis and exchange of strategic and operational information among case officers, national focal points, liaison officers and the organization.



SELEC's Operational Centre Unit in action. Photo: Supplied

We also lead training exercises and courses through our training centre at SELEC headquarters. This year, we introduced virtual-reality training that tests trainees' attention and perceptiveness. The simulation takes the trainees to a virtual border-crossing point where they have to inspect a vehicle suspected of smuggling cigarettes. Other interactive multimedia tools enable users to inspect vehicles and ships for smuggled goods and address different types of crimes that police and customs officials encounter regularly.

Do you also work with prosecutors?

Yes, complementing the work of police and customs, the Southeast European Prosecutors' Advisory Group (SEEPAG) has been operating under SELEC's auspices since 2003. SEEPAG's mission is to facilitate judicial cooperation in significant transnational criminal investigations and cases. In creating a network of experienced prosecutors, SEEPAG seeks to fill a critical gap in the region by promoting the timely exchange of information and evidence, whether through the proper execution of mutual legal assistance requests or more informal channels of communication. SEEPAG's function is also to provide guidance, assistance and feedback to lawmakers in the region on justice and law-enforcement issues. Each of the

member states appointed an experienced prosecutor or judge with expertise in international cooperation to be its SEEPAG representative.³⁶

There is considerable concern about the smuggling of firearms in south-eastern Europe. How does SELEC address that?

SELEC implemented a special project on strengthening the fight against firearms trafficking in south-eastern Europe from 2016 to 2019 to address these concerns. The project objective was to strengthen the capacities of law-enforcement authorities in south-eastern Europe to combat firearms trafficking. It was designed to improve cooperation between EU and SELEC member states in collecting and analyzing data regarding firearms, consolidating investigative capacity, carrying out joint investigations, and enhancing police cooperation and exchange of best practices between law-enforcement agencies dealing with the problem in the region.

Project activities and outputs included the establishment of a regional network of firearms experts, the creation of 15 mobile investigative units, training on spotting and dealing with firearms smuggling on the darknet and the publication of a best-practice handbook.

In the past three years, SELEC has published several reports on organized crime in south-eastern Europe. Can you tell us about your analytical work?

SELEC produces operational, analytical products on specific transnational cases and evaluation reports of the regional operations carried out, as well as strategic annual reports on the most important types of crime in south-eastern Europe, like drugs, trafficking in human beings, illegal migration, tobacco-products smuggling, terrorism, container security and vehicle crimes. The full reports are for law enforcement and judicial use only, although there are public versions available on our website.³⁷

Our most comprehensive strategic report is the Organized Crime Threat Assessment for Southeast Europe (OCTA SEE), which is produced in conjunction with our member states and covers a five-year period. The most recent one was issued in 2018. The OCTA SEE makes a qualitative assessment of organized crime in the region, illustrates current trends and highlights vulnerabilities and

opportunities revealed by various types of crimes. The report is designed not only to assess the situation, but also to cast light on areas where the member states could take remedial actions.

Which security challenges do you currently assess as most acute for the region?

Based on the analysis and findings from the 2018 OCTA SEE prepared by SELEC, we are currently focusing mainly on five priorities in the region: cybercrime, terrorism, drug trafficking, trade and industry crime, and trafficking in human beings and migrant smuggling. These are transnational challenges that cannot be addressed effectively by each country individually, but must be tackled together by all relevant actors.

I would like to underline that I am proud of the role that SELEC plays in strengthening cooperation among police and customs officers in south-eastern Europe. Together, we are making the region a safer place.

4. The promises we keep: monitoring anti-corruption pledges in the Western Balkans.

On 10 November 2020, leaders of the Western Balkan countries took part in the Sofia summit co-chaired by Bulgaria and North Macedonia within the Berlin Process. This process was introduced in 2014 with the aim of facilitating regional cooperation among the countries of the Western Balkans and boosting European integration and security. Every year, political leaders from the Western Balkans and the EU gather to work towards achieving greater security, stability, integration and prosperity in the region. Fighting corruption has been a priority of the Berlin Process. But are states living up to their commitments?

There was a comprehensive discussion of corruption and its impact on the region at the 2017 Trieste summit. The meeting concluded with a joint declaration by the Italian chair and the governments of the Western Balkan countries on their common commitment to fight corruption. In it, they acknowledged that 'corruption is a challenge for all our societies' and said that the 'time is ripe for an enhanced effort to meet the vast demand for integrity, respect for and predictability of the rule of law in our Countries'.³⁸

At the July 2018 summit in London, the Western Balkan countries (minus Serbia, which signed in 2019) went one step further by making anti-corruption pledges. The chair welcomed these promises, noting that 'corruption hinders economic growth and investment, weakens democratic institutions, destroys public confidence and undermines the rule of law'.³⁹ The pledges covered topics like public-private partnerships, public procurement, tax, whistleblowing, beneficial ownership, asset recovery and enforcement capabilities. These commitments were not new but reinforced those already made in the context of other initiatives, such as the 2016 London Anti-Corruption Summit, the first Global Declaration against Corruption, recommendations of the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption, and European Commission recommendations made as part of the EU accession process.

Anti-corruption was again on the agenda at the 2019 summit in Poznań. Although the Western Balkan countries did not formally establish an independent review mechanism, they did reach an understanding on the need for measurable progress in implementing their anti-corruption commitments. A side event highlighted civil society's role in helping to monitor implementation.

An independent regional assessment on corruption in the Western Balkans was undertaken as a follow-up to the Poznań summit, with the support of the government of the UK. National experts working in partnership with the

GI-TOC analyzed corruption and its impact on governance in each Western Balkans Six country. They conducted interviews with stakeholders, including representatives of the criminal-justice sector, civil society, academia and the media. In the process, the authors discovered that there was little knowledge of the anti-corruption pledges, either among the general public or within government agencies responsible for their implementation. It was also not evident which government bodies were responsible or accountable for monitoring implementation.

A recently published executive summary of findings on corruption and anti-corruption pledges in the Western Balkans by the GI-TOC shows that corruption 'is both a cause and consequence of a criminal culture that permeates the region, and the way that corruption is linked to politics suggests a degree of organized corruption, and even elements of state capture, in a number of countries in the region'.⁴⁰

An assessment of the extent to which governments of the Western Balkans are living up to their anti-corruption commitments highlights progress in some countries and in some areas, while there has been no progress or even backsliding in others. A forthcoming GI-TOC report will review implementation of the commitments in all six countries. Regular tracking of the implementation of the anti-corruption pledges should help close the gap between promises made and promises kept.



Club MASA's Almira Musić, project coordinator, and Almir Denjo, president, discuss the organization's role in promoting resilience and reconciliation in the community, particularly among the youth and people on the margins of society. *Photo: Supplied*

5. Strengthening resilience and reconciliation in Mostar.

Why was Club MASA founded? What is your mission and what do you do?

Club MASA (Mutual Action for Strengthening Alternative) existed for some time as an informal group, but we officially founded it in Mostar in 2016 to provide support and recreation for youth and people with disabilities. Young people were demotivated; they lacked opportunities and were exposed to extremism, violent football fan clubs, drug use and delinquency. We saw the need for an organization that could provide vulnerable youth in this region with viable alternatives.

Over the past four years, we have focused on promoting inter-ethnic cooperation between Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats in cities like Nevesinje and Bileća in Republika Srpska. We have organized joint initiatives to get people to meet and work together to create a more secure environment and to adapt society to the needs of youth and people with disabilities.

What are the main challenges that you face working with youth in the Mostar region?

As a civil-society organization (CSO) dealing with vulnerability in a country that has a high rate of youth unemployment, there is a lot for us to do. Unfortunately, working for a CSO in such a challenging region is a risky career move because of the lack of predictable and sustainable income and problems with social insurance. In Bosnia and Herzegovina there are a lot of CSOs, but not enough initiatives that engage directly with young people to empower them to reject organized crime, drugs and violence in their own lives and in society.

Young people are regarded (not least by themselves) as passive actors or even victims, rather than as potential change agents who can strengthen resilience in their networks and communities. We need to educate and encourage young people to engage in activism, to include them in our activities and to support them and their ideas in order to reach other young people. Since our educational system is poor and divided, informal education needs to step up and fill the gap.



FIGURE 4 Mostar is situated along key trafficking routes.

You conducted a project to promote intercultural dialogue and inclusion through sports that involved war veterans of different ethnicities as well as former prisoners. How were you able to bring these people together and what was the result?

More than twenty years after the war, Mostar is still a divided city, with a Croat part in the west and a Bosniak part in the east. There are two political parties representing the two main ethnic groups, two hospitals, two fire brigades, two utility and electricity companies and two post offices. There are even ethnically separate educational, cultural and sports activities.

We need projects that promote inter-ethnic understanding and cooperation because the younger generation is being raised on the old narratives and divisions of the past. They are being fed their parents' stories about the war

and history, which fuel tensions against each other. To overcome this, we organize workshops that bring together veterans, youth and former prisoners to discuss what happened here in the 1990s and about what should change in our society to make it better for everyone.

Rather than having people speak about their own experiences, we get the participants to role play, to let them see how it feels to walk in someone else's shoes. This helps to break down stereotypes and prejudice and build empathy. In a small community like Mostar, prejudice and stereotypes are all too present: even if you want to change, people will always remind you of your mistakes or judge you in a certain way. We believe everyone deserves a second chance, whether former prisoners trying to change their lifestyle, people with a history of drug use or those on the margins of society.

How would you describe organized-crime trends in Mostar and Herzegovina-Neretva Canton?

The legacy of war and political turmoil between ethnically based parties in Mostar – which has prevented the conduct of local elections for the past 12 years – has created a fertile environment for organized crime. There are several criminal groups active in drug trafficking in and around the city, some of which are involved in the distribution of cannabis and heroin. In the past few years, other groups have become engaged in cocaine trafficking. Most drugs enter the country via Bosnia and Herzegovina's borders with Serbia and Montenegro, around Bileća, Trebinje and Foča.

In addition to drugs, there is trafficking in human beings and smuggling of migrants, cigarettes and alcohol. The fact that large quantities of illicit weapons and explosives have been seized by the police in Mostar in recent raids suggests that inhabitants of the city possess significant amounts of illicit weapons. Most criminal groups around here are also engaged in loan-sharking and prostitution, bringing in women from Ukraine, Moldova and Serbia.

The situation is exacerbated by corruption in the judiciary and lenient sentences for crimes. There have also been some connections between criminals and local politicians that resulted in kidnappings and murders. This ecosystem has turned Mostar into a magnet for criminals from the region, primarily from Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. But it is not a safe haven: some of them have been killed here.

Is there also a drug-use problem in Mostar?

Previously, Mostar was mainly a transit point for drugs trafficked to Western Europe, but in the past 10 years the use of all types of drugs has increased. Demand is highest during the summer when tens of thousands of tourists stay in the city. Cannabis is the most-used drug in Mostar.

Mostar as a hotspot for organized crime

Mostar is a city in southern Bosnia and Herzegovina that is the administrative centre of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton. It is a popular tourist destination, not least because of its beautiful bridge over the Neretva river. It is situated along a key smuggling route about two hours' drive from the cities of Sarajevo, Herceg Novi (Montenegro) and Dubrovnik and Split (Croatia).

The city suffered during the Balkan wars of the 1990s: its famous bridge was destroyed, war crimes were committed and the city was divided along ethnic lines between the Bosniak and Croat communities. Politically, the city is still divided, with one half ruled by the main Bosniak party and the other half by the main Croatian one.

Mostar is the only European city that has not held local elections for 12 years. This has slowed down economic recovery and hampered governance. Notably, Mostar has not had a police commissioner for two years and there is a shortage of police officers. This has contributed to the city becoming a refuge for criminals from the region who are hiding from other criminal groups or fleeing the law.

Some take advantage of their dual citizenship (for example with Croatia or Serbia) to evade capture or get a reduced sentence. Others operate with impunity thanks to corruption and weak prosecution. Criminal groups in the city are said to be involved in the trafficking of drugs, weapons and human beings. In addition to being known as a hub for drug trafficking to Sarajevo and into the EU via Croatia, Mostar is also seen as a centre for drug consumption. A number of criminals have been murdered in the city, including a few with links to the Kotor clans in Montenegro. The killers are seldom found.

In addition, the city has a hooliganism problem. In the past 15 years, there have been multiple attacks on the police, particularly by violent supporters of the local Zrinjski football club. Members of hooligan groups are also allegedly involved in trafficking in drugs and weapons and have links to right-wing organizations in other parts of Europe, including in Ukraine.⁴¹



View of Mostar Bridge over the Neretva River. As well as a popular tourist destination, Mostar has become a hotspot for organized crime. © Denis Zuberi/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

What are the main challenges to encouraging inter-ethnic cooperation among young people, particularly to prevent crime?

The biggest obstacle to promoting inter-ethnic cooperation is extreme nationalism, especially in rural areas. Nationalists do not allow inter-ethnic contacts or reconciliation activities. Some of them are linked to crime, so it is not in their interest to empower young people to address negative phenomena in society. This makes it harder to improve inter-ethnic cooperation and to fight crime.

In this region, many of the key institutions responsible for criminal justice are led by the same political party. What impact does this have on fighting corruption and organized crime?

The main obstacle to the functioning of the prosecutor's office and the judiciary in the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, and thus in Mostar, is the fact that the prosecutor and the president of the court are from the same party, as are the interior minister and police commissioner. The cantonal court ruled that the commissioner was elected illegally, but the decision has not been implemented.

Corruption cases related to politicians or tycoons close to these leaders remain unresolved. Citizens rarely file lawsuits against powerful people because they know that these elites will not be prosecuted. Moreover, the police do not have a plan to fight organized crime or violence: as a result, there is a growing number of incidents and more young people are getting involved in criminal activities.

For example, in 2019, about 5 000 workers from the Aluminij factory, an economic giant in this region, lost their jobs. Other workers then went on strike to highlight allegations of corruption and mismanagement at the factory. The canton prosecutor's office initiated a case, but nothing has happened since then. A similar thing happened with the Soko factory, which used to be a big producer of parts for the aviation industry. The leader of one of the nationalist parties was the director of the factory when it went bankrupt after privatization. However, the material evidence and all the prosecution documents disappeared

on the way from the prosecution office to the court, and the charges were dropped.

The scandal surrounding Mostar's wastewater treatment plant is the most recent example. This wastewater plant should have been operating at full capacity more than three years ago, but it is still in the testing phase. The project has already cost over 180 million BAM (€92 million), with one collector yet to be completed.

This gives you an idea why so many young people leave this city, and why many of those who stay join criminal or hooligan groups. It is important to talk as much as possible about these problems and appeal to the authorities to initiate proceedings and prosecute those responsible. Every project, including those supported by the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund, that can help reduce vulnerability and get young people talking about and working towards a better future for themselves and their community is welcome.

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