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RESILIENT BALKANS

STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE OF YOUTH TO ORGANIZED CRIME



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RESILIENT BALKANS

This brief is part of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC's) 'Resilient Balkans' series, which looks at topics of common interest to civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans dealing with issues related to organized crime. This brief focuses on what makes youth vulnerable to organized crime in the region and looks at how CSOs are working with youth to strengthen resilience.

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The GI-TOC supports organizations across the Western Balkans working with youth and empowers their efforts against crime and corruption.

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SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Across the Western Balkans, young people are engaged in or vulnerable to a variety of organized criminal activities, including the cultivation and trafficking of drugs, sex work, trafficking in human beings, extortion and car theft or as foot soldiers for criminal groups. Others decide to leave the country irregularly, are smuggled abroad and get involved in criminal activity, particularly in the EU. What is the role of Western Balkan youth in organized crime? What factors make them vulnerable? What can be done to get them off the escalator of crime and prevent recidivism?


Although youth in the Western Balkans are exposed to and engaged in organized crime, civil society organizations (CSOs) either run by or working with them can be key sources of community resilience. Youth, generally accepted as people between the ages of 15 and 29,¹ should be considered as an asset rather than a problem: a source of energy, innovation and courage, as well as fresh ideas and approaches to strengthen integrity and reduce the risk posed by organized crime.


In the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC's) report *Stronger together: Bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans*, youth organizations were identified as key players for addressing vulnerabilities to organized crime and corruption.² In this brief, we look at their main activities and consider how to better strengthen the resilience of youth, including by highlighting positive examples.

The main findings and recommendations are as follows:

- Donors tend to focus on youth groups or issues in large cities, but young people in rural communities face many challenges. CSOs in small communities can make a big difference but are also more exposed; they need support from other CSOs, donors and government agencies, which could also help to establish CSOs in hotspots of organized crime.
- More attention should be paid to building a culture of integrity in schools, as well as pointing out to young people the harms of corruption and organized crime.
- There is a need for greater attention to preventing and treating drug use among youth in the Western Balkans.
- CSOs and influencers, as well as respected people in the community and the media, should develop narratives that counteract the glamourization of organized crime, toxic masculinity and the attractiveness of a 'get rich quick' lifestyle.
- CSOs, law enforcement agencies and football clubs should work more closely together to address the problem of football hooliganism and its links to organized crime.
- CSOs, donors and development agencies should cooperate to mainstream anti-crime elements addressing the needs of youth into strategies designed to promote rural development or the upgrading of urban neighbourhoods.
- There is a need for greater interaction between donors, government officials, CSOs and the private sector to promote training on in-demand skills and for sectors where there are employment opportunities. Partnerships between the private sector, schools and academia to develop joint business-oriented programmes that will mobilize youth, develop their skills and offer tangible alternatives to organized crime are a way forward.

CSOs in small communities can make a big difference but are also more exposed; they need support from other CSOs, donors and government agencies.





Donors often lack knowledge about CSOs working on youth issues and vice versa.

- There is a need to build bridges between government agencies and CSOs to enhance cooperation on sustainable programmatic activities to assist at-risk youth. For example, encouraging governments to work more closely with CSOs that deal with youth through sports or cultural activities, provide counselling and assistance to fight drug addiction and that are engaged in post-penal support.
- Greater attention is needed on post-penal reform as well as working with juvenile offenders before they are released from detention, in order to enhance resocialization and reduce their risk of recidivism. In addition, research should be undertaken in countries where there is a significant number of prisoners from the Western Balkans.
- Stakeholders should include a gender perspective into CSO work on youth issues by including the role and impact on women, men, and sexual and gender minorities into research and activities designed to increase resilience to organized crime.³
- Donors and governments should assist youth organizations and CSOs working with youth in the Western Balkans to strengthen their networks within the region, develop the know-how to apply for larger grants and improve their marketing skills.
- Governments in the Western Balkans should take greater advantage of the social reuse of recovered assets in order to provide facilities and support for sport, cultural and social activities for youth.
- Donors often lack knowledge about CSOs working on youth issues and vice versa. An annual meeting could be held, providing CSOs with the opportunity to make a pitch to donors, showcase their work and learn more about donor priorities.
- Take advantage of Tirana's status as Youth Capital 2022 to design activities and campaigns that empower young people to prevent and fight corruption and raise awareness about organized crime.



Young people are part of the engine of innovation and economic growth. © Vlora Youth Center

INTRODUCTION: WHY FOCUS ON YOUTH?

Young people are vulnerable to organized crime, as potential perpetrators and victims. For some people, youth are seen as a threat: as drug users, hooligans or foot soldiers for organized criminal networks. In the Western Balkans six (WB6),⁴ young people are the biggest consumers of certain kinds of drugs (like cannabis), are over-represented in prisons at home and abroad, and make up the bulk of criminal groups. They are involved in a wide range of crimes, such as drug trafficking, property theft (including burglary and vehicle theft), extortion and even assassinations.

But youth are also part of the engine of innovation and economic growth. They can be voices of positive change in politics and they bring life and energy to communities. Furthermore, they make up a significant percentage of the population – around 20 to 25% of the population of WB6 countries. Kosovo has the youngest population in Europe, and 53% of its citizens are under 25 years old.⁵

Unfortunately, ask most young people in the WB6 what they want to do in the future, and they will say 'leave'. Disillusionment with political polarization, corruption, high unemployment rates and an imbalance between what is taught in schools and the skills needed in the labour market are causing frustration.⁶ Despite the region's youthful population, this potential is being lost to brain drain and economic migration as many young people seek better opportunities abroad. According to the World Economic Forum, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia have some of the highest rates of brain drain in the world.⁷ Worse still, some young people in the region see crime as a shortcut to wealth, status and power.

This brief explores the risk factors that make young people vulnerable to organized crime in the Western Balkans and the response from civil society.



Klub MASA from Mostar engages young people to conduct public campaigns through street actions in a number of cities. © Klub MASA Mostar



Young people are vulnerable to organized crime, as potential perpetrators and victims. © *Bahrudin Bandic*

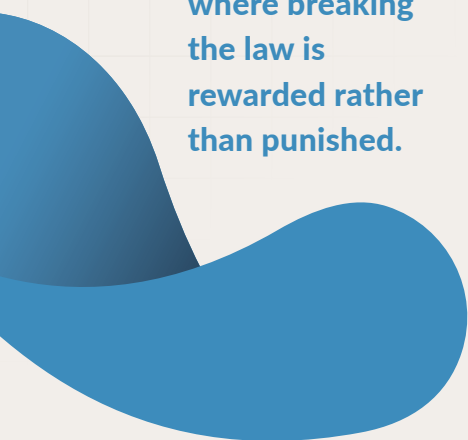
RISKS AND VULNERABILITIES

Based on the perspectives shared by CSOs dealing with at-risk youth, as well as focus-group discussions with young people, a number of risks and challenges were identified that make youth vulnerable to organized crime. However, it is seldom only one factor that creates vulnerability to crime, and this vulnerability is preyed on by criminal groups, as youth are more likely to receive leniency before the law.



CORRUPTION

Youth feel a sense of apathy and helplessness generated by growing up in an environment with high unemployment rates and widespread corruption. CSOs working with youth either referred to the latter's passivity, cynicism and desire to leave or their radical desire for change. Many of the young people we spoke to expressed a low level of trust in public institutions and participation in democratic processes, as well as a lack of agency.



There is a culture of corruption where breaking the law is rewarded rather than punished.

There was also a feeling of powerlessness in an ecosystem of organized crime and corruption where powerful figures operate with impunity. This leaves ambitious young people feeling that the system is rigged, that kleptocracy trumps meritocracy and that there is no justice. One respondent said:

The only thing I see as a possible way out is leaving the country, legally or illegally. Sometimes, I don't even care. The whole country is functioning on corruption and criminals are living the high life, whereas we spend half of our lives earning a degree. I am losing hope that I will stay here. And even if I do find a job, I will hardly be able to survive. Buying a house or starting a family is not even on my mind. But if I did some drug dealing, earned money and maybe even spent time in prison, I would still have more than enough time to enjoy life.⁸

CSO representatives and youth explained the debilitating and demoralizing effect that corruption can have on society, including on young people. This can go from systemic political corruption to everyday bribes needed to get decent healthcare, a job in the public sector, pass an exam or secure a construction permit, to name a few examples.⁹ This contributes to a culture of corruption where breaking the law is rewarded rather than punished. As one CSO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina warned, 'over time, a society that has lost confidence in the police and the government, and feels insecure and unprotected by its own state, begins to behave like an uncontrolled mass in which anything is possible'.¹⁰




UNDERDEVELOPMENT

In some communities, COVID-19 has increased the vulnerability posed by underdevelopment such as high youth unemployment or informal employment. This is exacerbated by insufficient educational opportunities offered in some areas. Migration has led to the closure or downsizing of primary and secondary schools, vocational schools and universities, and, in turn, the lack of employment and educational opportunities often drives migration, either within the country or abroad. Young people – predominantly men – with limited education, work experience or skills find it hard to find legal work abroad. They are therefore more likely to seek illegal work abroad, often by being smuggled into other countries.

The situation is much more difficult in communities where children and youth are so poor that they become victims of forced labour or sexual exploitation. This vulnerability is particularly high in some Roma communities.¹¹ In addition, young people who are part of mixed migration flows in the region are vulnerable to exploitation or becoming involved as smugglers themselves.

Insufficient opportunities for learning in-demand skills (for example IT or vocational trainings) is another risk. Unskilled and unemployed youth, often under pressure to make a living or simply looking for shortcuts to an affluent lifestyle, may become prey to criminality, drug use, gambling or loan sharks. They might also migrate abroad where they get on the escalator of crime, for example by watering cannabis plants in a greenhouse, acting as a lookout, taking part in burglaries or dealing drugs.

Unskilled and unemployed youth may become prey to criminality, drug use, gambling or loan sharks.



THE ESCALATOR OF CRIME

REALITY AT DESTINATION

- Debt bondage
- Criminal life
- No integration into society
- Longer imprisonments
- Exploitative labour conditions
- Arrest or deportation
- Modern slavery

PULL FACTORS

- Promise of 'get rich quick' lifestyle and improved social status
- Low risks of imprisonment and relatively short sentences
- Belief in a better future and legal work opportunities

PUSH FACTORS

- Lack of employment opportunities
- Violent and deviant role models
- Massive unskilled workforce
- Lack of education
- Poverty conditions
- Lack of perspective




VIOLENT ENVIRONMENTS

Young people who grow up in broken homes, have witnessed domestic violence or have a parent with addiction problems are often prone to replicating such behaviour or developing feelings of low self-esteem or mental-health issues. This can have long-term behavioural and psychological consequences. Furthermore, when a young person grows up in an environment permeated by organized crime and violence, patterns of aggressive behaviour come to be considered normal. As one CSO representative put it, this can lead to an inversion of values: ‘to cherish crime, violence and dishonesty instead of honesty, honour and tradition’.¹²

In some cases, young people are growing up in hotspots of organized crime. In such communities, violence – including shootings and bombings – is not unusual. Criminals have a high profile, and trafficking and smuggling activities are public knowledge. The police are considered ineffectual or even part of the problem. There is sometimes even a reluctant acceptance and justification of these forms of organized criminality as the norm. In such environments, organized crime is regarded by some as one of the few means of earning a decent income, and the role of criminal groups is seen as so strong and intertwined with state and local governance that it is difficult to differentiate criminal from non-criminal activities. Where there is a strong criminal milieu and few licit livelihoods, organized crime is considered a ‘way out’.

Even in communities that are not hotspots of organized crime, there is often little for young people to do. Many CSOs dealing with youth – as well as youth themselves – highlighted a lack of cinemas, sports facilities, theatres and youth centres. ‘Cities fall asleep at 4 o’clock’, said one NGO representative in Albania, meaning that cultural and artistic life is almost non-existent.¹³ This can lead to juvenile delinquency, a lack of positive social interaction and a weakened sense of community. It can also cause boredom and frustration, and lead to drug taking or involvement in fights, property crime and football hooliganism. When asked what motivated young people to get involved in organized crime, some respondents at a focus group in Mostar simply said ‘adrenaline’.

Where there is a strong criminal milieu and few licit livelihoods, organized crime is considered a ‘way out’.





SOCIAL EXCLUSION

In some cases, vulnerability stems from social exclusion, for example due to a young person's ethnic, economic or educational background. As an activist in Bosnia and Herzegovina explained, some young people who feel rejected by society 'view criminal activities as the only way they think they can be accepted'.¹⁴ A feeling of belonging was often cited as a reason for joining an organized criminal or hooligan group, especially among young men. Criminal groups provide youth with a much-needed sense of belonging and identity. Joining a gang or a criminal group offers a vulnerable young person membership in a peer group, a clear personal and social identity, increased autonomy from parents or guardians, psychosocial security and self-confidence, a 'path to manhood' for young men and the means by which to improve their social status.¹⁵

Cultural stereotypes of strong male figures and images of young men with cash, guns, women and expensive cars create appealing role models, and some youth think that being associated with these people will increase their position and status in society, at least among their peers. A CSO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina said: 'In recent years, there is a trend of popularizing the use of psychoactive substances, alcoholism, a criminal lifestyle, hooliganism, prostitution, etc. All this leads to an increase in the number of young people [engaging in criminal activities]'.¹⁶ Deviant role models who are involved in organized crime or who boast of a 'get rich quick' lifestyle can be attractive to impressionable young people. One interviewee emphasized: 'It's very easy to get used to quick earnings and big spending and very hard to go back'.¹⁷

However, not only children from disadvantaged backgrounds engage in crime. As a CSO in Kumanovo, North Macedonia, said, there are also young people who come from wealthy families and get involved in criminal activities to show off and revolt against their parents.¹⁸ There are also cases, for example in Serbia, of young kids from well-off backgrounds joining hooligan groups.

In a region where drugs are both easily available and affordable, drug use is becoming a problem, not least among school children and youth. The use of cannabis is particularly widespread among boys and girls in all countries of the Western Balkans, with the use of synthetic drugs and cocaine also rising, especially on the weekends, during festivals and in the summer.¹⁹ In some cases, young people deliver drugs to finance their own consumption. Drug treatment in the WB6 is insufficient, and more geared towards harm reduction and providing opiate substitution treatment than treatment for cannabis, cocaine or synthetic drugs.

There is also a lack of psychosocial support for rehabilitation and resocialization, and drug use and drug treatment are often stigmatized. An NGO in North Macedonia that provides support to drug users noted that young people who use drugs or who are treated for drug addiction ‘are much more difficult to employ and face stigma and discrimination at work. They often lose their jobs after it is discovered that they are being treated or have been treated for addiction’.²⁰ Similarly, youth who spend time in jail – either in their home country or abroad – often have difficulties reintegrating into society after their release, which can lead to a downward spiral due to the dearth of post-penal support.



YOUTH CSOs

A distinction should be made between CSOs dealing with issues relevant to youth and youth CSOs. The latter may deal with some of the same issues as the former through peer-to-peer support. However, they may also cover other issues like corruption, environmental crime, media freedom and investigative journalism, and human smuggling, all of which are of concern to youth, but not exclusively related to them. Such groups may, at times, be regarded as political by governments and not merely as organizations that provide services to support young people. Youth empowerment may be considered a threat to some governments, who regard these outspoken youngsters as anti-governmental rather than non-governmental.


Youth-led CSOs generally see themselves more as young people engaged in issues that affect them as citizens, as opposed to organizations designed to focus on youth issues. As a result, they often resent their lack of inclusion in consultative processes, or the token engagement of certain young people (often sponsored by governments) designated as youth representatives. Furthermore, the point was made by a number of young people in interviews and focus-group discussions that it is misleading to take a ‘one size fits all’ approach to the concerns of youth in a certain country or across the region, since conditions and needs are different in distinct communities.

The point was also made that stakeholders often think they know what young people need without even asking them. As a young person said in Mostar: ‘Everyone is supposing what we need and thinking that trends are the same in Mostar as in Sarajevo, Banja Luka or some other Balkan city.’ Another said: ‘If you want to engage with youth, you cannot always work with the same people, the same schools or pick only the good students. I feel that in most cases, the projects are done for the interests of donors rather than for those who are supposed to be the purpose of their project.’²¹

Both young men and women are vulnerable to organized crime. As a CSO representative in Vlora, Albania, pointed out: 'Young men are more at risk to be involved in these activities, because of the mindset of our society pressuring the men with the burden of breadwinning, while young women usually take these risks to support their partner or when they don't have someone to lean on.'²² A CSO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina who works with young people said that 'there are some types of female personalities who are more likely to become criminals because it becomes a "defence mechanism" against being a victim of a crime. The logic of some of the young women that she works with is "it is better to be a criminal than a victim of other criminals".²³ However, as traditional gender roles evolve in Western Balkan societies, it is likely that women's emancipation will also manifest itself in more leading roles for women in organized criminal groups.²⁴

As more people spend time online, young people, particularly children, can be susceptible to 'sextortion' or online commercial sexual exploitation. Youth are not only victims of cybercrime or cyber-enabled crime, but can also be perpetrators, by hacking, extorting sex, committing cryptocurrency fraud, using ransomware or mining cryptocurrencies (which is not a crime in itself, although stealing electricity to carry out the mining is).

Bearing in mind these risks and vulnerabilities, youth need alternative pathways. 'They need their voices to be heard and to be involved in democratic processes in order to be resilient to what organized crime has to offer', said a CSO representative in Vlora, Albania.²⁵ As shown in the next section, there are a number of CSOs in the WB6 providing support to help youth find these pathways and build resilience to organized crime.



Youth need alternative pathways to build resilience to organized crime.



There are not many CSOs in the Western Balkans that focus on organized crime, and even fewer that address the vulnerability of youth to organized crime. © *Juventas*

ACTIVITIES OF CSOs DEALING WITH YOUTH ISSUES

There are not many CSOs in the Western Balkans that focus on organized crime and even fewer that address the vulnerability of youth to organized crime. However, a number of CSOs in the region work on reducing the risks and vulnerabilities described in the previous section. As a result, their work helps to increase youth's resilience to organized crime. This is done in a number of ways, including:

- protecting, empowering and integrating young people;
- providing education, awareness raising, job training and support for social enterprises;
- creating a safe space for sport and cultural activities;
- providing positive role models and mentoring;
- working on drug prevention and treatment;
- providing post-penal assistance.

With relatively small budgets, CSOs working in this field undertake research, provide recommendations to local governments, carry out campaigns and organize trainings, conferences and workshops. They also conduct activities to engage youth in ways that empower them and keep them away from criminal groups. They work in big cities, but also in small communities, including those that are hotspots of organized crime.²⁶

This section looks at some of these activities in more detail based on the work of CSOs that receive support from the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund, that have taken part in the GI-TOC's resilience dialogues or that are part of the GI-TOC's Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe's civil society network.



EMPOWERMENT AND INTEGRATION

As noted above, some young people feel disenfranchised or disillusioned about their future prospects and their ability to affect change in their own lives or communities. This increases their vulnerability to dropping out of school, experimenting with drugs and getting on the escalator of crime. CSOs try to strengthen social cohesion by working with young people who are vulnerable to social exclusion and bringing them together with their peers to carry out joint activities including dialogues on topics of mutual interest, summer camps, sport and cultural activities, as well as engaging them in the work and life of the community. This helps to strengthen their sense of self-worth and confidence.

CSOs strengthen social cohesion by working with young people vulnerable to social exclusion.

Some CSOs have tried to explain the dangers of organized crime and bust the myth of a 'get rich quick' lifestyle. One of these, the CSO Together for Life based in Tirana, Albania, started a project in Dibra to raise awareness among youth on the dangers of organized crime. It also establishes links between young people and local businesses to provide training and job opportunities. Another Albanian CSO, New Epoch, based in Fier, organizes social clubs for youth as well as information days for parents to raise awareness about the risks associated with organized crime. In addition, Community Building Mitrovica in Kosovo held a high-profile campaign to warn young people against trafficking in human beings.

There are a number of examples of CSOs that put a strong emphasis on prevention and protection. For example, a CSO in Shtip, North Macedonia, works to prevent and report violence against children and youth; it is also engaged in preventing violent radicalization of youth and counteracting the recruitment and abuse of children and youth by organized crime. Klub Masa in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, carries out programmes to steer young people away from football hooliganism, which can also be an entry point for organized crime. Pomożimo Djeci in Banja Luka, in the Republic of Srpska, works with young people from an early age to counter juvenile delinquency. In addition, CSOs in the north and south of Albania have held campaigns to increase awareness of the risks of cultivating cannabis.

In other cases, CSOs try to counter the sense of learned helplessness and apathy by encouraging young people to take a more active role in the life of their communities. A good example comes from the Vlora Youth Center in southern Albania. Its work includes improving local democracy, fostering youth engagement and building community resilience and participatory budgeting. Another example can be found in Shkoder, Albania, where a martial arts club trains young men and women to become more active citizens. A CSO representative in Mostar said: 'There is a whole mass of young people who desperately want to be active in this passive society, but do not know how. It is very important to show young people how they can be engaged in the community through non-formal education.'²⁷

In communities where there are ethnic tensions, some CSOs seek to promote dialogue, provide alternatives to extremist or nationalist views and steer young people away from violence. Klub Masa, for instance, promotes inter-ethnic dialogue in its work in counteracting football hooliganism. In the first project of its kind, the CSO Community Building Mitrovica carried out an awareness-raising initiative on human trafficking that involved young ethnic Albanians and Serbs from both sides of the Ibar river. In Kumanovo, North Macedonia, a CSO promotes intercultural dialogue and understanding of cultural diversity through artistic activities such as painting, photography, theatre and filmmaking. '[Our] projects focus on breaking down prejudices and stereotypes, protecting human rights and promoting culture, diversity and tradition,' said a representative.²⁸

In many communities in the WB6, young people have a low opinion of the police and state institutions. Some CSOs, like Sebastia in Kurbin, Albania, have taken the initiative of increasing trust in law enforcement and public institutions through the organization of round-table meetings, trainings and artistic performances.

In the resilience dialogues organized by the GI-TOC in all six countries of the Western Balkans, youth organizations and CSOs dealing with youth issues were included in conversations between civil society and governments in order to build bridges between stakeholders. There is scope for greater sensitivity to youth issues as part of community policing, and a need for public institutions and local government to respond more effectively to the needs of youth and more proactively reach out to them. In particular, police should put a greater emphasis on crime prevention in collaboration with CSOs and other community groups, and tailor their work based on a granular, intelligence-led analysis of local conditions.



EDUCATION AND TRAINING

There is a disconnect between the education system and the job market, as well as lack of vocational training for youth.

One of the vulnerabilities noted by many CSOs is a disconnect between the education system and the job market, as well as a lack of vocational training for youth. Some CSOs aim to fill this gap by providing young people with opportunities to learn new skills, including to more effectively expose and combat organized crime. For example, the CSO Mladiinfo, based in Niksic, Montenegro, supports youth who want to engage in journalism, including investigative journalism on organized crime and corruption. Another example is the Vlora Youth Center, who for over 20 years has been working with young people to expand their horizons, skills and opportunities to support them towards legal livelihoods.²⁹

Some CSOs provide training to young staff or volunteers on project management, developing public awareness campaigns, advocacy, coalition building, resource mobilization and presentation skills. For example, the CSO Juventas in Montenegro involves young people in designing and implementing projects focused on strengthening the capacities of young people, including high school and university students, volunteers and youth workers.

However, further capacity-building support for CSOs working on issues related to organized crime is needed.



Young people discuss the harms of drugs in their community in North Macedonia. © Double Hope

Another idea worth exploring is to develop ‘impact hubs’ in order to promote and support innovation among youth, and create spaces for mentoring, networking, and sharing skills and resources. One example is a joint project of the Austrian Development Agency and the Austrian Research Promotion Agency to explore possibilities for implementing a new funding scheme on frugal innovation in the Western Balkans.³⁰



PROMOTION OF SPORTS AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

A recurrent problem identified by CSOs supporting youth and by youth themselves is the lack of sporting facilities and cultural activities for young people in the region. ‘There is no cinema in the city, and few cultural events. On the other hand, young people face constant pressure to join a political party. Politics has become present in every sphere of our lives, and this is hugely disappointing for young people,’ said a CSO representative in Kumanovo, North Macedonia.³¹

The KinFolk Coffee Library in Durrës focuses on providing a range of activities for youth. The venue, which is an asset seized from a criminal group, has been turned into a cafe that functions as a multicultural centre offering training, acting courses, discussion groups, chess and language classes, and summer and winter schools. CSOs can also use sports to reduce vulnerability to organized crime, as shown by the Martial Arts Club in Shkodra, Albania. There, instructors work with boys and girls to strengthen their discipline and self-confidence through tae kwon do, while also teaching them how to stay clear of criminal groups in the city.

Safe spaces like these create opportunities for young men and women to interact, helping to break down traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and they provide places where young people can develop their interests and self-esteem. There is scope for greater CSO engagement and the social reuse of confiscated assets to provide sport facilities and cultural centres for young people in the WB6.



PROVIDING POSITIVE ROLE MODELS AND MENTORING

As noted above, young people often lack positive role models and mentors. Across the WB6, CSO leaders and staff who deal with issues that can reduce vulnerability to organized crime are themselves role models. Their civic engagement, volunteerism and leadership are a positive example to young people. Church groups and service organizations like the Lions Club and Rotary International that are present across the region can provide strong role models while undertaking activities that support youth in the community.

There are also a number of good examples from Albania. For instance, the CSO Information Network and Active Citizenship carried out a project to understand the factors that affect youth in the crime hotspot of Elbasan and to identify positive role models who can share their experiences, expertise and values with youth. In addition, the Sebastia Youth Centre in the municipality of Kurbin, Albania, is working with young people to counter the region's stereotype as a hotspot for organized crime (particularly for burglars operating in the EU) and giving youth guidance for a better life.³²



Youth engage in a protest to save a historical site. The activity was organized by Sebastia Youth Center, a civil society organization based in Kurbin, Albania. © Sebastia Youth Center



YOUTH CENTRE OR SCHOOL OF CRIME?

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 in Albania: Kurbin, a municipality north of the capital, Tirana. After 2010, when it became easier for Albanians to travel within the EU, thieves from Kurbin took advantage of the opportunity and became notorious across Europe. The media dubbed them 'hawks' for their swiftness and predatory skills. Young men returning from their 'adventures' abroad with expensive cars, clothing and jewellery became role models for poor and impressionable youth in Kurbin who wanted to be as 'successful' as their new 'heroes'. 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. Experienced burglars passed on their skills to the younger ones in what became a 'school of crime'. To help tackle this problem, a group of young people established a CSO called Sebastia Youth Centre. This organization, which is unique in the municipality, works with vulnerable young people to offer positive role models and provide them with opportunities to engage in licit activities and learn new skills. It focuses on preventing youth from being recruited into criminal groups and gives them a chance to become more active members of the community.³³

Part of being a positive role model includes promoting gender equality, avoiding stereotypes and addressing toxic masculinity, as well as promoting tolerance and respect for diversity.³⁴ This is a topic that deserves more attention and support. In addition, involving former prisoners or members of criminal groups in dialogues with young people shows a less glamorous side to organized crime and can help reach young people who may be dismissive of more traditional types of focus group discussions or mentoring. Thus far, very few celebrities, community leaders or influencers have become engaged in strengthening resilience to organized crime. There is untapped potential in this area to counteract narratives that glamourize crime and drug use.



DRUG PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

Although drug use is rising in the Western Balkans, drug treatment seems to be lagging behind. Most drug treatment centres and programmes are geared towards opiate substitution therapy and harm reduction, yet heroin use is low among young people in the region, except for Roma communities in Albania and Kosovo. The main problems are with use of cannabis, cocaine and synthetic drugs.

Drug use is rising in the Western Balkans but drug treatment is lagging behind.

A number of CSOs in the WB6 provide support to drug users. This includes drug prevention campaigns and information (for example in high schools) and help for LGBT drug users, as well as services for reducing drug use among sex workers, prisoners and marginalized communities and minorities like the Roma community. Examples include Juventas in Montenegro, HOPS in North Macedonia and Restart in Serbia.

This work is particularly important to break the cycle of young people using drugs and then becoming involved in organized crime (including to pay for drugs) or who are involved in organized crime and then start using

drugs (such as when dealers become users). CSOs like Restart have pointed to positive examples of young people undergoing drug treatment and rehabilitation, before being able to successfully resocialize and reintegrate into society. Young people who manage to take this life-changing path are particularly powerful role models to youth who are trapped in a cycle of drugs and crime, since they can be credible sources to provide peer-to-peer support. Several CSOs – even those not specializing in drug treatment – underlined the need for more education and information in schools on the harmful effects of drugs and crime.

Although relations between CSOs and government agencies are often strained, they are generally good on the issue of drug prevention and treatment. This is perhaps because CSOs that provide support to drug users are regarded by the government as service providers, and help to address a shortfall in treatment, especially in countries that no longer have access to support from the Global Fund, an international organization investing in support programmes against diseases by local experts.



POST-PENAL ASSISTANCE

The number of young people from the Western Balkans in prison at home or abroad is quite high.³⁵ In some cases, young people who have been put in jail for relatively minor offences meet hardened criminals and end up risking not only recidivism but also moving up the ladder of crime based on the experience and contacts they make in prison. In Serbia, the recidivism rate is more than 60%.

Post-penal assistance is therefore essential. A CSO called Neostart in Serbia helps recently released prisoners and provides them with support for seeking a job, such as training on how to write CVs and prepare for job interviews, as well as counselling, psychological support and guidance on creating a healthy atmosphere in the family after the prisoner's release. In addition, Neostart supports young people (mostly men) leaving the correctional facility in Krusevac or the juvenile prison in Valjevo. This support includes food and accommodation for vulnerable youth to prevent recidivism, assistance with updating identity documents (which can often expire during imprisonment) and mentoring. Neostart also provides motivation for social inclusion and positive reintegration, and some of the CSO's mentors are former criminals.

Like drug prevention and treatment, post-penal assistance for youth is a topic where there is relatively good cooperation between CSOs and government agencies, but further financial support is necessary.



The NGO Community Building Mitrovica raised young people's awareness of national and local mechanisms for reporting human trafficking and seeking assistance.

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UNLOCKING YOUNG PEOPLE'S POTENTIAL

Although CSOs in the WB6 are doing important work to strengthen resilience to organized crime among youth, there is room for greater engagement by civil society. As a CSO representative in Brcko, Bosnia and Herzegovina, said: 'It is necessary to involve the NGO sector more when we talk about organized crime and prevention in order to give young people quality programmes to meet other young people, travel and socialize, and be recognized as leaders in their communities.'³⁶

There is also scope for strengthening regional youth networks in the Western Balkans to increase understanding and cooperation, and unite efforts to enhance resilience to organized crime. Such efforts could build on the work of the GI-TOC and existing programmes such as the Regional Youth Cooperative Office or the Regional Cooperation Council's Western Balkans Youth Lab project.³⁷

Youth are the key to a resilient Balkans, but they are also vulnerable to falling prey to organized criminals. Greater support for CSOs working with young people may unlock the potential of youth in the region and engage them more actively in strengthening the resilience of their communities to organized crime and corruption.

NOTES

- 1 The age range for what is considered 'youth' varies, but 15 to 29 years old is often selected for statistical purposes at EU level. See: European Commission, Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2021), 14 October 2021, https://europa.eu/youth/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/1_EN_ACT_part1_v3.pdf.
- 2 Kristina Amerhauser and Walter Kemp, Stronger together: Bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans, GI-TOC, February 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/WBalkans-CSOs-web.pdf>.
- 3 For more information, see Fatjona Mejdini and Kristina Amerhauser, Resilient Balkans: Gender and organized crime, GI-TOC, February 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GMFA-Gender-and-Organized-Crime-WEB.pdf>.
- 4 The Western Balkans six is formed by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. References to Kosovo in this report are made without prejudice to positions on status, and are in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on Kosovo's declaration of independence.
- 5 European Commission, EU Assistance to Kosovo, Education for the Future, n.d., https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/kosovo/documents/press_corner/education_for_the_future_en.pdf.
- 6 Regional Cooperation Council, Study on youth employment in the Western Balkans, July 2021, <https://www.rcc.int/docs/573/study-on-youth-employment-in-the-western-balkans>
- 7 Klaus Schwab, The global competitiveness report 2019, World Economic Forum, 2019, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf; see also Milica Stojanovic, Nearly half of Bosnia's youngsters pondering emigration, BalkanInsight, 17 November 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/17/nearly-half-of-bosnias-youngsters-pondering-emigration/>.
- 8 Statement at a focus group organized with youth in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, October 2021.
- 9 Interview with a representative of the Vlora Youth Center in Albania, 26 November 2021.
- 10 Interview with a representative of Klub MASA in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 4 November 2021.
- 11 Stephan Müller et al., Roma: Europe's neglected coronavirus victims, BalkanInsight, 1 April 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/01/roma-europes-neglected-coronavirus-victims/>.
- 12 Interview with a representative of Double Hope in Shtip, North Macedonia, 27 October 2021.
- 13 Interview with Nensi Dragoti in Albania, 28 November 2021.
- 14 Interview with Dzanan Berberovic, Associate Professor at the University of Tuzla and psychologist for juvenile and young adult offenders in the correctional-educational institution in Orasje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2 November 2021.
- 15 DaJung Woo et al., Social psychology of gangs: an intergroup communication perspective, in Scott H Decker and David C Pyrooz (eds), *The Handbook of Gangs*. John Wiley and Sons, 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305355348_Social_Psychology_of_Gangs_An_Intergroup_Communication_Perspective.

- 16 Interview with Ella Ljubić in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 4 November 2021.
- 17 Focus group discussion with youth in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15 October 2021.
- 18 Interview with a representative of the Youth Association Kreator in North Macedonia, 27 October 2021.
- 19 Data on drug use gathered through CSOs in the WB6 from September to December 2021.
- 20 Data provided by the Healthy Options Project in Skopje, North Macedonia, in November 2021.
- 21 Focus group meeting with youth in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 15 October 2021.
- 22 Interview with representatives of the organization Vlora Youth Center in Albania, 26 November 2021.
- 23 Interview with Džanan Berberović, Associate Professor at the University of Tuzla and psychologies for juvenile and young adult offenders in Correctional-educational Institution in Orašje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2 November 2021.
- 24 For more information, see Resilient Balkans, Gender and organized crime, GI-TOC, January 2022.
- 25 Interview with a representative of the Vlora Youth Center, December 2021.
- 26 Kristina Amerhauser and Walter Kemp, Stronger Together: Bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans, GI-TOC, February 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/WBalkans-CSOs-web.pdf>.
- 27 Interview with Ella Ljubić in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 4 November 2021.
- 28 Interview with a representative of the Youth Association Kreator in North Macedonia, 27 October 2021.
- 29 Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, Risk Bulletin, Issue 5, GI-TOC, February 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/seeobs-risk-bulletin-5/>.
- 30 For further information, see Impact Hub Vienna at <https://vienna.impacthub.net/innovation-for-a-better-world/>.
- 31 Interview with a representative of the Youth Association Kreator in North Macedonia, 27 October 2021.
- 32 Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, Risk Bulletin, Issue 6, GI-TOC, March–April 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/SEE-RB06-EN.pdf>.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 For more information, see Fatjona Mejдини and Kristina Amerhauser, Resilient Balkans, Gender and organized crime, GI-TOC, February 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GMFA-Gender-and-Organized-Crime-WEB.pdf>.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Interview with a representative of the youth Association from Brčko District in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 04 November 2021.
- 37 For more information on the Regional Youth Cooperation Office, see <https://www.rycowb.org>. Details on the Western Balkans Youth Lab can be found at https://www.rcc.int/priority_areas/48/western-balkans-youth-lab-project.



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