

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE



RISK BULLETIN

SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

1. **Burning rubber: Trebinje as a hotspot for organized crime.**

The city of Trebinje, at the southernmost tip of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has a reputation as a hub for trafficking. Due to its proximity to both the Croatian and Montenegrin borders, during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, Trebinje was an active route for the smuggling of a wide range of goods, including weapons, oil and cigarettes. After the war period, the municipality became a crossroads for the smuggling of drugs, cars and migrants. In addition, over the past decade, a number of cars have been burned in what appear to be targeted attacks. This story looks at why Trebinje is a hotspot for organized crime and what can be done to reduce its vulnerability.

2. **Passports and protection: the Macedonian connection of a Turkish crime boss.**

In May 2021, fugitive gang boss Sedat Peker made headlines with allegations of crime and corruption against people close to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in a much-watched series of videos supposedly filmed in Dubai. An interesting detail in this case is that Peker was arrested in Skopje in January 2020 and had acquired a North Macedonian passport using a stolen identity card. Instead of being extradited to Turkey, he was sent to Kosovo and from there seems to have disappeared to the United Arab Emirates. This story looks at the strange case of Sedat Peker and his links to North Macedonia.

3. **Crime does not pay: confiscating and reusing criminal proceeds.**

Millions of euros flow through south-eastern Europe every year as so-called illicit financial

flows – money stemming from organized crime, corruption and tax evasion. Yet only a fraction of this money is confiscated or seized. This article looks at what the countries of the Western Balkans are doing to go after illegally-gained assets and what happens to those assets once they are recovered. In particular, it focuses on the public reuse of criminal assets, for example to support civil society.

4. **Cell of a Montenegrin criminal group discovered in Slovenia.**

Since 2014, a bloody clash of clans has claimed the lives of dozens of young men from rival Montenegrin criminal groups, including the notorious Kavač clan. In 2021, in a complex operation, Slovenian police arrested 60 people suspected of being connected to the Kavač clan. This article looks at what is known about the activities of this cell operating in Slovenia and also examines an Austrian connection.

5. **More than microphone holders: the Association of Professional Journalists of Montenegro.**

Journalists in Montenegro, as in other parts of south-eastern Europe, face pressures including harassment, threats and violence, particularly when reporting on cases of corruption and organized crime. We talk to Mila Radulović, the secretary general and one of the founders of the Association of Professional Journalists of Montenegro, about the group's work, what it is like to be a journalist in Montenegro, the challenges that she faces in covering stories related to organized crime and corruption, and her thoughts on the country's new government.



ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Welcome to the eighth 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 are grateful for funding from the United Kingdom, which enables us to produce this unique publication. We also appreciate the hundreds of readers who download the Risk Bulletin every month.

As usual, we start the Risk Bulletin with a profile of a hotspot of organized crime – this time in Trebinje, the southernmost city in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This city, which was a hub for smuggling during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, is now known as a place for smuggling stolen cars. It has also grabbed attention for a series of firebomb attacks on cars. We look into why Trebinje is vulnerable to organized crime and what is going on there.

Earlier this year, a major scandal in North Macedonia revealed that over 215 passports with false identities were sold by officials in the Ministry of the Interior, including to known criminals. It turns out that one of these passports was sold to Sedat Peker, who recently released a series of videos containing outspoken allegations of crime and corruption by high-ranking officials close to the president of Turkey. We look at what this Turkish crime figure was doing in North Macedonia.

Over the past year, the GI-TOC has been paying increased attention to illicit financial flows (IFFs) in south-eastern Europe. In August 2020, we produced a report on IFFs in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, while the report 'Spot Prices: Analyzing flows of people, drugs and money in the Western Balkans', released in May 2021, included a section on money laundering in the Western Balkans. In September 2021, the GI-TOC

will launch a report on IFFs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. Furthermore, the Observatory has been working with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe to look at the financial and economic aspects of organized crime, particularly asset seizure, confiscation, management and reuse. In this issue, we share some of the information that we have uncovered on the latter topic, particularly on the reuse of seized assets.

The Observatory has been closely following the violent clash between the Kavač and Škaljari clans from Montenegro. We were therefore interested to see reports from the Slovenian police that the Kavač clan has had a cell in Slovenia since 2018. In this issue, we reveal some of the main findings of an investigation into the group that led to the arrest of over 60 people in May 2021, as well as the operations of the group in Austria, which came to light as a result of this case.

In every issue of the Risk Bulletin we feature the work of a civil society organization that is strengthening resilience to organized crime in the Western Balkans. In this issue, we talk to Mila Radulović, the secretary general and one of the founders of the Association of Professional Journalists of Montenegro. The Association is a recipient of the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund.

As we look ahead to future issues, we would welcome potential contributions to the Risk Bulletin. As we intend to widen our focus from the Western Balkans to all of south-eastern Europe, any stories on relevant topics in Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania, Slovenia and Turkey would be most welcome and remunerated. If you have a proposal for a story or would like to provide feedback, please contact Kristina.Amerhauser@globalinitiative.net.

1. Burning rubber: Trebinje as a hotspot for organized crime.

The town of Trebinje (with a population of approximately 40 000), at the southernmost tip of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has all the attributes of a hotspot of organized crime: it is located about 20 kilometres from the borders of both Montenegro and Croatia; the region suffers from underdevelopment as a result of corrupt privatization processes in the 1990s; there is a legacy of smuggling from the Yugoslav wars; and the criminal justice system is weak, allegedly even compromised. As a result, the municipality has become a crossroads for the smuggling of drugs, cars and migrants. A series of targeted arson attacks moreover points to a criminal culture of threats that has received insufficient attention from the authorities.

FROM WAR PROFITEERS TO CAR MAFIA

In the 1990s, during the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Trebinje was a key hub for the smuggling of a wide range of goods, including weapons, oil and cigarettes. A major kingpin from the area was even arrested in Zagreb in July 2006 on suspicion of smuggling 1.9 million fake euro banknotes.¹

After the wars and efforts by the authorities to crack down on weapons trafficking, criminals in the region

switched their attention to smuggling stolen cars, mostly from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Montenegro, taking advantage of the opening of new borders, markets and opportunities. While groups in the Jahorina area (Pale, Sokolac and East Sarajevo) were the main players responsible for stealing cars in Sarajevo, the car mafia in Trebinje was in charge of bribing the police and customs officers in order to deliver the stolen cars to criminals in Montenegro, particularly in Niksic, Budva and Kotor.

According to a former car thief, around one-third of these cars were destined for the local market in Montenegro, while the other two-thirds were shipped abroad, sometimes even to Africa.² According to this source, part of the money earned from car theft was invested in tourism in Montenegro and Trebinje, and part was invested in land and real estate. The power of the car mafia was so strong that in 2008, after Bishop Grigorije of Zahumlje-Herzegovina condemned it at a public session of the Assembly of Trebinje and called on the police 'to start doing their job and finally arrest the car thieves, whose names are well known to all citizens of Trebinje', he received a threatening letter and left the country.³

A view of the town of Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, a crossroads of crime. *Photo: Enrico Bottino/REDA&Co/Universal Images Group via Getty Images*





FIGURE 1 The location of Trebinje and trajectories of trafficking.

HUB FOR DRUG TRAFFICKING

Because of its location, Trebinje is a hub for drug trafficking. Whereas criminals from Trebinje used to act simply as intermediaries, over time they grew stronger and organized themselves into distinct groups. They developed connections with the police and border guards and linked up with other criminal groups in Montenegro and Croatia. As a result, drugs that go through Trebinje must now go through the town's criminal groups.

Trebinje is a crossroads for cannabis coming from Albania via Montenegro, cocaine coming through Adriatic ports and heroin moving from south to north. Dubrovnik, approximately 40 kilometres away, is a major market supplied by Trebinje's criminals, especially during the summer months when consumption rises alongside the tourist population.

The police have made significant arrests in the past,⁴ including of a former member of their own police force for domestic⁵ and international drug trafficking.⁶ In December 2018, police arrested 11 people as part of

operation 'Kanader', which aimed to break up an organized criminal group engaged in the illicit production and trafficking of narcotics. They seized 19.8 kilograms of cannabis, as well as a small amount of cocaine and speed.⁷

But there are allegations that police and border guards are offered bribes to enable drug shipments to pass without interdiction. According to one former customs official, more than half of the police officers that he worked with accepted bribes, and the practice was well known within the service. One reason that is sometimes given is that salaries are relatively low; the average salary for a police officer in the Republic of Srpska in 2019 was around €450 per month.⁸ Furthermore, this former official noted that high-ranking police officers have little to worry about because of their political connections and the fact that there are few high-level prosecutions. Only petty dealers and criminals are arrested, to show the public that the police are doing something, while big criminals become respectable citizens.

SMUGGLING OF MIGRANTS

As featured in a recent report by the GI-TOC, since 2015 Trebinje has become a hub for smuggling migrants.⁹ The region is sparsely populated and the terrain is difficult to control. Official crossings are easy to bypass through green borders. The same mountain trails used in the past to smuggle drugs and other contraband are now being used by migrants. With the help of guides, the migrants come across the mountains from Montenegro and head for Trebinje, and from there to Sarajevo. It is worth noting that there are few arrests for migrant smuggling in the region.¹⁰

BOMBS AND BURNING CARS

Trebinje's reputation as a hotspot for organized crime has been compounded by a series of fiery attacks on cars. Since 2005, there have been a number of incidents where criminals have planted explosive devices under cars, thrown bombs in front of victims' houses or set cars on fire using flammable liquids. Victims have included police and border officials, lawyers, local politicians and businessmen, as well as people from the criminal milieu.

Since 2020, eight cars have been set on fire in Trebinje – most recently in May 2021¹¹ – despite the fact that the city has extensive video surveillance.¹² While there is concern about the security situation among the local population, the police chief claims that the situation is under control and the police are taking measures to find the perpetrators.¹³

ACCUSATIONS OF CORRUPTION

Some people are not satisfied with the official response and are taking matters into their own hands. For example, a member of the Assembly of the Republic of Srpska, Nebojša Vukanović, has accused judges of the Court in Trebinje of being corrupt, involved in criminal acts and not doing their jobs professionally. Penalties

for drug trafficking are minimal and there are few convictions. According to Vukanović, 'the corrupt judiciary persecutes journalists, activists and opposition politicians who write about crime, but provides protection to those who are corrupt, rob and destroy the state and society'.¹⁴

According to police data, from 2014 to 2019, the Trebinje Police department recorded 44 criminal acts related to corruption, primarily the production and trafficking of narcotics, illicit trade, receiving and making bribes and abuse of official position or authority.¹⁵

TOURISM TO STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE?

While Trebinje can't change its location, it can reduce its vulnerability by strengthening the criminal justice system, for example by cracking down on corruption, prosecuting rather than protecting the perpetrators and confiscating the proceeds of crime. Greater cooperation is also needed between law enforcement agencies within the country (i.e., between the Republic of Srpska, where Trebinje is located, and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina), and between Bosnian police and border officials and those in neighbouring Croatia and Montenegro.

Trebinje has huge potential as a tourist destination – with a Mediterranean climate, clean rivers and proximity to the sea and mountains, as well as a rich historical heritage. Better marketing and development of the infrastructure necessary to welcome visitors (including accommodation, restaurants and transportation) could strengthen the resilience of the region. Some international donors, such as the EU and USAID, are providing support for sustainable tourism development.¹⁶

With good governance and steps to crack down on crime and corruption, Trebinje could be a destination for tourists rather than traffickers.

2. Passports and protection: the Macedonian connection of a Turkish crime boss.

In May 2021, fugitive gang boss Sedat Peker made headlines with a series of allegations against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Peker is now reportedly in Dubai, from where he has been releasing much-watched videos accusing people close to Erdogan of crimes and corruption.¹⁷ Not long ago, Peker was sitting in a prison cell in Skopje. What is the Macedonian connection to this high-profile case?

Even before his public accusations against the Turkish president, Peker was a well-known criminal in Europe. Born in Turkey, he spent much of his youth in Germany and made a name for himself in the underworld. He was even linked to the murder of a notorious drug smuggler in the 1990s. He then fled to Romania, where he was reportedly involved in extortion and racketeering.¹⁸

Although he often had run-ins with the law in different countries, Peker allegedly enjoyed a degree of political protection in Turkey, which enabled him to serve

reduced sentences when convicted. By his own admission, he had knowledge of a milieu where criminals were paid by members of the security services to carry out hits against political opponents.¹⁹ Such relationships can work in both directions: often criminals can be used by the secret services to be part of their networks, but after a while, the relationship ends and so does their protection.

This seems to have happened to Peker, because he was arrested during Operation Butterfly in 2005.²⁰ In 2007, he was found guilty of building and leading a criminal organization, as well as robbery, forgery and two counts of false imprisonment; he was sentenced to 14 years and five months in prison. In August 2013, as part of the Ergenekon trials in Turkey (which accused a network of high-level officials of being involved in clandestine activities), Peker – an outspoken nationalist – was sentenced to 10 years in prison. However, he was released a few months later.²¹



Sedat Peker seen in Skopje. Photo: Social media

Peker seems to have not only good connections in the underworld, but also with some politicians and businessmen, as well as prominent people in North Macedonia. Indeed, his background makes his current allegations all the more interesting. As a Turkish journalist put it, his monologues feel like 'live reporting from inside the gang'.²² But at some point, Peker made enemies of other big players in the Turkish underworld and people with high-level political connections.²³

To facilitate his movement, Peker acquired a North Macedonian passport using the stolen identity card of someone named Xhadin Ademovski (who apparently lives abroad).²⁴ Peker also spent some time in North Macedonia. Videos have emerged of him driving with a police escort as well as being protected by an off-duty policeman when walking through Skopje.²⁵ In one of his videos, he even claims that he met with 'the leader of that country, in his home' – apparently meaning North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev.²⁶ In Skopje, Peker was sometimes accompanied by Enes Ibrahim, a representative from the Turkish Movement political party, a partner in Zaev's governing coalition. Ibrahim told the media that Peker was an 'old friend'. It is no secret that while Peker was staying in North Macedonia, he had meetings with businessmen, investors, artists and politicians. He also had meetings with Albanian political parties and VMRO-DPMNE (the biggest opposition party), as well as with various mayors.²⁷

While this may seem strange, the fact that Peker was able to receive a North Macedonian passport was not unique. A scandal recently revealed that it was relatively easy for foreign nationals, including notorious criminals, to obtain North Macedonian passports from corrupt officials in the interior ministry.²⁸ Indeed, it has been revealed that at least 215 passports with fake identities were sold for €20 000 each to foreign criminals and high-risk individuals by ministry officials. Thus far, at least 10 police officers responsible for issuing passports and identity documents have been arrested as part of Operation Double, carried out in coordination with INTERPOL and the Office for Investigation of the US embassy in Skopje.²⁹ In June 2021, seven of them pleaded guilty, settled in court and were convicted.

The maximum sentence was three years. The question remains whether these officials were acting alone or if there were others higher up the chain of command who knew more.

Regardless, there seems to have been a limit to the extent of Peker's protection. On 20 January 2021, Peker was arrested in Skopje.³⁰ Regional media speculated that Peker's arrest was linked to his involvement in drug trafficking.³¹ But what happened to his alleged connections and his protection? One theory is that something went wrong for him in Turkey (perhaps when the interior ministry opened a new investigation into his networks)³² prompting him to travel to North Macedonia, but officials there were pressured by Ankara to bring him to justice. However, North Macedonian officials sent him instead to Kosovo, where it is thought he also had citizenship or at least a permit to stay in the country until 29 December 2021. From Kosovo, he was supposed to be extradited to Turkey. But the next time he appeared in public was in his damning videos allegedly filmed in Dubai – so he seems to have had powerful friends in Kosovo. Conveniently, the United Arab Emirates do not have an extradition agreement with Turkey.

Suspicions about Peker's involvement in drug trafficking deepened when his alleged associate, Boban Tomovski, a Macedonian citizen said to be involved in criminal activity in Germany, among other places,³³ was arrested in June 2021 at Sabiha Gökçen airport in Istanbul while trying to board a plane to Egypt.³⁴ He currently faces extradition to North Macedonia. For his part, Peker has built a captive audience waiting for further revelations about organized crime and corruption in Turkey.

Besides the impact of Peker's claims on the political situation in Turkey, this case highlights the dangers of corruption as an enabler of organized crime, including in an Interior Ministry; the widespread use of identity theft by criminal groups; the threat posed by the infiltration of the Turkish mafia in the Western Balkans; and the impact of the provision and removal of political protection – both for the protectors and those they protect.

3. Crime does not pay: confiscating and reusing criminal proceeds.

One of the main motives for engaging in organized crime is to make money. Therefore, a good way of increasing the risks and reducing the benefits of criminal activity is to confiscate the proceeds of crime. Countries of the Western Balkans are adopting measures to increase their capacity to systematically confiscate, seize and reuse the assets of crime, but challenges remain.

Millions of euros flow through the Western Balkans every year as IFFs – money stemming from organized crime, corruption and tax evasion. These IFFs discourage public and private investment in infrastructure, pervert local economies and deprive governments of badly needed resources for sustainable development.³⁵ They also erode criminal justice systems, weaken state institutions and further fuel corruption.³⁶

In recent years, all six countries of the Western Balkans have taken significant steps to address IFFs. Special focus has been put on improving anti-money laundering (AML) measures.³⁷ Most countries of the region have introduced relevant AML legislation, created specialized departments and strategies and conduct money laundering risk assessments. As a result, the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering has removed the Western Balkan countries from its black-list, although many countries remain subject to enhanced/expedited follow-up procedures, not least because of continued low awareness of AML risks among reporting entities and a general lack of implementation of AML legislation.

Following the principles laid out in the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (also known as the Palermo Convention) and in line with the EU acquis, they have also adopted measures to enable the identification, tracing, freezing and

seizure of proceeds of crime like property, 'moveables' (e.g. boats or cars), cash and other assets. The confiscation of criminal assets is important to prevent them from being laundered into the formal economy or reinvested into other illegal activities, while reducing the rewards of organized crime and corruption. It also has a psychological and symbolic effect: it shows that crime does not pay.

Government efforts to promote the confiscation of assets from organized crime and corruption can be divided into (and evaluated against) three main aspects: first, the countries' legislation that sets the foundation for government action; second, the implementation of financial investigations and court procedures that lead to the confiscation of assets; and third, the adequate reuse of confiscated assets.

All countries of the Western Balkans have laws enabling the confiscation of illegally gained assets. However, Albania is the only country in the region that has thus far also included provisions on the confiscation of assets in its anti-organized crime laws (on the model of the Italian Rognoni-La Torre law of 1982),³⁸ which shifts the burden of proof from the prosecution to the defendant and enables authorities to act against criminal assets and not just criminal actors.³⁹ In addition, all countries except Bosnia and Herzegovina have laws in place that allow for extended confiscation of assets, which enables the confiscation of property belonging to a convicted person when the crime is liable to give rise to economic benefit and/or the circumstances of the case indicate that the property is derived from criminal conduct. All six Western Balkan countries have established bodies mandated to administer confiscated assets and publish statistics on the confiscation of cash and assets; in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the agencies work on the entity and not the national level.

		ALBANIA	BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	KOSOVO	MONTENEGRO	NORTH MACEDONIA	SERBIA
LEGISLATION	Law on the confiscation of illegally gained assets						
	Specific provisions on confiscation within anti-organized crime laws						
	Law on the extended confiscation (of proceeds of crime)						
	Law on government reuse of confiscated assets						
	Law on social reuse of confiscated assets						
	National agency/body for confiscated assets		 (only on entity level)				
IMPLEMENTATION	Confiscation of assets						
	Extended confiscation of assets						
	Government reuse of confiscated assets						
	Social reuse of confiscated assets						



Law in place



Law implemented



Not in place/implemented

FIGURE 2 Asset confiscation in the Western Balkans.

SOURCE: Based on information available on the current legislation on asset recovery in each country and a review of reports on its implementation. See also The AIRE Centre and Regional Anticorruption Initiative, Combating Corruption in the Western Balkans: Strengthening regional cooperation in the field of asset recovery, 2021, http://www.rai-see.org/php_sets/uploads/2021/02/2nd-edition-AR-Report-WB-EN-final.pdf.

However, despite having the relevant legal frameworks in place, most countries of the region have little practical experience with asset confiscation. The financial and economic aspects of organized crime are frequently neglected in the criminal justice process. EU progress reports continuously emphasize the protracted nature of financial investigations and note that asset seizure and confiscation are not used systematically.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the general willingness to confiscate assets remains low and some cases seem to simply disappear. Interviewees from the region suggested that even convicted criminals seldom forfeit their ill-gotten gains, as asset confiscations are disproportionately low compared to the gravity of the crimes.⁴¹ The overall value of assets confiscated in Western Balkan countries cannot be established, given that every country has a different system of measuring and presenting its data.

After the confiscation, the relevant institutions decide how to use the funds. In general, recovered assets are either used by the state or given to civil society.

In practice, assets (like vehicles or other movables) that are seized often sit in warehouses for years, where they depreciate. In other cases, there is a lack of transparency about what happens to assets that are recovered.

However, there are some positive experiences that are worth highlighting. Albania has considerable experience with the social reuse of assets. For example, it has created a special fund to use money earned from renting out confiscated properties to support civil society, anti-trafficking activities and victims of organized crime. Through an initiative called Confiscated Assets Used for Social Experimentation, which is supported by the European Union, civil society organizations from Albania have partnered with organizations from Italy to successfully transform three confiscated assets into social businesses: a cafe/library in Durres, a bakery in Fier and a handicraft shop and studio in Saranda.⁴² A fourth project is expected to be launched soon in Elbasan.



KeBuono, a bakery in Fier, Albania, which was established on a property confiscated from the proceeds of organized crime.

Photo: KeBuono

Elsewhere in the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina reported that it bestowed part of the confiscated cash and movable assets on charitable organizations for children and veterans.⁴³ Serbia adopted a new law in 2016 that set out that 30% of all confiscated assets shall be used for social and healthcare projects, with a specific focus on those organizations that work against human trafficking. In addition, it provides property and vehicles to community centres or government organizations.⁴⁴ Such good practices show that the Western Balkans are on the right track, but more can be done – especially in North Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro, which appear to have the least experience on social reuse of assets.

Moving forward, it is crucial that existing laws and procedures on asset confiscation are implemented in an efficient, transparent and timely manner. Awareness needs to be raised on the importance of asset confiscation as a mechanism to reduce the incentives for and rewards of organized crime and corruption.

Greater regional cooperation would also be beneficial. At the moment, countries of the Western Balkans have different levels of expertise and experience on asset confiscation and different methods of gathering information and reporting on confiscated assets. There is greater scope for cooperation and sharing of good

practices. For example, the work of the Balkan Asset Management Interagency Network (BAMIN) could be expanded to increase the effectiveness and timeliness of national asset management processes.⁴⁵ Thus far, BAMIN includes 18 members from the Western Balkans and beyond who serve as an expert group on asset management topics. They come together to provide training to national prosecutors, law enforcement officials and asset managers to strengthen the effective implementation of knowledge exchange, cooperation and networking initiatives.

Furthermore, since IFFs involving tax evasion, corruption and the proceeds of crime which have been generated by citizens of the Western Balkans are hidden or laundered outside the region, while some foreign criminals launder their money in the Western Balkans, full use should be made of the type of international cooperation for the purpose of confiscation that is laid out in the Palermo Convention.

Finally, the symbolic and psychological effect of the social reuse of confiscated assets should be highlighted by showcasing how giving back buildings, companies or parks to communities affected by organized crime not only redistributes ill-gotten gains for public benefit, but it also undermines the strength and image of criminal and corrupt actors as being rich and untouchable.

4. Cell of a Montenegrin criminal group discovered in Slovenia.

For seven years, a bloody clash of clans has claimed the lives of dozens of young men from rival Montenegrin criminal groups. New evidence shows that one of the groups, the Kavač clan, had a branch in Slovenia and was also active in Austria.

The Kavač and Škaljari groups, both from the Montenegrin coastal town of Kotor, began feuding in 2014 after the disappearance of a 200-kilogram

shipment of cocaine. Since then, there has been a tit-for-tat spiral of attacks as the groups compete for control of a lucrative slice of the cocaine trafficking market in Europe, where profits are higher and risks are lower than in the US.⁴⁶

In 2016, the violence spilled over into Serbia; since then, there have been hits in a number of European countries, including Austria, Germany, Greece, the

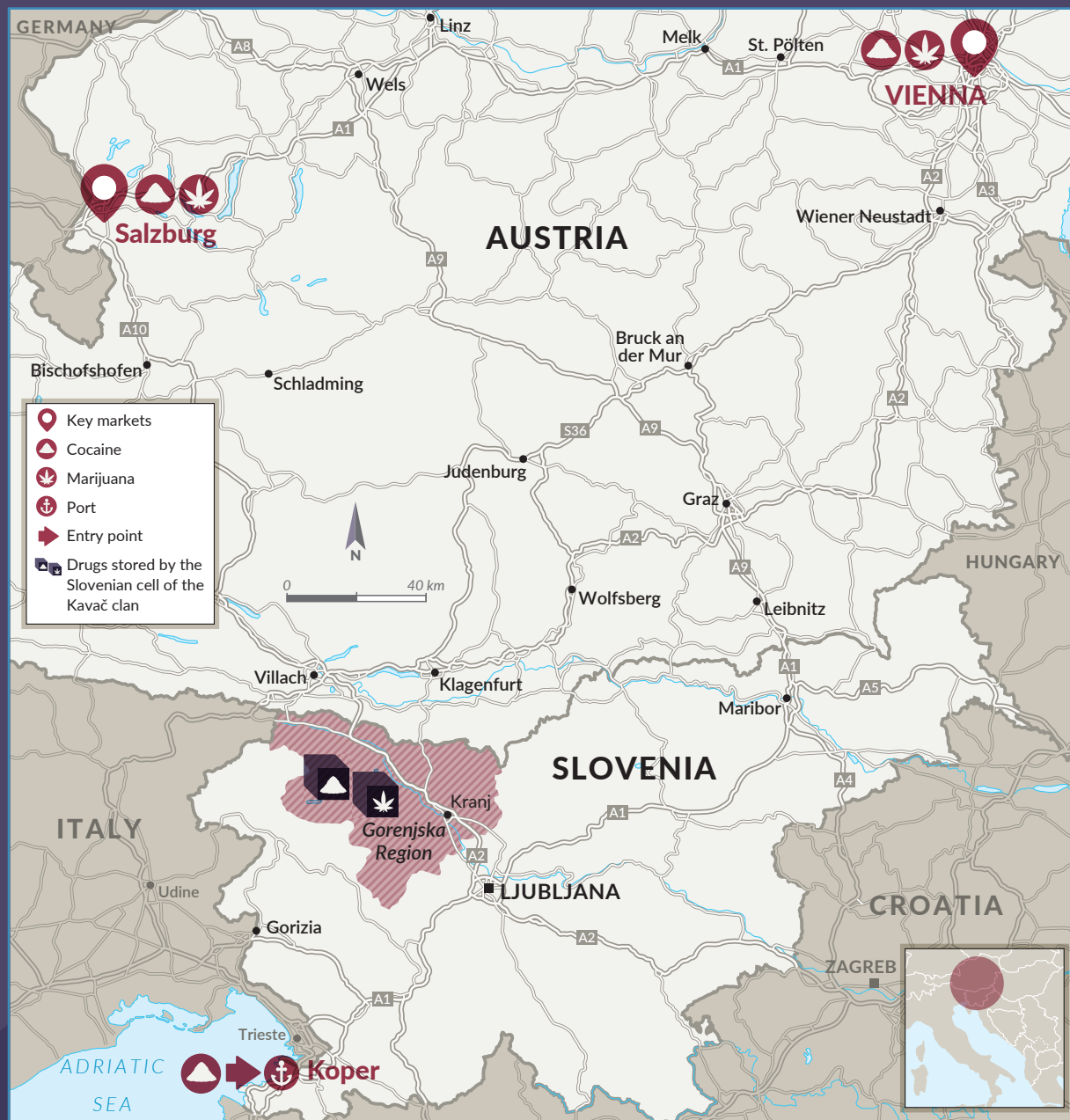


FIGURE 3 Key areas of activity of the Kavač clan's operations in Slovenia, and drug markets that they supplied in Austria.

Netherlands, Spain and Ukraine.⁴⁷ This is symptomatic of how the tentacles of criminal groups from the Western Balkans now spread around the world and how groups from the region have become major players in the cocaine business.

Until recently, the activities of these groups in Slovenia did not garner public attention, although the police seem to have been monitoring their activities through physical and electronic surveillance, use of undercover agents, international police data exchange and covert investigative measures.⁴⁸ In May 2021, the Slovenian police submitted criminal charges to the state prosecutor's office in Ljubljana against a cell of the Kavač clan that had been operating in Slovenia since 2018. The criminal charges, which have been seen by the GI-TOC, also shed light on the group's activities in Austria.

According to the police, the Kavač clan's Slovenian branch had been trafficking drugs (mostly cannabis and cocaine) to Slovenia from the Netherlands and Spain. It also appears that some cocaine was entering the country via the port of Koper. The drugs were usually stored in the mountainous and touristic Gorenjska region before distribution to Austria, Germany and Italy. The group is also alleged to have purchased semi-automatic rifles and automatic pistols in Slovakia, which they sold to organized criminal groups in the Netherlands, Serbia and Slovenia.

In May 2021, Slovenian police arrested almost 60 suspected members of the group. Their investigation reveals that the group was well-organized. It used encrypted communication, namely the Sky network (which has since been taken down). It operated a transportation network including cars and trucks with purpose-built compartments for concealing drugs. And members of the group had well-defined roles including being responsible for negotiating and purchasing shipments, organizing transportation, modifying vehicles, storing the loads, selling the drugs, recruiting new members, accounting and establishing companies to provide cover for criminal activities.

The encrypted chats reveal that members of the group had nicknames (sometimes more than one) including

Laviteše, Sandman, Mr Nice, Damatinac, Caspar, Coco (Chanel), Tom Ford and Mr Fantastic.

It is suspected that since 2018, the criminal group smuggled at least 790 kilograms of cocaine, more than two tonnes of cannabis, 10 kilograms of heroin and 30 litres of amphetamine base. The actual amounts could have been even higher: in August 2019, members of the Slovenia-based group were arrested on a yacht near the Azores trying to smuggle 800 kilograms of cocaine.

In addition, the Slovenian police gave indications about the group's activities in Austria. Shipments of cocaine were brought from Koper to Vienna and Salzburg in specially modified trucks that belonged to companies regularly used by the criminal group. There are also records of several shipments of cannabis sent from Girona in Catalonia, Spain, via France and Italy to Slovenia, Vienna and Salzburg. In each case, a truck with a secret compartment containing the drugs was preceded by a scout to inform the drivers that passage was safe. It is interesting to note that the packages of cannabis were colour-coded, either to indicate the quality of the drug or to facilitate onward distribution.

The group kept meticulous records of its deals, including logs of all income and expenses. According to the police, most of the income was in cash and represented profit from drug trafficking and sales. Expenses included payments to suppliers, for transportation and other costs for intermediaries, couriers, drivers and bags for drugs.⁴⁹ For example, the records show how much couriers were paid to transport the drugs: one driver was paid €150 per kilogram of cannabis smuggled from Slovenia to Austria and €2 000 for each kilogram of cocaine. For major transactions, money was often physically carried by a courier. Slovenian police suspect that some of the proceeds of crime were transferred from Spain and laundered in Serbia.

According to the criminal charges, it is suspected that at least two members of the Kavač clan have been hiding in the vicinity of Vienna.

The Austrian connection

This is not the first link between the Kavač clan and the Austrian capital of Vienna. In December 2018, Vladimir Roganović, a member of the Kavač clan, was shot and killed outside a popular restaurant in the city centre.⁵⁰ More recently, Dario Djordjevic from Serbia was arrested in Vienna in June 2021 as part of the global operation Trojan Shield.⁵¹ He allegedly planned a number of assassinations for the Kavač clan.⁵²

Drug trafficking routes between south-eastern Europe and Austria are well established. In 2021, a court in Salzburg convicted several members of a criminal group from the region for smuggling cannabis, cocaine and synthetic drugs from Slovenia to Austria in 2019 and 2020.⁵³

The Slovenian investigation shows that the Montenegrin clan war extends even into the European Union. It also illustrates how well the groups are organized and reveals their trafficking routes and modes of operation. Furthermore, like the recent takedown of the ANOM encrypted messaging app,⁵⁴ this case shows the extent to which criminal groups exploit communications technology but are simultaneously also vulnerable on such platforms.

The case also raises a number of questions. Why is a criminal group from Montenegro importing cannabis from Spain when there is plenty of it in the Western Balkans? Is this due to the increased supply in Spain,⁵⁵

combined with reduced cultivation in Albania? Are there other cells of criminal groups from the Western Balkans active in EU countries? How vulnerable are Adriatic ports and marinas to drug trafficking and what more can be done to enhance controls?

During its presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2021, Slovenia has an opportunity to use the lessons learned from this case to strengthen cooperation in the Western Balkans and between the EU and the region in order to more effectively tackle organized crime.⁵⁶

5. More than microphone holders: the Association of Professional Journalists of Montenegro.

The Association of Professional Journalists of Montenegro (DPNCG) is an organization that supports investigative journalism and works to increase the safety and security of reporters. Furthermore, the DPNCG offers journalists free legal aid and psychological support. In Montenegro, such assistance is indispensable at a time when the authorities harass the media and violence against journalists often goes unpunished.

Secretary General Mila Radulović talks about the DPNCG's work and explains what it is like to be a journalist in the country, especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as organized crime and corruption.



Mila Radulović, secretary general of the Association of Professional Journalists of Montenegro.

You are simultaneously the secretary general of the DPNCG and the editor of the daily newspaper *Vijesti*. What motivates you to do two such demanding jobs?

Ambition to change things. Since the beginning of my journalistic career, starting with the newspaper *Borba*, I have been involved in daily journalism. When a journalist reaches a certain point, the job no longer stimulates you and you get into a rut, it is good to have a change. That is why I also took on the role of secretary general. The DPNCG is developing slowly; we have only one full-time employee. But as an association, we must fight in solidarity for better professional conditions and to prevent the humiliation of journalism and journalists. That is my motivation.

What challenges does journalism face in Montenegro?

Journalists in Montenegro have been turned into people who simply transmit statements by politicians, their tweets and posts – we have become microphone holders. We are contributing to a climate that is not conducive to social development but to stagnation. Media owners pay attention to clicks, while there is no time, staff or money for investigative, analytical journalism. Sometimes, a journalist shines with a good story, but unfortunately not often enough. We need to think more about the interests of the public and less about the number of comments, likes or reposts. We need to look at the motives behind political statements, rather than just reporting those statements.

The DPNCG is a relatively young association of journalists. You were founded in 2016. Why did you decide to form an association? For what purpose?

For years, no one represented the interest of journalists in Montenegro. I started to be ashamed that there is no such association, so we first formed a union. Then some colleagues suggested that we should form an association because a union could not represent freelancers or provide legal assistance. In the meantime, things have changed here. There is a more vibrant civil society that is vocal and follows topics related to the media and journalists. I can't say that we are successful because journalistic solidarity is not yet at a high level, but things are improving.

Dealing with organized crime and corruption can be difficult and frustrating. How do you motivate colleagues and your network to try to make a difference?

These are, in fact, topics that should be in our focus because they reveal how our regimes work. The link between organized crime and corruption and parts of the government marks us in the Balkans and only a few journalists are ready and have the knowledge to get into those stories. We have great editors: we work with colleagues from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) and we try to learn something and make progress concerning the stories that are read in the media every day.

Looking at the DPNCG from the outside, the association mainly combines investigative journalism and training. Why do you think this combination is good? How interested are the DPNCG members – and journalists in Montenegro in general – in these topics?

Since newsrooms don't have the time or money to invest in journalists, we use the opportunity to gather on weekends, relax and break through the polarized media scene by socializing in order to learn about the rights and techniques of investigative, responsible journalism. Our members are colleagues from most media outputs. They recognize our good intentions and together, I believe we can make some progress. But it will take time. The very fact that there is such a lousy media situation in this country indicates that we are just at the beginning of our work.

The change of government in Montenegro has triggered a significant reorganization of the state apparatus, including institutions fighting organized crime and corruption. How do you assess the situation?

As long as the heads of investigations are prosecutors who only did their job selectively and were rewarded with loans and apartments from the executive, or while people at the head of the courts were also bribed in the same way, there will be no results. Results will come when we get a prosecutor who is not be afraid to investigate suspicions that parts of the judiciary, police and political apparatus, as well as certain individuals, earned millions from smuggling tobacco and drugs and the privatization of state property. Everything else can only be a farce for the European Commission. We expect changes in the prosecution soon and then we will see if the change of government has brought anything new. For now, the only change is that the police do not report us for social media posts in which we criticize the leaders of the former government.

When looking at organized crime and corruption, does the DPNCG cooperate with other civil society organizations and state institutions? Has anything improved as a result of the country's recent change of government?

We had excellent cooperation from civil society and representatives of state institutions, through the ombudsman's office, when working on stories about crime and

corruption. These are individuals who are ready to help raise journalistic standards because they see how bad the situation is. Unfortunately, so far, we have not had the opportunity to go thoroughly into this topic, but we are trying to change that. Concerning the change of government, thus far the only noticeable difference is the political will to change things. But the old regime has not been dismantled in critical areas. Those who were replaced because they did nothing to fight organized crime and corruption are now, it seems, mostly pulling the strings from the shadows.

Recently, the DPNCG issued a statement demanding responsibility for the unsolved murder of journalist Duško Jovanović and attacks on colleagues in general. What is the background of the announcement? How endangered are journalists in Montenegro?

Almost all attacks on journalists, including the murder of the former editor and owner of the daily *Dan*, remain unsolved. I know this because I followed most of these cases while I was in the commission to investigate attacks on journalists. You don't have to be a lawyer or watch crime films to realize that prosecutors in Montenegro have not invested sufficiently in investigating attacks on journalists – even murder. Looking at those case files is depressing. Honestly, it's a shame to what extent these prosecutors did not want to make any effort to do their jobs properly. And yet many were promoted; others are retired, but sit on different bodies where they benefit. Someone should finally ask them why they failed to do their jobs: was it fear, ignorance, obstruction from the top or something else?

The change of government has not changed much for journalists – they are still targeted. We won't be free to do our work until we not only know that those who attack us will be punished, but also until we are responsible for what we write and say. This means that some journalists should start serving the public interest instead of that of certain people.

You provide legal and psychological assistance to journalists. What motivated you to provide these services? What is the reaction of your fellow journalists? Do they ask for help?

It took journalists time to realize that they cannot fight their problems alone. Furthermore, the newsrooms mainly look out for their own interests, not those of journalists. The pandemic also confirmed that journalists increasingly need professional help. Unfortunately, they don't use it enough because there is still insufficient awareness in the Balkans that we should go to a psychologist or a psychotherapist. That said, some colleagues talk individually with a psychologist about stressful situations at work. And at group training sessions, we share our experiences, which helps to overcome challenges and better prepare us for future situations. Things are improving and we will not give up on this help.

Can you tell us how the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund helped the DPNCG and the journalists you represent?

Thanks to the Resilience Fund, we have published two excellent brochures on researching organized crime that are available to everyone online. We also linked relevant information from the NGO Affirmation Network (MANS), the Center for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro, and

the BIRN to journalists who are writing about corruption and organized crime. Furthermore, through the Fund we learned a lot about human trafficking, particularly through consultations with the police and civil society organizations that are seriously following this issue. We also understood why our country had been the target of criticism from international organizations and institutions for years. It's because of the poor access to justice and compensation for victims and lack of punishment of perpetrators. In addition, through the Fund, we were able to publish excellent, high-quality texts on human trafficking that resonated outside Montenegro.

What are the next steps for the DPNCG? What are your hopes for the future?

Our goal is to develop what we started, try to professionalize, unite and report about the problems that do not allow our societies to break away from the alliance of corruption and crime. To do this as professional journalists, we must have credible sources and check every fact. Then, we can publish and promote stories on our website and social networks, independent of the will of the media outlets where we work. Maybe this will make someone angry, but free media is still an ideal. So we have to work at least on developing free, high-quality self-aware journalists.

Mila Radulović is a journalist and editor of the Montenegrin daily *Vijesti*. She graduated from the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade, Department of Journalism. A professional journalist since 1991, Radulović has worked for the Belgrade newspapers *Borba*, *Naša Borba* and *Dnevni Telegraph*, as a correspondent for the Belgrade news agency Beta and as an associate of the Belgrade weekly *Duga* and *NIN*, as well as Banja Luka's *Nezavisne Novine*. She was a coordinator for investigative journalism at MANS. She is one of the founders of the Media Union and a former member of the Commission for Investigation of Attacks on Journalists. She has won a number of awards, including the MANS and Centre for Civic Education awards for articles on human rights and the fight against corruption.

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