



MIND THE GAP

Analysis of research on illicit
economies in the Western Balkans

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This research report is an output of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe.

The report is based on desk research and data and analysis collected through interviews with scholars, civil society researchers and activists, journalists, active and retired criminal justice professionals, members of parliament, anti-corruption officials and experts, people from the business sector and representatives of international organizations. We thank them for their valuable insights and contributions.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans have been on the rise since the 1990s, following the war in former Yugoslavia in 1995 and the political-economic crisis triggered by the collapse of pyramid schemes in Albania in 1997. Accordingly, popular, journalistic and academic research on organized crime in these states – namely, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – has also increased.

In 1996, for example, the head of Belgrade's criminal police, Marko Nicović, published the book *Droga: Carstvo zla (Drugs: Evil Empire)* about the history of organized drug trade and the current fight to curtail it.¹ In 2001, the Serbian Interior Ministry mapped and systematically identified 118 organized criminal groups for the first time in the *White Book*.² In 2002, journalist Jelena Bjelica wrote a study on human trafficking in Europe and the Balkans.³ In 2005, journalist Miloš Vasić published an in-depth profile of the Zemun Clan, which he described as one of the most powerful criminal organizations in the Balkans during their heyday between 1999 and 2003.⁴ One of the first regional projects on the impact of organized crime on peace-building in the region was launched in 2006.⁵ Organized crime in the region also sparked interest among international scholars, such as Misha Glenny, who, in 2018, published *McMafia*, about the global rise in organized crime since the 1980s. Despite the surge in research on organized crime in the Western Balkans, the findings are still insufficient and lacking in certain respects.

These works reflect three main trends of illicit economies in the Western Balkans. First, the geography of organized crime has advanced from heroin smuggling through the Balkan route to cocaine trafficking from Latin America to Western Europe, and to the region being a source of particular illicit goods such as weapons and cannabis.⁶ Second, the politics of illicit economies in the region has evolved from being an ecosystem of political protection for crime facilitators to organized corruption that enriches and shields those with power.⁷ Third, following the end of communism and regional wars, the lack of institutional capacity to provide tangible societal improvements resulted in only partial reforms in criminal justice systems across the region. This is despite the 1999 reforms in justice and home affairs fostered by the EU through the Stabilization and Association Process.⁸

The objective of this study prepared by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) is to systematically and strategically identify gaps in the current understanding of organized crime in the Western Balkans, and to suggest future areas of work that could help close these gaps and better understand illicit practices. This gap analysis maps existing knowledge, identifies

trends and emerging issues, and reveals the under-researched aspects of illicit economies in the region. With this approach, this study aims to better understand areas of uncertainty and initiate new studies more quickly.⁹ Identifying blind spots in the existing literature is a necessary step for creating a new research agenda, establishing strategic and funding priorities and designing research projects that can build the knowledge base, enhance analysis and contribute to evidence-based policymaking.¹⁰ Ultimately, this research agenda should aid in the prevention and disruption of organized crime both in the Western Balkans or perpetrated by criminals from the region.

After first describing the methodology and data collection techniques of the gap analysis, the paper explains the scale, scope and impact of organized crime and corruption research in the Western Balkans. It then examines the main thematic focus of research on organized crime in the region – namely, criminal markets, criminal actors, and the resilience of state and non-state actors to organized crime and corruption. The third part lays out recommendations and further steps to better understand and increase knowledge of the illicit economies in the Western Balkans.

Methodology

To identify research gaps within the body of knowledge on organized crime in the Western Balkans, this study focuses on the efforts of researchers to explore the actions taken by criminal groups to profit from illicit market activities by using violence, monopoly or corruption. It also includes the institutional and civil society reactions to organized crime and corruption through law enforcement and prevention actions and strategies. This study uses and upgrades metrics from the Global Organized Crime Index, namely, the indicators for criminal markets, criminal actors and resilience to illicit economies,¹¹ as shown in Figure 1.

Group of indicators	Specific indicator	
Criminal markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human trafficking • Human smuggling • Arms trafficking • Flora crimes • Fauna crimes • Non-renewable resource crimes • Heroin trade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cocaine trade • Cannabis trade • Synthetic drug trade • Cybercrime • Financial crime • Cigarette smuggling
Criminal actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mafia-style groups • Criminal networks • State-embedded actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign actors • Gender and crime
Resilience to illicit economies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political leadership and governance • Government transparency and accountability • International cooperation • National policies and laws • Judicial system and detention • Anti-money laundering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law enforcement • Territorial integrity • Economic regulatory capacity • Victim and witness support • Prevention • Non-state actors

FIGURE 1 Global Organized Crime Index 2021 indicators and additional indicators used to identify fields of interest for the gap analysis.

Data collection took place in two phases. Adopting a medium-term timeframe (i.e. a five-year outlook based on data from the preceding five years), a systematic review of published research papers from 2017 to 2022 was conducted.¹² A quantitative analysis of this literature was performed with the

aim of mapping and assessing the existing knowledge base and specific research subjects.¹³ This literature review involved identifying research papers related to illicit economies by searching: i) Web of Science, a worldwide database that provides reference and citation data from academic journals, conference proceedings, as well as other academic documents; ii) websites of civil society organizations, universities, academic journals, interior ministries, police services and regional initiatives in the Western Balkans; and iii) databases of scientific articles and PhD theses.

The results were limited to studies with empirical research findings on illicit economies in the Western Balkans published between 2017 and 2022, regardless of the authors' origin. Many researchers from this region tend to publish in their native languages without the opportunity to translate into other regional languages or English. Therefore, this analysis searched research papers in English and in the national languages of the Western Balkans.

In the second phase of data collection, the findings of the systematic literature review were checked, confirmed and updated through interviews with experts in the field. These included scholars, civil society researchers and activists, journalists, active and retired criminal justice professionals, members of parliament, anti-corruption officials and experts, people from the business sector and representatives of international organizations. Participants were asked to detect credible reports, identify studies with impact on policymaking and debating (to supplement the literature review), discuss unresearched and under-researched topics, discuss limitations in and barriers to researching organized crime, and identify their research needs. In total, 61 interviews were conducted in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia in July and August 2022.

The analysis identified 514 research papers based on the search results from 584 entries on the Web of Science using 84 keywords, 217 civil society organization websites, 43 universities for PhD theses, 37 academic journals, 18 interior ministries or police services' official websites, 13 international and regional organization websites, five databases of scientific articles, two databases of a PhD thesis, and 61 interviews with experts.



Key findings

- Researchers of illicit economies in the Western Balkans published more than 500 reports between 2017 and 2022. Most research focuses on the ability of states to fight organized crime and corruption. Less research exists on the prevalence of criminal markets and the actions of criminal actors. Only 20% of publications provide a comparative analysis of three or more Western Balkan countries.
- Researchers mainly cover national policies and laws. Civil society monitors the implementation of national policies and laws, the judicial system and detention, and the performance of law enforcement. National and foreign governments tend to focus on law enforcement work and drug trafficking, while international and regional organizations cover police and prosecution reform. Investigative media concentrate on specific corruption and drug trafficking cases.
- The research of international organizations and foreign countries or blocs, such as the EU and the US, has the most significant policy impact, particularly when it comes to changing legislative strategies and institutional settings to counter organized crime and corruption. Citizens and politicians are interested in the work of investigative journalists, while the expert community wants to see more from civil society and academia.
- The research on criminal markets aligns with the risk analysis or priorities that governments set through national police strategic assessments. In particular, drug trafficking and human smuggling are currently key focus areas for researchers and priorities for governments, while inquiries on cyber, environmental and financial crime are marginal. Researchers primarily explore criminals rooted in the state apparatus by investigating corrupt practices in specific countries. Excluded from the research focus are foreign criminal actors and a gender perspective of organized crime and corruption.
- Donors usually drive the research agenda since researchers must align proposals with their priorities when applying for funding. The partnership between analysts from state and non-state institutions and organizations needs to be improved, but the community of researchers of illicit economies is growing.
- In the future, researchers should work more closely to identify criminal actors, delve deeper into cyber and cyber-enabled crime, investigate illicit financial flows, increase the focus on environmental crime, enhance methodologies for analyzing illicit economies, and propose policy-relevant solutions for practical prevention and disruption strategies. Their research should also reflect global and regional trends, such as the war in Ukraine, the Open Balkan and Belt and Road initiatives, and the migration policies of countries close to conflict, such as Turkey.

NAVIGATING THE RESEARCH

According to the data set compiled from a systematic literature review and expert interviews, 514 research papers on illicit economies were published by researchers from academia, civil society, governments, and international and regional organizations between 2017 and 2022. The annual publication rate fluctuated over the period, as shown in Figure 2.

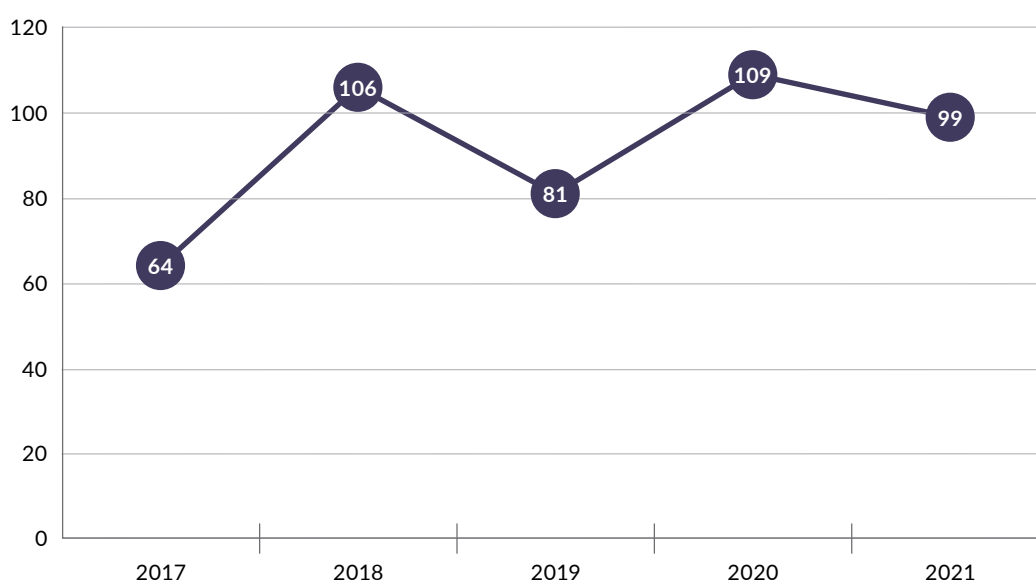


FIGURE 2 Number of research works on illicit economies published per year, Western Balkans.

Trends in research production

Research on illicit economies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia and the Western Balkans more generally surged starting in 2018, and in Kosovo and Montenegro in 2020, as shown in Figure 3. One of the reasons for the increase is that international organizations – namely, the EU and the Council of Europe – and comparative global indexes such as those created by Transparency International and Freedom House highlighted problems of organized crime and corruption in their reporting on the Western Balkans around this time.¹⁴

In 2018, the European Commission detected 'links with organized crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests' in the whole of the Western Balkans.¹⁵ In the same period, the region was under increased monitoring by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) due to risks of money laundering and financing terrorism.¹⁶ Transparency International found that the Western Balkans became more corrupt in 2020 than in 2019.¹⁷ Freedom House categorized the region as 'partly free',¹⁸ which qualifies countries as electoral, but not liberal, democracies.

Year	Countries included in the research						
	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia	Western Balkans*
2017	11	19	20	6	12	21	7
2018	15	25 (32%↑)	30	20 (233%↑)	14	33 (57%↑)	19 (171%↑)
2019	24 (60%↑)	29	21	21	16	33	20
2020	23	33	35 (67%↑)	26	21 (31%↑)	45	24
2021	25	41	30	24	27	46	27
2022	17	22	18	19	19	29	16
Total	115	169	154	116	109	207	113

FIGURE 3 Research works per year on each country, with most significant increases indicated.

*In the data presented here and in the following figures, 'Western Balkans' refers to research papers that cover three or more countries from the region.

Additionally, big donors to civil society, academia and governments, such as the EU, drive the research agenda by formulating priorities that applicants must follow.¹⁹ Fighting organized crime and corruption has been one of the top EU priorities for the Western Balkans since the opening of accession talks in the first decade of the 2000s. 'If it were not for donors, there would be no research into organized crime and corruption,' a civil society researcher pointed out.²⁰

Sources

As Figure 4 shows, 70% of published works come from two sources: academic journals (36%) and civil society (34%) reports. This is followed by reports from international organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the European Commission (10%), as well as conference papers (7%). Outputs from governmental and regional organizations reports, PhD theses and books represent less than 5% of the published research.

Conference papers are mainly published at three scientific meetings. The first is Policing in Central and Eastern Europe, organized biennially since 1996 by the Slovenian Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security.²¹ The second is Archibald Reiss Days, organized annually since 2010 by the University of Criminal Investigation and Police Studies in Belgrade.²² The university also founded the Jakov repository, which provides open access to works produced and published within the institution.²³ The third is Balkan Criminology, which organized almost 50 meetings on various topics related to crime and its prevention in the Balkans between 2012 and 2020.²⁴

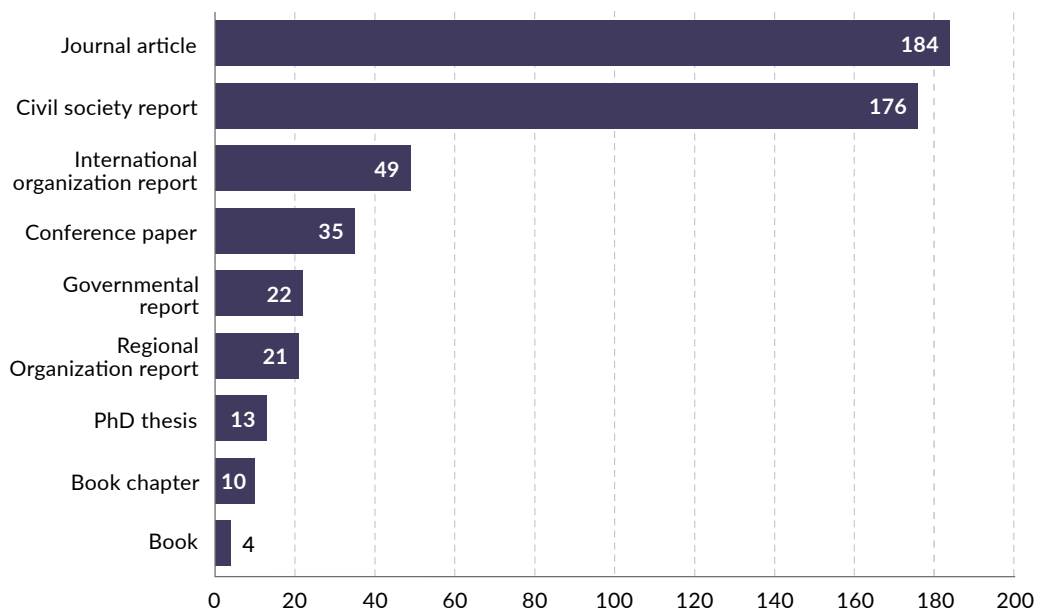


FIGURE 4 Number of published research works per category.

Geographic coverage

As indicated in Figure 5, journal articles are primarily focused on Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, while civil society in Kosovo and Serbia have the highest publishing output. International organizations and national institutions are more focused on individual countries, while reports from foreign governments cover multiple countries or offer a regional view. Reports from regional organizations, such as the Regional Cooperation Council or Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), are region-oriented and cover all six of the Western Balkan countries.

Only 13 doctoral theses in the Western Balkans deal with illicit economies, with Serbia featuring the most frequently. No doctoral dissertations were found on Montenegro, and four universities in the country also confirmed this in writing.

Type of research product	Countries Included in the research						
	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia	Western Balkans
Journal article	25	66	33	27	24	60	34
Civil society report	33	34	86	34	41	73	29
International organization report	16	16	11	15	12	17	8
Conference paper	1	13	0	5	1	14	5
Governmental report	16	12	6	7	8	15	12
Regional organization report	21	21	15	21	21	21	21
PhD thesis	2	3	1	2	0	5	1
Book chapter	0	2	0	4	1	1	2
Book	1	2	2	1	1	1	1

FIGURE 5 Published research works per country and type, 2017–2022.

Strengths and weaknesses of the research

Although all the Western Balkan countries are represented in the research, the majority of papers focused on Serbia (40%), as Figure 6 illustrates. As a result, and as the interviews with experts revealed, the current body of research is insufficient to explain the phenomena of illicit economies in the region objectively, empirically and comparatively. Multiple interviewees observed that research on organized crime has differing research impact, does not force real change, or is only of interest to specific groups, such as law enforcement or civil society.

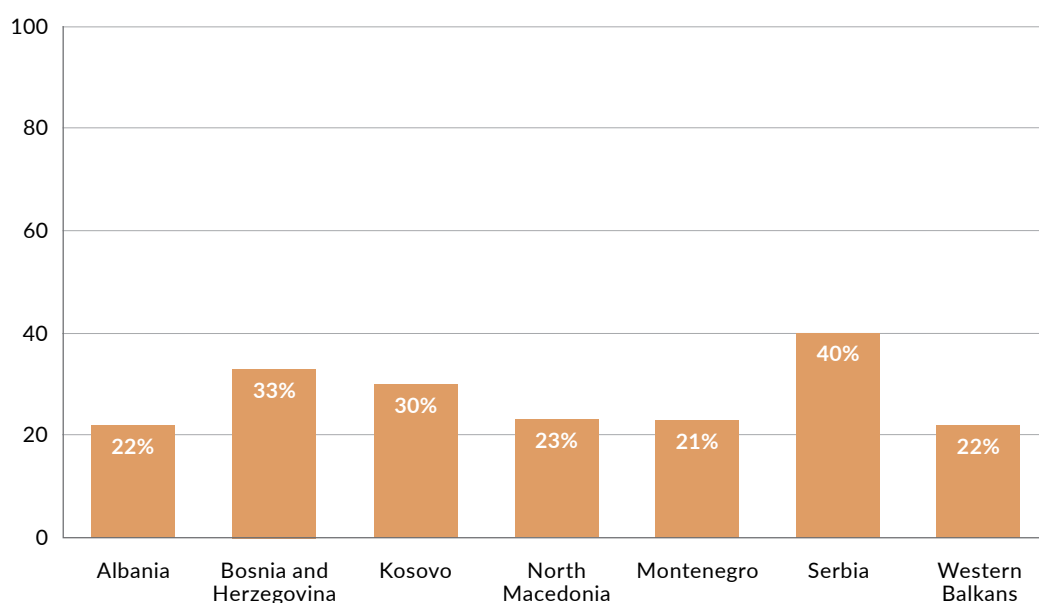


FIGURE 6 Research focus per country as a percentage of total published works.

For example, one prosecutor said that there is insufficient research on organized crime and corruption, which is a significant problem.²⁵ Scholars added that, although a research community is building, objective and credible research is missing, and available research only scratches the surface of the problem.²⁶ Members of parliament rarely ask scholars or other researchers for specific analyses, with most interactions confined to requests to their personal researcher acquaintances for legal opinions on law amendments.²⁷

Another challenge the interviewees raised was reaching out to citizens and raising awareness of illegal practices. One journalist said that the key challenge is not the insufficient generation of research, but rather the dissemination of existing research to citizens. 'I don't know why they don't reach people', the journalist said. 'Maybe because the way the media report about those studies or their content does not correspond with the political choice that the media supports.'²⁸

SWOT analysis of research on illicit economies in the Western Balkans

A SWOT analysis of research in the Western Balkans can help researchers identify the areas of greatest potential impact, and greatest threat, for their research work. For example, governments in the region have set fighting crime and corruption as a top policy priority. Furthermore, a recent survey shows that organized crime currently features second on the top five issues that most negatively affect citizens' feelings of security in the Western Balkans.²⁹ Researchers should therefore design studies that respond to the high relevance of organized crime and corruption for policymakers and the populace.

From this analysis, one of the biggest areas of concern is the partnership gap between state and non-state researchers. One of the biggest opportunities to address this issue is the formation of a research community that congregates regularly for discussion and analysis. Such a consortium could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of research problems and stimulate more effective solutions informed by different perspectives.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Civil society researchers and investigative journalists collaborate effectively ■ Research community on organized crime and corruption is slowly growing ■ Law enforcement analysts agreed on the applicability of the methodology of the Serious Organized Crime Threat Assessment designed by EUROPOL to analyze and describe criminal markets and actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Inadequate partnership between researchers from different sectors ■ Lack of specialists in organized crime and corruption research ■ Difficulty of collecting data on organized crime and corruption ■ Government-funded research can be driven by short-term political agendas ■ Regional perspective on illicit economies is missing ■ Lack of sufficient methodologies to research illicit economies ■ Language barriers, especially between Albanian and former Yugoslav languages
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Organized crime and corruption are topics of high public concern ■ Emergence of new forms and patterns of organized crime and corruption create spaces for fresh debates ■ Open-access documents make it more possible for researchers to carry out studies ■ Heightened interest in the Western Balkans from external actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Safety and security of researchers ■ Limited funds restrict original data collection and influence credibility of research

When interviewees were asked about the relevance of existing research, their responses varied relative to their roles, with experts often referring to research from their own circles or peers. For example, civil servants cited national organized crime threat assessments or money laundering risk evaluations as worthwhile work, while civil society activists quoted their colleagues or international organizations.³⁰ As a result, partnerships between academia, civil society and public servants are rare.

Researchers from different groups seldom cooperate when developing methodologies and collecting data, such as when using official data in drafting reports. Additionally, their research efforts are rarely complimentary. For example, public servants and civil society researchers tend to focus on immediate problems and challenges, often responding to current events or donor needs. Their goals are to generate effective institutional and policy responses, increase public debate, and push institutional reaction. Meanwhile, scholars tend to look at longer-term issues based on empirical evidence. Their goals are to prove or disprove hypotheses, and to work differently regarding their research topics and how they respond to them.

Impact of the research

The outputs with the most significant policy impacts – changing legislation, strategies, and institutional settings – have come from international organizations and foreign countries. These policy changes manifest in the framework of the EU enlargement processes or when a foreign country, such as the US, publishes work on human trafficking and narcotics.³¹ As one police officer said, 'It's impossible to change anything in the region without foreign embassies.'³²

However, the impact of research from the European Commission has reduced as of late due to frustrations around the process of integrating Western Balkan states into the EU. Delays in the accession process, as well as perceptions of double standards in the application of requirements on the part of role players in civil society, government and international organizations, have inspired criticism of the relevance of official EU reports.³³ In particular, there is a perception that the progress reports from the European Commission, which are intended to serve as a roadmap for integration, focus on bureaucratic aspects of stabilizing the Western Balkan states, rather than the realities of corruption that work against transformation. Instead of democratization and full institutional transformation, the Western Balkan countries have become 'stabilitocracies' with 'obvious democratic backslidings that simultaneously claim to work towards democratic reform and offer stability'.³⁴ This has led researchers to question the transformative power of the EU.³⁵

As a civil society researcher explained, 'Before, debate on European Commission progress reports was substantive. Today, these reports are a day or two in the media, then they quickly disappear from the public radar.'³⁶

By contrast, according to civil society activists, political leaders in opposition often use the EU and media stories in political battles, while political leaders choose to comment on what is in their favour or keep silent.³⁷

According to interviewees, the impact of civil society in terms of research contribution is limited in that these groups often act as sources for research by international organizations, and are often secondary to official data.³⁸ Meanwhile, the impact of academia in terms of real-world transformation is marginal,³⁹ although the expert community is more interested in academic and civil society work than politicians and citizens are.⁴⁰ However, scholars tend to publish research papers in international journals (which have more impact) rather than in national ones, depending on their capacity to write or translate their work into English.⁴¹

Investigative journalists shine a spotlight on illicit economies in the Western Balkans

An analysis of the output from three key investigative journalism networks provides a preliminary understanding of the efforts of journalists to report on criminal markets and actors in the Western Balkans. InSight Crime and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) are global investigative reporting organizations specializing in organized crime and corruption. The OCCRP network also includes six media organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.⁴² Balkan Insight is a regional investigative reporting portal run by journalists from South Eastern Europe, including all Western Balkan countries. Although they are not specialized, they report on organized crime and corruption.

Journalists from these three organizations published 53 investigative stories on illicit economies in the Western Balkans between 2017 and 2022. Journalists mostly reported on organized crime and corruption cases in Serbia (51%), Albania (34%) and Montenegro (28%), as shown in Figure 7. Missing from this portfolio is a regional and comparative perspective, as well as cases from Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Year	Countries included in the research						
	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia	Western Balkans
2017	0	0	0	0	2	3	0
2018	3	0	0	0	2	2	0
2019	2	0	1	1	2	2	0
2020	1	1	0	0	5	10	2
2021	10	1	0	1	2	7	1
2022	2	0	0	0	2	3	0
Total	18	2	1	2	15	27	3

FIGURE 7 Published investigative stories per country, 2017–2022.

Unlike other researchers in this study, journalists concentrated exclusively on investigating criminal markets and actors. However, they were not focused on the ability of state and non-state actors to confront organized crime and corruption. Rather, as shown in Figure 8, their main focus was drugs, especially the cocaine trade, followed by arms trafficking and financial crime. There were no stories on crimes related to human trafficking, fauna or non-renewable resources. The primary subjects of these corruption investigations were state-embedded actors (54%), followed by mafia-style groups (38%). The relationship between gender and organized crime was not explored in any of these works. Indeed, looking at organized crime through a gender lens is absent in research outputs from academia, civil society, media and government.

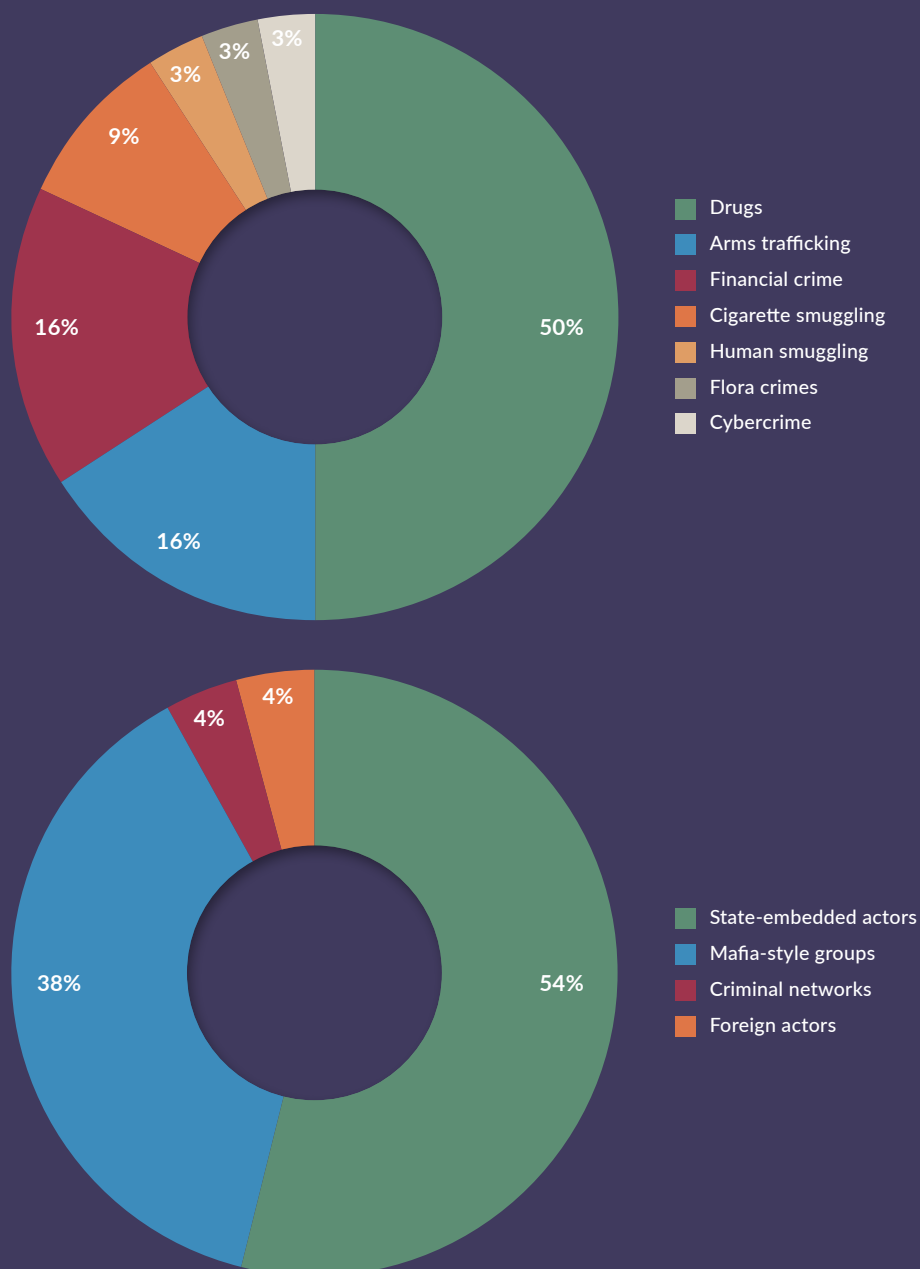


FIGURE 8 Focus of investigative journalists on criminal markets and criminal actors.

Regarding impact, the reporters interviewed suggested that investigative journalism is needed to raise substantive public debates and inform citizens, but that the challenge is that law enforcement rarely follow up on their stories.⁴³ Similarly, researchers, especially from civil society, use media-related content to analyze trends, while politicians from opposition parties use it to challenge political rulers.⁴⁴



DISCOVERING THE ILLICIT

Western Balkan countries scored poorly on the 2021 Global Organized Crime Index. Four Western Balkan states ranked in the top 10 of European countries on criminality: Serbia (second), Montenegro (fourth), Bosnia and Herzegovina (fifth) and Albania (ninth). High scores are evident for human smuggling, heroin trafficking and arms trafficking, while cannabis and cocaine trafficking scores are higher than the European average. It should be noted that financial crime and cyber or cyber-enabled crimes are not covered by the 2021 iteration of the Index but will be analyzed in the next edition, to be published in 2023.

The Index also measures the resilience of a country to organized crime as the ability of state and non-state actors to tackle illicit activities. North Macedonia is the only country in the Western Balkans with a high criminality score and a relatively high resilience score. Montenegro's troubles are intensified by high criminality and relatively low resilience scores, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has one of the lowest resilience scores in Europe. One of the most worrying findings is that state-embedded actors are the most dominant type of criminal actor in the Western Balkans.⁴⁵

Resilience to illicit crime

Between 2017 and 2022, most research in the Western Balkans focused on resilience – that is, the existence and capacity of countries (including state and non-state actors) to prevent and suppress organized crime and corruption through political, economic, legal and social measures, and to mitigate its effects on communities. Less research exists on criminal markets such as drug trafficking or environmental crime. Furthermore, research on criminal actors – types or structural forms of criminal organizations – is minimal.

Research on organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans primarily focused on national policies and laws – state legal action, structures and frameworks for responding to criminal activities.⁴⁶ Since the six Western Balkans countries have been engaged in the EU accession processes, research has often dealt with harmonizing national legislation with the EU or assessing law implementation.

From the European Commission reports, it is clear that when the EU considers the progress in combating organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans, it looks primarily at final court judgments and institutional responses, rather than the interventions of non-state actors. The weak reaction of institutions, reflected in low conviction rates for organized crime cases, is one of the main reasons behind the EU's dissatisfaction with and poor assessment of resilience in the Western Balkans.

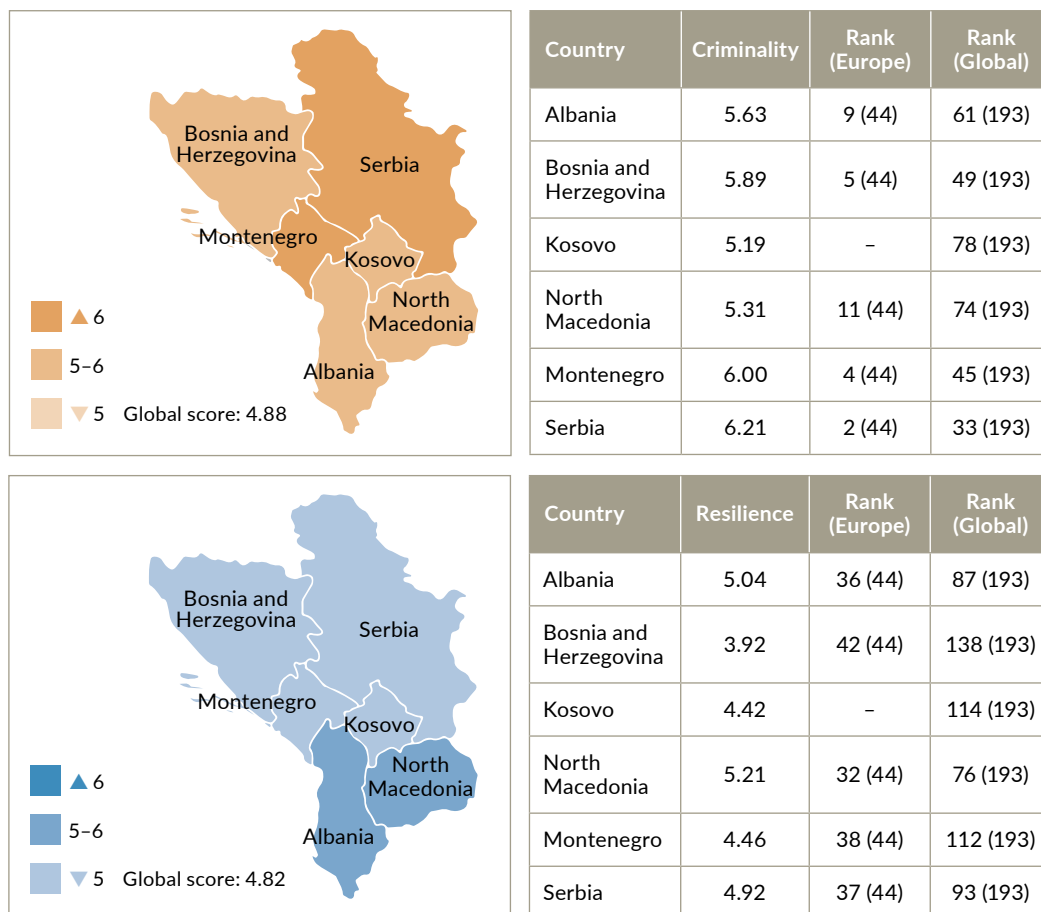


FIGURE 9 Criminality and resilience scores of the Western Balkans in the 2021 Global Organized Crime Index.

EU progress reporting on fighting organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans

During interviews for this study, experts identified the European Commission reports as the most impactful, which results from the desire of the Western Balkan governments to join the EU. Evaluation of the progress of Western Balkan countries in fighting organized crime and corruption has mostly stayed the same since 2018, as shown in Figures 10 and 11. Albania and Montenegro have shown slight improvements: Albania progressed in crime-fighting in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022, while Montenegro was on a good anti-corruption track in 2019 and 2020. By contrast, the anti-organized crime and anti-corruption efforts of Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2018 have not produced any significant results.

Country	Year				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Albania	Some	Good	Good	Good	Good
Bosnia	Some	No	No	No	No
Kosovo	Some	Some	Limited	Limited	Limited
North Macedonia	Some	Some	Some	Some	Some
Montenegro	Some	Some	Some	Some	Some
Serbia	Some	Some	Limited	Limited	Limited

FIGURE 10 EU assessment of progress in fighting organized crime in the Western Balkans.

SOURCE: European Commission, Enlargement package for the Western Balkans, 2018–2022.

Country	Year				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Albania	Good	Good	Good	Some	Some
Bosnia	Some	No	No	No	No
Kosovo	Some	Some	Limited	Limited	Limited
North Macedonia	Some	Limited	Limited	Some	Some
Montenegro	Some	Good	Good	Limited	Limited
Serbia	Some	Limited	Limited	Limited	Limited

FIGURE 11 EU assessment of progress in fighting corruption in the Western Balkans.

SOURCE: European Commission, Enlargement package for the Western Balkans, 2018–2022.

Research by the UNODC in 2020 shows that convictions related to organized crime in the Western Balkans steadily dropped from 744 in 2013 to 491 in 2017, or by 34%. Meanwhile, the number of prosecutions increased from 217 to 1 328, or 84%.⁴⁷ These trends indicate that the criminal justice systems in Western Balkan countries cannot sufficiently gather evidence, construct successful prosecutions and adjudicate organized crime cases properly, which fits with the EU assessment and opinions expressed by interviewees.⁴⁸

The interviewed experts from academia, civil society, government and the international community assess that weak institutional responses to illicit economies are the root cause of organized crime and corruption in Western Balkan countries. Moreover, they underlined the problem of corruption within institutions that should be fighting organized crime and corruption, such as police, prosecutors and courts. As one civil society researcher said, 'Because of corruption and strong ties between politics and organized crime groups, criminal investigations are selective. Information leakage from police and customs is a consequence.'⁴⁹

A considerable amount of research focuses on government transparency and accountability, and political leadership and governance in tackling criminal and corrupt activities. This research is often connected with the efforts of political powers to defend human rights and promote democratic change. Although not directly associated with illicit economies, it provides an overall assessment of the country's political situation and governance.

Finally, the economic aspects of strengthening resilience, as well as the role of non-state actors, such as civil society, in fighting organized crime and corruption are among the least researched topics, as shown in Figure 12.

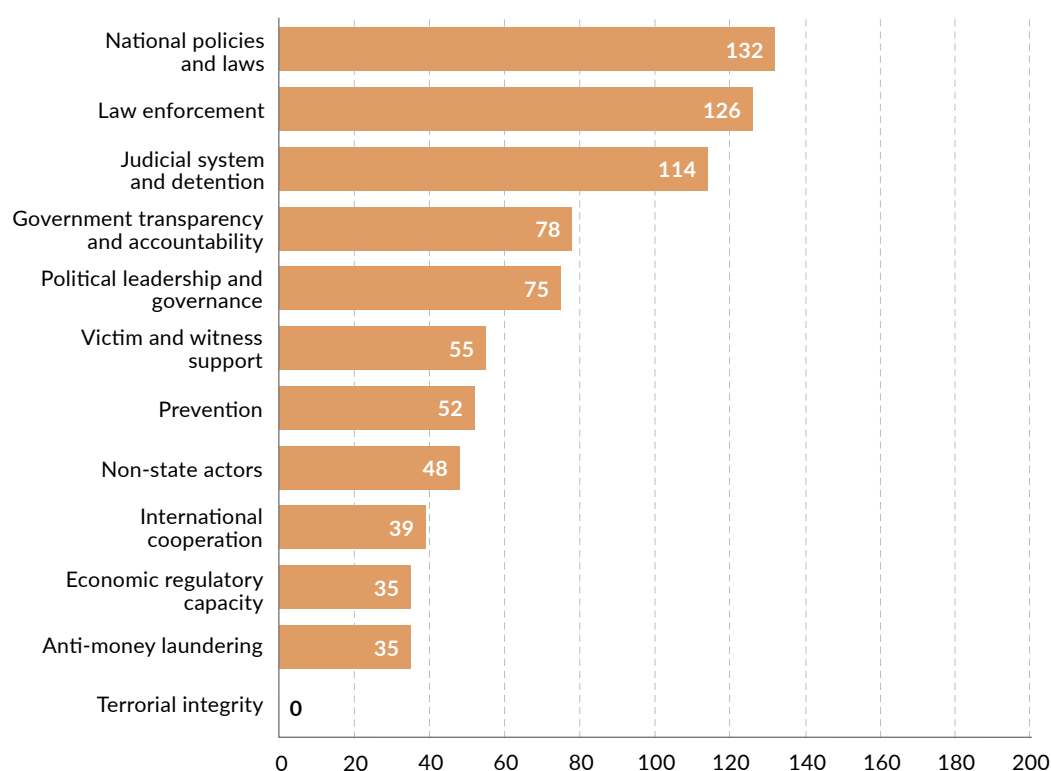


FIGURE 12 Research on the resilience of state and non-state actors to fight organized crime and corruption.

Most studies on resilience in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and the Western Balkans region focus on law enforcement capacities to tackle organized crime and corruption, as indicated in Figure 13. National policies and laws are a concern for researchers in Serbia, while for researchers in Kosovo, it is the judicial system and detention.

There are no studies on territorial integrity, which captures a country's ability to control its territory and infrastructure against organized criminal activities. Research results on border control are in the context of illegal migration and the impact of the influx of refugees and asylum seekers in 2015.

Most works on non-state actors and crime prevention are on Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro. Limited research exists on economic regulatory capacity and anti-money-laundering efforts, although interviewees highlighted these as the most effective crime-fighting tools.⁵⁰ 'Follow the money' is easy to say, but investigating financial transactions and using them to extract information or evidence about a crime or suspect is the most useful crime-fighting tool,' said one financial intelligence officer from North Macedonia.⁵¹ Consequently, strengthening the financial forensic skills of researchers would fill a critical knowledge gap.

Resilience indicator	Countries included in the research						
	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia	Western Balkans
National policies and laws	26	32	27	27	17	58	19
Law enforcement	38	43	36	33	31	57	28
Judicial system and detention	29	32	46	23	20	40	19
Government transparency and accountability	18	16	25	15	14	23	10
Political leadership and governance	15	19	26	16	18	23	18
Victim and witness support	14	17	12	12	13	26	9
Prevention	16	17	16	17	18	24	11
Non-state actors	13	13	15	13	14	20	14
International cooperation	11	11	12	10	10	13	8
Anti-money laundering	4	10	4	6	4	8	0
Economic regulatory capacity	4	8	6	5	9	4	0
Territorial integrity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

FIGURE 13 Number of published works on resilience per country.

Criminal markets

As shown in Figure 14, researchers mainly concentrate on illicit drug markets – namely, cannabis, heroin, cocaine and synthetic drugs – which are the top organized crime threat in the region.⁵² There are half as many research papers on people trafficking and smuggling, and even fewer on financial crime, illicit trade in arms and cigarettes, and environmental crime. Cybercrime is the least researched area in the Western Balkans, but interviewees reported that this is changing. According to experts, most criminal actors involved in cybercrime seem not to be from the Western Balkans.⁵³

This prioritization of research topics mirrors the priorities set by governments in accordance with the strategic assessments of organized crime by the national police – the Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA). These assessments identify drug trafficking and human smuggling as critical criminal markets. The 2021 Global Organized Crime Index similarly found that the drug trade was the most challenging in the region. In interviews, multiple experts explained that one reason for this is the lack of research showing the links between organized crime and politics.

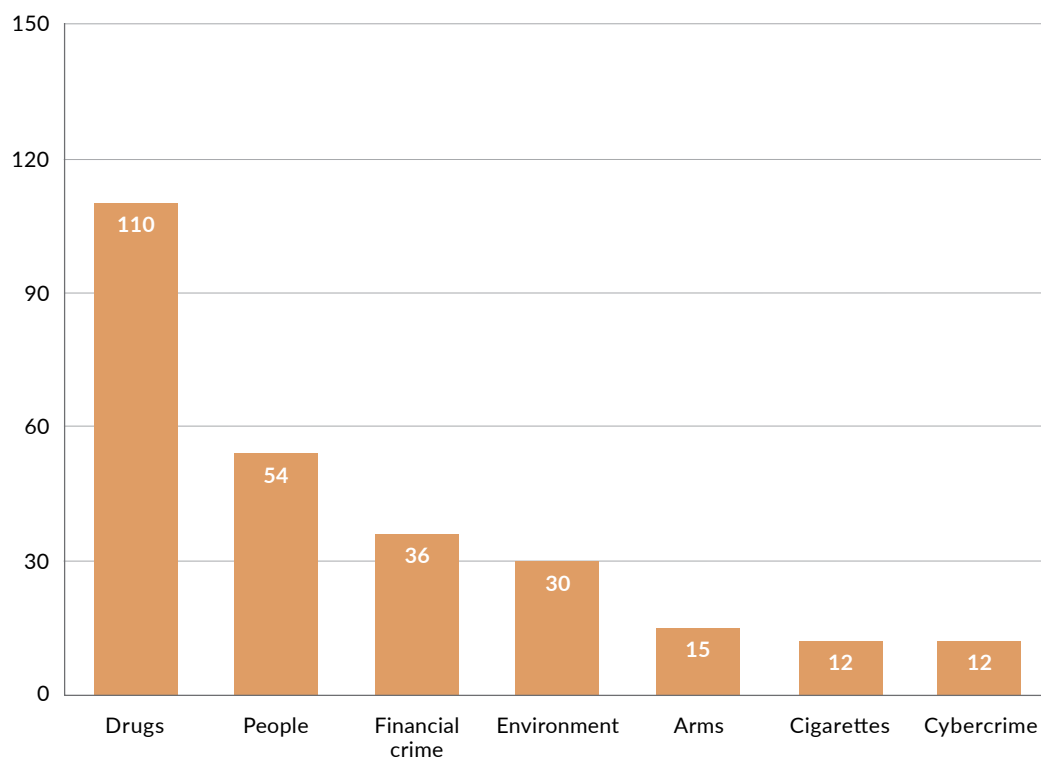


FIGURE 14 Research on criminal markets in the Western Balkans.

Not all Western Balkan countries have organized crime assessments based on EUROPOL's SOCTA approach.⁵⁴ Although Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina are still preparing SOCTA reports,⁵⁵ strategic evaluations of criminal markets form part of the national strategies to counter organized crime in these countries. Kosovo's assessment was completed in May 2022, but is not publicly available.⁵⁶ North Macedonia and Montenegro adopted SOCTA in 2022.⁵⁷ The latest SOCTA for Serbia is from 2020,⁵⁸ and the Interior Ministry adopted the Public Security Threat Assessment in 2021.⁵⁹ Only one regional SOCTA covers Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Issued in 2016, it assessed that the production and smuggling of drugs were the dominant and the most profitable types of organized crime, with the largest number of organized criminal groups involved.⁶⁰

Overall, governmental assessments underline that corruption is the leading driver of organized crime in the Western Balkans countries, while laundered profit is the primary power tool of criminal actors. The threat from transnational criminal groups is increasing. These and other risks identified in the SOCTA reports and similar assessments influence the research priorities adopted in the Western Balkans research community. Based on the latest SOCTA reports and similar assessments, the country-specific priorities are as follows:

- Albania is a cannabis production source and a home base for organized criminal groups engaged in trafficking illicit drugs across Europe and beyond.⁶¹ Albanian criminal groups are primarily involved in drug trafficking, mostly cannabis, but also cocaine and heroin. Occasionally, they are engaged in arms trafficking.⁶²
- Official data from Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that the most significant organized criminal groups are involved in drug trafficking and human trafficking. In addition, there are a small number of cases on the smuggling of firearms and ammunition, and their sale on the black market. Some members of the criminal underworld from the country are involved in violent crimes such as contract killings, blackmailing, kidnapping and extortion.⁶³
- In Kosovo, the biggest forms of organized crime are drugs, arms and human trafficking, followed by goods and migrant smuggling, cybercrime and money laundering.⁶⁴
- North Macedonian police found that drug trafficking is rising, while modern technologies will accelerate criminal activities. Human smuggling will continue. Cybercrime is an emerging threat that increased during COVID-19. Arms trafficking will continue to be a threat as long as weapons from past conflicts remain in circulation. The illicit cigarette trade is expected to continue, while forthcoming economic crises will increase risks for property crimes. Risks related to environmental crime, such as forest degradation and illegal waste trade, were also highlighted.⁶⁵
- In Montenegro, the government recognizes the operations of high-risk organized criminal groups as the main priority. Narcotics, the most lucrative illicit market, is the second priority, followed by corruption, particularly grand corruption. Human smuggling, human trafficking and smuggling of excise goods (mainly cigarettes) are next on the priority. Cybercrime is a growing threat to the country, while violence and arms trafficking are also concerns.⁶⁶
- In Serbia, drug trafficking, especially cocaine and heroin, and money laundering are the biggest risk areas. Cybercrime and human trafficking tend to become high-risk criminal markets, while arms trafficking and smuggling of goods and people pose moderate risks. The threat of counterfeiting money is low.⁶⁷

These risks are reflected in the research output on criminal markets in each country, as shown in Figure 15.

Criminal market	Countries included in the research						
	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia	Western Balkans
Cocaine trade	21	18	11	15	18	20	17
Cannabis trade	20	17	11	14	15	20	16
Synthetic drug trade	18	17	10	14	16	20	17
Heroin trade	20	17	10	14	16	18	16
Financial crime	16	21	9	11	13	20	16
Human trafficking	15	16	10	13	13	16	12
Human smuggling	7	14	4	8	8	14	9
Arms trafficking	8	8	6	8	9	9	8
Cigarette smuggling	4	6	3	5	7	4	5
Cybercrime	4	4	2	5	5	6	3
Flora crimes	1	4	0	4	3	3	1
Non-renewable-resource crimes	2	3	0	3	3	3	2
Fauna crimes	1	3	0	2	3	3	1

FIGURE 15 Research on criminal markets in the Western Balkans per country, 2017–2022.



Criminal markets in the hands of the Western Balkan police services

One of the main ways to confront transnational organized crime is police cooperation,⁶⁸ which involves collaboration between two or more police entities to exchange data, investigate crimes and identify suspects.⁶⁹ Police services in the Western Balkans took part in at least 135 operations implemented bilaterally, regionally and globally between 2017 and 2022. Some of these operations were coordinated by organizations such as SELEC, EUROPOL or INTERPOL.

Like researchers, joint police operations have concentrated on drugs. As shown in Figure 16, based on the number of police operations, the main markets focused on are cocaine (15) and cannabis (13), and some involve synthetic drugs (9) and heroin (2). Overall, 26% of police operations target illicit flows of people – human smuggling (26) and human trafficking (9) – while 21% target financial crime (25).

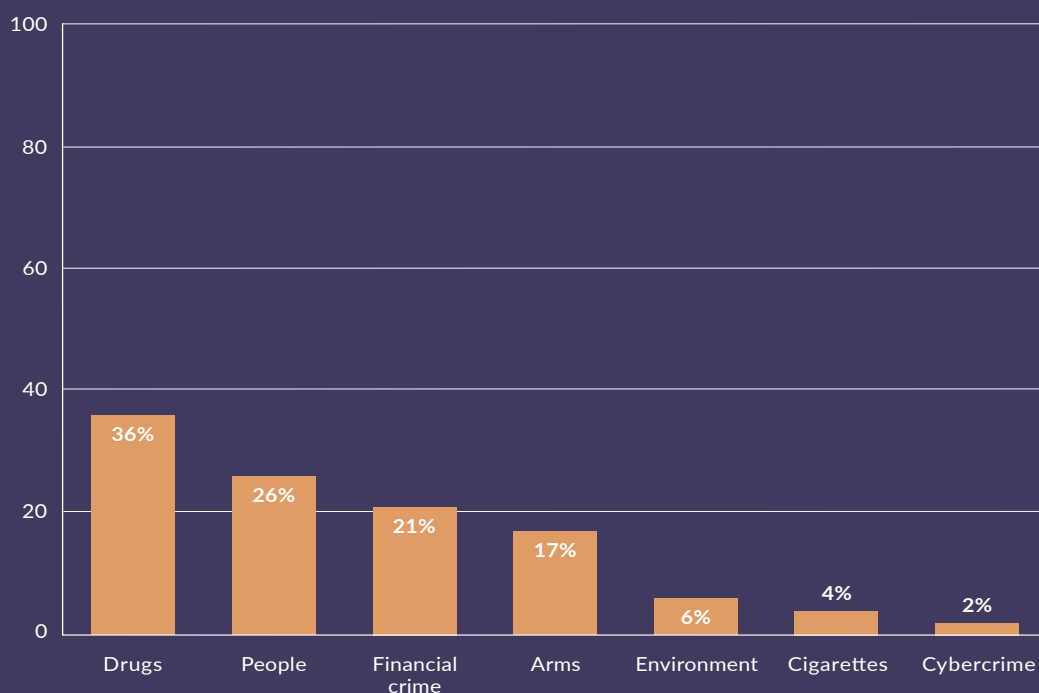


FIGURE 16 Criminal markets and police operations among Western Balkans' police services.

Criminal actors

The least covered topic among analysts of the Western Balkans is criminal actors – i.e. the forms and function of criminal organizations and their impact on the political, economic and social spheres of the countries they run. As shown in Figure 17, researchers primarily investigate state-embedded actors, criminals rooted in or from state apparatus.

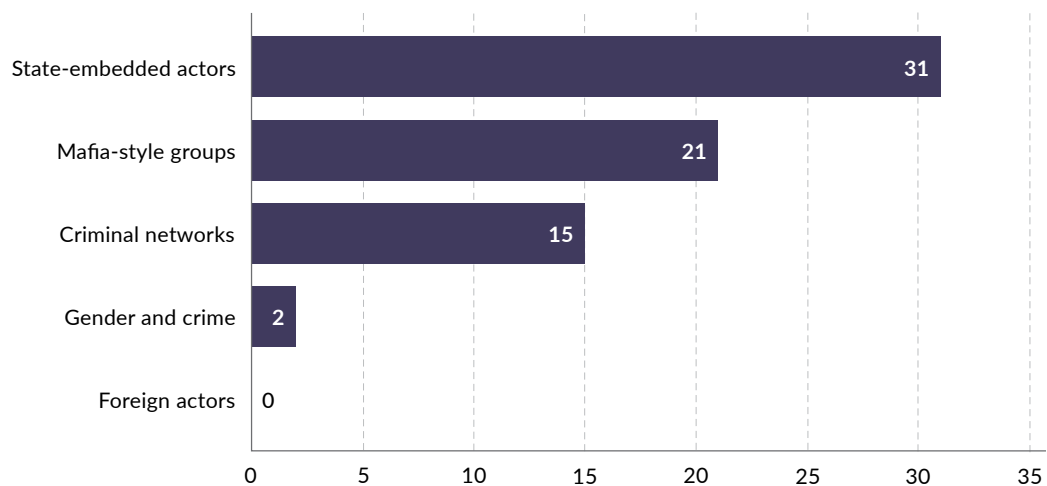


FIGURE 17 Research on criminal actors.

Research on state-embedded actors is often connected with corruption in the Western Balkans, which continues to be widespread.⁷⁰ The research shows that corruption has transformed over the last 30 years from an ecosystem of political protection of crime facilitators from the 1990s to organized corruption that enriched and shielded those with power during the first decade of the 2000s. This manifests itself in the abuse of power in the decision-making process by disposing of public property and interest between non-transparent agreements on the distribution of profits. ‘Organized corruption’ is often part of buying loyalty, support, and compromise regarding acquiring and preserving power and authority.⁷¹ In the last three decades, corruption has evolved from crooked privatization processes to public procurements misuse, which is the most lucrative for corruption, especially in the health, infrastructure, environmental and climate sectors.

After corrupt state actors, researchers focus heavily on high-profile mafia-style organized criminal groups with well-defined leadership, territorial control and identifiable membership. The SOCTA reports are the most relevant and often the only source of information on criminal actors in the Western Balkans. As mentioned, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia have adopted SOCTA, while Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina are still in the process of preparing an assessment (previously adopted in 2014).

Most organized criminal groups in the Western Balkans are named after the cities or villages from which their members originate. In Montenegro, for example, where 10 organized criminal groups operate, the Skaljari Clan, Kavaci Clan and Berane Group are considered the strongest. Next are the Budva Group and Bar Group, which often cooperate and assist leading players, and the Mojkovac Clan and Grand Clan.⁷² In Albania, organized criminal groups are from Shkodra, Fier, Elbasan, Tirana and Durres. Each city has three or four criminal organizations.⁷³ In North Macedonia, there are 40 groups, including the Skopje and Gostivar groups, as well as groups from Aracinovo, Kondovo and Grcic.⁷⁴

In the cocaine business, the criminal underworld from the Balkans has developed to the point that it is sometimes referred to as ‘the Balkan cartel’ by EUROPOL and the media.⁷⁵ This criminal network consists of groups from all six countries who control all phases of cocaine smuggling – from procurement and loading in South America, to transport, unloading, and delivery to Europe and, more recently, to Adriatic Sea ports for local distribution in Western Europe.⁷⁶

According to the literature, organized criminal groups from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia and Croatia function as cells of the criminal underworld of Serbia and Montenegro. Croats are responsible for smuggling in certain phases and finding travel documents. At the same time, Slovenes smuggle cocaine on land roads, coordinate activities and facilitate the stay of members from Serbia and Montenegro in Slovenia. The links between Albanian-speaking groups and ex-Yugoslavia groups, who speak different languages, still need to be explored. Since most cocaine business takes place outside the Western Balkans, more research must focus on the operations of criminal groups from the Western Balkans in key markets such as Latin America and Western Europe.

Researchers primarily focus on criminal actors in Serbia, Montenegro and Albania, as shown in Figure 18, with 75% of research papers about criminal actors from these three countries focusing on state-embedded actors and mafia-style groups. There are only two works on gender and crime, one covering the whole region and the other focusing solely on North Macedonia.

Criminal actors	Countries included in the research						
	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	North Macedonia	Montenegro	Serbia	Western Balkans
Mafia-style groups	15	9	3	16	9	18	10
Criminal networks	8	8	2	11	8	10	8
State-embedded actors	9	10	8	16	10	23	8
Foreign actors	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Gender and crime	1	1	1	1	2	1	1

FIGURE 18 Research on criminal actors per country.

Finding the gaps

To understand where the critical research gaps are, in terms of the actual risks of organized crime in the Western Balkans, it is instructive to return to the Global Organized Crime Index. A comparison of the average results of six countries from the 2021 Index with the systematic literature review, as illustrated in Figure 19, highlights the areas of mismatch between risk and research focus. This mapping shows that, in fact, the three resilience indicators with the lowest scores in the Index (victim and witness support, government transparency and accountability, political leadership and governance) do not align with the three most explored research topics (national policies and law, law enforcement, and the judicial system and detention). Indeed, 'national policies and laws' is the resilience indicator with the second highest score.

Similarly, with regards to criminal markets, the highest-scoring markets (the heroin trade and human smuggling) do not feature prominently in the research output overall. There is a lack of research on the heroin trade, in particular.⁷⁷

Regarding criminal actors, the criminal actor with the highest score on the Index (state-embedded actors) is the most researched, but not in proportion to its score. Given the transnational character of organized crime in the region, the dearth of research on criminal networks and foreign actors, which is completely lacking, is striking.

Indicator	Average Western Balkans score	Published research papers
Resilience		
Victim and witness support	4.17	55
Government transparency and accountability	4.17	78
Political leadership and governance	4.25	75
Economic regulatory capacity	4.25	35
Law enforcement	4.58	126
Judicial system and detention	4.67	114
Prevention	4.75	52
Anti-money laundering	4.75	35
Non-state actors	4.83	48
Territorial integrity	5.00	0
National policies and laws	5.00	132
International cooperation	5.50	39
Criminal markets		
Heroin trade	6.3	26
Human smuggling	6.3	27
Cannabis trade	5.9	29
Cocaine trade	5.7	29
Arms trafficking	5.7	15
Human trafficking	5.3	29
Synthetic drug trade	3.8	29
Flora crimes	4.0	11
Fauna crimes	3.9	8
Non-renewable resource crimes	3.9	11
Criminal actors		
State-embedded actors	7.25	31
Criminal networks	6.75	15
Foreign actors	5.75	0
Mafia-style groups	5.25	21

FIGURE 19 Indicators in the 2021 Global Organized Crime Index and the systematic literature review, with critical areas to research highlighted.



What is the international community doing on illicit economies in the Western Balkans?

Various major donors are working to fight organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans. The EU, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the UN, Norway, the UK and the US all support country-specific and regional projects from governments as well as civil society.⁷⁸ Community resilience to illicit economies is generally out of donors' support. Donors link their assistance with the EU accession process and the broader rule-of-law context. Projects are intensely focused on anti-corruption, justice reform and technical assistance to law enforcement. For instance, the Horizontal Facility is a joint initiative of the EU and the Council of Europe designed to strengthen the efficiency and independence of the judiciary; fight against corruption, organized crime and economic crime; promote freedom of expression, media rights and anti-discrimination; and protect the rights of vulnerable groups.⁷⁹

To a lesser extent, the EU assists civil society in monitoring the performance of the police, judiciary and government. For example, the EU supports Serbia's prEUgovor, a coalition that publishes reports on the progress of Serbia in the EU accession every six months, including results in fighting organized crime and corruption.⁸⁰ Support for civil society in the Western Balkans also comes from non-governmental donors and private foundations such as the Open Society Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the National Endowment for Democracy.

The European Court of Auditors has found that, while EU action has contributed to reforms in technical and operational areas (e.g. improving judiciary efficiency), it has had little overall impact on fundamental rule-of-law reforms in the region. Auditors have pointed to insufficient domestic political will as the reason for the lack of change. Following these findings, auditors recommended that the EU institutions strengthen the promotion of rule-of-law reforms in the enlargement process, intensify support for civil society and media, reinforce the use of conditionality in pre-accession assistance, and strengthen project reporting and monitoring.⁸¹



FILLING THE KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Although there is a large body of research on organized crime and corruption in the Western Balkans from the last five years, it is limited and heavily focused on national laws and policies. Collaboration between researchers from academia, civil society, media, and the public and private sectors is also lacking. Yet, examples of successful partnership between scholars and civil society researchers exist, with groups such as Balkan Criminology, Balkan Security Platform, Southeast Europe Leadership for Development and Integrity and the GI-TOC exploring illicit economies together.⁸²

As identifying and filling knowledge gaps is essential for designing new and innovative studies, sharing expertise and practices from other countries, especially from broader South Eastern Europe, is highly relevant. There is a demand for a sustainable network of scholars, activists, researchers, journalists and professionals interested in understanding the illicit economies in the Western Balkans and proposing solutions for building resilience to state and non-state actors. There is also a need for closer cooperation between analytical units on regional initiatives dealing with justice and home affairs. At the same time, police colleges in the Western Balkans should invest in networking their analytical capabilities.

Based on the results of this analysis, and the misalignment of current research with the most critical research areas, it is recommended that researchers undertake joint efforts to set a research agenda with the following priorities: i) criminal actors, ii) criminal markets and iii) resilience. Collaborative approaches will enhance the research through the sharing of best practices, comparing of different experiences and performance of in-depth analysis. As part of the new agenda, researchers should focus their studies on three key under-researched areas: i) mafia-style groups, criminal networks, state-embedded actors, foreign actors, and gender and crime; ii) cyber, financial and environmental crime as emerging criminal markets; and iii) crime-prevention strategies focusing on youth, vulnerable groups and confiscation of criminal assets.

Pinpoint the criminal actors

Researchers from state and non-state institutions and organizations should explore, map and assess the power of different criminal actors in the Western Balkans inside and outside the region, and also through a gender lens. They should identify the models of organized criminal groups (whether hierarchical, ethnic, enterprise or hybrid) within the Western Balkans criminal underworld and contribute to long-term crime-prevention strategies.

Researchers should follow the example from Serbia in 2015, when civil society and law enforcement joined forces to produce a national organized crime threat assessment, and work together.⁸³ So far, in most cases, scholars, civil society, media and government analysts have worked independently or with minimal cooperation. For example, the working group for anti-organized crime strategy in Bosnia and Herzegovina only includes members from state institutions, with no representation from civil society, academia or the media.⁸⁴

Cooperation among criminal organizations from the Western Balkans should also be investigated. Uncovering cooperation links between criminal organizations and the localities where they operate is as important as identifying trafficking routes for fighting crime, especially for improving international police cooperation and crime prevention. Analysts should explore the characteristics of criminal networks, how and where they work, which services they provide, and their practices of loansharking and usury. Partnerships between regional initiatives would be particularly useful in researching criminal networks.

Civil society researchers and investigative journalists should continue to study state-embedded actors and corruption. Donors should increase support for the more vital collaboration between investigative journalists and civil society groups on their mission to demonstrate the harm of organized crime and corruption through concrete examples. There is also a need for more focus (not least from academia) on corruption in criminal justice systems (police, prosecution and courts) and procurement. More research on illicit economies helps states rely less on data from seizures and crime statistics.

Although research on foreign criminal actors in the Western Balkans is almost non-existent, recent global trends require that this changes. The war in Ukraine could affect organized crime in the Western Balkans and increase the possibility of foreign involvement in the region. At the same time, the increased flow of migrants through the Western Balkans largely depends on Turkey's migration policy and the political and security situation in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. In addition, it has been noted that cybercrime actors in the region are not dominantly from the Western Balkans.⁸⁵

Furthermore, analysis of organized crime in the region is generally reactive rather than preventative. However, organized crime is evolving and adapting quickly in a rapidly changing world. More attention needs to be paid to strategic foresight and anticipation, for example, in relation to the impact of geopolitics, technology, migration and climate change on illicit markets in the region.

Increase exploration of cyber, financial and environmental crimes

Researchers of illicit economies of the Western Balkans should follow more cyber, environmental and financial crimes, all emerging regional threats that seem to be the least researched. For instance, between 2017 and 2022, there was only one credible evaluation of the cybersecurity ecosystem.⁸⁶

According to the interviews, the landscape of cyber threat in the Western Balkans is dominated by malware, phishing, ransomware and, to an extent, distributed denial of service.⁸⁷ Analysts from state and non-state institutions and organizations should develop regional internet organized crime threat assessments, like the EUROPOL evaluation for the EU member states.⁸⁸ Researchers should assess the threat of cyber-dependent crime, child sexual abuse material, online fraud and the dark web in the Western Balkans. It is also important to support regional researchers in the further specialization of knowledge and methodologies to research cybercrime.

The area that connects the cyber and financial world is cryptocurrency, an alternative digital form of payment created using encryption algorithms. Cryptocurrency and the impact of technology on organized crime are a grey zone in the Western Balkans.⁸⁹ Analysts in the region should spotlight the use of cryptocurrency and technology as part of criminal schemes. There is also a need to explore links between cryptocurrency and money laundering, particularly in the high-risk areas of the infrastructure, gambling and hospitality industries.⁹⁰

Research on money laundering should be part of a broader investigation of illicit financial flows and proceeds generated from criminal activities (tax evasion; human, arms, drug and cigarette trafficking; human smuggling; fraud and corruption). That way, illicit cash flows from drugs, people and goods, the most lucrative illegal businesses in the Western Balkans, will not be neglected. Indeed, one could anticipate that the attention of research should shift from identifying trafficking routes of illicit goods to finding and disrupting illegal money flows.

Like cybercrime, research on environmental crime is minimal. One of the rare comprehensive studies is a doctoral thesis focusing only on Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹¹ Although the regional view is lacking, the strongest resilience shown was in response to environmental crimes.⁹² This should benefit researchers, as many environmental movements are active in the region and work locally to mobilize citizens to tackle issues from air and river pollution to illegal logging, fossil fuel use and hydropower.⁹³ The FATF identifies environmental crime as one of the designated predicate offenses for money laundering and urges the public and private sectors to do more to detect financial flows from ecological crimes.⁹⁴ The research gap on environmental crime in the region must be filled.

Conclusion: Discovering practical preventative strategies

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the current research on illicit economies in the Western Balkans region in order to encourage researchers, governments and donors to devote more attention and resources to the topics of greatest risk. With a renewed and enhanced research agenda, the research community can strengthen the knowledge base for more effective prevention and disruption of organized crime and corruption.

Research can contribute to greater regional cooperation among researchers and strengthen networks between academics, civil society researchers and activists, journalists, and analysts within governmental and inter-governmental institutions on the common concern. It is also the basis of evidence-based policy. Researchers should identify enablers and drivers of illicit economies in the Western Balkans to better assist state and non-state actors in formulating organized crime and corruption prevention strategies.

Although electronic surveillance, undercover operations and informants are considered essential crime-fighting tools, crime prevention approaches must be holistic. Lessons from crime prevention

experiments could support national policy formation. The research focus should therefore be on the local level, youth, gender, social reuse of confiscated criminal assets, and post-penal support in rural and urban areas. Additionally, victimization surveys are essential for designing effective crime prevention strategies and victim support.

Cooperation between regional and international police is another critical research area for tackling transnational organized crime activities. The research focus should be on uncovering best practices and identifying opportunities and challenges of law enforcement strategies for anti-corruption. In the context of the Open Balkan initiative, which aims to remove all border obstacles in the region, researchers should examine territorial integrity, particularly efforts to prevent customs and border police corruption. Over the long term, territorial integrity will continue to be a topic of interest due to the possible entry of the Western Balkan countries into the Schengen Area.

Civil society researchers should follow their primary mission and monitor the performance of the criminal justice system in tackling organized crime and corruption, especially in criminal law applications, and pinpoint best practices. The research focus should be on the local level to find the best models of tracing, confiscating, seizing and forfeiting criminal property. This is also valid for investigative journalists and their mission to reveal organized crime and corruption in concrete cases. The media is the strongest channel for influencing political leadership, good governance, government transparency and accountability.



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