

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE



RISK BULLETIN

SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

1. **A trafficking hub in the middle of nowhere.**

Ever heard of Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje? This inconspicuous town in central Bosnia and Herzegovina is home to a trucking company called Sičaja. In January 2021, the head of the company, a well-known and politically connected businessman, was arrested for possessing 400 kilograms of cannabis. The town has become a drug trafficking hotspot, which shows the significance of logistics hubs in supply chains and links between the licit and illicit economies, as well as connections between business, political and criminal elites.

2. **A crackdown on organized crime in the Western Balkans?**

In a series of arrests in January and February 2021, police in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina took down criminals that media allege have links to the notorious Kavač and Škaljari criminal clans from Montenegro. Moreover, Serbia's president has promised to crack down on organized crime. A few important figures have been arrested, but some elements of the media and the police have also been caught up in recent developments.

3. **The vulnerability of Roma children to commercial sexual exploitation.**

Commercial sexual exploitation of children is a serious concern across the Western

Balkans. Roma children constitute a particularly vulnerable group. Drawing on information from a forthcoming GI-TOC report, we look at why Roma children are so susceptible and how the problem manifests itself, both within the Western Balkans and in other parts of Europe.

4. **The 'hawks' of Kurbin: a school of thieves.**

In recent years, break-ins and thefts at the homes of football players and celebrities have made the headlines in Spain and Italy. Many of the perpetrators are young men who come from the region of Kurbin, in Albania. We look at why this area is producing and exporting so many burglars.

5. **Youth as the engine of the community: an interview with Sebastia Youth Centre.**

The municipality of Kurbin, centred around the town of Lac, has developed a reputation in Albania and abroad for being a finishing school for burglary. This region faces socio-economic hardships, with limited licit career options for youth and few civil society organizations (CSOs). To address this problem, a young lawyer and a local teacher teamed up to establish the Sebastia Youth Center, a CSO that aims to counter stereotypes and give youth a platform for a better life. We talk to the founders and leaders, Emarilda Leti and Elton Laska.



ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Welcome to the sixth issue of the Risk Bulletin produced by the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).

We start off, as always, with a profile of a hotspot of organized crime in the region, this time the little-known town of Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This logistics hub became a focal point with a recent drug bust of 400 kilograms of cannabis.

There have also been several significant operations against organized crime in some countries of the Western Balkans, including Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, leading to a number of arrests, including the well-known leader of a football fan group in Serbia. The situation in Serbia has taken a few twists and turns, including a smear campaign against a group of investigative journalists by some tabloids and politicians, which the GI-TOC has condemned.

The GI-TOC will soon release a groundbreaking report on the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) across the Western Balkans. In this issue, we feature one aspect of the problem, namely the

exploitation of Roma children who are particularly vulnerable to CSEC.

Albanian burglars, known as the 'hawks', have become notorious over the past few years for conducting break-ins and thefts at the homes of the rich and famous, particularly football players and celebrities in Spain and Italy. Many of the 'hawks' are from one small, poor region of Albania named Kurbin. We look at why this area is producing and exporting so many burglars and talk to two directors of a civil society organization that works with youth in the area to make them less vulnerable to a life of crime.

Finally, we feature an overview of recent publications related to organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans and showcase a number of new reports by the GI-TOC. We intend to publish such a list on an occasional basis and would welcome any suggestions.

Please let us know if you would like to contribute a story; we 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. A trafficking hub in the middle of nowhere.

Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje is a small town in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The fact that it is a logistics hub, close to major highways, makes it a strategically placed yet inconspicuous hotspot for trafficking.

The town, with a population of around 20 000 inhabitants,¹ is close to the city of Bugojno in the central part of the country. It is therefore close to main roads going north–south from Banja Luka to Mostar and east–west from Sarajevo to Croatia.² Like other hotspots, the town suffers from socio-economic vulnerability, including high unemployment (43.5 per cent in 2016) and a low average salary of €345 per month.³ The town is divided between Bosniaks and Croats, which has strengthened ethnically based patronage networks but crippled public institutions.

In the past ten years, its central position has been used to build a criminal milieu in this small locality. It has nevertheless operated largely below the radar.

One of the few times that Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje made the news was when one of its former inhabitants, Vinko Žuljević Klica, was assassinated in May 2015 in Zagreb. Klica, a war veteran, was behind one of the most powerful security companies in Croatia and was allegedly a major player in Zagreb's underground scene.⁴

But in January 2020, Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje made headlines when Ante Sičaja, the owner of an eponymous local import–export company, was arrested with 400 kilograms of cannabis with an estimated value of

€2 million. Cannabis coming from Albania and Montenegro was allegedly transported by his company from Capljina via Bileca and Mostar. The drugs were repackaged in Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje. A small portion was kept for the domestic market, while the majority of the cannabis was shipped west to Croatia and farther into the EU.⁵ Ostensibly, the political connections of the owner, who is said to be linked to the Croatian Democratic Union, along with the good reputation of the company in the region, may have helped to avoid suspicion.

It is possible that this counter-narcotics operation, carried out by the State Investigation and Protection Agency, exposed a network that has been in operation for some time. Police reportedly seized a personal diary kept by Mr Sičaja which connects the company's illicit activities with other criminal figures from the region, including in Croatia, Montenegro and Bulgaria.⁶

Furthermore, there are recent cases that point to the fact that buyers were coming to Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje to purchase drugs, which were said to be easier to obtain and relatively cheap.⁷ Seizures from towns in the surrounding areas can usually trace the drugs back to Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje.⁸

There are rumours that the town is also a hub for weapons smuggling. There have been cases in which weapons have been confiscated from residents of the municipality. Weapons have also been found on the premises of the Sičaja company.⁹

This case illustrates that hotspots for drugs may not just be major urban centres or socio-economically vulnerable towns, but also logistical hubs along key

trafficking routes. For example, in April 2020, Macedonian police discovered 1.2 tonnes of cannabis in a warehouse just outside of Skopje. In November 2020, Serbian police seized 628 kilograms of cannabis from an abandoned hanger in Arandjelovac, 80 kilometres south of Belgrade. The drugs were being packaged for further distribution in Western Europe. In November 2019, Serbian police seized 77 kilograms of heroin near the town of Mladenovac on the outskirts of Belgrade.

These examples show that when looking at the flow of drugs, it is misleading and simplistic to draw arrows on a map that show the trafficking of heroin from, for example, Turkey via the Western Balkans to the EU, or cannabis from Albania via Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia and beyond as if they were straight, uninterrupted journeys. The reality is that these shipments are usually made in a series of short trips, with the journey and often the load broken up in order to avoid obstacles and take advantage of opportunities.

Trafficking routes tend to follow the paths of least resistance, where risk is lower because of political connections, corruption and concealment in a relatively safe form of transportation (in this case, a well-known trucking company). Indeed, the case of Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje shows the links between the licit and the illicit economy and the sometimes cozy relationship between business, political and criminal elites.



FIGURE 1 Drug trafficking routes through Gornji Vakuf-Uskoplje.

2. A crackdown on organized crime in the Western Balkans?

In a series of arrests in January and February 2021, police in Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina took down criminals that the media allege have links to the notorious Kavač and Škaljari criminal clans from Montenegro. Police in North Macedonia arrested six people in Prilep, the country's fourth-largest city, on drug-related charges.¹⁰ Are we witnessing a crackdown on organized crime in the Western Balkans?

On the morning of 4 February, Serbia's anti-organized crime prosecutor Mladen Nenadić announced that police had arrested 16 people suspected of serious crimes.¹¹ The news spread like wildfire. Some sections of the media speculated that this was the beginning

of President Aleksandar Vučić's long-promised crackdown on organized crime,¹² while others stressed the necessity of investigating links between criminal groups and officials in politics and the security services.¹³

One of the most important figures arrested was Veljko Belivuk. In the early 2000s, Belivuk was a member of United Force, an ultras group formed by Belgrade skinheads to support Serbian football club FK Rad. He also worked as a security guard at a Belgrade night club, where he beat and wounded two people in 2007. The court finally found him guilty eight years later.¹⁴ Belivuk came to public attention in April 2016 when, along with Aleksandar Stanković – leader of the



Veljko Belivuk, leader of a Serbian hooligan group with ties to the criminal underworld, is arrested in Belgrade in February 2021.

Photo: Stefan Tomasevic&ATAImages

football club FK Partizan fan group Janjičari –, he was caught on surveillance camera brutally beating the security guards of FK Partizan's general manager.¹⁵

After Stanković was killed in a mafia-style shooting in October 2016,¹⁶ Belivuk succeeded Stanković as the new leader of the Janjičari.¹⁷ The day after the assassination, then minister of interior Nebojša Stefanović declared a war against the mafia and corrupt police.¹⁸ However, in the following years, Serbian streets became a battleground, with more than 60 murders allegedly connected to organized crime.¹⁹

Belivuk's troubles with the law continued in 2017 when he was charged as an associate in organizing a murder. However, the court acquitted him of the charges.²⁰ Meanwhile, investigative journalists discovered photos of Janjičari members with a senior policeman,²¹ as well as possible links between Belivuk and senior officials in the interior ministry.²² Furthermore, Janjičari members acted as security guards at the inauguration of President Vučić.²³ It has also been reported that the Janjičari have ties to the Kavač clan.²⁴

In Serbia, it is an open secret that hooligan groups are involved in illicit activities related to drugs, private security, gambling and construction.²⁵ However, Vučić has promised to fight against the mafia, 'regardless of personal, political and any other consequences'.²⁶

In February 2021, Serbian police arrested Belivuk upon his return from Montenegro, where he allegedly met Radoje Zvicer, one of the leaders of the Kavač clan.²⁷ Belivuk's group was accused of murder, extortion, kidnapping and drug dealing,²⁸ as well as a possible plan to assassinate a top state official.²⁹ Other suspects were charged with association to commit criminal offences; unauthorized production and distribution of narcotics; and illicit production, possession, carrying and trafficking of weapons and explosives, in addition to three cases of aggravated murder.³⁰

Separately, in the city of Tivat, Montenegro, in January police took into custody suspected members of a criminal organization. It was believed that the suspects 'intended to liquidate members of the Kavač group'.³¹ One of the intended targets was thought to be Belivuk.

In February, police in Bosnia and Herzegovina arrested three Montenegrins close to the Jahorina ski resort for illegal production and trafficking of drugs and weapons.³² Media reported that they were from the Škaljari clan and planned to kill the leader of the rival Kavač clan, Radoje Zvicer, and his wife during their stay at the resort.³³

Back in Serbia, Vučić vowed to show pictures of the cruelty of the Janjičari group.³⁴ At a press conference in March, Vučić showed a photo of a headless victim to a primetime television audience.³⁵ After, a journalist from the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) asked the president why some of the government's representatives were not being questioned by police. Vučić did not respond.³⁶ Several days later, pro-government tabloids accused KRIK and some police officers of being part of the Janjičari group.³⁷ Media associations and international organizations,³⁸ including the GI-TOC, reacted to the smear campaign,³⁹ as did Vučić, who stated that KRIK should be left alone to do its work since that is democracy.⁴⁰

While there is no end in sight to the clash between the Škaljari and Kavač clans from Montenegro that started in 2014 and has involved figures from Serbian criminal and hooligan groups,⁴¹ efforts of the state to crack down on it seem to have intensified.

Serbia has come down hard on organized crime in the past, for example during Operation Sabre in 2008, which dismantled major groups like the Zemun clan after the assassination of Prime Minister Đinđić. It will be interesting to see if President Vučić can live up to his promise.



In a village near Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a majority Roma settlement where exploitation of children for various purposes, including begging and sexual exploitation, has been reported. *Photo: Bahrudin Bandic*

3. The vulnerability of Roma children to commercial sexual exploitation.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a serious concern across the Western Balkans. An upcoming research report from the GI-TOC, which is expected to be published in April 2021, shows that children are exposed to diverse and often multiple forms of exploitation. They are most commonly exploited in local bars and hotels, but there are also reports of sexual exploitation of children on the move and in cyberspace. While the upcoming report focuses generally on children's susceptibility to CSEC online and in the travel and tourism industry, our field research has also offered insights specifically on the vulnerability of Roma children, who are among the most endangered groups for CSEC across the region.

Roma across the Western Balkans often live in informal settlements where spaces are overcrowded and there is limited access to infrastructure and sanitation facilities.

Indeed, in Albania, less than 50 per cent of all Roma households have access to piped water.⁴² Formalization of these settlements has been slow, and many Roma communities continue to live as closed-off groups, with little access to the formal economy or government services. In Kosovo, for instance, only 10 per cent of Roma above the age of 16 are reported to have access to health insurance.⁴³ This marginalization has also facilitated the persistence of stereotypes around their way of living and their culture, language and traditions, which has made their integration into local societies more difficult.

The historical exclusion, marginalization and discrimination experienced by Roma has led to low levels of education and high unemployment. Only a small percentage of children have regular access to education. Primary and preschool enrolment rates are

especially worrisome. In Serbia, preschool education covers less than 4 per cent of Roma, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, only 2 per cent of Roma children aged three to five are enrolled in educational programmes.⁴⁴ Employment rates range between 11 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 22 per cent in North Macedonia (with the rest of the Western Balkan countries located somewhere in between).⁴⁵

These factors, among others, make Roma adults – and their children – vulnerable to various forms of exploitation. Most prominently, several reports have researched the role of Roma children in forced begging within the Western Balkans and in Western Europe.⁴⁶ Roma children are allegedly forced to beg in most big cities and the region's capitals. Roma children are also reportedly trafficked to seaside towns and touristic areas and are sometimes forced into sexual exploitation, especially sex work in local bars, restaurants and hotels.⁴⁷

The 'Hamidović case'

In 2015, French law enforcement agencies working together with the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation launched an investigation into Husmet Hamidović, who was suspected of leading an internationally organized human trafficking network. Hamidović, a Bosnian national, was found guilty of trafficking more than 500 mostly Roma girls and women from Bosnia and Herzegovina to France for the purpose of sexual exploitation, begging and pickpocketing. Another 22 girls belonging to his network were found in a house in Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The network was also active in Austria, Belgium, Italy and Spain.

Many girls had been forced into marriage with members of the criminal networks to facilitate their journey between Bosnia and Herzegovina and France. Forged visas were obtained under false names primarily from the Bosnian Embassy in Paris, which charged between €500 and €1 200 for each document. The girls are reported to have travelled regularly between the two countries as they were tasked with bringing the money back into the Western Balkans.

As described in the upcoming research report, a significant percentage of Roma children are forced into marriage by close family members or influential people in the community. Although data is inherently difficult to obtain and to access, previous reports have argued that more than 22 per cent of all Roma girls aged between 15 and 19 are forced into marriages in North Macedonia, while the figure for Kosovo stands at 10 per cent. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 50 per cent of all Roma women get married before the age of 18 – a figure that very likely underrepresents real dynamics.

Girls (and, to a lesser extent, boys) aged between 10 and 16⁴⁸ are sold for marriage to men either in the same community or in Roma communities in neighbouring countries.⁴⁹ Although many of these marriages take place within the broader Roma community, experts maintain that forced marriages can also be the beginning of a life of exploitation, composed of tasks ranging from begging and pickpocketing, to sex work in bars and nightclubs.⁵⁰

Monetary compensation for girls forced into marriages within their own community or within other communities across the Western Balkans can be low, ranging from €200 to €500. However, such transactions do not always take the form of cash, as there are also reports of families selling their daughters for appliances such as a coloured TV, a used refrigerator or a second-hand car.⁵¹ More money, however, can be earned by selling children abroad, especially to Roma communities in Western Europe. Families are deceived into sending their children abroad in the hope of a better life for them (and themselves) but may not be aware of the implications.

Indeed, according to experts interviewed in December 2020, many of the children that are forced into marriage abroad are in fact sold to members of organized criminal groups and forced into organized sex work across Western Europe.⁵² This was most prominently observed in the so-called 'Hamidović case' in 2015, where French and Bosnian authorities discovered more than 500 Roma girls and women who were trafficked from Bosnia and Herzegovina to France and forced into pickpocketing and sex work.⁵³

There are few official statistics across Western Europe on CSEC in general or on Roma children as victims of

human trafficking for sexual exploitation in particular. However, the Hamidović case was not the only one brought to the attention of the media and judiciary in recent years. Operation Golf, a joint operation between the London Metropolitan Police Service and the Romanian National Police from 2007 to 2010, identified more than 1 000 Roma children from one Romanian town that were trafficked to Western Europe for forced labour and sexual exploitation.⁵⁴ Investigations carried out in Austria identified 91 possible child victims of sexual exploitation in 2016, with 73 of those being from Bosnia and Herzegovina, most of whom were suspected to be Roma.⁵⁵ Similarly, the 2020 US Human Trafficking report underlines the vulnerability of Roma children trafficked for sexual exploitation to various Western European countries, including France and Germany.⁵⁶

Despite these cases, awareness on the commercial sexual exploitation of children in the Western Balkans, its links to organized crime and the vulnerability of the Roma community to this phenomenon is still low. The upcoming research report attempts to close this gap by

providing a cross-regional overview of the topic. For example, it explores how forced marriages are often regarded as traditional in the Roma community and therefore are not investigated and followed-up as human trafficking cases by the authorities responsible. Roma are not recognized as minorities in all countries and many marriages and births are not registered, making it difficult for the community to obtain the documents and the institutional support needed in their country of residence.

There is much that must and can be done to better detect the vulnerabilities of Roma children across the Western Balkans and prevent CSEC in the region in the first place. This includes, among other initiatives, the need for more awareness raising, the opening of national referral mechanisms to the Roma community and the provision of specialized training for law enforcement and the judiciary. The full set of recommendations and steps forward were discussed at an expert group meeting on 11 and 12 March 2021 and will be made available in the report.

4. The 'hawks' of Kurbin: a school of thieves.

In recent years, break-ins and thefts at the homes of football players and celebrities have made the headlines in Spain and Italy. Many of the perpetrators are young men who come from the same region, namely Kurbin in Albania.

Kurbin is a municipality 50 kilometres north of the Albanian capital, Tirana. It borders the Adriatic Sea in the west. During the communist period, the main town of Lac, once a rural area, developed into an important centre for industry. As a result, Lac was ranked as the second most important city in northern Albania by size, population and economic importance.⁵⁷

However, with the fall of communism in the early 1990s, the factories were closed. Unemployment rose and many people migrated to Greece and Italy to seek

work. The municipality was also badly hit by the civil unrest that swept through Albania in 1997 after the collapse of a pyramid scheme. The violence left a legacy of criminality, guns and a culture of lawlessness.⁵⁸ This became a fertile environment for young people to turn to a life of crime.

Youth from Kurbin developed a reputation for being skilled thieves, robbing luxurious villas and cars in Western Europe. They gained the attention of law enforcement authorities and the media in Milan and Turin after they robbed several celebrities, including football players.⁵⁹ Liberalization of travel within the Schengen area in 2010 created increased opportunities for Albanians to travel.⁶⁰ Thieves from Kurbin took the opportunity to expand their reach into Andorra, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland.



Kurbin, a town in Albania strongly hit by unemployment and violence, has become a breeding ground for burglars.

Photo: Desarta Mejдини

Young men returning from their ‘adventures’ abroad with expensive cars, clothing and jewellery became role models for poor and impressionable kids in Kurbin who wanted to be as ‘successful’ as their new heroes.⁶¹ By 2015 and 2016, the phenomenon became so widespread in the area that some youngsters dropped out of school in order to travel abroad and engage in thievery. Young men with experience in breaking and entering passed on their skills to the younger ones in what became a de facto school of crime. From this recruitment ground, teams were assembled and spread out across Europe to conduct robberies.

High-profile burglaries of villas of famous football players from Spanish clubs like Real Madrid and Barcelona further boosted the myth of the thieves from Kurbin.⁶² The media dubbed them the ‘hawks’ for their swift and predatory skills. The thieves became part of Albanian popular culture, with TV shows and

movies depicting, and sometimes satirizing, the lavish and thieving lifestyles of the young men from Lac.⁶³ However, the less glamorous aspects of the hawks have received less attention: young men killed in car chases with the police or becoming disabled after falling from heights during a break-in.⁶⁴

Despite the high-profile media attention given to the problem, little has been done to address it. Kurbin remains one of the poorer areas of Albania with high levels of unemployment, particularly for youth.⁶⁵ The situation was exacerbated by the November 2019 earthquake that destroyed almost half of all buildings in Lac.⁶⁶ COVID-19 has further deepened economic vulnerabilities.

Some of the few initiatives that have been made to give young people from Kurbin alternative pathways have come from civil society groups like the Sebastia Youth Centre, profiled below.

5. Youth as the engine of the community: an interview with Sebastia Youth Centre.



The municipality of Kurbin has developed a reputation in Albania and abroad for being a finishing school for burglary. This region faces socio-economic hardships, there are limited licit career options for youth and few civil society organizations (CSOs). To address this problem, a young lawyer and a local teacher teamed up to establish the Sebastia Youth Centre, a CSO that aims to counter stereotypes and give youngsters a platform for a better life. We talk to its founders and leaders, [Elton Laska](#) and [Emarilda Leti](#).

What can you tell us about Sebastia and the work you are doing in Kurbin?

Sebastia was established in 2013 by Elton Laska. In collaboration with a Swiss organization, Sebastia was active in providing school equipment to children in Lac, but that was a short-term engagement. In 2019, we were both working together on a project for the Albanian Caritas, which was focused on finding employment for youth in the area. When that project ended, we thought that there was still much work to be done to support youth in Kurbin. So we decided to re-launch Sebastia.

We started organizing cultural and social activities for youths on a voluntary basis. One of our first initiatives was a series of role model activities. We invited notable people from the community to come and speak to the youth to inspire them and encourage them to follow in their footsteps.

Unfortunately, this series did not last long, because Albania was hit by a devastating earthquake in November 2019 that left almost half of the buildings in Kurbin uninhabitable. So we swiftly shifted our work to humanitarian volunteering. Our team of young people helped to distribute food and secure shelter

for families, collaborating closely with the Catholic church in Lac.

After the immediate crisis was over, we returned to our regular activities, this time also establishing a feminism lab for young women to discuss their challenges and how they can better understand and exercise their rights. Currently, we are also implementing a project from the European Endowment for Democracy called React for yourself, which is focused on civic engagement. We believe that young people are the engine of this community.

We are also very committed to countering the stereotypes that people have about this area. Unfortunately, Kurbin is known for the wrong reasons and television has played a role in perpetuating these stereotypes. On TV, youth from Lac are usually portrayed as being uneducated thieves. The image of the 'hawks' who go abroad to steal has been glamourized. Unfortunately, many young people have found an attractive new identity in this stereotype and are keen to embrace it. We want to raise awareness that this is wrong and that the Kurbin area has more to offer than this model. We have to teach the youth that they don't need to become 'hawks' in order to become known and successful in life.

What are some of Kurbin's main challenges and why is the area considered so difficult for youth to live in?

Due to high rates of unemployment and economic hardships (public administration is seen as one of the few sectors where people can find a job), some people from the area went abroad and engaged in criminal activities, like human and drug trafficking or burglary. They came back to Kurbin and flaunted their new-found wealth. Unfortunately, they were seen as role models by youth in the area. Often, these people not only have money but also power in the area and beyond. They have achieved the dream of becoming rich and powerful in a short period of time, something that their parents were not able to do despite having worked hard their whole lives. So many young people look up to these criminals as their idols. It is a major challenge to get the youth in the area to reject these role models and embrace new ones.

I should add that the youth here are not aware of their rights and they have literally no place to go for social and cultural activities. After school, young women stay indoors, while young men gather in coffee shops or smoke cannabis in the street. Drug consumption has started to become problematic, not least in the school environment.

What is the organized-crime situation like?

It is not easy to speak openly about organized crime in Kurbin, since some of these people or groups have strong connections with people in power.

There are criminal organizations from the area that are also active abroad. It is important for central and local authorities to collaborate closely to tackle the problem.

For us, as a civil society organization, it is vital that we prevent these networks from recruiting youth from the area and that we give young people the confidence and opportunity to live an honest life. We all know somebody in the neighbourhood that was involved in illicit activities and who is considered a role model because they have money and power. This needs to end.

What can organizations like yours do to change this reality?

While the biggest effort should come from central and local governments, we cannot do nothing and wait for somebody else to act. One specific project that we think could make a difference is building a youth centre. It could serve as a recreational and educational space and help orient young people towards a licit career path. It is also important that we help young people understand the consequences of criminal behaviours and the various forms of organized crime.

We also want to promote the best models that this area has to offer in terms of human resources, skills and experiences, as well as historical and touristic resources. We are ready to build this centre but are still searching for financial support. We hope that one day there will physically be a Sebastia Youth Centre.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Risk Bulletin is an output of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (SEE-Obs).

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.

We would like to thank Klevis Paloka and Imran Polovia for their valuable contributions.

PUBLICATIONS AT A GLANCE

In this new feature, we list a number of recent publications related to organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans and showcase several new reports by the GI-TOC.

Saša Djordjević and Bojan Dobovšek, Organised crime in Western Balkans Six at the onset of coronavirus , <i>International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy</i> , 40, 9/10, 807–820.	This paper looks at the impact of COVID-19 on fighting organized crime in the Western Balkans and provides an overview of the criminal landscapes in the WB6 at the beginning of the pandemic crisis.
Tena Prelec, The United Arab Emirates profile themselves as a new global hub for money laundering, with implications for the Balkans , <i>IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook 2020</i> . Barcelona: IEMed, 2020, 197–200.	This work looks at how relations between the United Arab Emirates and countries of south-eastern Europe have been improved by a boom in investments and 'sweet loans', starting with Montenegro and then moving into Serbia and other countries.
Christina Griessler, The Berlin Process. Bringing the Western Balkan region closer to the European Union , <i>Südosteuropa</i> , 68, 1, 1–24.	This paper examines the documentation of the Berlin Process and shows that although proactive measures have been taken, such efforts have not been successful in enabling the Western Balkans to implement the reforms required for EU accession.
Vedran Recher, Illegal tobacco demand: The case of Western Balkan , <i>Economic Analysis and Policy</i> , 66, 182–193.	This paper investigates tobacco smuggling in the Western Balkans. Data are used to explore smoking habits and attitudes about the illicit market.
Elena Kršmanović, 'Crimen et circenses: Serbian turbo folk music and organised crime' , in eds. D Siegel and F Bovenkerk, <i>Crime and Music</i> , Springer, Cham, 149–167.	This chapter critically explores the vibrant, carnivalesque Serbian turbo folk scene and its links to organized crime.
Megan Duffy and Samuel Green, Organised Chaos: Russian influence and the state of disinformation in the Western Balkans , <i>Murrow Center For a Digital World</i> , Special Papers Series, Fall 2020.	This research analyzes disinformation sources and trends in the Western Balkans and examines how the local context allows disinformation to permeate the information space.
Iztok Prezelj and Nina Otorepec Vogrinčič, Criminal and networked state capture in the Western Balkans: the case of the Zemun clan , <i>Southeast European and Black Sea Studies</i> , 20, 4, 547–570.	This paper argues that the Western Balkans face the problem of networked state capture based on a corrupt nexus among organized crime, business, politics, security services and the judiciary.
Jovanka Kuvekalović-Stamatović and Marko Filijović, Illegal logging as a threat to human security in the Western Balkans , <i>Journal of European and Balkan Perspectives</i> , 3, 2, 72–93.	In this paper, the authors analyze the problem of illegal logging in the Western Balkans. The main hypothesis is that the destructive exploitation of forests represents a threat to human security in the region.
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NEW AND FORTHCOMING GI-TOC PUBLICATIONS



STRONGER TOGETHER:

Bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans.

KRISTINA AMERHAUSER AND WALTER KEMP

As the space for civil society appears to be shrinking in the Western Balkans, this report looks at organized crime and corruption in the region from a civil society perspective. It aims to give an overview of how civil society organizations in the Western Balkans deal with issues related to organized crime and corruption and highlights their main activities and concerns.



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WALTER KEMP, KRISTINA AMERHAUSER AND RUGGERO SCATURRO

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POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND ANTI-CORRUPTION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS.

Western Balkans anti-corruption pledges monitor.

UGLJEŠA UGI ZVEKIĆ AND SUNČANA ROKSANDIĆ

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This publication was produced with the financial support of the United Kingdom's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the GI-TOC and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Kingdom.



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