



**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME



# CATCH ME IF YOU CAN

**Illicit flows through  
Balkan airports**

RUGGERO SCATURRO

MAY 2023







# **CATCH ME IF YOU CAN**

*Illicit flows through Balkan airports*

RUGGERO SCATURRO

May 2023

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

The report is based on qualitative data and analysis collected through interviews with more than 20 stakeholders, including airport authorities, law enforcement agencies, international organizations, journalists, aviation security experts and air cargo industry representatives, and through secondary data and sources such as media, digital tools, analytical reports and academic articles. We would like to thank our interview partners for their valuable insights and contributions.

Thanks to Saša Đorđević and Slobodan Čopić for conducting field research at the airport of Belgrade and to Aleksandar Srbnovski and Trpe Stojanovski for conducting field research in the airport of Skopje.

We would also like to thank the GI-TOC's South Eastern Europe team for their invaluable help in providing advice throughout the report-drafting process.

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



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruggero Scaturro is an analyst at the GI-TOC and a PhD candidate on criminal justice and security in Slovenia. He conducts research on Eastern and South Eastern Europe, and on Italian mafia-related issues. His main areas of interest and expertise are drug trafficking and consumption habits in Europe, as well as the history of Cosa Nostra and its ties with other criminal networks across the Mediterranean.

© 2023 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.  
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Global Initiative.

Cover: © *Gent Shkullaku/AFP via Getty Images*

Cartography: Rudi de Lange  
Design: Elné Potgieter

Please direct inquiries to:  
The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime  
Avenue de France 23  
Geneva, CH-1202  
Switzerland

[www.globalinitiative.net](http://www.globalinitiative.net)



# CONTENTS

<b>Executive summary</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>The role of airports in the Balkans</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Organized crime at Balkan airports</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Airports as hubs of poly-criminality .....	12
Criminal actors at airports .....	18
Skopje International Airport .....	20
Belgrade Nikola Tesla Airport .....	25
Summary of observations .....	30
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>32</b>
Notes .....	34

FLIGHT N.

DESTINATION

JU 108 SARAJEVO

JA 1377 SARAJEVO

JU 466 MONASTIR

JU 668 PODGORICA

JU 114 SKOPJE


OS 738 VIENNA

JU 8316 VIENNA

WZZ 4091 DORTMUND

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Balkans airports serve as nodes connecting Western Europe and Asia, and are part of a wider regional infrastructure that feeds into a network of trade and travel corridors. © YAY Media AS



**T**his report applies the 'hotspots' approach that has been used by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's (GI-TOC) Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe to analyze organized crime in the Western Balkans as well as the activities of criminal groups from the region in other parts of the world, as exposed in the earlier 'Transnational tentacles' report.<sup>1</sup> As in the context of the risk assessment conducted on Western Balkan ports last year, this approach examines places that are associated with organized crime (hotspots), rather than people or markets. The objective is to focus on the factors that make these locations vulnerable or attractive to organized crime; assess the internal dynamics and players; plot the locations on a map and connect the dots between them to get a clearer overview of the geography of crime in the region.<sup>2</sup>

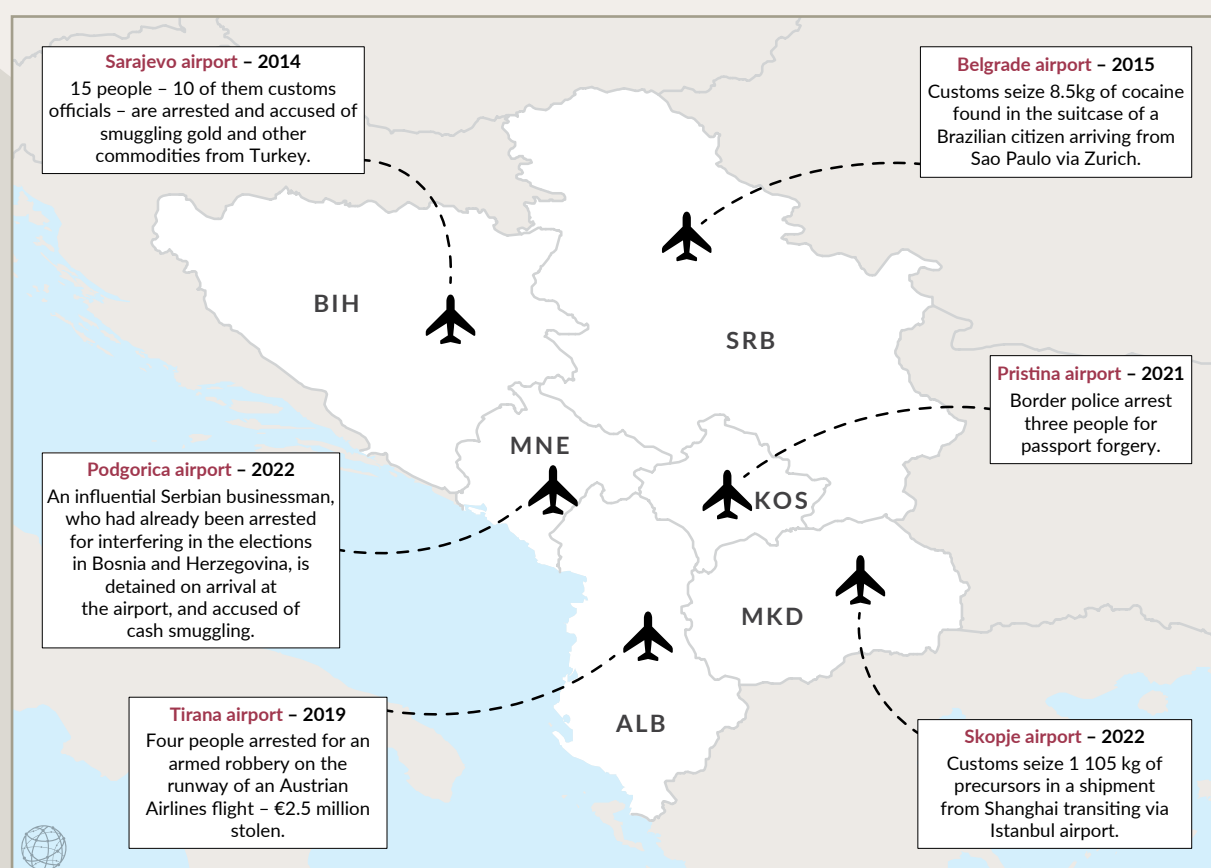
When researching hotspots of criminal activity in the Western Balkans and the activities of Balkan criminal groups abroad, it became evident that there were a growing number of police and customs operations in major international airports, particularly in Tirana (Albania), Skopje (North Macedonia) and Belgrade (Serbia). These operations merited a closer look, so it was decided that an organized crime-based security threat assessment of airports in the Western Balkans should be undertaken. Although illicit activities are also being conducted using private jets that land at minor airports and airstrips, it was beyond the scope of this study to analyze every aviation site in the Western Balkans. Rather, the focus is limited to two major airports, which are presented as case studies: Belgrade and Skopje's international airports. These seem to be the hubs for illicit activities related to human trafficking, smuggling of migrants and goods, as well as main entry points for shipments of drugs and precursors.

Using a similar model to the research conducted for the report 'Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes', we developed a methodology for carrying out a risk assessment, together with airport security experts.<sup>3</sup> Among the issues covered by this methodology are airport ownership; trade and passenger volumes; security measures; major illicit markets; criminal actors involved; law enforcement operations; and enabling factors of illicit activity, such as infrastructure, governance and corruption. These assessments were done at the airports of Belgrade and Skopje between November 2022 and January 2023,



and involved semi-structured interviews with more than 20 airport experts, including security providers (i.e. representatives of customs, border police, state police, prosecutors' offices and private security companies), representatives of logistics companies operating in the Western Balkans, international experts on aviation security, academics, and journalists reporting on illicit trade through airports. The findings, outlined in the two case studies, are set out in the report.

The report also provides an analytical overview of security at airports, factors of vulnerability in aviation departing from and arriving in the Western Balkans, and how these vulnerabilities are exploited for criminal purposes. In addition, the report considers how airports are part of a wider regional infrastructure that feeds into a network of trade and travel corridors, and particularly how they serve as nodes connecting Western Europe and Asia. Recommendations to help mitigate the risk of illicit flows through these aviation hotspots are given in the final section of the report.



**FIGURE 1** Law enforcement agency operations at airports in the Western Balkan Six (WB6).

NOTE: WB6 refers to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia

## Main findings

- Over the past few years, there have been multiple seizures of illicit goods and arrests made at both cargo and passenger terminals of regional airports. Some have involved shipments of commodities arriving in the region and some leaving; others (especially cargo) were discovered while in transit (see the table for details).

AIRPORT	COUNTRY	MAJOR POLICE AND CUSTOMS OPERATIONS
Belgrade	Serbia	<b>2015</b> – Police seize the suitcase of a Brazilian citizen carrying 8.5 kg of cocaine.
		<b>2016</b> – Customs seize two missiles with explosive charges found in transit from Beirut via Belgrade and London to Portland, US.
		<b>2021</b> – A Macedonian citizen is arrested on arrival from Ecuador with a suitcase full of liquid cocaine soaked into items of clothing.
Skopje	North Macedonia	<b>2018</b> – Customs officials seize nearly 2 kg of cocaine hidden in the suitcase of a Venezuelan citizen.
		<b>2022</b> – Customs seize precursors worth more than €50 million in transit from China and Turkey and destined for Western Europe.
		<b>2022</b> – Three people are arrested for international child trafficking from North Macedonia to Western Europe.
Sarajevo	Bosnia and Herzegovina	<b>2014</b> – The entire staff of customs officials at the Sarajevo airport is arrested for corruption and gold smuggling.
		<b>2017</b> – A citizen from New Zealand is arrested for trying to board a flight from Sarajevo to Dubai carrying sundry military equipment.
		<b>2019</b> – A US citizen is arrested while boarding a flight to Zagreb, for illegally carrying military equipment.
Tirana	Albania	<b>2019</b> – Four people are arrested and another 40 investigated for an armed robbery of €2.5 million from a plane transporting the money to a bank in Vienna.
		<b>2021</b> – 13 people are arrested in one police operation for migrant smuggling.
		<b>2023</b> – Authorities seize 1 007 pills of Ecstasy hidden in the luggage of three Albanian citizens arriving from the Netherlands.
Thessaloniki	Greece	<b>2016 to 2018</b> – Police arrest a group of Albanians who transported cash amounting to more than £7 million in over 80 flights from London Stansted to Thessaloniki, for onward transportation to Albania by car.
Podgorica/London	Montenegro/UK	<b>2022</b> – UK authorities arrest a group of six Italians at London Stansted set to board a flight to Podgorica. They had more than £800 000 in their checked-in luggage.
Istanbul	Turkey	<b>2022</b> – Turkish authorities arrest four passengers on a flight from Tirana to Istanbul after finding 32.98 kg of cannabis in their suitcases.
Sofia	Bulgaria	<b>2022</b> – Drug squad officers seize a cargo shipment of 352 kg of ketamine, which arrived at Sofia airport from India via Frankfurt.

- There do not seem to be highly organized levels of regional connection among the criminal groups involved in trafficking through Balkan airports. Instead, larger criminal groups based abroad (including those with members from Western Balkan countries) seem to seek opportunities where they arise, and team up with local corrupt airport security staff.
- Cocaine is usually transported in quantities up to 10 kilograms and hidden in the personal luggage of passengers arriving at regional airports from Latin America, usually after layover at a Western European airport.
- A recent rise in the number of seizures might suggest that the opening of new seasonal routes connecting regional airports (especially Belgrade) to Western European airports (such as London) have boosted the smuggling of cigarettes and other tobacco products.
- Precursors and synthetic drugs meant to supply regional and Western European markets are being found in transit through regional airports (especially Skopje and Sofia). However, there are also instances of synthetic drugs being trafficked from traditional Western European production countries (such as the Netherlands) coming into the region by air.
- In recent decades, Western Balkan countries have made great strides in improving airport security in line with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards, thanks to international support from organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Airport Communication Programme (AIRCOP), Airports Council International (ACI), Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, as well as bilateral assistance. However, at airports, there is still a breakdown of communication between those in charge of ensuring physical safety and security, those mandated to perform x-ray screening of export cargo, officers checking imports and other security service providers.
- Major seizures are often followed by arrests of low-level actors, yet there are few prosecutions of the kingpins, and rare attempts to back-track the shipment routes.
- Foreign investment in the development of airports and new concessions given to multinational holdings increase the connectivity of the region by air, but they expose these airports to a heightened risk of the flow of illicit goods from new sources, for example, precursors and counterfeit products from eastern Asia.



A photograph of an airport tarmac under an overcast sky. A white airplane with teal accents is parked at a gate. Ground crew members in high-visibility yellow vests are working around the aircraft. Several yellow cargo loading platforms (CLTs) are positioned in the foreground, loaded with various items including suitcases, bags, and equipment. A white service truck is also visible near the plane. The background shows airport infrastructure, including a control tower and hangars.

# THE ROLE OF AIRPORTS IN THE BALKANS

Foreign investment in the development of regional airports increases the connectivity of the Balkans by air but exposes these airports to illicit flows of goods from new sources. © Ivan Spasic via Getty Images



**A**lthough the COVID-19 pandemic had a crippling effect on travel and infrastructure development for over two years, air transport of people and goods continued slowly but steadily. During the first three quarters of 2022, the 23 commercial airports in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia handled a combined total of more than 21 million passengers. Several of these airports were well ahead of their pre-COVID performance, including Belgrade (the busiest airport in the Western Balkans), Pristina, Sarajevo and Skopje.<sup>4</sup> A similar trend applies to Albania, with the total number of passengers in 2022 registering an increase of more than 45 per cent from 2021, ranking first in terms of air transport recovery since June/July 2021, with 107 flights per day.<sup>5</sup>

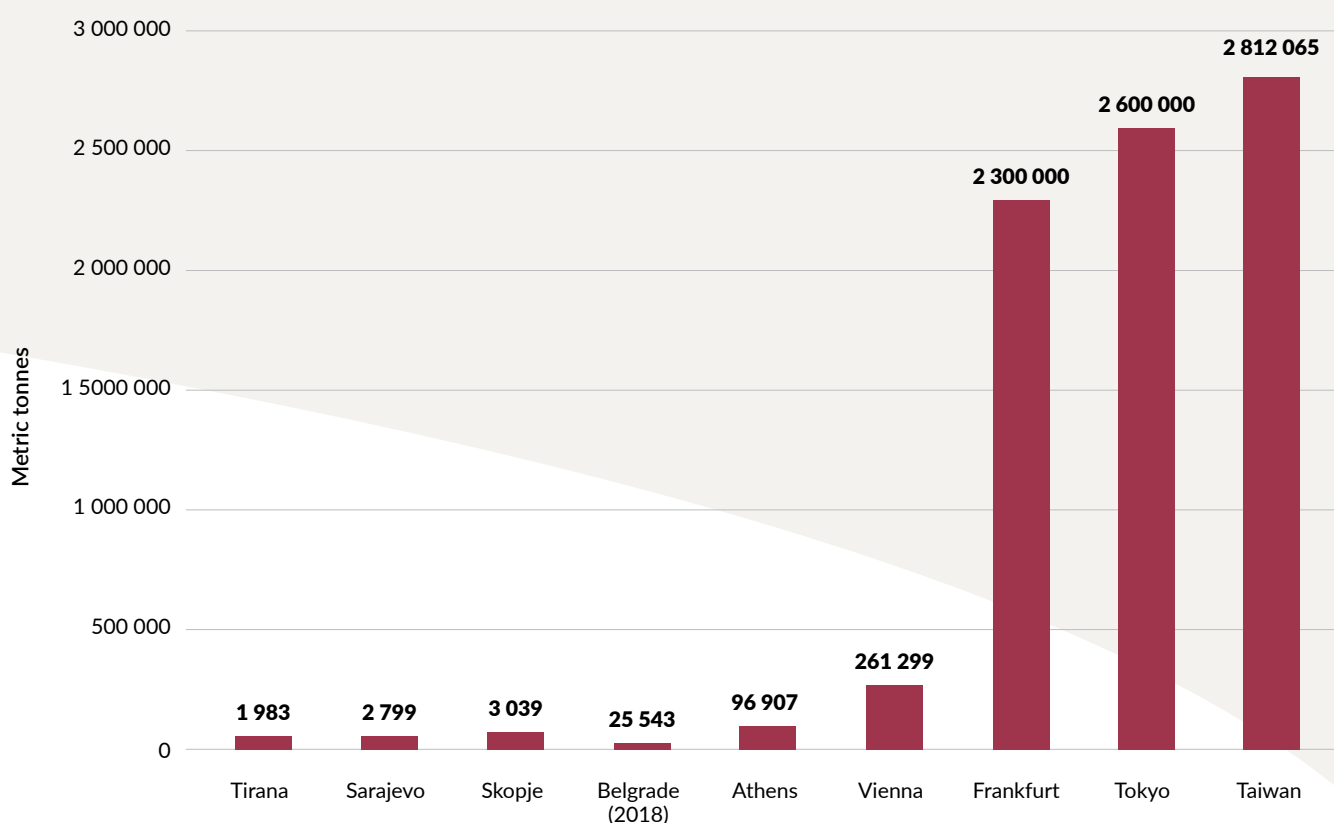
The better the infrastructure, the more attractive the destination. Tourism in the Western Balkans is, in fact, growing significantly, with the tourism growth index from 2017 to 2027 foreseeing an average increase of more than 35 per cent in arrivals.<sup>6</sup> Low-cost airlines are also progressively investing in the region – a trend that will require governments to develop new infrastructure that can cater for large quantities of travellers, far in excess of the norm in the past.<sup>7</sup>

In parallel, the development of airborne transportation of goods contributes to boosting trade and stimulating economic growth. In comparison to maritime cargo transport, which accounts for more than 80 per cent of worldwide trade,<sup>8</sup> air cargo transports a relatively small amount of goods: about 0.5 per cent of total volumes.<sup>9</sup>

In the Western Balkans, most of the cargo is transported overland. Currently, major investment is being ploughed into connecting main regional ports, such as Piraeus, to Western Balkan capitals and logistic hubs via regional railroads, with the goal of making freight transport more environmentally friendly, in line with EU regulations.<sup>10</sup>

Together with the need for fast transportation, it is the high value of goods that underpins the importance of air cargo.<sup>11</sup> In fact, with over US\$6 trillion worth of goods, air cargo accounts for approximately 35 per cent of the value of world trade.<sup>12</sup> Urgent materials (such as radiopharmaceuticals) and high-value goods (such as technological products) are typically shipped by air. The speed of air transport also makes it ideal for certain food products, such as fresh fish and exotic fruits, and other perishables.<sup>13</sup>

As shown in Figure 2, cargo terminals at Balkan airports are the smallest in Europe, however, handling only small amounts of cargo, especially when compared with Western European or Asian airports.<sup>14</sup>



**FIGURE 2** Metric tonnes of cargo handled by selected airports, 2021.

Nevertheless, Balkan airports are significant for two main reasons. From a logistics perspective, their geographical location is key. As shown in Figure 3, many are close enough to national borders to be able to serve neighbouring countries. Both Skopje airport and the new Albanian airport of Kukes, for instance, are less than 20 kilometres from the Kosovo border. Dubrovnik airport in Croatia can serve parts of Montenegro, and those of Sarajevo in Bosnia and Osijek in Croatia are close to the Serbian border.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, despite the relatively small size of national aviation markets, a key aspect of airports in countries such as Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia is to function as a

hub for tourist and business travel, while also connecting remote geographic areas for commerce.<sup>16</sup> Belgrade airport, for instance, is located in a very favourable position, as there are only three major airports (Budapest, Sofia and Zagreb) and only four small ones (Timisoara, Tuzla, Osijek and Nis) within a range of 450 kilometres.<sup>17</sup> Currently, at Nikola Tesla Airport in Belgrade, work is underway to build a new runway and passenger terminal, which will allow for a significant increase in passenger reception capacity – up to 15 million a year.

Foreign investments are key for such developments. In January 2018, the government of Serbia granted a



*Seizures of drugs and precursors usually gain international attention, but drug trafficking is not the only crime occurring at airports.*

25-year concession of Nikola Tesla airport to French airport operator VINCI Airports for €501 million. Since the concession, the airport has seen a sizeable increase in revenue and net income.<sup>18</sup>

Governments regard the development of aviation infrastructure as a strategy for boosting tourism, trade and economic development in the whole region: in 2017, for instance, China Everbright Limited became the sole owner of Tirana International after reaching an agreement with the Albanian government, but after only three years of operation, the influential Kastrati Group holding took over the concession for €71 million.<sup>19</sup> In 2005, the airport was handling about 600 000 passengers; by December 2022, this had increased to 5 million.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, in 2008, the government of North Macedonia granted the Turkish TAV Airport holding company the concession for Skopje airport – where key investments resulted in the construction of a new terminal, new administration building, new cargo terminal and an extended runway.<sup>21</sup>

Investments in airport infrastructure developments increase intercontinental connectivity, both towards the west (with non-stop flights such as those connecting Belgrade to the US) and to the east (with daily connections to Turkey and the UAE from various Balkan airports).



**FIGURE 3** Commercial airports in the WB6.



Departure and transit screening procedures at Balkan airports are generally carried out for safety purposes rather than identifying contraband, which enables illicit goods to pass through undetected. © Bibiphoto via Shutterstock

In general, the bigger the airport and the greater the volume of passengers and cargo moving through the airport, the greater the likelihood of exposure to criminal interests and illicit flows. Instances of seizures at big international airports all over the world are abundant,<sup>22</sup> and in Western Europe, for example, 765 cases of drug seizures at airports – with cocaine accounting for 63 per cent (nearly 2 tonnes) – were reported in 2020 alone.<sup>23</sup> Seizures of drugs and precursors are the ones that usually gain international attention, but drug trafficking is not the only crime occurring at airports.<sup>24</sup> For example, according to a former police officer and human trafficking expert based in Serbia, visa regimes that are particularly favourable for nationals

of countries characterized by strong emigration flows, combined with low-skilled and undertrained border police and immigration units present, can make airports particularly vulnerable, negatively affecting the fight against smuggling of migrants and human trafficking schemes.<sup>25</sup> In other words, there are determinants other than just passenger and trade volume, such as low risk of interdiction, shifts in criminal markets and the specific geolocation of airports that enable criminal actors to exploit the 'airport business'.

Examples of how crime manifests in airports are analyzed in the next section and explored in greater detail in the two in-depth case studies: Belgrade and Skopje airports.






# ORGANIZED CRIME AT BALKAN AIRPORTS

Examples from the past few years show a variety of crime types taking place at regional airports, some of which have been described as scenarios of 'airport capture'. © Alekk Pires via Shutterstock





**R**ecent investment in aviation infrastructure has increased the region's connectivity with Europe and Western Asia. This, as well as increased volumes of traffic, puts airport security systems under significant pressure and, just as infrastructure benefits legitimate trade, illicit economies are also boosted by increased connectivity between source and destination markets for trafficked goods.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, given that they are complex transport infrastructure ecosystems, airports have certain characteristics that make them vulnerable to certain internal and external security threats. These include 'a transient population, and time-critical operations'.<sup>27</sup> However, especially when compared with large intercontinental centres known to authorities as smuggling hubs, such as Chennai, Bangkok or Shanghai, Balkan airports (as centres of illicit trade) are perceived as less of a risk.<sup>28</sup>

In the region, large quantities of illicit goods go undetected for seemingly three main reasons.<sup>29</sup> First, it is unlikely that trafficking illicit goods would be detected by departure and transit screening procedures, as these are generally carried out for safety purposes rather than identifying contraband. Secondly, screenings on arrival performed by customs are generally focused on revenue and the detection of undeclared *licit* goods.<sup>30</sup> And, thirdly, in contrast to the often more sophisticated infrastructure at seaports, criminal networks generally count on the precarious governance systems that are currently in place in the region's airports.<sup>31</sup>

The conditions that permit illicit trafficking are long-standing in the Western Balkans region, and examples from the past few years show a variety of crime types taking place at regional airports, some of which have even been depicted as scenarios of 'airport capture'. In 2014, for instance, the office of the general prosecutor of Bosnia and Herzegovina ordered the arrest of the entire customs staff working at Sarajevo airport.<sup>32</sup> The officials were later accused of smuggling gold from Turkey, as well as of systematic bribery schemes.<sup>33</sup>

## Corruption at Balkan airports

Corruption manifests at airports in forms ranging from petty bribes offered to airport security personnel to misappropriation and mismanagement of public funds by senior officials and managers. Corruption not only represents an additional cost, but it also affects the development of air traffic-related infrastructure. In 2018, for instance, the media reported on a Serbian businessman twice indicted for cigarette smuggling (but later acquitted of all charges) and known for his links to an alleged drug lord, who was set to make millions from the expansion of Belgrade's airport.<sup>34</sup>

Similar cases abound in the region. In 2016, Albania's supreme state audit filed a criminal report against the former real estate registry director of Kukes, two legal experts and a cartographer, accusing them of the embezzlement of €104 000 in the process of land acquisition for the airport's construction.<sup>35</sup> In 2011, officials of Kosovo's financial investigation unit arrested two senior officials of Pristina airport. The chief of the cargo handling section and the chief of the cargo lost and found deposit were also suspected of having abused their official positions through the appropriation of money belonging to Pristina airport and were additionally charged with misappropriation and fraud in office. According to the financial investigation unit, the two suspects managed, by means of false statements, to receive a reduced amount of storage fees for imported merchandise that was yet to be placed into consumption. The amount was not paid to the airport but kept by the suspects. The activity meant a significant financial loss for Pristina airport.<sup>36</sup>

## Airports as hubs of poly-criminality

Regardless of how 'organized' instances of crime might be, illicit activities taking place at airports can be roughly divided in two main categories: static crimes, such as heists, thefts and assault, and non-static crimes, such as human trafficking and smuggling of contraband. For the latter, the airport can be a starting, transit or end point of the flow.<sup>37</sup>

Major law enforcement agencies' operations suggest that human, drug and arms trafficking are the most common manifestations of non-static organized crime. But regional airports are also meanwhile hubs for other types of crimes, such as heists and trafficking of various licit goods, such as tobacco products and cash. The sections below give an overview of major cases identified.



In January 2023, Albanian customs seized 1 007 MDMA (Ecstasy) tablets that had arrived at Tirana airport from the Netherlands. © B.O'Kane/Getty Images

## Human trafficking and migrant smuggling

Evidence from recent investigations suggests that many of the airports in the Western Balkans are used as starting and transit points for international human trafficking schemes, as well as hotspots of irregular entry into national territories. For instance, between 8 and 12 November 2021, Europol supported a large-scale international action against human trafficking for sexual exploitation purposes that resulted in 212 arrests and the identification of 89 other suspects operating in the airports of 29 countries, including the WB6.<sup>38</sup> More recently, in May 2022, the public prosecutor's office of North Macedonia issued an order for an investigation into three people involved in child trafficking through Skopje airport (for more details, see the Skopje case study).<sup>39</sup>

Although it lies outside the Western Balkans region, Sofia, Bulgaria, is just 200 kilometres from Skopje, and similar instances have occurred at its international airport. In 2017, for example, Bulgarian police arrested two border police officers and two Bangladeshi nationals residing in Bulgaria, and accused them of bribery and migrant smuggling. During the operation at Sofia airport, a large number of real and fake foreign identity documents and SIM cards were also discovered and seized. It was found that border police officers at the airport were accepting bribes to turn a blind eye.<sup>40</sup>

In November 2021, Albanian border police and the Tirana police service arrested a resident of the UAE accused of 'assistance in illegal border crossing' at Rinas airport.<sup>41</sup> Investigations revealed that the smuggler, in cooperation with other people from the UAE and under the auspices of a travel company, arranged trips for South East Asian migrants in the UAE to EU countries via Albania. As a result of the investigations, 13 citizens of Bangladesh were prosecuted for 'illegal border crossing'.<sup>42</sup> Travel companies are particularly fruitful to traffickers because they can be used to prevent a money trail by accepting cash, instead of online payments, to reserve flights.<sup>43</sup>

There is no clear indication of the type and level of organization of criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling and human trafficking, but information about the victims, gleaned during police operations, is revealing. In the case of human trafficking, evidence shows that airports in the Balkans are starting points for victims being trafficked, mainly to Western Europe, for sexual exploitation. With regard to illegal migrants apprehended on arrival at Balkan airports, their countries of origin – such as Vietnam, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan – suggest that these airports are the final step of the flow, and that migrant-smuggling schemes are in place to supply the informal workforce in the region's industrial, agricultural and tourism sectors.<sup>44</sup>



## Cocaine and synthetic drugs: growing concerns

Data shows that although marine shipping tends to be the preferred method of transportation for drugs and drug precursors,<sup>45</sup> smaller quantities of these commodities account for a significant percentage of seizures at Balkan airports in recent years, in particular cocaine and synthetic drugs.

Drug traffic at Balkan airports manifests in different forms and involves a spectrum of criminal actors, depending on factors such as the type of drug, the quantity being trafficked and the mode of transportation. These include drug mules, and drugs hidden in luggage or in air-cargo shipments. Drug mules generally tend to go undetected and are rather rare in the region,<sup>46</sup> but there have recently been cases of drugs hidden in luggage and cargo.

Usually, regional airports are the final destination for flows of cocaine coming from Latin America, synthetic drugs from Western Europe (typically Belgium and the Netherlands) and of precursors from Asia. Couriers are typically from abroad, highlighting the increased connectivity between this region and other parts of the world. In 2015, for instance, Serbian authorities discovered that the suitcase of a Brazilian citizen contained 8.5 kilograms of cocaine, the largest quantity ever discovered at Belgrade Nikola Tesla Airport.<sup>47</sup> In 2018, a similar case occurred at Skopje airport: customs officials seized nearly 2 kilograms of cocaine hidden in the suitcase of a Venezuelan citizen.<sup>48</sup> But it is not just foreigners: citizens of Western Balkan countries are also directly involved in drug trafficking. In January 2023, for instance, Albanian authorities seized 1 007 Ecstasy tablets concealed in the luggage of three Albanian citizens arriving at Tirana airport on a flight from the Netherlands.<sup>49</sup>

Other variables can also influence the demand for drugs and therefore inflows from abroad, also by air. According

to an interviewee from the Serbian Office for Combating Drugs, whenever there are popular summer events, such as the EXIT music festival, which takes place every July in Novi Sad, law enforcement authorities register a spike in the number of seizures of drugs (especially synthetic drugs) at Belgrade airport in the days leading up to the festival.<sup>50</sup>

Several cases of drug trafficking by air cargo have also occurred in the region. For instance, in November 2021, a large quantity of synthetic drugs was seized in a raid coordinated with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) at Skopje International Airport.<sup>51</sup> A few months later, at the same airport, precursors worth more than €50 million were seized. Macedonian citizens smuggled the drugs from China via Turkey, for distribution throughout Europe.<sup>52</sup> Not far from Skopje, in September 2022, a record-setting quantity of ketamine was seized by the Bulgarian Customs Agency at Sofia airport.<sup>53</sup> When drug squad officers inspected a cargo shipment that had arrived from India via Frankfurt, they found 12 canisters filled with 352 kilograms of ketamine – an amount allegedly sufficient for the production of up to 2 million doses.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to being drug-smuggling destinations, regional airports are points of origin for locally produced drugs such as cannabis. In October 2022, Turkish media reported on the arrest of four passengers on a flight from Tirana to Istanbul, after authorities x-rayed their suitcases and found 32.98 kilograms of cannabis.<sup>55</sup>

There are also reports of smuggling on private planes. In July 2019, for instance, Operation Familia, coordinated by Europol and the US DEA, with support from Frontex, targeted a vast trafficking network that used private planes to transport cocaine from South America to Europe. The operation led to the arrest of 16 individuals, 11 of them in Europe (Croatia, Czechia, Serbia and Switzerland), and the seizure of more than 1 tonne of cocaine and €2 million in cash.<sup>56</sup>

## From safety to security at airports

The April 1947 implementation of the Convention on International Civil Aviation (Chicago Convention) and the simultaneous creation of the ICAO – a UN specialized agency working as secretariat of the convention – marked the beginning of international cooperation in coordinating principles and techniques of international air traffic, and in collectively planning and developing international air transport to ensure the safe and orderly growth of the sector.<sup>57</sup> With its 19 annexes, which contain standards and recommended practices, the Chicago Convention establishes rules of airspace, aircraft registration, sustainability and, more importantly, safety and security.

Aviation safety is understood as the study and practice of managing risks in aviation. This includes preventing aviation accidents and incidents through research; educating air travel personnel, passengers and the general public; and designing aircraft and aviation infrastructure.<sup>58</sup> Aviation security also focuses on protecting air travellers, aircraft and infrastructure from intentional harm or disruption, as opposed to unintentional mishaps. However, although there are differences at the theoretical level, the slight practical distinctions between the two aspects became further blurred after the 9/11 attacks.<sup>59</sup> Since then, the regulatory framework in this field has expanded worldwide, and today security is widely understood as a state's responsibility to prevent harm deliberately caused by third parties.

At the EU level, for instance, Regulation (EC) No 300/2008 covers all parts of the air transport chain that can affect the security of the aircraft and/or infrastructure. 'EU rules apply to all airports in the union that are open to civil aviation, to all operators providing services at these airports, including air carriers, and to all other operators "applying aviation security standards" providing goods or services to or through such airports.'<sup>60</sup> However, in an interview with security experts from the ACI – a leading association in the aviation industry contributing to the safety, security, and sustainability of global aviation – it emerged that a 'modern understanding of security can no longer be limited to the concept of "protecting" aviation and aviators'.<sup>61</sup> So, together with terrorism and hijackings, migrant smuggling and trafficking in humans, drugs and weapons, as well as wildlife, are to be understood as important challenges in the governance of aviation, especially at airports.<sup>62</sup>

International organizations, regulatory bodies, the private aviation sector and civil society have developed policies and initiatives designed to counter trafficking through air routes. However, some have argued that policymakers have tended to focus more on countering terror threats to the exclusion of countering illicit trade – and that security providers tend to work in silos, with little information sharing between airport concessionaires mandated to ensure security, customs and border police.<sup>63</sup>

In practice, airports are seen by security stakeholders as 'choke points' where illicit commodities and the networks involved in moving them can be detected and intercepted with effective oversight measures originally meant to ensure physical security and safety. For example, as part of the physical security measures that are maintained in an airport, certain areas are to be accessed by authorized personnel only.<sup>64</sup> To enforce these necessary restrictions, airports use electronic gates in conjunction with CCTV and motion sensors. Installing CCTV, IP cameras, thermal cameras and motion sensors allows for the monitoring of the airport's interior, with particular focus on areas characterized by high risks of criminal activity.<sup>65</sup> The same measures can also be applied at the airport's perimeter, to prevent unauthorized access to the runway and hangars. But these Internet of Things-based security applications – those, such as cameras, that are connected to the cloud – rely on networked systems that can be accessed either from the airport's intranet or from the internet. Therefore, potential offenders can launch a number of diverse cyberattacks to affect the functionality of the security systems. Perimeter sensors can be compromised by gaining access to the airport's intranet and either be deactivated, thus allowing unauthorized access to the runway and hangars, or cause excessive false alarms – a practice that has become rather common at Balkan airports.<sup>66</sup> However, all these measures, contained in Annex 17 of the Chicago Convention, are focused mostly on protecting airports from undefined attacks rather than from organized criminal activity and, although they may mitigate some of the risk of criminal activity, they do not take into account the whole transport chain of passengers and goods flows, which is where most illicit trade manifests.<sup>67</sup>



## Weapons seizures

Evidence suggests that regional airports are both transit and exit points for weapons of different sizes and types. In 2016, for instance, two missiles with explosive charges were found in transit from Beirut via Belgrade and London to Portland, US. The 1.5-metre-long rockets were in the plane's luggage on a regular flight from Beirut to Belgrade. The package had been sent as express mail. The explosive devices were in crates and had accompanying documentation. Sniffer dogs found traces of gunpowder on the rockets and an investigation was carried out. In the end, it turned out that the rockets contained no explosives.<sup>68</sup>

As for exit points, in August 2017, a New Zealand citizen was reportedly arrested for trying to board a flight from Sarajevo to Dubai with various items of military equipment. Police officers and members of the security service allegedly found 24 bayonets, a bandoleer for 7.9mm ammunition and a box for carrying a machine gun spare barrel as the man's luggage went through a metal detector at Sarajevo International Airport.<sup>69</sup>

In August 2019, a US citizen was arrested at Sarajevo airport while boarding a flight to Zagreb for illegally carrying military equipment. Bosnian border police found two optics for a military rifle, three wooden rifles and one military knife – a bayonet.<sup>70</sup>



Following the armed robbery of cash destined for a bank in Vienna on an Austrian Airlines flight, Albanian military police stand guard outside Mother Teresa International Airport in Tirana, April 2019. © Gent Shkullaku/AFP via Getty Images



## Cash smuggling

Cash is often seized at airports in the region and recent police and customs operations show that smugglers operate both as part of organized networks and alone. In October 2022, a Serbian businessman, who, according to reporting by news platform CDM, is 'close to' the Serbian president, and who had already been arrested in Banja Luka for interfering in the elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was detained in Montenegro upon arrival at Podgorica airport, carrying large amounts of money allegedly to be 'invested' in political campaigns. In an attempt to shift responsibility and 'protect' the businessman, the air crew claimed the money was theirs.<sup>71</sup> In 2017, Macedonian customs searched a suspicious traveller and found €107 000 strapped to his torso, hidden under his shirt.<sup>72</sup> In October 2021, the Serbian police stopped someone who was trying to smuggle €40 000 and cigarettes worth €13 000 through Belgrade airport.<sup>73</sup> A few months later, a Cameroonian was arrested for attempting to smuggle over €1 million, which was later found to be counterfeit.<sup>74</sup>

Couriers are also active in smuggling cash from Western European countries to regional airports, which they often use as transit points because of their convenient location. Between 2016 and 2018, for example, more than 80 trips were made by a group of Albanians to smuggle cash amounting to £7 million from London Stansted airport to Thessaloniki, Greece, for onward transportation to Albania by car. In a similar attempt, six Italians were arrested at Stansted airport before boarding a flight to Podgorica, Montenegro. The group had stuffed more than £800 000 into their checked-in luggage.<sup>75</sup>

Operations such as these shed light on how organized criminal groups rely on cash couriers to bring illicitly gained cash to their country of origin for money-laundering purposes, but they also suggest that the proximity of airports to international borders with poor control systems is easily exploited by criminal networks running transnational illicit flows.<sup>76</sup>

## Heists

In some cases, criminals engage in violent acts that can have an impact not only on security, but also on the safety of passengers and airport staff, such as in the case of heists. In April 2019, for instance, armed robbers broke onto the runway of Tirana airport through a gate used by firefighters and stole €2.5 million from an Austrian Airlines plane. The cash was due to be transported to a bank in Vienna, Austria.<sup>77</sup> According to police, three armed robbers dressed in military fatigues got their hands on the money by threatening the employees handling luggage.<sup>78</sup> In the previous reported heist at a regional airport, in December 2007, at least four men wearing the insignia of Bosnia and Herzegovina's special police overpowered three staff members in Sarajevo airport's cargo building and seized bags containing between €2 million and €3 million.<sup>79</sup> As a result of these risks, many logistics companies operating in the region now will not ship valuables, such as artworks and cash.<sup>80</sup>

*The proximity of airports to international borders with poor control systems is exploited by criminal networks running transnational illicit flows.*

## Criminal actors at airports

Criminal actors identified at Western Balkan airports can be categorized into four types, applying the classification provided by the GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index: criminal networks, state-embedded actors, foreign actors and mafia-style groups.<sup>81</sup>

### Criminal networks

The Index defines 'criminal networks' as loose formations of criminal associates that engage in trafficking but neither control a specific territory nor show the other defining features of mafia-style groups. Criminal networks run illicit trafficking operations through Western Balkan airports and operate in several of the airports analyzed in this study.

For instance, investigations following arrests in Belgrade, Skopje and Tirana have shown that local criminal groups team up with corrupt border police officials and private entities, such as travel agencies, to facilitate smuggling of migrants and trafficking of people.

In contrast, the seizure of large quantities of precursors and synthetic drugs arriving and transiting through air cargo shows that international criminal networks use regional airports as transit points for further distribution in Western Europe. Such criminal networks often involve internationals running flows from origin (especially East Asia) to destination (Western Europe) and that they rely on local 'insiders' (either corrupt customs officers or concessionaire employees) to make sure that their loads transit the airport.

### State-embedded actors

The Index defines state-embedded actors as criminals acting within the state's apparatus. The history of police operations at regional airports offers good examples of

the involvement of such actors. The expansion plans for the airports of Kukes, Pristina and Belgrade, for example, have been associated with alleged misuse of funds, embezzlement, and allegations of money laundering by high-ranking officials and political elites. Another example is Sarajevo, where, as mentioned earlier, corruption scandals involving the entire customs corps deployed at the airport point to 'airport capture'.

### Foreign actors

Foreign actors are state or non-state criminal actors operating outside their home country. Depending on the illicit commodity, instances of foreigners arrested at Balkan airports show different degrees of sophistication. In major regional airports, the most commonly identified foreign actors are drug couriers carrying drugs from Latin America, and money launderers smuggling large amounts of cash from Western Europe back into the region. The latter case is particularly relevant for the airports that are located outside our region of reference but are close to international borders – such as Thessaloniki, Greece, which has been identified as a transit point for money launderers from the Western Balkans.

### Mafia-style groups

Mafia-style groups are clearly defined, organized criminal groups that have four distinctive features: a known name, a defined leadership, territorial control and identifiable membership. Despite the proximity of airports to hotspots of organized crime in the Western Balkans, research has not highlighted any presence of structured groups typically operating through such infrastructures. The limited spaces of airports, as well as the high levels of security are likely to prevent mafia-style groups from using airports as typical hubs for illicit trade.

## Insiders – key criminal actors at airports

Airports are complex entities and, although highly secured, they are vulnerable to a variety of risks. With reference to serious and organized crime, such as heists and trafficking of various kinds, airport security experts emphasize the need to focus on the role of insiders.<sup>82</sup>

At airports, insiders are defined as people who exploit – or have the intention of exploiting – their role or knowledge for unauthorized purposes. They may, for example, be full- or part-time employees working for the airport concessionaire, airline companies, consultants or baggage handlers.<sup>83</sup> Unlike ‘outsiders’ (i.e. potential offenders willing to exploit airports because they have identified them as key infrastructure nodes for their illicit activities but have no direct access to them), aviation insiders potentially know and have access to the most critical and sensitive parts of an airport.<sup>84</sup> Because of their job, they are already in a position of trust and might hold an access badge to an airport’s airside areas, for example. Given this level of access, they are more likely to be able to identify vulnerabilities and target the weakest areas within their airport.<sup>85</sup> But they can also represent a vulnerability themselves. According to an interviewee, private security staff often lack adequate anti-smuggling training and in some cases their expertise in checking papers and vehicles entering and exiting airport premises is not satisfactory, especially if compared with border police and law enforcement authorities.<sup>86</sup> Airport civilian employees with low skills and lack of training are ideal targets for outsiders wanting to infiltrate airports.

Based on the level of engagement with criminal networks, it is possible to identify different types of insiders, ranging from those turning a blind eye in return for financial gain – such as in the case of the two Bulgarian border police officers described in the section ‘Human trafficking and migrant smuggling’ – to those with a formal affiliation with criminal networks and organized criminal groups, which suggests ‘airport capture’. The case of the arrest of all the customs officers deployed at Sarajevo airport in 2014 is an example of systemic corruption and wrongdoing affecting the whole airport security system.

In all cases, as emphasized by the head of the division of civil aviation security at Pristina airport, insider motivation to act against the interests of their organization and against the law need specific attention.<sup>87</sup> These can be issue-driven (e.g. environmentalist groups targeting airports as places of high carbon emissions) or terrorism focused; alternatively, individuals may become insiders simply because of a general lack of integrity and ethics, or because they are unhappy with their pay or with the way they are treated by their employers.<sup>88</sup> According to a Macedonian investigative journalist, junior guards, technicians and cleaners are the kinds of employees whom criminals can target and turn into insiders because of their low salaries.<sup>89</sup>



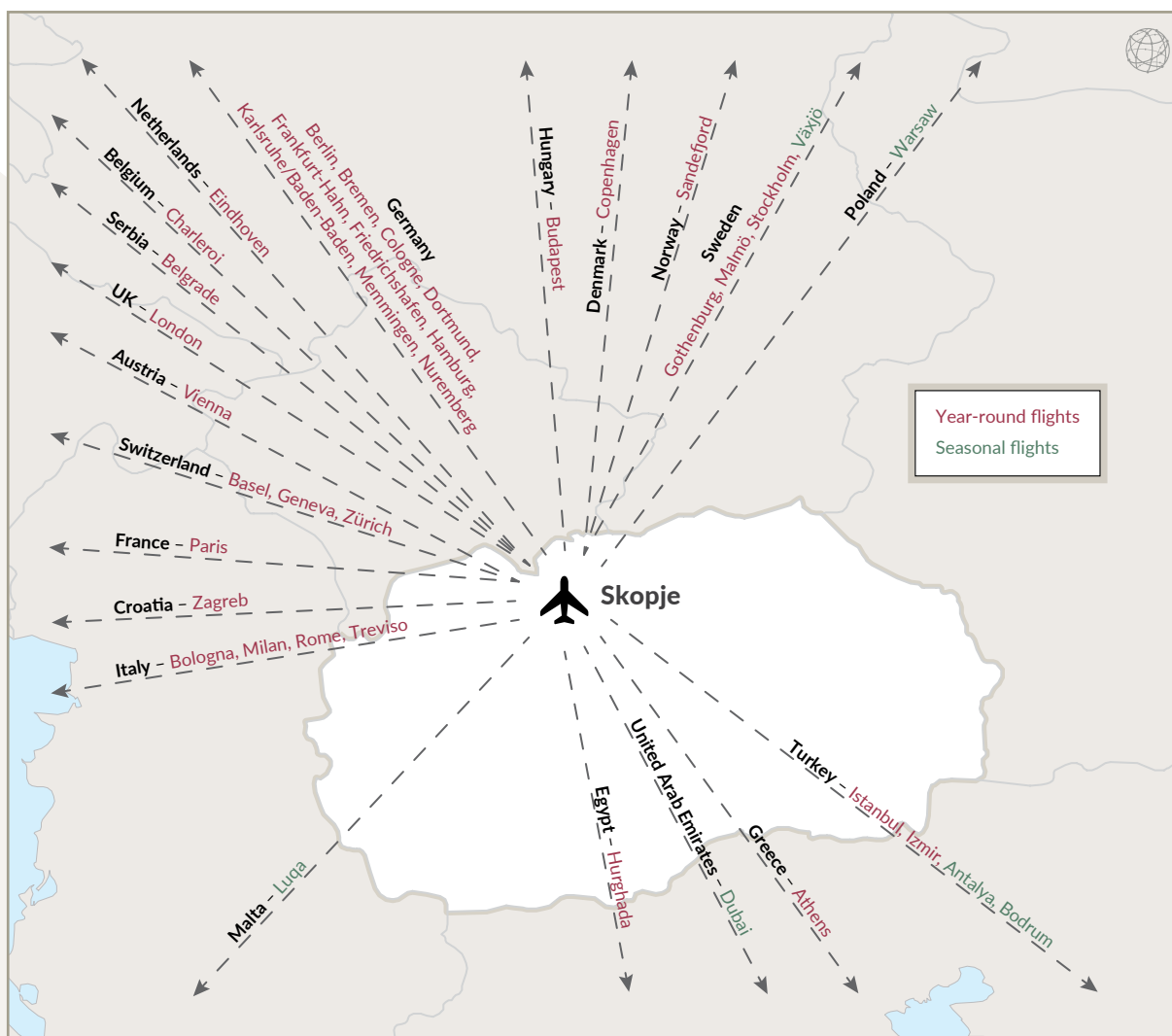
## Skopje International Airport

Skopje International Airport is the main airport and the primary air transport gateway into the Republic of North Macedonia. It is located 25 kilometres from the capital, Skopje.

The airport is a public-owned facility, but in 2008, the Macedonian government signed a contract with the Turkish company Tepe Akfen Ventures (TAV) for a 20-year concession, during which this company would manage Macedonia's two existing airports, Skopje and St Paul the Apostle Airport in Ohrid. TAV Airports Holding was founded in Istanbul, and from its origins in Turkey, the company has expanded its overseas airport operations to include Tbilisi and Batumi airports in Georgia; Monastir and Enfidha airports in Tunisia, and Skopje and Ohrid airports

in North Macedonia. In Skopje, the airport company operations include the provision and maintenance of the physical infrastructure of the airport, as well as ground handling and security services.<sup>90</sup>

In September 2011, the new terminal building, extension of the runway, new administrative building, cargo building, and the new access road with parking facilities were opened. Since the concession, the number of passengers has increased in the past decade by 160 per cent, from 759 918 passengers transiting in 2011 to 1 972 663 in 2022 (until the end of November).<sup>91</sup> Thanks to its strategic location, Skopje airport is attractive not only for the Macedonian market but also for passengers coming from Kosovo, Northern Albania and Southern Serbia.<sup>92</sup>



**FIGURE 4** Skopje airport's international connections.

Performances in handling air cargo have also improved thanks to investments, with a more than 48 per cent increase registered between 2012 (2 297 tonnes handled) and 2019 (3 437 tonnes).<sup>93</sup> After a contraction caused by COVID-19 in 2020 (during which 2 132 tonnes were handled), numbers went up again to almost pre-pandemic levels, with 3 039 tonnes handled in 2021 and 2 399 until the end of November 2022.<sup>94</sup>

### **Ensuring safety and security at the airport: The role of TAV Macedonia**

TAV Macedonia, border police and customs are the three agencies that provide security at Skopje airport. Together, they cover aviation security (physical and x-ray checks), passport control and public order, and cargo-related operations.<sup>95</sup>

TAV Macedonia is in charge of ensuring security at the perimeters of the facility and checks all access and exit points to and from the airport through CCTV surveillance, including at warehouses.<sup>96</sup> TAV possesses the necessary equipment for handling and screening air cargo (including three x-ray machines), and security for the whole facility is supported by 24/7 video surveillance.<sup>97</sup> In case of investigations or official requests by the prosecutor's office, customs and border police get access to CCTV camera footage, and to date, according to a representative of TAV Macedonia, information-sharing mechanisms, when requested, have been functioning smoothly.<sup>98</sup>

TAV Macedonia operates within the safety-management system of an operational framework that allows the concessionaire to define threats that may arise during working activities, to calculate the related risks and to reduce such risks to an acceptable level.<sup>99</sup> In practice, this is done through the implementation and monitoring of the measures introduced by the ICAO with the Safety Management System Manual 9859-AN/474 edition 3, a set of rules that TAV Macedonia strictly follows to enhance security and prevent crime, according to an interviewed expert.<sup>100</sup> However, the manual does not mention or regulate 'crime prevention' as such: provisions aimed at ensuring safety extend to security but do not encompass procedures to detect flows of illicit goods.

Staff are obliged to wear agency uniforms and security identification badges provided by airport security upon receiving consent and approval for a badge from the National Agency for Security.<sup>101</sup> The latter is also responsible for running security background checks on individuals applying for job vacancies at the airport. Reportedly, background security checks are thoroughly performed, but interviewed former airport personnel questioned the transparency of the recruitment processes in the recent past. For example, one mentioned the presence of father-son referral mechanisms,<sup>102</sup> whereas another pointed to affiliation with the ruling political party as a key condition for appointment as a senior airport security official.<sup>103</sup>

### **Rising drug concerns**

Illicit goods, mainly small quantities of drugs for personal consumption or small-scale sales, are regularly seized at the passenger terminal of Skopje airport and are often detected by customs in travellers' luggage. In 2018, for instance, customs officers found 2 kilograms of cocaine with a retail value of up to €570 000 in the luggage of a Venezuelan citizen arriving from Zurich.<sup>104</sup> A year later, a Turkish citizen travelling from Vienna arrived at Skopje airport and headed to the 'green channel' exit for passengers who have nothing to declare. However, customs officers selected him for controls and found 10 bottles containing 10 millilitres of hashish oil each, a 1 litre plastic bottle filled with hashish oil and a glass container with 2.1 litres of hashish oil in his luggage.<sup>105</sup> In another case, in 2021, customs seized 8.01 grams of cannabis, 3.33 grams of hashish and 18 milliliters of hashish oil hidden in the bag of an Italian citizen.<sup>106</sup>

The kinds of substances detected in personal luggage, the relatively small quantities seized and the frequency of seizures suggest that drug trafficking at Skopje passenger terminal does not reach significant levels of sophistication. The number of drug mules and traffickers identified is low, and they seem to operate individually and in an opportunistic way, benefiting from the recent increase in seasonal flights to Skopje airport. In addition, information on the types of criminal networks involved in such traffics is often limited and does not allow for the identification of major trafficking patterns.

Air cargo is a different story, however, both in terms of the quantities involved and the multiple steps of the supply chain exposed to criminal exploitation. The following is an overview of how customs operates in the commercial terminal of Skopje airport.

Regarding imports, a customs declaration is the primary document that importers need to submit either electronically or by post to customs in a specific format (known as a 'single administrative document'). In addition, for the release of goods, the importer is required to provide a purchase invoice, a transport document (the air bill of lading), a cargo manifest (accompanying the transport documents, and containing a detailed description of the goods and their packaging) and a certificate of origin. All these documents must be submitted through the customs declarations and excise documents processing system (CDEPS).<sup>107</sup>

As with ports and other entry points into the national territory, assessing the risks posed in import declarations is the responsibility of the department of risk analysis. They manage a risk-based selectivity system, where imports are screened against predetermined criteria.<sup>108</sup> Based on such criteria, the system assigns imports a colour corresponding to a specific action to be taken: green when the shipment is free to go, yellow when further control of documentation is needed but no inspection is undertaken, and red when document checks and a physical inspection of the shipment are necessary. If the system does not specify a risk level, the shipment is automatically assigned a green code. However, customs officers can decide to perform inspections based on their own evaluation or when the national risk analysis is unavailable. In case of specific risks, the local customs unit informs the national administration which, if necessary, asks the police to initiate a criminal case.<sup>109</sup>

Similar procedures also apply to exports and transshipments. Goods destined for export are usually placed in surveilled airport storage facilities awaiting CDEPS clearance and a green light from the department of analysis. At Skopje airport, almost all the goods are assigned a green colour, indicating that levels of smuggling through the airport are low. Transshipment cargoes are handled in a similar fashion to exports: once they have obtained the necessary transit declarations, goods are cleared for loading. Notably, customs officers can still

stop and examine transshipment cargoes, but the fact that this is not a regular occurrence means that the airport is vulnerable to trafficking.<sup>110</sup>

From a risk assessment carried out by the UNODC in 2020, it emerged that the likelihood of smuggling illicit goods through Skopje airport was regarded as low (assigned a score of 2 out of 5, with 5 being the maximum level of risk) but recent customs operations raise questions about this assessment.<sup>111</sup> In August 2021, for example, with the support of the US DEA, Macedonian police intercepted a shipment of 'several hundred kilograms' of unspecified synthetic drugs that were packed in boxes originally carrying smartphones imported by a 'well-known Skopje-based mobile phone company'.<sup>112</sup> The shipment was assigned a green light and passed through customs without inspection, but was then intercepted by the police outside the airport on its way to its final destination.<sup>113</sup> More recently, in February 2022, Turkish customs and North Macedonian police conducted a controlled delivery that led to the detection of 1 105 kilograms of 1-phenyl-2-propanone (also known as phenylacetone or P2P), a precursor that could have been used for the production of up to €50-million worth of amphetamines and methamphetamines. The shipment was sent via Istanbul from Shanghai to Skopje by air, with Western Europe being the destination for the synthesized drug. As a result of this joint operation, which was one of the biggest seizures of precursors in the region, two North Macedonian citizens allegedly affiliated with an international drug-trafficking organization were arrested, and the entire quantity of the illegal substance was confiscated.<sup>114</sup>

Controlled deliveries performed with international law enforcement partners are key operations not only for the detection of illicit substances but also to identify new routes and new criminal methods. In the context of this operation, investigators explained that the two Macedonians had established relations with their Chinese counterpart and had imported 5 kilograms of the same precursor to test the delivery.<sup>115</sup>

Collaboration between security partners and secrecy of information are key, and cooperation requires high levels of professionalism and integrity.<sup>116</sup> The latter can be achieved through continual performance checks, periodic



training sessions and regular monitoring of satisfaction at work. Customs airport attendance is divided into 12-hour shifts for staff assigned to passenger processing and eight and a half hours for staff assigned to air cargo clearance. For officers working in the commercial clearance of cargo, there is no separation of tasks or specialization between the processing of import/export goods, and examination of cargo is undertaken in the airport cargo building. Reportedly, officers are sufficiently equipped with tools and training to assist with their examinations, but sometimes this is not enough. In December 2021, Macedonian authorities dismantled a criminal network of three police and five customs officers who were successfully smuggling precursors to Skopje airport via the UAE.<sup>117</sup> Arrests of security staff raise questions about the degree of integrity at the airport, and experts agree on the need to tackle security staff exposure to corruption and improve reporting systems: whistleblowing mechanisms exist, but, because of slow and disincentivizing bureaucracy, they do not work in practice.<sup>118</sup> In addition, according to a senior representative of the airport Border Interagency Unit, security staff at the airport need further ethics training, higher salaries and a better-functioning performance monitoring system.<sup>119</sup>

*Security staff at the airport need further ethics training, higher salaries and a better-functioning performance monitoring system.*

### **The role of border police in detecting irregular border crossings**

The border police's primary role at the airport is to monitor immigration-related matters, and the bulk of their work is focused on passport control. This implies that their normal duties do not encompass security checks on air cargo; nonetheless, border police officers support customs work and intervene in cargo inspections, especially in case of the detection of firearms.<sup>120</sup>

Police staff assigned to airport duties are subject to the normal placement and rotation protocols followed by the police across the country. Lack of understanding and training on the specifics of the airport and how crime manifests at its premises might have an effect on the level of security provided, especially for junior officers.<sup>121</sup> Other than that, the work performed by the border police has been regarded as efficient and does not seem to present specific vulnerabilities.<sup>122</sup> According to a senior representative of the border interagency unit, this has probably to do with the relatively small number of passengers passing through the airport, especially in comparison to busier airports in the region, such as Belgrade.<sup>123</sup>

As a result, to date, only two major cases have made it into the national media. In January 2020, police arrested a Turkish citizen who was trying to enter North Macedonia with an Israeli passport, which was found to be forged.<sup>124</sup> In another case, the public prosecutor's office of North Macedonia issued an order for an investigation into three people involved in child trafficking: in May 2022, a Belgian citizen came into contact with the Macedonian parents of six minors through the internet and met them at Skopje airport on multiple occasions to organize the trafficking operation to Belgium.<sup>125</sup>

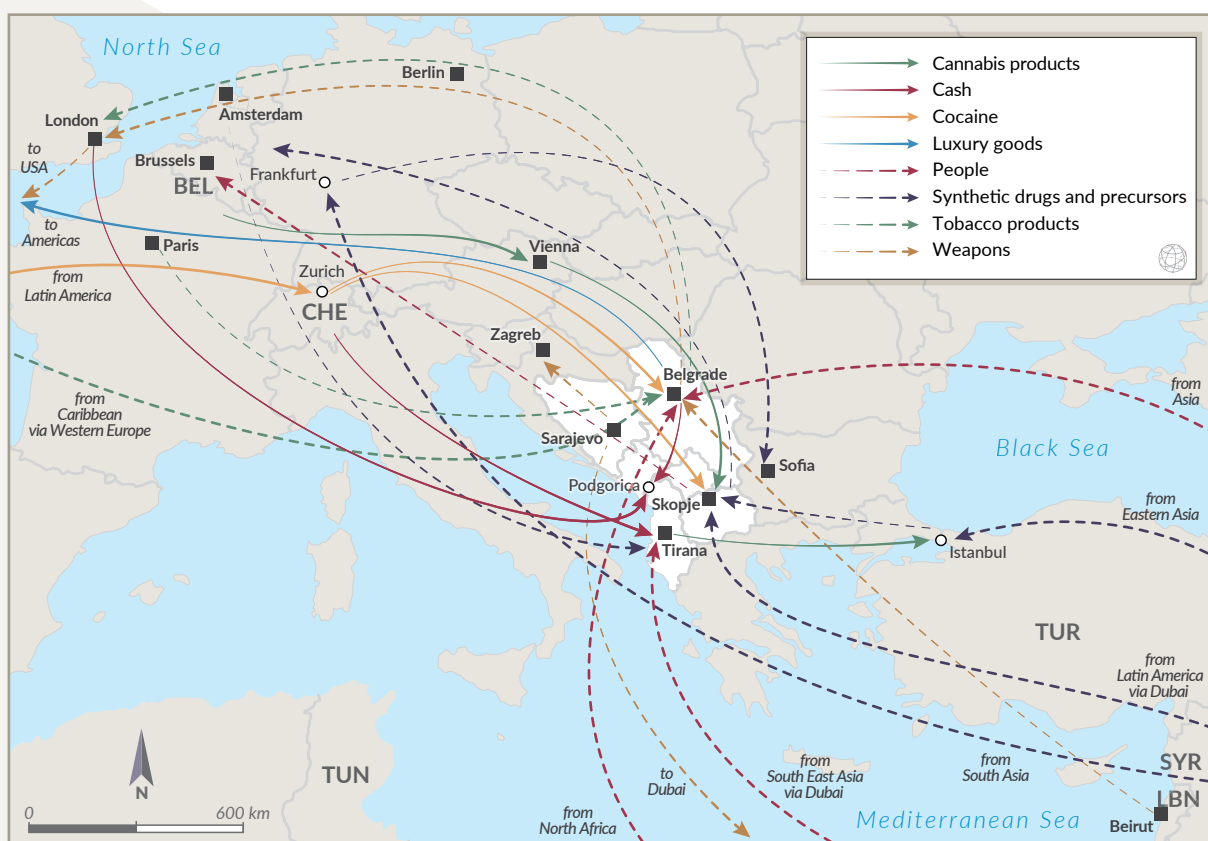
## Interagency cooperation

In recognition of the importance of integrating and coordinating the work of its border agencies, the government of North Macedonia has promulgated a general action plan for integrating border management and established the national border management coordination centre to implement the plan. The primary role of the centre is to inform customs and border police about potential threats and their development, as well as to assist their border enforcement work.<sup>126</sup> Customs are the main actors that work with the centre, where they also have liaison officers who enjoy secure communication channels with all other institutions and partner agencies, especially the border police and TAV Macedonia. Border police participate in interception, inspection and the searching of cargo and related consignments, usually after receipt of previously obtained information. On the other hand, TAV Macedonia's primary goal is to assure its commercial partners that the airport is efficiently run and that their goods are protected from negligent damage, pilfering and theft.<sup>127</sup>

There are, in fact, fundamental differences in the direction of enforcement focus when it comes to

maintaining security over goods as opposed to combating contraband smuggling, but agencies do collaborate.<sup>128</sup> However, according to experts, while cooperation is reportedly not lacking, coordination could be strengthened.<sup>129</sup> In addition, the focus of support and cooperation is more reactive than proactive in both the sharing of information and practical cooperation on the ground.<sup>130</sup> As a result, there is an operational disconnect in communication between those in charge of ensuring physical safety and security, those mandated to perform x-ray screening of export cargo, officers checking imports and other security service providers.<sup>131</sup>

At the international level, border police and customs officers engage in a number of programmes. Notably, in January 2020, the UNODC launched an EU–UNODC joint action on promoting targeted border control measures at Western Balkan ports and airports. In North Macedonia, the government and the UNODC formally committed to the implementation of UNODC initiatives in North Macedonia and, in particular, to the establishment of a nationally owned airport interagency group consisting of a Container Control Programme (CCP) air-cargo control unit and an AIRCOP joint airport interdiction task force at Skopje airport.<sup>132</sup>



**FIGURE 5** Illicit flows in the Western Balkans by air.



Belgrade airport is a hub for illicit activities related to human trafficking, smuggling of migrants and goods, and a main entry point for the shipment of drugs and precursors. © Aleksandar Stojanovic/AFP via Getty Images

## Belgrade Nikola Tesla Airport

Belgrade Nikola Tesla Airport is the largest in Serbia and one of six international airports in the country. It served 5.6 million passengers in 2022, 70 per cent more than in 2021.<sup>133</sup> Nearly 30 airlines work through regular routes from Belgrade airport to more than 90 destinations in 38 countries. The airport is located 18 kilometres west of the centre of Belgrade, close to the three European road corridors key for illicit flows of drugs and people across the Western Balkans: the E-70 (connecting Croatia to Romania), the E-75 (connecting North Macedonia to Hungary) and the E-763 (connecting Montenegro to Serbia).<sup>134</sup>





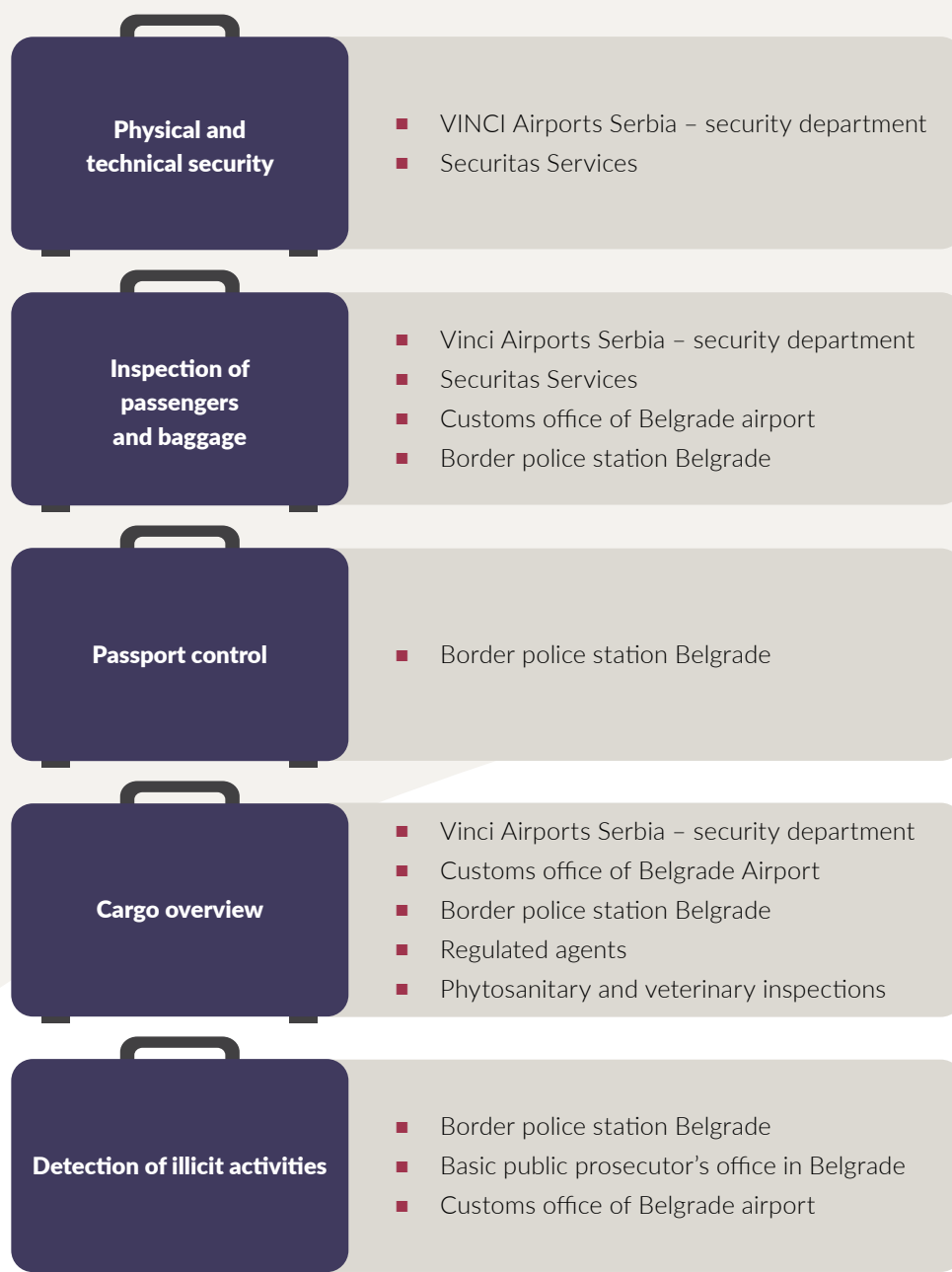
Corruption-related scandals are not new for Belgrade airport. In December 2017, the CEO of the airport was arrested along with 55 employees and accused of concluding a damaging agreement with low-cost airline Wizz Air through abuse of office practices.<sup>140</sup> Earlier that year, the Serbian government had launched an investigation into alleged benefits that Wizz Air had received from Belgrade airport since opening its base there in 2011. Reportedly, the airport had discounted passenger taxes, handling, landing and service fees for the low-cost airline over the previous three years. According to the investigation's findings, Wizz Air saved €5.4 million at Belgrade airport since 2011, with terms of the agreement being negotiated solely by the CEO, which allegedly went against existing legislation.<sup>141</sup> In 2022, the CEO was acquitted, and Wizz Air has always denied the allegations.<sup>142</sup>

Today, the relationship between the Serbian government and Etihad and VINCI is reportedly non-transparent,<sup>143</sup> but the change in the ownership of the national airline and the arrival of a new operator have brought economic benefits and infrastructure development. The Air Serbia fleet was increased by 12 planes,<sup>144</sup> and at the same time, there was an increase in the number of destinations, flights and passengers, as well as the amount of cargo.

Between 2012 and 2019, Belgrade airport noted growth in all the most important traffic indicators. Throughout this period, the number of commercial flights increased by 56 per cent, passengers by 83 per cent and cargo by 195 per cent. Owing to the global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant slump in traffic in 2020, with the number of air operations falling by 52 per cent: the number of commercial flights in 2022 was 34 per cent higher than in 2021 but 30 per cent lower than in 2019. In 2022, the number of passengers was still 9 per cent lower than in 2019, but cargo numbers were back at pre-pandemic levels.<sup>145</sup>

## **Complex security systems**

As the infrastructural transformation of Belgrade airport is currently underway, construction and resulting disruptions at airport premises are having an impact on the levels of security provided.<sup>146</sup> Several institutions and organizations from the public and private sectors contribute to security operations at Belgrade airport, as shown in Figure 7.



**FIGURE 7** Components of the security system at Belgrade airport.

The leading roles are played by the interior ministry, the security information agency and the airport security service, all following international standards and regulations.<sup>147</sup> The institutional security arrangement of the airport began to change when VINCI Airports took over management of the airport. The operator hired a private security company, Securitas Services, whose workers are responsible for screening and inspecting passengers

and luggage.<sup>148</sup> Some interviewees pointed out that the quality of security has decreased since the private security company took over the work traditionally performed by law enforcement personnel, because private security workers are not suitably trained, especially not for preventing smuggling.<sup>149</sup> Nevertheless, interviewed security experts seem to agree that Belgrade airport is safe and that security is ensured, especially since 2016.<sup>150</sup>



## A hub for multiple illicit flows

Unlike at larger entry points, such as ports, where the presence of Serbian criminal networks has often been identified by law enforcement agencies, detecting the presence of organized criminal groups operating at Belgrade airport is not an easy task.<sup>151</sup> This mainly stems from the fact that Belgrade airport offers a very limited and rather secured space to the public, and most suspicious activity can be seen and prevented well in advance.

In May 2022, the ICAO determined, after an audit, that the aviation security system in Serbia currently complies with almost 95 per cent of international aviation security standards.<sup>152</sup> Although the quantities of goods illicitly moving through Belgrade airport remain small, the presence of a considerable number of individual cases of illicit trade indicates the need for a closer look.<sup>153</sup>

Alongside migrant smuggling and human trafficking, smuggling of drugs, tobacco products, luxury goods and cash are the most common illicit activities detected at the airport, but cases of smuggling of plants and animals, antique coins and weapons have also been reported.

## Drug trafficking

Seizures of cocaine arriving from Latin America, most often the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru, have been carried out at Belgrade airport. One of the largest seizures took place in 2015, when 8.5 kilograms of cocaine were found in the possession of a Brazilian citizen travelling to Belgrade from São Paulo via Zurich. Upon his arrival, a number of red flags alerted customs to suspicious activity. The man reportedly acted disoriented and was carrying a new passport in which the first seal was the one that he received to enter Serbia. Thanks to a rapid international exchange of intelligence, customs identified the passenger as a risk, and forced him into the control area, with customs officials from the department of anti-smuggling waiting to x-ray and inspect his luggage.<sup>154</sup>

More recently, in November 2021, a Macedonian citizen of Albanian ethnicity was caught travelling from Ecuador with a suitcase carrying liquid cocaine soaked into various items of clothing.<sup>155</sup>

There is also evidence to show that drug mules have frequently been arrested at the airport. They are often women, who, at the time of their arrest, do not carry any luggage and cannot tell authorities where they are going to stay or spend the night. A red flag usually identified by customs is that most of them carry laxatives that help them to quickly expel the drug upon arrival.<sup>156</sup>

Other drugs, such as cannabis and synthetic substances, are intercepted on passengers in Belgrade airport, but most activity takes place in the cargo area, through international shipments intended for transit and export.<sup>157</sup> In most of these cases, loads of licit goods have had small quantities of cannabis hidden in boxes of CDs or books. Cannabis is usually produced locally in indoor cultivation hubs in Pancevo and Sremska Mitrovica, destined for the US and UK markets.<sup>158</sup>

## Other seizures

Tobacco products are typically smuggled from Serbia to the UK using the Belgrade–London Luton route. This involves individuals buying boxes of cigarettes at Belgrade airport for about €20 per box and selling them in the UK for approximately £80 per box. The net profit amounts to around €500 per carton of 10 packs. The smuggling method is simple: cigarettes are either carried in hand luggage or hidden in specially sewn apparel.<sup>159</sup>

Cigars are also often smuggled into Serbia.<sup>160</sup> For example, in October 2021, a Chinese citizen tried to smuggle 950 cigars into Belgrade airport. A year later, customs and police stopped a Serbian citizen who had arrived from Paris and, thanks to a sniffer dog, discovered more than 1 000 cigars in his luggage.<sup>161</sup> In a similar case in January 2023, a Serbian citizen returning from Cuba was found guilty of smuggling around 2 000 cigars.<sup>162</sup>

Customs regularly seize various types of flora and fauna from around the world and either store or destroy them in warehouses just outside the airport.<sup>163</sup> The fact that goods are transported outside, and not stored or destroyed within the perimeters of the airport, might constitute a vulnerability, as it exposes officers and airport staff carrying the seized goods to risks of corruption, or they may attempt to take the seized goods.<sup>164</sup>

Plants that lack accompanying documentation arrive mainly from China for recipients usually located in Serbia.<sup>165</sup> Animals mostly come from Africa and corals from South America and Asia.<sup>166</sup> Ivory items, teeth and hunting trophies are usually found transiting Belgrade, in most cases accompanied by forged documents. For example, in early 2023, customs seized 12 falcons that were declared as non-commercial imports into Serbia and, in July 2021, some Italian citizens were stopped at the airport and found to be in possession of quails and canaries. Snakes and scorpions from Thailand have also been detected transiting Belgrade.<sup>167</sup>

Small but valuable items such as jewellery (in particular, luxury watches) are often smuggled through Belgrade airport. In one case, customs stopped a passenger arriving from the US who had hidden nine undeclared Rolex watches worth half a million euros in a toaster.<sup>168</sup> Other cases have involved art. In July 2021, for instance, customs found a painting by Serbian artist Paja Jovanović worth over €140 000 in the luggage of a senior public official of the municipality of Belgrade, who, at the time of the seizure, declared that it was his personal belonging and that, in his opinion, no customs clearance was needed.<sup>169</sup>

According to a retired border police officer, cash and ancient coins are sometimes seized at the airport, mainly being moved from Serbia to North or South America.<sup>170</sup> The detection of weapons trafficking appears to be rare: in the past, missile parts were sent from Belgrade airport, especially after the war in the former Yugoslavia, but this is no longer the case.<sup>171</sup>

## Summary of observations

We can draw a number of conclusions from the analysis of illicit flows through Skopje and Belgrade airports. First, it illustrates that airports in the Western Balkans are relatively secure systems, through which, barring specific cases in which cargo operations are involved, it is difficult to smuggle illicit goods in large quantities. In addition, it is interesting to note that there are relatively predictable routes and modalities – for example, for the trafficking of precursors from China or cocaine from Latin America, both in small quantities hidden in luggage and larger loads shipped as cargo.

## People flows

Since 2015, Belgrade has been a hub for irregular migration. To reach the desired destination, migrants often change their identity papers in transit at the airport, using falsified visas and residence permits from Serbia and EU member states. They are primarily citizens of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Syria, Tunisia, Nigeria, Cameroon, Liberia and Algeria.<sup>172</sup> However, although Belgrade airport was not heavily exposed to migratory pressure during the height of the refugee crisis of 2015 to 2021,<sup>173</sup> it has progressively become a key transit destination for citizens of countries for which Serbia currently has a visa-free regime, such as Iran, India and Tunisia.<sup>174</sup>

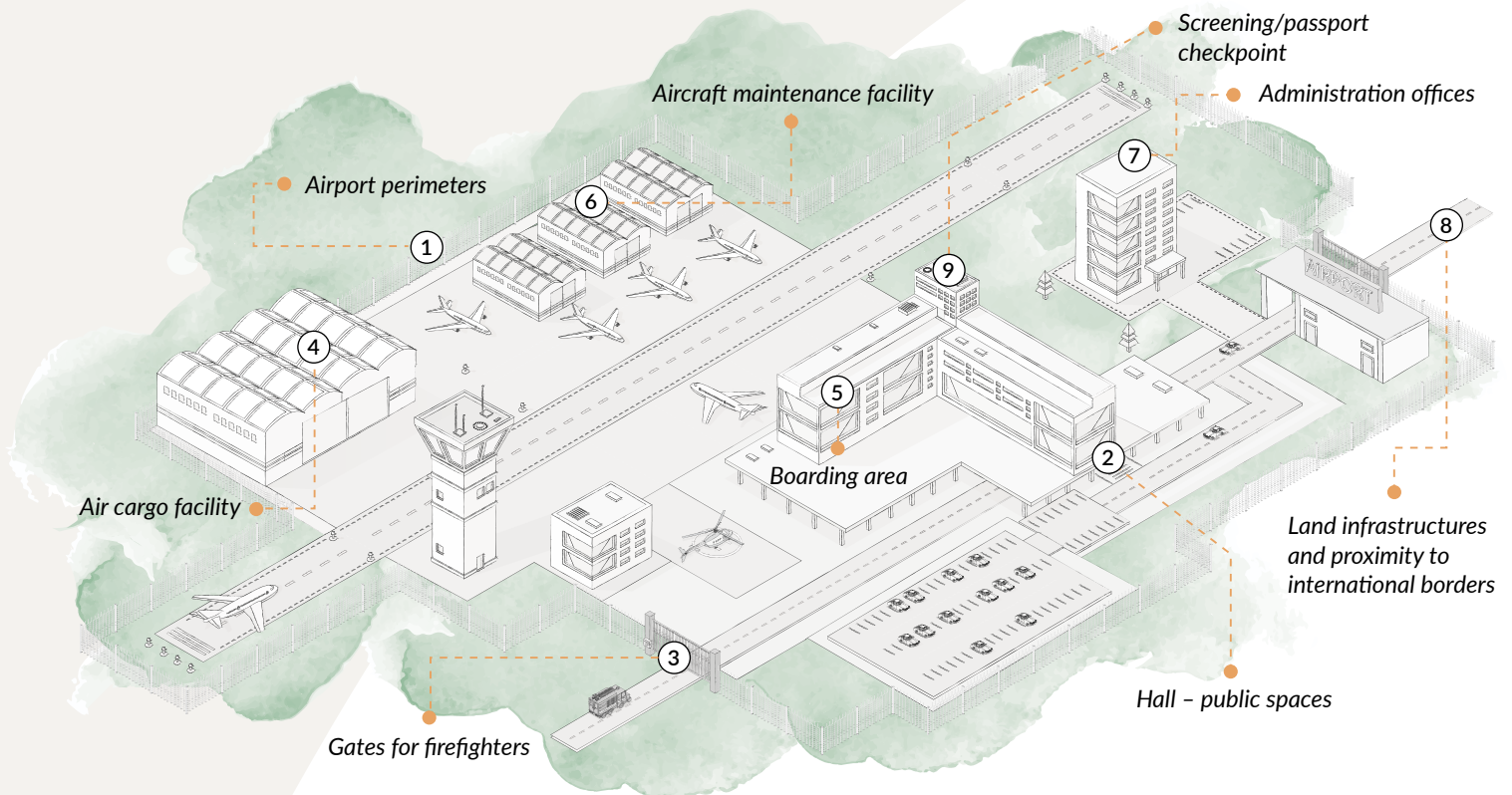
Illegal border crossing at Belgrade airport is often facilitated by forged travel documents, identity cards, residence permits and visas. Forged Croatian, German and Belgian passports are the most common documents detected by border police, and although the introduction of biometric documents has reduced the number of fake travel documents, border police stamps and immigration visas are still being falsified.<sup>175</sup>

Cooperation between the police, customs officers and the prosecution authority, who are responsible for detecting crime at the airport, is good, and meetings of critical institutions and organizations from the public and private sectors are held regularly.<sup>176</sup>

The analysis also shows how, given the high levels of security systems in place, criminal groups operating through the region's airports cannot disregard the need to rely on insiders, including employees of the concessionaire, customs or police services. In cases of systemic corruption, total control over the security system suggested 'airport capture'.

The analysis of past seizures, as well as ongoing investigations, pinpoints common vulnerabilities in regional airports. The infographic that follows shows a generic, fictitious airport and illustrates the types of vulnerabilities identified during the data collection phase.

## TYPES OF VULNERABILITIES IDENTIFIED



- ① **Fences and CCTV coverage** of the airport are the first and most external barrier in place to prevent incursions from outsiders. If not in compliance with international standards and regularly patrolled, barriers far from busy areas can offer potential offenders the opportunity to break into airport spaces.
- ② **Airports halls** host thousands of occupants daily – a diverse and transient population. Based on the arrivals and departures schedules, offenders such as couriers and drug mules can plan to benefit from rush-hours and, thanks to the loose security systems, can use public toilets and other areas for smuggling purposes.
- ③ If not sufficiently secured, **access gates for vehicles** can be targeted by potential offenders willing to enter airport spaces for illicit purposes, ranging from armed robbery to tampering with cargo.
- ④ **Air cargo facilities** temporarily host goods of different value for import and export. Spaces are regularly monitored with CCTV cameras, but concessionaire employees in charge of inspections are more focused on checks for safety purposes than on detecting illicit goods. Customs, on the other hand, are focused on tax revenues for import and export, and do not regularly check cargo in transit.
- ⑤ **Boarding areas** at airports host several operators, ranging from private security guards to salespeople, technicians and cleaners. Often because of their low salaries, or because of the lack of training on integrity and ethics at work, they can be an easy target for criminals who offer them small bribes.
- ⑥ If not properly trained, supervised and monitored, **land operators and technicians** working at aircraft maintenance facilities are well placed to tamper with airplanes, and to put contraband onboard or hide it in cargo loads.
- ⑦ **Lack of transparency** in airport ownership and concession contracts and investments can enable corruption and money laundering.
- ⑧ **The proximity of airports to international borders** with poor control systems is exploited by criminal networks for running transnational illicit flows.
- ⑨ Particularly **favourable visa regimes for citizens** of typical countries of emigration may enhance the risks of human trafficking. At airports, untrained border police in charge of checking passports, with no understanding of international human trafficking routes, may constitute a vulnerability and could expose the airport to trafficking.





# RECOMMENDATIONS

Airports have certain characteristics that make them vulnerable to particular internal and external security threats, including a transient population and time-sensitive operations. © Armin Durgut/Pixsell via Getty Images



**F**rom the main findings of this study, a number of recommendations can be made to try to reduce the vulnerability of airports in the Western Balkans, and to improve transnational cooperation to disrupt illicit flows.

**Improve collaboration on the ground:** Airport security agencies with different security-related mandates working 'in silos' are a concern for international aviation security. Lack of proactive cooperation and information exchange among agencies with enforcement responsibilities (customs, concessionaire, private security firms and border police) has an adverse impact on security, as it can undermine established and effective responses to illicit trade and organized crime.

**Strengthen international cooperation:** The higher the risk of interdiction, the less attractive an airport is for traffickers. At the international level, international organizations such as the UNODC, the World Customs Organization, INTERPOL, AIRCOP, the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the UN's ICAO agency have been active in building capacity in countries seeking to improve risk management, supply-chain security, trade facilitation in airports, and detection and interdiction of illicit trafficking, and to prevent the cross-border movement of illicit goods.<sup>177</sup> However, as the research conducted shows that a lot of illicit trade through airports still goes undetected, cooperation at the international level could be improved.

**Deploy liaison officers:** Airport-specific liaison and security networks enabled by national legislation and by the private sector in airports could support investigations into illicit supply chains. It would also help if each airport had a dedicated crime liaison officer, an expert on organized crime, crime prevention and security, whose role is to network with local authorities operating outside airport spaces, including police, customs and prosecution offices, and to be the focal point for international partners, depending on the specific criminal market the airport is most affected by. Liaison officers could be linked up with peers in other relevant airports, both in the region, and in major destinations across Western Europe and the East, to develop a network.

**Strengthen integrity measures:** The best security systems will be undermined if there is corruption at an airport. Therefore, employment procedures should always include background criminal checks. Junior airport staff and low-paid employees should be continually monitored through periodic temperature checks to identify signs of discontent and the related risk of becoming criminal insiders. Workers' unions and airport staff representatives should also be involved in briefings on infiltration risks, as well as in training designed to strengthen a culture of integrity.

**Take a closer look at airstrips:** Although falling outside the scope of the research, we often came across information on mafia-style groups owning and controlling private airstrips from which they operate illicit trade, especially drug trafficking and tobacco smuggling. Identifying and checking these sites is even more relevant when they are located nearby public airports and are well connected by transport networks to major logistics hubs.

## NOTES

- 1 Walter Kemp, Transnational tentacles: Global hotspots of Balkan organized crime, GI-TOC, July 2020, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/transnational-tentacles-wb6>.
- 2 GI-TOC, Hotspots of organized crime in the Western Balkans: Local vulnerabilities in a regional context, May 2019, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/oc-western-balkans>, p 7.
- 3 For more information, see Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime>.
- 4 EX-YU Aviation News, Former Yugoslavia's 23 airports handle 21 million passengers, 28 October 2022, <https://www.exyuaviation.com/2022/10/former-yugoslavia-23-airports-handle.html>.
- 5 Eduart Halili, Increase in air trafficking, Albania on top of classification, Albanian Daily News, 8 May 2022, <https://albanianailynews.com/news/increase-in-air-trafficking-albania-on-top-of-clasification>.
- 6 The 'Tourism Growth Index 2017/2027' is calculated on the percentage ratio between the international arrivals registered in 2017 and the 2027, forecast by the World Travel and Tourism Council.
- 7 Interview with a representative of TAV Macedonia Airports Holding Co., January 2023, online.
- 8 Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime>, p 13.
- 9 Reuters, Air cargo carriers battle competition from seas, passenger planes, 3 June 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/airlines-iata-cargo-idUSL6NOOK1BY20140603>.
- 10 Transport Community, Strategy for sustainable and smart mobility in the Western Balkans, July 2021, <https://www.transport-community.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Strategy-for-Sustainable-and-Smart-Mobility-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>.
- 11 International Air Transport Association (IATA), What types of cargo are transported by air?, 7 September 2022, <https://www.iata.org/en/publications/newsletters/iata-knowledge-hub/what-types-of-cargo-are-transported-by-air>.
- 12 IATA, Value of air cargo, <https://www.iata.org/en/programs/cargo/sustainability/benefits>.
- 13 IATA, What types of cargo are transported by air?, 7 September 2022, <https://www.iata.org/en/publications/newsletters/iata-knowledge-hub/what-types-of-cargo-are-transported-by-air>.
- 14 International Airport Review, The top 10 busiest airports in the world by cargo handled, 27 April 2022, <https://www.internationalairportreview.com/article/107921/top-10-busiest-airports-world-cargo>.
- 15 Daniel Müller-Jentsch, The European common aviation area and the Western Balkans: Domestic reforms and regional integration in air transport, Office for South East Europe European Commission – World Bank, February 2007, [https://transport.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2016-09/2007\\_02\\_09\\_see\\_air\\_transport\\_en.pdf](https://transport.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2016-09/2007_02_09_see_air_transport_en.pdf).
- 16 Nickolaos Koroniotis et al, A holistic review of cybersecurity and reliability perspectives in smart airports, *IEEE Access*, 8, 209802–209834, <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=9252856>.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 VINCI Airports, Serbia: Belgrade airport, <https://www.vinci-airports.com/en/airports/belgrade-airport>.
- 19 CAPA, Albanian company takes on the concession for Tirana Rinas Airport, 24 February 2021, <https://centreforaviation.com/analysis/reports/albanian-company-takes-on-the-concession-for-tirana-rinas-airport-548563>.
- 20 Tirana International Airport, History is written! Tirana International Airport counts the 5 millionth passenger, 20 December 2022, <https://www.tirana-airport.com/en/article/960/History-is-written%21-Tirana-International-Airport-counts-the-5-millionth-passenger>.
- 21 Transport Community Treaty Permanent Secretariat, Development of indicative TEN-T extensions of the comprehensive and core network in Western Balkans, June 2021, <https://www.transport-community.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/TEN-T-report-2020.pdf>.
- 22 See, for example, FanABC, Customs commission seizes 773mln birr worth cocaine at Bole Int'l Airport, 28 September 2022, <https://www.fanabc.com/english/customs-commission-seizes-773mln-birr-worth-cocaine-at-bole-intl-airport>; S Venkadesan, Gold, cigarettes seized from two passengers at Chennai airport, *The Times of India*, 1 October 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/gold-cigarettes-seized-from-two>



- passengers-at-chennai-airport/articleshow/94581269.cms; and Clifford Lo, HK\$147 million cocaine seizure biggest at Hong Kong International Airport in 20 years, *South China Morning Post*, 25 November 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/3157340/hk147-million-cocaine-seizure-biggest-hong-kong-international>.
- 23 Tony Kingham, In 2020, 765 cases of drug seizures at airports were reported across Western Europe, *Border Security Report*, 24 June 2021, <https://border-security-report.com/in-2020-765-cases-of-drug-seizures-at-airports-were-reported-across-western-europe>.
  - 24 See, for example, UNODC, Major European airports see substantial decrease in drug seizures in flights from Latin America and the Caribbean to Europe, <https://www.unodc.org/ropan/en/major-european-airports-see-substantial-decrease-in-drug-seizures-in-flights-from-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-to-europe.html>.
  - 25 Interview with a retired police officer working on human trafficking in Belgrade, Serbia, December 2022.
  - 26 Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime>.
  - 27 David BaMaung, Security: The hidden 'insider' threat of the aviation sector, *International Airport Review*, 20 August 2018, <https://www.internationalairportreview.com/article/73985/security-the-hidden-insider-threat-of-the-aviation-sector>.
  - 28 Interview with a retired high-ranking police officer at Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022; Interview with Milan Pekić, director of the Office for Combating Drugs in Serbia, Belgrade, December 2022.
  - 29 Interview with Professor Mangai Natarajan, Department of Criminal Justice at John Jay College, February 2023, online.
  - 30 ENACT, Illicit goods trafficking via port and airport facilities in Africa, June 2020, <https://enact-africa.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/2020-06-29-interpol-ports-threat-assessment-report.pdf>; Interview with Kastriot Gashi, Head of Division of Civil Aviation Security in Pristina, December 2022.
  - 31 Interview with Professor Mangai Natarajan, Department of Criminal Justice at John Jay College, February 2023, online.
  - 32 Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), B&H: Sarajevo airport's customs staff arrested for gold smuggling, 3 June 2014, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/2471-bosnia-herzegovina-sarajevo-airports-entire-customs-staff-arrested-for-gold-smuggling>.
  - 33 Ibid.
  - 34 Dragana Pećo, Serbian businessman with organized crime ties to profit big in airport deal, OCCRP, 18 October 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/8759-serbian-businessman-with-organized-crime-ties-to-profit-big-in-airport-deal>.
  - 35 Top Channel Albania, Kukes airport, SSA reveals robbery with land privatization, 9 September 2016, <https://top-channel.tv/english/kukes-airport-ssa-reveals-robbery-with-land-privatization>.
  - 36 UN Mission to Kosovo, FIU arrested two senior officials from Pristina airport, 1 October 2004, <https://unmik.unmissions.org/1236-fiu-arrested-two-senior-officials-pristina-airport>.
  - 37 Andrew D Newton, Crime on public transport: 'Static' and 'non static' (moving) crime events, *Western Criminology Review*, 5, 3 (2004), 25–42.
  - 38 Countries involved: Austria (action leader), Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania (action co-leader), Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina. See more at Europol, Human traffickers grounded in 29-country sweep of European airports and roads, 26 November 2021, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/human-traffickers-grounded-in-29-country-sweep-of-european-airports-and-roads>.
  - 39 Public Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, Донесена наредба за истрага против три лица за кривично дело Трговија со дете, 17 May 2022, <https://jorm.gov.mk/donesena-naredba-za-istraga-protiv-tri-licza-za-krivichno-delo-trgovija-so-dete>.
  - 40 Явор Симов, Задържаните за престъпната схема на летище София остават в ареста, *Bulgarian National Television*, 27 May 2017, <https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/chetirimata-zadrzhani-na-letishche-sofiya-za-trafik-na-khoro-ostavat-v-aresta>; Republic of Bulgaria, Канал за превеждане на мигранти през Летище София е разбит след съвместни действия на ДАНС, МВР и прокуратурата, 25 May 2017, <https://dans.bg/bg/press-releases-menu-bul/724-operaciakanalmigrantiletishtesofia-26052017-art-bul>.
  - 41 Kristi Ceta, UAE citizen arrested in Tirana airport for smuggling immigrants, *Albanian Daily News*, 4 November 2021, <https://albaniandailynews.com/news/uae-citizen-arrested-in-tirana-airport-for-transporting-illegal-immigrants-1>.
  - 42 Ibid.
  - 43 ENACT, Illicit goods trafficking via port and airport facilities in Africa, June 2020, <https://enact-africa.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/2020-06-29-interpol-ports-threat-assessment-report.pdf>.
  - 44 Interview with a representative of the Serbian NGO Astra, December 2022, by phone.
  - 45 Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime>.
  - 46 Simone Cappelletti et al, Drug importation into Italy by body packing: An analysis of the UNODC individual drug seizures database, *Medico-Legal Journal*, 86, 4 (2018), 193–197; Interview with Milan Pekić, director of the Office for Combating Drugs in Serbia, Belgrade, December 2022.
  - 47 Telegraf.tv, Here's how a Brazilian hid the largest amount of cocaine ever at the Belgrade airport!, 14 July 2015, <https://www.telegraf.rs/english/1653202-heres-how-a-brazilian-hid-the-largest-amount-of-cocaine-ever-at-the-belgrade-airport-photo>.

- 48 Public Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, Република Северна Македонија, Поднесено обвинение за венецуелскиот државјанин фатен со дрога на скопскиот аеродром, 17 December 2018, <https://jorm.gov.mk/podneseno-obvinenie-za-venecuelskio>.
- 49 Syri, Ekstazi nga Holanda për lokalet e natës në Tiranë, 23 January 2023, <https://www.syri.net/kronike/565085/ekstazi-nga-holanda-per-lokalet-e-nates-ne-tirane>.
- 50 Interview with Milan Pekić, director of the Office for Combating Drugs in Serbia, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 51 See more at Republika, Large quantity of synthetic drugs seized in a Skopje raid reportedly coordinated with the DEA, 8 November 2021, <https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/large-quantity-of-synthetic-drugs-seized-in-a-skopje-raid-reportedly-coordinated-with-the-dea>.
- 52 TV21.mk, Видео: Голема заплена на скопскиот аеродром – требало да биде произведен амфетамин вреден над 50 милиони евра, 3 February 2022, <https://mk.tv21.tv/video-zaplenet-nad-eden-ton-prekursor-od-koj-trebalo-da-bide-proizveden-amfetamin-vreden-nad-50-milioni-evra-razbiena-megunarodna-kriminalna-grupa>.
- 53 Nadezhda Filipova, Record-setting amount of ketamine seized at Sofia airport, Bulgarian News Agency, 14 October 2022, <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/343867-record-setting-amount-of-ketamine-seized-at-sofia-airport>.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Politiko, Drugs are seized on the plane coming from Albania to Istanbul airport, 15 October 2022, <https://politiko.al/english/e-tjera/sekuestrohet--ne-avionin-qe-vinte-nga-shqiperia-ne-aeroportin-e-sta-i468901>.
- 56 See Europol, Balkan cartel trafficking cocaine around the globe in private planes busted, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/balkan-cartel-trafficking-cocaine-around-globe-in-private-planes-busted>.
- 57 Sebastian Höhne, IT in general aviation: Pen and paper vs. bits and bytes, Master's thesis, Leibniz University Hannover and the University of Oslo, 30 August 2013, [http://www.hoehne.net/files/hoehne\\_master-thesis\\_llm.pdf](http://www.hoehne.net/files/hoehne_master-thesis_llm.pdf).
- 58 DBpedia, About: Aviation safety, [https://dbpedia.org/page/Aviation\\_safety](https://dbpedia.org/page/Aviation_safety).
- 59 Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime>.
- 60 European Parliament, Air transport: Civil aviation security, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU\\_3.4.7.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU_3.4.7.pdf).
- 61 Interview with a representative of the ACI, December 2022, online.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Interview with Kosovo border police at Pristina airport, Pristina, December 2022.
- 65 Nickolaos Koroniotis et al, A holistic review of cybersecurity and reliability perspectives in smart airports, *IEEE Access*, 8 (2020), 209802–209834, <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&number=9252856>.
- 66 See, for example, AP, Serbia's capital Belgrade paralysed by hundreds of bomb threats, Euronews, 16 May 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/05/16/serbia-s-capital-belgrade-paralysed-by-hundreds-of-bomb-threats>; and Crisis24, North Macedonia: Anonymous bomb threats continue to prompt evacuations and disruptions in Skopje, 16 December 2022, <https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2022/12/north-macedonia-anonymous-bomb-threats-continue-to-prompt-evacuations-and-disruptions-in-skopje-dec-16-update-1>.
- 67 Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime>.
- 68 See, for example, RTV, *Pronadene rakete na BG aerodromu?*, 12 March 2016, [https://rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/hronika/pronadjene-rakete-na-bg-aerodromu\\_698202.html](https://rtv.rs/sr_lat/hronika/pronadjene-rakete-na-bg-aerodromu_698202.html).
- 69 Stuff, Kiwi reportedly arrested at Sarajevo airport, 5 August 2017, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/95487535/kiwi-reportedly-arrested-at-sarajevo-airport>.
- 70 *Sarajevo Times*, One person arrested at Sarajevo International airport for illegally carrying military equipment, 19 August 2019, <https://sarajevotimes.com/one-person-arrested-at-sarajevo-international-airport-for-illegally-carrying-military-equipment>.
- 71 CDM, A Serbian businessman detained upon landing at Podgorica airport: He arrived in helicopter, carrying large amounts of money, 23 October 2022, <https://www.cdm.me/english/a-serbian-businessman-detained-upon-landing-at-podgorica-airport-he-arrived-in-helicopter-carrying-large-amounts-of-money>.
- 72 MRT, На скопскиот аеродром спречен обид за нелегално изнесување на 105 илјади евра, 5 January 2017, <https://www.mrt.com.mk/node/37226>.
- 73 For more details, see Telegraf, *Pokušaj šverca na aerodromu Nikola Tesla: Kinez u specijalnim džepovima donjeg veša sakrio ever*, 16 October 2021, <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/hronika/3405276-pokusaj-sverca-na-aerodromu-nikola-tesla-kinez-u-specijalnim-dzepovima-donjeg-vesa-sakrio-evre>.
- 74 *Sloboden Pecat*, More than a million counterfeit euros seized at Tirana airport, <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/zapleneti-nad-milion-falsifikuvani-evra-na-aerodromot-vo-tirana>.
- 75 Jaimie Kay, Stansted airport: £800,000 seized after a group of men tried to smuggle it to Montenegro, HertsLive, 11 March 2022, <https://www.hertfordshiremercury.co.uk/news/hertfordshire-news/stansted-airport-800000-seized-after-6786237>.
- 76 ITV, Men jailed for smuggling £7million in cash out of UK airports, 22 December 2018, <https://www.itv.com/news/anglia/2018-12-22/men-jailed-for-smuggling-7million-in-cash-out-of-uk-airports>.
- 77 AFP, Albania airport heist: armed robbers steal €2.5m from Austrian Airlines plane, *The Guardian*, 10 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/10/albania-airport-heist-armed-robbers-steal-25m-from-austrian-airlines-plane>.
- 78 Ibid.
- 79 B92, Robbers take EUR 3mn at Sarajevo airport, 6 December 2007, [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2007&mm=12&dd=06&nav\\_id=45983](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/region.php?yyyy=2007&mm=12&dd=06&nav_id=45983).
- 80 Interview with a security manager of a multinational logistics company in Belgrade, December 2022.
- 81 For more information on the Global Organized Crime Index, see <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/ocindex-2021>.
- 82 Interview with a representative of ACI, December 2022, online; Interview with a representative of TAV Macedonia Airports Holding Co., January 2023, online.

- 83 IATA, Insider threat in civil aviation, June 2018, <https://www.iata.org/contentassets/e55ae27b2fc34343a1143fca5129c8dd/insider-threats-position.pdf>.
- 84 Butterfly Training, The 'insider' threat in aviation, 30 September 2019, <https://blog.butterfly-training.net/insider-threat-within-aviation>.
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 Interview with a security manager of a multinational logistics company in Belgrade, December 2022.
- 87 Interview with Kastriot Gashi, head of the division of civil aviation security in Pristina, December 2022.
- 88 Butterfly Training, The 'insider' threat in aviation, 30 September 2019, <https://blog.butterfly-training.net/insider-threat-within-aviation>.
- 89 Interview with Viktor Stefanovski, investigative journalist based in North Macedonia, Skopje, December 2022.
- 90 UNODC, Airport assessment – Skopje International Airport, Republic of North Macedonia, UNODC-CCP and WCO, November 2020, p 18.
- 91 For more information, visit the Skopje airport website, <https://skp.airports.com.mk/en-EN/cargo-terminal-business>.
- 92 Interview with a representative of TAV Macedonia Airports Holding Co., January 2023, online.
- 93 UNODC, Airport assessment – Skopje International Airport, Republic of North Macedonia, UNODC-CCP and WCO, November 2020, p 18.
- 94 For more information, visit the Skopje Airport website, <https://skp.airports.com.mk/en-EN/cargo-terminal-business>.
- 95 UNODC, Airport assessment – Skopje International Airport, Republic of North Macedonia, UNODC-CCP and WCO, November 2020, p 21.
- 96 Ibid.
- 97 Ibid, p 19.
- 98 Interview with a representative of TAV Macedonia Airports Holding Co., January 2023, online.
- 99 Interview with a former senior manager of TAV Macedonia, Skopje, December 2022.
- 100 International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), Safety management manual (SMM), 2013, <https://www.icao.int/SAM/Documents/2017-SSP-GUY/Doc%209859%20SMM%20Third%20edition%20en.pdf>.
- 101 UNODC, Airport assessment – Skopje International Airport, Republic of North Macedonia, UNODC-CCP and WCO, November 2020, p 19.
- 102 Interview with a representative of a trade union of airport workers, Skopje, December 2022.
- 103 Interview with a former senior manager of Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022.
- 104 Сашо Спасоски, Обид за шверц на два килограми кокаин на скопскиот аеродром, МЕТА, 7 December 2018, <https://meta.mk/obid-za-shverts-na-dva-kilogrami-kokain-na-skopskiot-aerodrom>.
- 105 See more at: Tocka Macedonia, <https://tocka.com.mk/vesti/317219/obvinenie-protiv-turcin-koj-na-skopskiot-aerodrom-sakal-da-prosvercuva-maslo-od-hasis%2026/08/2019>.
- 106 Public Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, Република Северна Македонија, Истрага против италијански државјанин за откриена дрога во неговиот багаж на скопскиот аеродром, 19 May 2021, <https://jorm.gov.mk/istraga-protiv-itali%20d1%20anski-drzhav%20d1%20anin-za-otkriena-droga-vo-negoviot-bagazh-na-skopskiot-aerodrom>.
- 107 UNODC, Airport assessment – Skopje International Airport, Republic of North Macedonia, UNODC-CCP and WCO, November 2020, p 20.
- 108 Ibid.
- 109 Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime>.
- 110 Interview with a representative of the law enforcement sector and intelligence department of the border interagency unit at Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022; Interview with a representative of a trade union of airport workers, Skopje, December 2022.
- 111 UNODC, Airport assessment – Skopje International Airport, Republic of North Macedonia, UNODC-CCP and WCO, November 2020, p 26.
- 112 Republika, Нова акција на ДЕА во Македонија: Дрога спакувана во делови за мобилни откриена по слетувањето во Скопје, 8 November 2021, <https://republika.mk/vesti/crna-hronika/nova-akcija-na-dea-vo-makedonija-droga-spakuvana-vo-delovi-za-mobilni-otkriena-po-sletuvanje-vo-skopje>.
- 113 Ibid.
- 114 Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, The North Macedonian and Turkish law enforcement authorities made one of the biggest seizure of synthetic drugs in Southeast, 17 February 2022, <https://www.selec.org/the-north-macedonian-and-turkish-law-enforcement-authorities-made-one-of-the-biggest-seizure-of-synthetic-drugs-in-southeast>.
- 115 Interview with a representative of the law enforcement sector and intelligence department of the border interagency unit at Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022.
- 116 Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime>.
- 117 Горан Наумовски, Цариници и полицајци дозволиле шверц на дрога преку скопскиот аеродром, SlobodenPecat, December 2021, <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/carinici-i-policajci-dozvolile-shverc-na-droga-preku-skopskiot-aerodrom>.
- 118 Interview with a retired high-ranking police officer at Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022.
- 119 Interview with a representative of the law enforcement sector and intelligence department of the border interagency unit at Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022; Interview



- with representative of a trade union of airport workers, Skopje, December 2022.
- 120 UNODC, Airport assessment – Skopje International Airport, Republic of North Macedonia, UNODC-CCP and WCO, November 2020, p 26.
- 121 Interview with a retired high-ranking police officer at Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022.
- 122 UNODC, Airport assessment – Skopje International Airport, Republic of North Macedonia, UNODC-CCP and WCO, November 2020 and interview with a retired high-ranking police officer at Skopje airport, in Skopje in December 2022.
- 123 Interview with a representative of the law enforcement sector and intelligence department of the border interagency unit at Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022.
- 124 Public Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, Република Северна Македонија, Поведена постапка за фалсификување исправи, 25 January 2020, <https://jorm.gov.mk/povedena-postapka-za-falsifikuvane-ispravi>.
- 125 Public Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, Република Северна Македонија, Донесена наредба за истрага против три лица за кривично дело Трговија со дете, 17 May 2022, <https://jorm.gov.mk/donesena-naredba-za-istraga-protiv-tri-licza-za-krivichno-delo-trgovija-so-dete>.
- 126 UNODC, Airport assessment – Skopje International Airport, Republic of North Macedonia, UNODC-CCP and WCO, November 2020, p 26.
- 127 UNODC, Airport assessment – Skopje International Airport, Republic of North Macedonia, UNODC-CCP and WCO, November 2020; Interview with a representative of TAV Macedonia Airports Holding Co., January 2023, online.
- 128 Interview with a representative of TAV Macedonia Airports Holding Co., January 2023, online; Interview with a retired high-ranking police officer at Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022.
- 129 Interview with a representative of the law enforcement sector and intelligence department of the border interagency unit at Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022; Interview with a retired high-ranking police officer at Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022.
- 130 Interview with a former senior manager of TAV Macedonia, Skopje, December 2022; Interview with a representative of the law enforcement sector and intelligence department of the border interagency unit at Skopje airport, Skopje, December 2022.
- 131 UNODC, Airport assessment – Skopje International Airport, Republic of North Macedonia, UNODC-CCP and WCO, November 2020.
- 132 UNODC, UNODC & North Macedonia to cooperate on enhanced border control, 26 January 2020, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2021/January/unodc-and-north-macedonia-to-cooperate-on-enhanced-border-control.html>.
- 133 EX-YU Aviation News, Belgrade airport handles 5.6 million passengers in 2022, 13 January 2023, <https://www.exyuaviation.com/2023/01/belgrade-airport-handles-56-million.html>.
- 134 For more information on illicit flows through European road corridors see, for example, Walter Kemp, Kristina Amerhauser and Ruggero Scaturro, Spot prices: Analyzing flows of people, drugs and money in the Western Balkans, GI-TOC, May 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/western-balkans-crime-hotspots-3>.
- 135 See the website of AirSerbia, [https://www.airserbia.com/footer\\_menu/kompanija/o-nama/nasa-prica](https://www.airserbia.com/footer_menu/kompanija/o-nama/nasa-prica).
- 136 See the website of Belgrade airport, [https://www.beg.aero/lat/korporativno/o\\_koncesiji](https://www.beg.aero/lat/korporativno/o_koncesiji).
- 137 Dragana Pećo and Vesna Radojević, Businessman nets 47M for Belgrade airport land, then partners with lawyer whose firm advised on deal, OCCRP, 21 March 2021, <https://www.occrp.org/en/openlux/businessman-nets-47m-for-belgrade-airport-land-then-partners-with-lawyer-whose-firm-advised-on-deal>.
- 138 Robin Cartwright and Kristina Amerhauser, Illicit financial flows in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, GI-TOC, January 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/iffs-western-balkans-2>, pp 24–25.
- 139 Dragana Pećo, Subotić će zaraditi najmanje 28 miliona evra od koncesije aerodroma, Krik, 18 October 2018, <https://www.krik.rs/subotic-ce-zaraditi-najmanje-28-miliona-evra-od-koncesije-aerodroma>.
- 140 RAI, Serbia: Former Belgrade airport head among 56 arrested for corruption, 5 December 2017, <https://rai-see.org/serbia-former-belgrade-airport-head-among-56-arrested-for-corruption>; RTS, Bivši generalni direktor Aerodroma 'Nikola Tesla' pravosnažno oslobođen, 15 April 2022, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/135/hronika/4779604/pravosnazno-oslobodjen-direktor-nikola-tesla-velimir-radosavljevic.html>.
- 141 Ibid.
- 142 Ibid.
- 143 In June 2017, the civil society organization Transparency Serbia filed a lawsuit against the government of Serbia in the administrative court because the government refused to release documents related to the Belgrade airport concession based on the right to free access to information of public importance. In October 2022, the administrative court ruled in favor of Transparency Serbia, but the government of Serbia has still not acted on the verdict and sent the documents.
- 144 For more information, visit the website of AirSerbia, [https://www.airserbia.com/footer\\_menu/kompanija/nasa-flota](https://www.airserbia.com/footer_menu/kompanija/nasa-flota).
- 145 Euronews, Novo lice aerodroma Nikola Tesla – kako će izgledati najveća vazдушna luka u Srbiji, 3 January 2021, <https://www.euronews.rs/biznis/biznis-vesti/31220/novo-lice-aerodroma-nikola-tesla-kako-ce-izgledati-najveca-vazdusna-luka-u-srbiji-video/vest>.
- 146 Ibid.
- 147 Interview with an airport security manager, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 148 Interview with a retired border police officer, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with an airport security manager, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with an investigative journalist, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with Tango Six editor Petar Vojinović, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 149 Interview with a retired border police officer, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with an investigative journalist, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with a multinational company security manager, Belgrade, December 2022;

- Interview with a border veterinary inspection representative, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 150 Interview with a retired border police officer, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with an investigative journalist, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with an airport security manager, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with Tango Six editor Petar Vojinović, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 151 See, for example, Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime>.
- 152 Direktorat za civilno vazduhoplovstvo, Veliki uspeh za civilno vazduhoplovstvo RS - usaglašenost Srbije u oblasti sistema obezbeđivanja (security) u vazduhoplovstvu na najvišem nivou, 15 July 2022, <https://cad.gov.rs/lat/vest/20991/veliki-uspeh-za-civilno-vazduhoplovstvo-rs---usaglasenost-srbije-u-oblasti-sistema-obezbeđivanja-security-u-vazduhoplovstvu-na-najvisem-nivou>.
- 153 Interview with Milan Pekić, director of the Office for Combating Drugs, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 154 Politika, Na aerodromu 'Nikola Tesla' zaplenjeno 8,5 kilograma kokaina, 9 July 2015, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/332715/Hronika/Na-aerodromu-Nikola-Tesla-zaplenjeno-8-5-kilograma-kokaina>.
- 155 Ibid.
- 156 Mondo, Kako carinici 'provale' švercere: Kokain u gitari, Rolex u tosteru, YouTube, 22 July 2021, <https://youtu.be/B88sGmwk6Hs>.
- 157 Interview with a Post of Serbia security manager, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 158 Ibid.
- 159 Interview with a retired border police officer, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 160 Uprava carina, Uklijučenje za RTS sa aerodroma Nikola Tesla, 17 January 2023, <https://www.carina.rs/sr/pres/vesti/246265/uključenje-za-rt-sa-aerodroma-nikola-tesla.html>.
- 161 RTS, Rekao da nema ništa da prijavi – pas otkrio švercovane tompute na aerodromu, Naslovi.net, 9 December 2022, <https://naslovi.net/2022-12-09/rt-s-rekao-da-nema-nista-da-prijavi-pas-otkrio-svercovane-tompuse-na-aerodromu/32189908>.
- 162 RTV, U prtljagu putnika iz Havane sakriveno 2.000 tomputa, 9 January 2023, [https://www.rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/hronika/u-prtljagu-putnika-iz-havane-sakriveno-2.000-tompusa\\_1406760.html](https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/hronika/u-prtljagu-putnika-iz-havane-sakriveno-2.000-tompusa_1406760.html).
- 163 Interview with a border phytosanitary inspection representative, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with a border veterinary inspection representative, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 164 Interview with a retired border police officer, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with a border phytosanitary inspection representative, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with a border veterinary inspection representative, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 165 Interview with a border phytosanitary inspection representative, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 166 Interview with a border veterinary inspection representative, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 167 Mondo, Kako carinici "provale" švercere: Kokain u gitari, Rolex u tosteru, YouTube, 22 July 2021, <https://youtu.be/B88sGmwk6Hs>.
- 168 Ibid.
- 169 Jovana Tomić, Slučaj 'Stražar' Kolekcionar iz gradske uprave, Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia, 21 September 2021, <https://www.cins.rs/slučaj-strazar-kolekcionar-iz-gradske-uprave>.
- 170 Interview with a Post of Serbia security manager, Belgrade, December 2022; Južne vesti, Sprečeno krijumčarenje 300 antičkih novčića iz rimskog doba u pošiljci za Ameriku, 12 February 2021, <https://www.juznevesti.com/Hronika/Spreceno-krijumčarenje-300-antickih-novcica-iz-rimskog-doba-u-posiljci-za-Ameriku.sr.html>.
- 171 Interview with a retired border police officer, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with an investigative journalist, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with a Post of Serbia security manager, Belgrade, December 2022; Južne vesti, Sprečeno krijumčarenje 300 antičkih novčića iz rimskog doba u pošiljci za Ameriku, 12 February 2021, <https://www.juznevesti.com/Hronika/Spreceno-krijumčarenje-300-antickih-novcica-iz-rimskog-doba-u-posiljci-za-Ameriku.sr.html>.
- 172 Interview with a retired border police officer, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 173 From 2015 to 2021, the number of expressed intentions to seek asylum at the Belgrade airport was drastically lower than other places where the intention to seek asylum is expressed more often, such as regional police stations and other border crossings. See the annual reports on the right to asylum of the Belgrade Center for Human Rights at <http://azil.rs/godisnji-izvestaji-o-ljudskim-pravima-u-srbiji>.
- 174 Aviatica, Iranci osvajaju Beograd, 31 May 2018, <https://www.aviatica.rs/iranci-osvajaju-beograd/>; DW, Više migracije na Balkanskoj ruti: prvo u Srbiju, onda u EU, 29 September 2022, <https://www.dw.com/sr/vi%C5%A1e-migracije-na-balkanskoj-ruti-prvo-u-srbiju-onda-u-eu/a-63274946>.
- 175 Interview with deputy prosecutor Ivan Marković, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 176 Interview with a retired border police officer, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with an airport security manager, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with deputy prosecutor Ivan Marković, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with a multinational company security manager, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with Milan Pekić, director of the Office for Combating Drugs, Belgrade, December 2022; Interview with a retired senior police officer, Belgrade, December 2022.
- 177 See more details at UNODC, UNODCITY 'Urban Safety Governance Initiative', <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/urban-safety/airports.html>, Council of Europe, Airports – General aviation – Controlled deliveries, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/pompidou/activities/airports>.







# GLOBAL INITIATIVE

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

## ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 600 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

**[www.globalinitiative.net](http://www.globalinitiative.net)**

Supported by



**UK Government**