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RISK BULLETIN

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   While Albania and Kosovo have taken steps since 2019 to abolish gambling in their countries because of its links to organized crime, the number of electronic casinos and betting shops in North Macedonia has doubled. Gambling is potentially lucrative, but it brings with it risks associated with addiction, money laundering and the potential harm to historic tourist destinations such as Ohrid.

4. **Islands of resilience: civil society organizations in the Western Balkans.**
   These are hard times for civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans. In many places, CSOs dealing with organized crime and corruption are under pressure from governments and threatened by people involved in corrupt or illicit activity. Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis has made it difficult for CSOs to have face-to-face contact with many of the individuals and groups that they normally work with, like women, youth, former prisoners or addicts. We explore some of the challenges and opportunities for strengthening resilience to organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans, based on a cross-regional workshop held in mid-December 2020 and the findings of a forthcoming Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) report.

5. **Neostart, a place for a second chance.**
   There are about 12 000 prisoners in Serbia; around 8 000 of them are released from prison each year. Yet the rate of recidivism is between 60% and 75%, meaning that many will end up back in prison. Neostart, a centre for crime prevention and post-penal assistance, is a non-governmental organization in Serbia that is reducing recidivism by helping former offenders reintegrate into society. We talk to its director, Darjan Vulevic, about their work and challenges and successes.

GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Happy New Year! Welcome to the fourth issue of the Risk Bulletin produced by the Civil Society Observatory to Counter Organized Crime in South Eastern Europe. As in every issue, we look at a hotspot of organized crime. This month we focus on Vranje, a city in southern Serbia that has recently emerged as a hub for drug trafficking and the smuggling of migrants.

Over the past few years, Sweden has witnessed an increase in gang-related violence. We examine Sweden's Balkan connection, namely the smuggling of guns and grenades.

Albania and Kosovo have significantly reduced gambling in their countries in the past two years, not least due to concerns about its links to organized crime and money laundering. But North Macedonia is taking a different approach, as witnessed by a doubling in the number of gambling establishments since 2019. We look at the potential risks associated with this policy.

In addition to highlighting risks, resilience is a regular feature of our Risk Bulletin, particularly the work being done by civil society organizations in the Western Balkans to counteract corruption and organized crime. From 14 to 16 December 2020, the GI-TOC brought together more than 50 representatives of non-governmental organizations from the six Western Balkan countries to discuss the challenges and opportunities for strengthening resilience to organized crime and corruption in the region. In this issue, we report on some of the highlights of this discussion. More findings will be published in a report titled 'Stronger together: Bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans', which will be published in early February 2021.

In our monthly profile of civil society organizations dealing with crime-related issues, we talk with the director of Neostart, Darjan Vulevic, about the work of his non-governmental organization in helping former prisoners reintegrate into Serbian society.

We are always interested in ideas for contributions to the Risk Bulletin and offer authors an honorarium. If you have a proposal for a story or would like to provide feedback, please contact Kristina.Amerhauser@globalinitiative.net.

1. Vranje, an emerging criminal hotspot.

Since 2019, one place keeps popping up in media and police reports about trafficking drugs and smuggling migrants: Vranje, which has all the characteristics of an organized-crime hotspot. This city, with a population of around 80 000 people according to official data,[1] is located in southern Serbia close to Kosovo and Bulgaria along the E75 highway, which is a well-known trafficking route from North Macedonia to central Europe through Serbia and Romania.

The city is also economically vulnerable: the average salary is about €390,[2] much lower than the Serbian average of €513.[3] Vranje's at-risk-of-poverty rate of 31% is well above the national rate of 24% in 2018.[4] There are also elements of weak governance: Vranje has been slow to implement an anti-corruption plan[5] and sessions of the town council are closed to the media.[6]

Vranje is only 20 kilometres from the village of Veliki Trnovac, which until recently was such a notorious place for drug trafficking that it was even difficult for police to enter.[7] However, most criminal activity seems to have shifted from Veliki Trnovac to Vranje. The latter is said to be a hub for cannabis and cocaine smuggling along well-established routes from neighbouring North Macedonia and Kosovo. In addition, at least one group from Vranje may have links to the Montenegrin Škaljari clan, a major player in the cocaine trade. Ties also seem to extend to Romania and possibly as far away as Latin America.

Indeed, a high-profile case from 2019 put Vranje on the map. In March 2019, Romanian police discovered a package with 1 kilogram of cocaine that had allegedly fallen out of a van. Following up on this lead, they seized around 1.8 tonnes of cocaine with a purity level of 90%. It was wrapped in balloons in a capsized boat on the Black Sea coast around the Danube Delta.[8] The estimated value of the seized cocaine was €600 million,[9] but it could have had a street value of two to three times that after being cut and mixed with other substances. To put that in perspective, the entire annual budget of the city of Belgrade in 2019 was just over €1 billion.

FIGURE 1 Vranje, in southern Serbia, is an emerging hotspot for organized crime.

Romanian police arrested two people, both truck drivers from Vranje. The investigation showed that the cocaine originated in Brazil, entered Romania by sea via Turkey and was supposed to reach Serbia by road,[10] where it would then be distributed to markets in Western Europe, primarily Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain.[11]

In July 2020, Romanian prosecutors brought charges against 14 people, including Romanians, Spaniards and Ukrainians, as well as a notorious Lebanese drug lord operating out of Brazil. Some of those arrested were divers with expertise in recovering drugs thrown overboard from ships.[12] The intended buyers were allegedly a 'Balkan cartel' from Serbia.[13]

Tellingly, only the two truck drivers from Vranje and none of their Serbian bosses were indicted. Serbian media reported that the two drivers were hired by someone with links to Davor Trajković. Trajković, who is said to be from Vranje but apparently lives in Moscow,[14] has been linked to drug trafficking in the past.[15] There are rumours that he was involved in the theft of a major shipment of cocaine in 2014 in Valencia, Spain, that triggered the split of an organized crime group in Kotor;[16] the resulting bloody feud between the Škaljari and Kavač clans has killed almost 50 people since 2015.[17] Media reported that Trajković had shared the cost of the 2019 shipment with Igor Dedović, a leading figure in the Škaljari clan.[18] Dedović was killed by gunmen in January 2020 at a restaurant in Athens.

Since 2018, police in Vranje have been implicated at least twice in criminal activity. In 2018, a second criminal from Vranje (not linked to the Škaljari clan) was arrested with 47 kilograms of cannabis. The group he belonged to, which included police officers,[19] was active in trafficking cannabis from Kosovo to Subotica in northern Serbia, from where the drugs were smuggled across the border into Hungary.

In July 2019, a police inspector from Vranje was arrested.[20] Police found 21 kilograms of cannabis in his house. The police inspector allegedly tried to arrange for one of the truck drivers involved in the botched cocaine delivery mentioned above to be moved from Romania to Serbia.[21] Prosecutors from Vranje filed an indictment against the police inspector in October 2019.[22] The high court in Vranje extended his detention six times; nevertheless, the appeals court in Niš released him from custody in December 2019.[23]

It is suspected that drug profits are being laundered in Vranje to finance hotels, casinos, companies, restaurants and cafes and to buy the luxury cars that are visible on the city's streets.

In addition to drug trafficking, Vranje has become a hub for migrant smuggling from North Macedonia towards Belgrade and on to Croatia or Hungary. Smuggling of migrants through Vranje appears to be less organized than drug trafficking; much of it is facilitated by either helpful or opportunistic local people transporting migrants from one point to another within Serbia.

The migrants, mostly young men from Syria, Pakistan and Afghanistan, usually seek 'connections for departure' outside Vranje city centre to avoid detection. Transportation is arranged either through in-person meetings or via mobile phones and social networks. Migrants tend to stay in the city (sometimes for as long as a month) until there is a critical mass and then move as a group. This suggests that their movement is organized by smugglers.

Indeed, the most common criminal offence in and around Vranje relates to the transportation of migrants by passenger vehicles. Most cases deal with migrants who have been picked up near the town of Presevo and are heading north. It is said that smugglers are charging around €500–€600 per person to go from North Macedonia to Serbia.[24] The drivers of the vehicles that are caught (usually young Serbian men of Serbian or Albanian ethnicity) often use licence plates from a different car.

The significant increase in migrant smuggling and drug trafficking, as well as the apparent involvement of some law enforcement officials in organized criminal activities, are indications that Vranje is emerging as a hotspot of organized crime.

2. Guns for gangs in Sweden: the Balkan connection.

In Sweden, the notorious Yugoslav mafia that dominated the organized crime landscape in Stockholm in the 1990s – the so-called Juggemaffian – is long gone, but criminal connections to the former Yugoslavia are alive and well.

In the past few years, organized crime has increased dramatically in Sweden, with some of the weapons and drugs coming in from the Western Balkans. 'What we've seen in the past few years are organized crime groups mostly based in Serbia that set up proxies in Sweden to receive shipments of drugs and weapons,' said Detective Superintendent Gunnar Appelgren,[25] one of Sweden's most experienced organized crime investigators.[26]

These groups are not of the same profile as the Juggemaffian. This organized crime group, which operated among the diaspora of refugees who had fled the former Yugoslavia during the Balkan Wars ('jugge' is slang for Yugoslav), made most of their money from protection rackets and extortion. According to a former hitman, Janne Raninen,[27] who murdered Swedish-Serbian mobster Dragan Joksović in 1998 near Stockholm,[28] the Juggemaffian's clout was based more on a brash image of 'shiny suits and bulging muscles' rather than on violence. In retrospect, 'they looked like amateurs compared to the gangs we have now'.[29]

However, criminal groups from the Western Balkans are not among the most dominant in Sweden today. The main actors are long-established motorcycle gangs and family-based organizations sometimes referred to as criminal clans.[30] There are also more fluid groups that are mostly in charge of the sale of narcotics in poorer neighbourhoods.[31]

Some groups are named after the neighbourhoods where they operate, while others take on more cinematic monikers such as Shottaz, a group of young men who belong mainly to the Swedish-Somali community in northwestern Stockholm, or the Network, a notorious group of loan sharks that has exploited its own community of Orthodox-Christian immigrants from the Middle East for decades.[32] Many of these groups share the same arms dealers who provide weapons from the Western Balkans, including Kalashnikov assault rifles, Serb-manufactured Zastava pistols and hand grenades.

A Swedish policeman investigates a crime scene.

In 2015, the National Police presented a graphic of shootings with confirmed or suspected ties to 'criminal environments' showing that murders had nearly doubled between 2014 and 2015.[33] After a further surge, the number of murder victims across the country has surpassed around 40 each year,[34] with most related to organized crime.

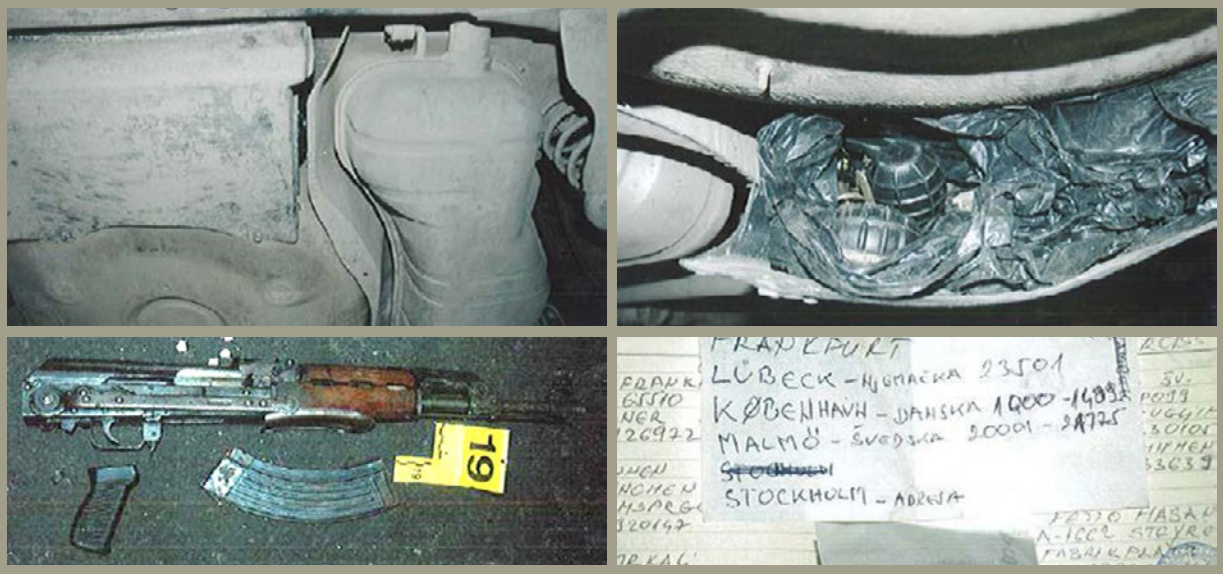
In 2018, the government reformed the law, lengthening prison sentences for aggravated weapons crimes.[35] The updated legislation allowed police to intensify surveillance of key actors and to conduct more raids, which increased the number of seized weapons. However, gangs have delegated the task of transporting and storing guns, rifles and hand grenades to teenagers who act as errand boys. In a recent report by public service radio, police chiefs across the country confirmed the trend of gangs using younger members who, if caught, face shorter prison sentences due to their age.[36]

The decreasing age of errand boys is seen as a legislative failure, which critics had warned the government about before the reform. Furthermore, the increase in successful weapon raids has not led to a reduction in violent crime: police statistics for 2020 show a marginal increase in shooting deaths over the previous year. In addition, 117 people suffered non-fatal gunshot wounds in 2020, compared to 120 in 2019.[37]

Modified starter pistols have become more common in criminal circles in Sweden in recent years, but most weapons used in shootings still hail from the former Yugoslavia, according to police analysts.[38] At Karolinska Hospital north of Stockholm, an intensive-care doctor who did not want to be named pointed out that surgeons have grown accustomed to operating on shooting victims. There is a greater chance of survival, the doctor pointed out, if the shots have been fired from a lower-calibre weapon, such as a Zastava pistol. These weapons remain popular: a 2020 police report found that one third of illegal handguns in Stockholm county were Zastavas.[39]

Stopping illegal arms smuggling has been a priority for almost a decade. In 2012, the government gave Swedish customs the task of intercepting weapons. Around the same time, all key public agencies, including customs and the police's financial crime unit, created a council to work together holistically and tackle organized crime from all sides.

International cooperation has also evolved. In 2018, the Swedish police joined forces with their Serbian counterparts to combat the influx of weapons. Gothenburg police chief Erik Nord told Swedish television that, during a meeting in Belgrade, the Serbian police officers 'raised their eyebrows' in incredulity when he described the number and nature of gang murders in Sweden.[40] In 2019, Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde and her colleague, Interior Minister Mikael Damberg, visited Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina to learn about best practices in combatting transnational crime and discuss ways forward. 'We have to do more to cut off the flow of narcotics and illegal weapons to our country,' Damberg said in a press release.[41] 'We know that our international cooperative efforts have led to the police being able to seize more [narcotics and



Findings from a Swedish police intelligence report on the Operation Rekyl investigation.

illegal weapons] from serious criminals in Sweden. By going further with this kind of cooperation, society can attack organized crime in a better and more effective way.'

In 2014, Operation Rekyl (Operation Recoil) became one of the first large-scale international investigations. It was initiated after the discovery of five automatic weapons and 59 hand grenades in a car travelling from Slovenia to Sweden.[42] Appelgren led a team of Swedish investigators in cooperation with Slovenian, Bosnian and Serbian colleagues to bring down a weapon-smuggling network.

After six months of surveillance, charges were brought against a Bosnian couple and several of their associates, including Swedish nationals. The ringleader was found guilty by a Swedish court and sentenced to five years in prison for attempted aggravated smuggling. However, the charges of aggravated weapons crime did not stick, despite his associates having been caught with Kalashnikovs and hand grenades – some of them rusty, testifying to the long shadow of the Balkan wars.

The weapons arsenal left behind in the Balkans appears to be unlimited, despite attempts to collect surplus weapons. The United Nations, for example, has assisted the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina with several amnesty schemes. 'People who handed in weapons were given lottery tickets with very good prizes, such as fridges,' said Christine McNab, the UN Resident Coordinator in Sarajevo between 2002 and 2006.[43] 'But we noted that many of the weapons were quite old and we always had a sneaky feeling that these weapons were "grandad's second-world-war rifle", not the Kalashnikovs that people had hidden under barn floors.'

As long as demand remains high in countries such as Sweden, that hidden stock of weapons risks ending up in the hands of smugglers. According to Appelgren, the only way forward is to intensify cross-border cooperation even further, as today's structures are 'insidious'.[44]

After Operation Rekyl – which one newspaper called a law-enforcement fiasco – the Swedish justice minister at the time, Morgan Johansson, promised and later delivered on legal reform meant to not only increase the likelihood that such criminals would be brought to justice, but that they would also be found guilty of weapon crimes. After the Swedish investigation's patchy success, Bosnian prosecutors stepped in, successfully charging several people connected to the scheme, thanks in part to evidence obtained at several weapon-storage facilities located by the Bosnian police in Republika Srpska, in northern Bosnia.

Prosecutor Goran Glamocanin pointed out that while most of the weapons in this case had been smuggled to the harbour city of Gothenburg on Sweden's west coast, the investigation had spanned most of the country. 'Because of the good possibilities of making money quickly, criminal groups have collected illegal weapons and put in place measures to transport them to Sweden,' Glamocanin told the press.[45] 'The number of cases we are trying does speak to Sweden still being an important market for smugglers.'

Weapons originating in the Balkans continue to have an impact far beyond the region, meaning that states have an ongoing shared interest in reducing their vulnerability to this threat.

3. Taking a gamble in North Macedonia.

Gambling is potentially lucrative, but it can bring serious risks, including an opening for organized crime. In January 2019, the Albanian government took the decisive step of banning all electronic casinos and sports-betting shops. Explaining this decision, Prime Minister Edi Rama cited the social and economic problems that gambling was creating for many Albanian families. He noted that in Albania, 'in large part the gambling activities are financed by organized crime. There is money that is being laundered through gambling and people in organized crime are involved indirectly or directly in this sector.'[46] As a result, 4 364 establishments that hosted electronic casinos or sports betting were closed down. However, the National Lottery and a big casino in central Tirana are still operating and the possibility remains for new casinos to be built on the premises of five-star hotels. This puts control of gambling in the hands of a few.

In March 2019, the Kosovar government took even more drastic measures: new legislation banned all gambling activities in the country, in part because of the industry's links with organized crime.[47] Establishments that did not comply were forcibly shut down. For example, in September 2020, hundreds of police officers took part in an operation to close an illegal casino in the village of Karachevo, close to the border with Serbia. At least 35 people were arrested on charges of illegal gambling, prostitution and possession of guns and drugs. Some of those arrested were border police officers.[48]

The decision to ban gambling has had economic consequences. It is estimated that 7 280 people lost their jobs in Albania due to the decision, while the state forfeited around €45 million in tax revenue.[49] In Kosovo, about 350 businesses involved in gambling were closed, leaving thousands of people unemployed. In 2018, these businesses had paid almost €16 million in excise tax.[50]

While Albania and Kosovo have taken resolute steps to curb gambling, neighbouring North Macedonia has seen a major increase in gambling since 2019. According to data from the Macedonian Ministry of Finance, 40 licenses have been issued to companies to conduct gambling activities.[51] More than half of these licenses have been issued in 2019 and 2020 (see figure 2), after the gambling restrictions came into effect in Albania and Kosovo. These companies have the right to open electronic casinos or betting shops throughout the country.

FIGURE 2 Number of companies with licences to conduct gambling activities in North Macedonia.

SOURCE: North Macedonia Ministry of Finance

For the past twenty years, casinos and betting shops have been a familiar sight in North Macedonia's capital, Skopje, or Gevgelija, in the south of the country. But since 2019, quiet towns like Ohrid and Struga, close to the border with Albania, have seen a dramatic increase in the number of casinos and betting shops. Indeed, North Macedonia seems to have turned into an oasis for gambling in the region.

In the July 2020 parliamentary election, gambling was not a big issue. Although Prime Minister Zoran Zaev has recognized the negative effects of casinos and betting places in some communities, he has also made it clear that his government will not rush to ban the sector, but rather will monitor it closely and take measures to regulate it.[52]

North Macedonia's gambling boom is good for its economy. Metodi Hadji-Janev, a law professor and expert on the gambling sector at the Military Academy in Skopje, said that in 2020 the number of people directly employed in the gambling sector increased to 7 700; there are around 54 000 other gambling-related jobs in the country, bringing the state budget millions of euros in taxes.[53]

However, there are also hazards associated with gambling, such as addiction, socio-economic vulnerability and crime. In their decisions to restrict gambling, Albania and Kosovo specifically cited concerns about increased poverty, family violence and illegal activity as gamblers struggle to pay for their habit. According to Hadji-Janev, 'once they have exhausted their own resources, gamblers often start spending someone else's money and put their family in danger because they are prone to illegal loans, namely usury'.[54]

The growth in gambling is changing the character of some cities. There are concerns that Ohrid, a protected UNESCO site, risks becoming a magnet for tourists attracted to gambling rather than the historical beauty of the city.[55] Struga, which used to be a quiet town, is now overrun with casinos and sports-betting shops, which often have garish exteriors and bright, flashing lights.

As highlighted in the August 2020 GI-TOC report 'Illicit financial flows in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia', gambling – whether at physical or online casinos – point-of-sale slot machines or sports betting, has long been identified as a money laundering channel in the Western Balkans.[56] According to North Macedonia's former interior minister, Pavle Trajanov, there is 'a possibility that money of criminal origin can be laundered through the casinos and is legalized in the process'.[57] Furthermore, Trajanov noted that prostitution is often linked with the casino business.

In short, North Macedonia is taking a gamble. While two of its neighbours – Albania and Kosovo – have severely restricted gambling, North Macedonia seems to be raising its profile as a place for betting. While there are wins to be made in terms of jobs and tax revenue, there are also potential losses, including changing the country's image – and that of some of its most famous tourist destinations – and attracting organized crime, money laundering and addiction. The stakes are high.

4. Islands of resilience: civil society organizations in the Western Balkans.

These are hard times for civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans. In many countries of the region, CSOs dealing with organized crime and corruption are under pressure from governments and threatened by people involved in corrupt or illicit activity. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis has made it difficult for CSOs to have face-to-face contacts with many of the individuals and groups in society that they normally work with, like women, youth, former prisoners or drug users. To find ways to overcome these obstacles, the GI-TOC convened a cross-regional dialogue from 14 to 16 December 2020 to discuss current challenges and opportunities for strengthening resilience to organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans.[58]

The online event brought together more than 50 civil society representatives from community-based NGOs, think tanks, media and academia to discuss challenges and good practices in their work. The participants discussed common challenges and ways to strengthen networks and received training on advocacy and security. Civil society representatives from different parts of the world who are engaged in similar work also shared their experiences on topics ranging from gender issues and reporting on corruption to engagement with governments.

The cross-regional dialogue was organized together with the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund and is part of a project funded by the German foreign office to map the work of CSOs in the Western Balkans dealing with organized crime and corruption and to help strengthen their resilience. The meeting was preceded by national workshops with CSOs in each of the six countries of the Western Balkans.

As part of this project, in 2020 the Resilience Fund supported 13 CSOs from across the Western Balkans. These organizations are engaged in a wide variety of activities, including working with youth, addressing drug issues, fostering post-prison reintegration, fighting corruption, dealing with environmental issues and combatting violence against women.

A special effort was made to select organizations from smaller towns that are vulnerable to organized crime and that may not receive as much attention or funding from donors as CSOs in major cities. Indeed, the GI-TOC particularly focused on supporting CSOs from places identified in its report, 'Hotspots of Organized Crime in the Western Balkans', from May 2019.[59] These hotspots are marked in red (see figure 3), while locations of the CSOs supported by the Resilience Fund are marked in green.

The GI-TOC analyzes the work of CSOs in the Western Balkans dealing with organized crime and corruption in an upcoming report, 'Stronger together: Bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans', which will be published in early February 2021. The report describes some of the challenges faced by CSOs in the region and looks at the different approaches that they use to counter organized crime and corruption in their communities. It also examines the crime-related issues that are of particular interest to them, like extortion and loan sharking, environmental crime, corruption, youth gangs and hooliganism, money laundering and labour exploitation, including sex work. The report also identifies several good practices and entry points commonly used by CSOs in the Western Balkans to engage with their constituencies and to raise awareness of organized crime and corruption.

In the report and at the cross-regional dialogue, practitioners discussed how to strengthen resilience. They stressed that organized crime and corruption need to be made tangible for the community, to demystify the topics and explain their impact in an easy and understandable manner. It was noted that many people either do not recognize the symptoms of organized crime and corruption or feel helpless to deal with them. Civil society therefore has a key role to play in raising awareness, explaining the harm and promoting integrity, transparency, accountability and good governance.

Participants stressed that networking among CSOs is important both nationally and regionally, as well as between Western Balkan CSOs and their counterparts in other regions. This is where the GI-TOC can help. More needs to be done to strengthen partnerships between non-governmental organizations, investigative journalists and academia working on issues of organized crime and corruption.

FIGURE 3 Hotspots of organized crime and places of resilience across the Western Balkans.

A dilemma for CSOs in many countries of the Western Balkans is how to interact with governments. In countries where the opposition is weak or has boycotted parliament, or in situations where the political elite is perceived as corrupt or even has ties to criminal elements, CSOs take on the role of the opposition. This creates the impression that they are anti-governmental rather than non-governmental organizations. On the other hand, governments label such groups – especially if they receive support from foreign donors – as 'traitors' or 'foreign agents' and go after them in the press, through 'law enforcement' or even intimidation. A primary challenge is therefore to keep channels of dialogue open between the government and civil society and to strengthen cooperation against what should be a common enemy: organized crime. International actors can sometimes help facilitate such dialogue.

Another observation that came through in the cross-regional dialogue and the report is that international donors need to be more sensitive to the challenges of CSOs, particularly smaller ones outside of big cities. For example, they should be more transparent in their calls for applications, better understand local conditions (including finite capacity for project administration and limited language skills, as well as low absorption capacity) and ensure that support is need-driven. Donors should provide the opportunity for longer-term grants to enhance sustainability and strengthen resilience. They should also involve civil society in the entire project cycle from design through implementation. Finally, donors should stand behind CSOs during the implementation of projects related to fighting organized crime and corruption, to demonstrate solidarity and increase the risk and political cost to those who pressure these organizations.

In countries where governments are reluctant or unable to take a top-down approach to tackling organized crime, the work of civil society becomes even more important. A methodology based on strengthening community resilience can empower change agents and boost social antibodies against organized crime and corruption.

But in an ecosystem of criminal governance, there are limits to what CSOs can do on their own. Looking forward, the challenge is to move from islands of resilience to networks of support. This is a process that the GI-TOC and the Resilience Fund are committed to supporting across the Western Balkans.

5. Neostart, a place for a second chance.

There are currently about 12 000 prisoners in Serbia; around 8 000 of them are released from prison each year. However, with a recidivism rate of 60 to 75 per cent, many of them will end up back in prison. Neostart, a centre for crime prevention and post-penal assistance, is a non-governmental organization in Serbia that is helping reduce vulnerability to recidivism by supporting former offenders in their efforts to reintegrate into society. We talk to its director, Darjan Vulevic, about their work and challenges and successes.

Who are the people involved in Neostart and what motivates you?

A variety of individuals are engaged in Neostart: teachers, psychologists, lawyers, college students and social scientists, as well as former prisoners. For some members of Neostart, this line of work is a professional calling. Others are involved because they have survived a similar fate, either living on the street or having served time in prison. And some take part because they want to help those who are not often given a second chance.

What is life like for someone just released from prison?

It is tough. The lack of personal documents is a significant problem: they usually expire while the person is in prison. In 2016, half of all people released from prison in Serbia did not have valid personal documents. The situation has improved somewhat since then, but registration is still often tricky. This creates a snowball effect where, without documents, it is hard for people getting out of prison to apply for jobs or even receive some public services, like healthcare.

How difficult is it for former prisoners to find work?

A person released from prison after a lengthy sentence does not have the same opportunities to find a job as other people. One reason is that many employers require a certificate that says you don't have a criminal record. Another reason is psychological: it is hard to adjust after being in confinement for 22 hours a day. The transition to freedom can be difficult. Offenders need preparation for life outside while still serving time in prison, as well as support after they re-enter society.

Can you share any success stories?

One of our most satisfying successes was when we helped a former offender open a pizzeria. The pizzeria has since become a success and the owner now assists other former prisoners reintegrate into society. None of our achievements would have been possible without the dedicated work of our volunteers, of whom I am particularly proud.

Do men and women face different challenges after release from prison?

Of the 12 000 people in prison in Serbia, only 200 are women. While many prisoners share similar experiences, every person is unique and we have seen that men and women face different challenges, especially in terms of finding employment. In general, women say that they have no problem finding a job and thus approach us for employment assistance much less often than men. Many of them are mothers who return to their families. In some cases, this provides a support network, but in other cases it presents additional challenges. Therefore, women make more use of our counselling and family programmes.

Often prisons are 'finishing schools' that turn petty criminals into hardened ones. Have you encountered this problem? Do you provide any counselling or conduct other activities with prisoners before or after their release to reduce their risk of moving up the crime ladder?

Sadly, this is a real problem, as you can see from the 70% recidivism rate. The former prisoner's first days after leaving juvenile detention or a correctional facility are the most crucial. If the person does not get comprehensive support in this early period, the chance of recidivism grows. That is why we launched a post-penal programme targeting youth upon their release from prison.

What support does Neostart provide to former prisoners?

We have five programmes and a helpline. These programmes include support for jobseekers, such as training to write a CV and prepare for a job interview. I am proud to say that those clients who came to us at least three times all managed to get a job. Often, previous clients return when they want to change careers or find a better job. Through fieldwork, we provide direct support to former prisoners who are in contact with state institutions and other services. One of our most in-demand programmes is counselling for former prisoners trying to overcome existential problems, especially immediately after their release. Psychologists help ex-prisoners deal with specific concerns. We also have a family programme, which usually begins while the person is still incarcerated. The goal is to create a healthy atmosphere in the family after the prisoner's release. We also provide support to young people, such as those leaving the correctional facility in Kruševac or the juvenile prison in Valjevo. Most recently, we have managed to provide food and accommodation for vulnerable youth to prevent recidivism.

You recently visited the youth correctional facility in Kruševac. What was your impression?

We created a special programme for young people that we are implementing together with organizations in other Serbian cities, such as Restart in Novi Sad or the Youth Council in Kruševac. We presented the programme in the correctional facility and tried to motivate young people to get involved. The discussion about what they can expect in the first few days after their release was very intense because of their anticipation and excitement about their plans and needs.

How do former prisoners find Neostart?

Neostart staff regularly visit prisons, which enables us to talk to prisoners weeks or months before their release. In this way, we get to know each other and can identify problems in advance. Neostart has been engaged in this work for ten years; we are now quite well-known, so it easy for ex-prisoners to find us. We also often receive letters from current or former prisoners or are contacted by a prisoner's family member. Some ex-prisoners call us after their release to arrange a meeting.

What do your clients usually ask you for first?

They usually ask if we can give them money, work or provide some material support. Unfortunately, we are not able to offer a job except on rare occasions. Approaching an organization like Neostart is not for everyone, but for those ex-prisoners who contact us, there is usually a great atmosphere, since people who want to invest in themselves get actively involved in our activities.

What challenges do you face?

Donors do not want to provide direct support for ex-prisoners. This forces us to focus on projects that can help the post-penal system as a whole. Of course, this is worthwhile, but the results often do not have an immediate impact on the lives of those who need help the most.

How has COVID-19 affected your work?

It has made the situation worse, since prisons have become even more closed. The prisoner's contact with family and friends is problematic, which makes it more difficult to plan and carry out post-penal support programmes. We are not able to visit prisons at the moment, which is an obstacle to helping prisoners to prepare for the challenges they will face upon release. During the first lockdown in April, we had cases where people who had just been released from prison had to walk 80 kilometres from Požarevac to Belgrade because public transport was not working.

What measures could improve the post-penal support system in Serbia?

Preparation for release should begin on the day the person starts serving his or her sentence. This would require a larger number of post-penal treatment officers, but could reduce the high rate of recidivism. Alternatives to imprisonment should also be considered. To that end, it is necessary to improve cooperation between the alternative-sanction authorities and other sectors in society such as the non-governmental organizations that provide direct services. More significant financial aid from the state, as well as overall support is needed to ensure a better functioning post-penal system and to reduce vulnerability to recidivism.

In November 2020, Neostart and its partners visited a youth correctional institution and held a talk-show style discussion with about 20 inmates on how to start over after their release.

Neostart is a recent beneficiary of support from the Resilience Fund. What does this project mean to you?

In the past, young clients often disappeared halfway through the support programme. They stopped engaging or responding. They did not want to admit that they had gone back to doing something that they felt was essential

to survival, although they knew it was not in their interest in the long run. The Resilience Fund project gives us the means to reduce the burden on young people who have just been released from a correctional facility. The support provided by the Resilience Fund enables us to help these young people deal with existential problems on their first day of freedom, such as finding the money for food and accommodation. This allows them to concentrate on the future and build a new life.

Darjan Vulevic is one of the founders of Neostart and the organization's new director. He graduated from the Serbian police academy and specializes in working with former prisoners, young offenders and drug users. He is the co-author of a number of publications on post-penal practice.

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