

# OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

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## Summary highlights



### **A renaissance of crime in Novi Pazar?**

A spate of violent incidents has put Novi Pazar in southern Serbia back on the map as a hotspot of organized crime. The city, situated along key trafficking routes, once had the reputation of being the main heroin warehouse in Europe. We look at its past and present links to illicit economies.



### **Synthetic drugs in the Western Balkans.**

The Western Balkans is well known as a transit region for the trafficking of drugs, like cannabis, cocaine and heroin. But, as examined in this article, there are signs that the region is also a producer of synthetic drugs, as well as a growing consumer market.



### **Troubled waters: smuggling migrants across the Adriatic.**

Recent rescue operations in the Adriatic off the coasts of Albania and Montenegro suggest that a growing number of migrants are being smuggled by boat from marinas and ports in those two countries. We look at

recent cases and what they indicate about a shift in smuggling routes and methods.



### **Lessons learned from cannabis legalization in North Macedonia.**

In March 2016, North Macedonia legalized the cultivation and export of cannabis for medicinal use. We look at lessons learned from North Macedonia's experience over the past five years, particularly related to regulation, and the dangers of legally-grown cannabis landing on the black market.



### **Empowering youth in Vlorë.**

The city of Vlorë in southern Albania has a reputation for being a place for producing criminals who apply their skills at home and abroad. For more than 20 years, the Vlorë Youth Center has been working with young people in the community to expand their horizons, skills and opportunities to support them along a path towards legal livelihoods. We talk to the director of the centre, Alketa Dhimitri, about her work and the challenges and opportunities that she sees.



## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Welcome to the fifth issue of the Risk Bulletin produced by the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe. As in our previous issues, we start by looking at a hotspot of organized crime, this time Novi Pazar in southern Serbia. Then we look at the production and use of synthetic drugs in the Western Balkans, particularly in Serbia and North Macedonia. We also focus on recent cases of smuggling of migrants off the coast of Albania and Montenegro.

In many countries around the world, there is a trend towards the decriminalization and even the legalization of cannabis. We look at the issue in the context of the Western Balkans, particularly related to the experience

in North Macedonia over the five years since it legalized the cultivation, production and export of cannabis for medical use.

As always, we conclude with a profile of the work of a civil society organization from the Western Balkans that is working to strengthen resilience to organized crime. This month, we talk to the director of the Vlora Youth Center in southern Albania about the challenges and opportunities that she sees in her work with young people.

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# A renaissance of crime in Novi Pazar?

In mid-December 2020, shots rang out in the streets of Novi Pazar. In the middle of the day, close to a police station, a nightclub owner with an extensive police rap sheet and his son shot at a man from their moving car, injuring a bystander.<sup>1</sup> Two days later, in broad daylight, several bullets were fired at a man sitting in a café in the city centre who, not long before, was reportedly in the company of two police officers.<sup>2</sup> In a high-profile response to the shootings, the Serbian interior minister sent in the gendarmerie to patrol the city and conduct raids.<sup>3</sup> There is a palpable sense of fear in the city and people are carrying knives and other weapons to protect themselves. After years of relative stability, Novi Pazar is back in the news as a hotspot of organized crime.

Novi Pazar is located in south-western Serbia (in the Sandzak region) close to Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Because of its location, the Bosniak-majority city of around 120 000 inhabitants has traditionally been a hub for trade and trafficking.<sup>4</sup> Like other criminal hotspots in the Western Balkans identified by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), Novi Pazar is underdeveloped: the average monthly salary is €353 – €160 less than the national average – while 12% of the population is dependent on social assistance.<sup>5</sup> Around one fifth (20 768) of the adult population is unemployed.<sup>6</sup> Many inhabitants of the city allegedly gain some of their income from remittances or smuggling. 'Everything is smuggled – wood, livestock, food, tools, machines, textiles,' said a local civil society activist.<sup>7</sup> Because of the economic hardships, many young people are leaving the area.<sup>8</sup> Some of those that stay engage in criminal activities.

Novi Pazar used to be a notorious hub for criminal activity, much of which was centred around the Hajrović family. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Hikmet Hajrović was reputed to be one of Serbia's biggest drug bosses, particularly for heroin smuggled from Turkey to Novi Pazar. Criminal groups smuggled consignments of drugs in specially-modified compartments in trucks, buses or vans. The heroin that Hajrović smuggled was said to be of exceptional purity – among the best quality in Europe – and some of the shipments weighed hundreds of kilograms. In 2008, the US State Department nicknamed the Sandzak region as Europe's 'heroin stash'.<sup>9</sup> From Novi Pazar, criminals smuggled drugs to other cities in Serbia, mainly Belgrade, and on to Western Europe, as

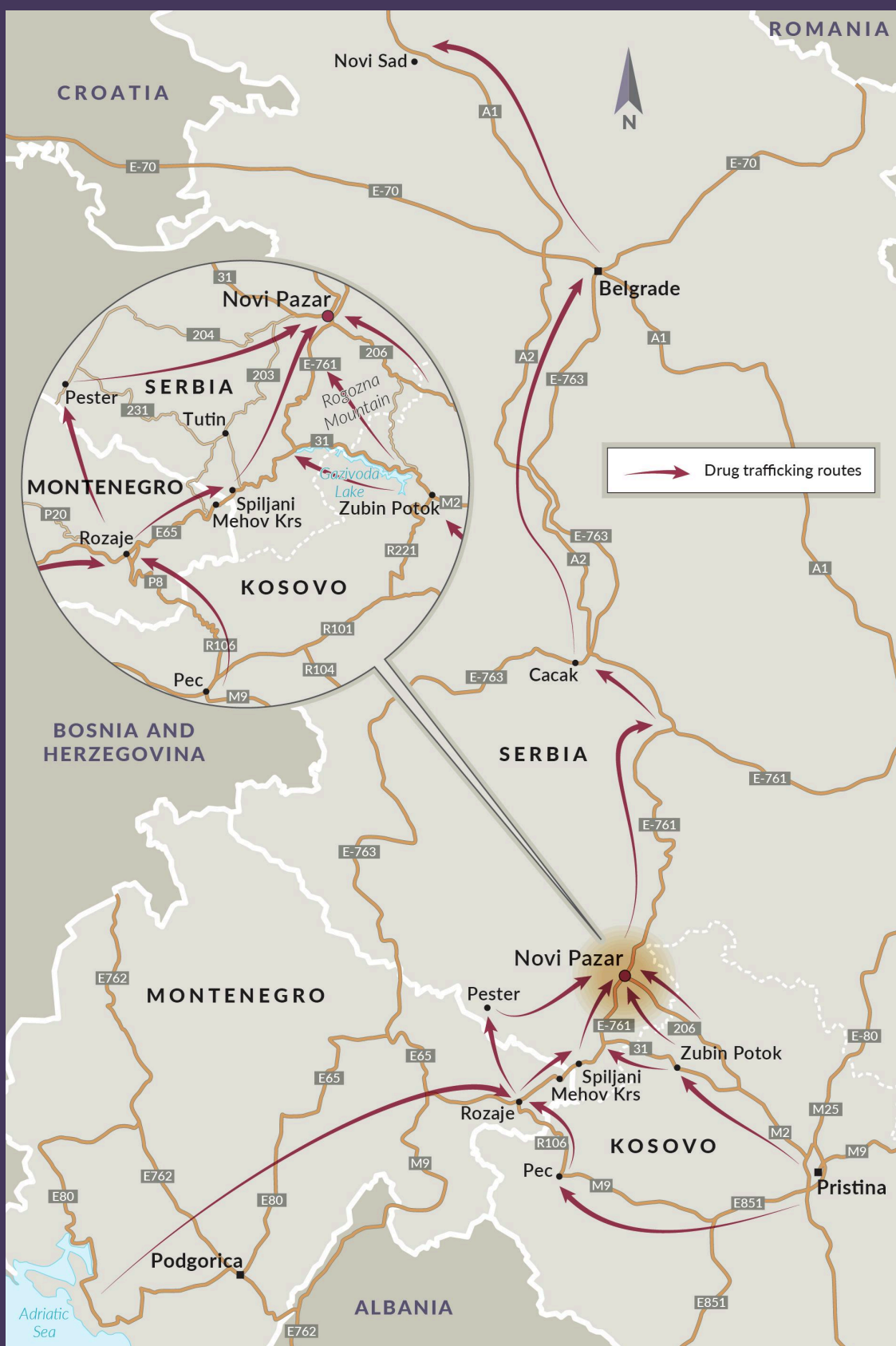
far away as London. Hajrović was finally arrested in 2011 and sentenced in 2013 to 15 years in prison, based on a plea bargain.<sup>10</sup>

Until the recent shootings, Novi Pazar's criminal heyday seemed to have passed. Criminals from the 1990s and early 2000s had allegedly invested their assets in legal businesses and abandoned crime. Heroin trafficking was taken over by bigger and more powerful groups involved in cocaine trafficking from outside Sandzak. While heroin and cannabis are still trafficked through Novi Pazar (particularly via Rozaje in Montenegro),<sup>11</sup> the volume is said to be lower than in the past.

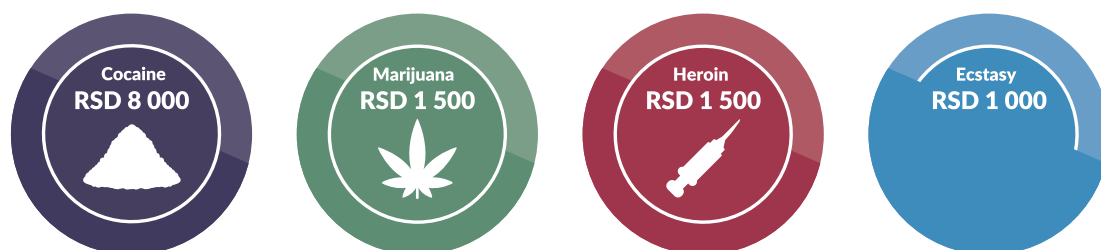
There is also some evidence of synthetic drugs in Novi Pazar, primarily ecstasy produced in Western Europe and brands known as Super Mario and Ladybug.<sup>12</sup> According to police data, the street price of marijuana is around 1 000 Serbian dinars (RSD) or €8.5 per gram; heroin, amphetamine and ecstasy are each RSD1 500 per gram (€7), while a gram of cocaine costs RSD8 000 (€68).<sup>13</sup> However, those familiar with the local drug market say that the real prices are lower.<sup>14</sup>

While Novi Pazar's role as a drug-trafficking hub is less significant than in the past, the problem has not disappeared. Since 2015, 114 people have been prosecuted for illicit production, possession or sale of narcotics in Novi Pazar. The court sentenced them to a total of 281 years in prison. Most of the sentences have been minor. A rare exception was a dealer sentenced to seven years in prison for possessing 21 kilograms of marijuana intended for sale.<sup>15</sup> Police have arrested criminals from Novi Pazar in other countries, such as Hungary and Turkey, in possession of tens of kilograms of cannabis. And local groups, although smaller and less powerful than in the past, are reported to be cooperating with criminal groups from Kosovo, Belgrade, Cacak and Novi Sad.<sup>16</sup>

The business model of some groups from Novi Pazar seems to be stealing drugs from other criminals.<sup>17</sup> In 2019, a group from Novi Pazar allegedly stole 6 kilograms of cocaine in Slovenia from the Montenegrin Kavač clan. A few months later, in December 2019, a member of the same Novi Pazar group<sup>18</sup> was shot in Belgrade during a drug handover.<sup>19</sup> Drugs and around €300 000 in cash that he had with him disappeared.<sup>20</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Drug trafficking routes in and around Novi Pazar.



**FIGURE 2** Street prices for drugs in Novi Pazar.

Time will tell if these recent incidents in Novi Pazar are only a temporary flare-up or if they presage a return to the city's notorious past.

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# Synthetic drugs in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans is often labelled as a transit region for the trafficking of drugs like cannabis, cocaine and heroin. But there are signs that the region is also a producer of synthetic drugs, as well as a growing consumer market.

The main synthetic drugs being smuggled into the Western Balkans are amphetamines, methamphetamine and ecstasy (MDMA), as well as new synthetic versions of cannabis and opioids like heroin. The main source of the drugs are countries in Western Europe, particularly the Netherlands, Belgium, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria.<sup>1</sup> In Serbia, there is also a growing tendency to import synthetic drugs from the Baltic countries<sup>2</sup> and Eurasia, including Afghanistan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, local production appears to be increasing, particularly in North Macedonia and Serbia. Between 2009 and 2019, police in Serbia uncovered over 140 illicit drug laboratories, mostly on residential premises.<sup>4</sup> The majority of the main labs in Serbia are in the

Belgrade suburbs or in Nis.<sup>5</sup> One of the biggest discoveries was in 2003 in the small town of Stara Pazova (in the northern province of Vojvodina), where police found around 2 million ecstasy tablets valued at over €4 million, as well as approximately 20 tonnes of acid for ecstasy production, estimated to be worth over €10 million. Nevertheless, only 245 people were convicted – an average of less than two people per illegal laboratory uncovered.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that the police are only catching the ‘cooks’ and not all of those involved in the production and distribution networks.

In 2020, most seizures of synthetic drugs in Serbia were made either in Belgrade and Novi Sad or close to the border with Hungary, for example at the Horgos border crossing point. Seizures were also made in Kragujevac and Bor.<sup>7</sup>

The problem is not limited to Serbia. In December 2017, police discovered illegal drug labs in the village of Batinci and in a home near Tetovo in North Macedonia.<sup>8</sup> They seized around 910 000 Captagon tablets, 52 kilograms



**The youth's increased access to synthetic drugs has heightened health concerns in Serbia.**

Photo: serpeblu/iStock



of pure amphetamine and large quantities of substances used for narcotics production. The main suspect, Milan Zarubica, had previously been convicted in relation to a lab in Stara Pazova, Serbia. A few months later, Macedonian police found yet another laboratory used to illegally manufacture synthetic drugs.

In addition to trafficking and production, there seems to be a growing local market for synthetic drugs.<sup>9</sup> New psychoactive substances – mostly synthetic cannabinoids – which mimic traditional illicit drugs like cannabis, cocaine, MDMA and LSD are emerging in Serbia.

In Serbia and North Macedonia, prices for synthetic drugs are relatively low, which is a major factor in their increasing market share compared to plant-based drugs.<sup>10</sup> It is possible to buy five ecstasy pills for around €25.<sup>11</sup> That said, there are also substances like the amphetamine Tucibi (2C-B) which is known as an 'elite drug' because of its high cost and strong psychedelic effects. The drug is usually sold on the black market in the form of pills or capsules, but can also be mixed with ecstasy.<sup>12</sup> In 2019, police in Nis arrested a person in possession of almost 175 grams of Tucibi.<sup>13</sup>

Synthetic drugs are easily accessible, particularly in large cities.<sup>14</sup> 'The market in Serbia is well supplied with amphetamine, ecstasy and MDMA,' said someone with knowledge of the situation on the streets. Methamphetamine is less present in Serbia.<sup>15</sup> Still,

marijuana and heroin are the most widely-used drugs in Serbia, followed by speed.<sup>16</sup>

It is unclear how COVID-19 has affected the synthetic drug market in the Western Balkans, but there is a sense that the market is relatively resilient, with some synthetic drugs being used as a substitute for heroin.<sup>17</sup> Users are turning to the Internet to access suppliers since they cannot meet dealers in clubs or at festivals like in the past.<sup>18</sup>

Although heroin remains the main cause of the approximately 50 drug-related deaths in Serbia every year,<sup>19</sup> increased access to and use of synthetic drugs have heightened health concerns in the country and led to the tragic drug-related deaths of young people. After a 15-year-old girl died in November 2018 in the small town of Arandjelovac after taking ecstasy for the first time at a party, locals organized a series of protests calling for better prevention measures.<sup>20</sup> In neighbouring Lazarevac, residents put up posters around the city with photos of local drug dealers. In 2018, four young people aged 17 to 21 died after taking ecstasy, while between 2009 and 2019 more than fifty people died in the country from different synthetic drugs.<sup>21</sup>

While the focus on drugs in the Western Balkans has usually been on the transit of plant-based substances like cocaine, heroin and cannabis, it is also important to keep an eye on the production and use of synthetic drugs.

## Notes

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# Troubled waters: smuggling migrants across the Adriatic

On 9 January 2021, 55 migrants from Syria, Iran and Egypt – including women and children – were rescued in rough seas off the coast of Albania. The speedboat that they had been travelling in, which had departed from Vlora, Albania, on its way to Italy, had broken down. The pilots had fled, and the boat was drifting and spilling fuel.<sup>1</sup>

This rescue operation followed two incidents in October and December 2020 where Montenegrin authorities intercepted two sailboats attempting to smuggle Kurds from Turkey via the Western Balkans to Italy. These occurrences suggest that more effective law enforcement and COVID-19-related restrictions along the traditional Balkan route have led smugglers to select alternative paths, including the Adriatic maritime routes. The closure of the Balkan route in March 2016 led to a significant decrease in the number of asylum-seekers and migrants moving through the Western Balkans. But since 2019, the number of refugees and migrants has again steadily increased.

Because of improved border controls between Greece and North Macedonia, a growing number of people on the move are travelling through Albania. Once they cross into the country, they either head north towards Montenegro or north-east through Kosovo into Serbia. Additionally, in the past few months there have been signs of increasing attempts to smuggle people across the Adriatic Sea to Italy.

The 55 migrants that were rescued on 9 January say that they paid between US\$2 000 and US\$4 000 each to smugglers for safe transport by yacht to Italy. Instead, they were transported in a speedboat.<sup>2</sup> In early January, police in Vlora stopped another 21 migrants who were planning to illegally cross the Adriatic.<sup>3</sup>

The smuggling routes are well-established, dating back to the early 1990s when tens of thousands of Albanians tried to emigrate to Italy. As recently as 2004 – exactly 17 years to the day before the rescue of the 55 migrants – 28 Albanians drowned at sea while trying to cross from Vlora across the Strait of Otranto to Italy.<sup>4</sup> Now it is mostly foreigners from the Middle East and North Africa who are being smuggled to Italy from Albanian shores.



**FIGURE 3** Ports and marinas at risk for being used for migrant smuggling.

In the past, the same routes were used to smuggle drugs, particularly cannabis, using speedboats. The problem was so acute that boats were seized and burned by the Albanian government. A ban on motorboats in Albanian territorial waters was introduced in 2006;<sup>5</sup> it was finally lifted in 2013, to the relief of the tourism industry.<sup>6</sup> The smuggling route from the shoreline around Fier and Vlora across the Strait of Otranto to Italy became popular again in 2016 when there was bumper crop of cannabis in Albania, but then tailed off. It will be interesting to see how the Albanian government reacts if the problem again worsens.

Neighbouring Montenegro is facing a similar challenge. In October 2020, Montenegrin police in the marina of Zelenika intercepted a sailboat named *Poseidon* with a Croatian flag and Serbian crew; it had originated in Budva and was heading for Italy.<sup>7</sup> On inspecting the vessel, police discovered 52 Kurdish migrants on board.<sup>8</sup> Smugglers in Turkey who had arranged the trip charged between €5 000 and €8 000 per person for the transfer to Italy, according to police sources.<sup>9</sup> That means the smugglers earned approximately €300 000 from only one group of about fifty migrants, while the costs were estimated at around €100 000,<sup>10</sup> leaving a considerable profit margin.

On 17 December 2020, Montenegrin police and maritime safety authorities, using a thermal-imaging sensor, detected an unknown boat around Trsteno bay, close to Budva. In cooperation with the Italian authorities, an observation helicopter from the Guardia di Finanza was deployed. The boat, named *Marina*, was flying a Swedish flag; it was intercepted and escorted to the port of Bar.<sup>11</sup> Onboard, police found 39 migrants (including women and children) and arrested two smugglers from Turkey.<sup>12</sup>

These incidents tell us a number of things. First, the smuggling of migrants via the Western Balkans has not gone away; rather, it has moved further west. Albania, which for three decades has been a source country for migration, is now also a transit country. Second, in addition to trying to reach the European Union via Albania and Montenegro over a land route, some migrants are trying to enter Italy by boat. The stories covered in this article show that there are smugglers willing to facilitate such journeys at a sizeable profit. Third, these incidents highlight the vulnerability of marinas and informal mooring areas on the Adriatic coast as havens for smuggling. This is a risk that deserves more attention, not least by law enforcement officials.

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# Lessons learned from cannabis legalization in North Macedonia

In March 2016, North Macedonia amended its Law on Control of Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.<sup>1</sup> As a result, it became legal to grow cannabis for medical purposes and to refine, extract and produce hemp seed and cannabis oil. North Macedonia thus joined a growing number of countries (36 including Croatia since 2019 and Greece since 2018) that allows for the cultivation and export of medical cannabis. Is this a risky business or a possible model for other countries in the region?

Mirroring Canada's approach, North Macedonia introduced a free-market approach to cannabis cultivation, distribution and sale. This is a boon to the economy worth an estimated €100 million per year that has attracted local and foreign investors.<sup>2</sup> Competition for medical cannabis production in North Macedonia is rapidly increasing.

From May 2016 to May 2018, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy issued a total of five licences for the production of cannabis for medical use and two licences for extraction. Since then, according to government data, a total of 55 companies have received licences to grow cannabis for medicinal purposes; another 17 companies are awaiting approval.<sup>3</sup> A number of these companies are said to be linked to the prime minister and his friends and family.<sup>4</sup>

The high number of licences that have been issued means that a considerable amount of cannabis is now being grown in North Macedonia. However, there is concern among investors that supply is outpacing demand and that the business opportunity may not be as lucrative as originally foreseen. It should be kept in mind that the current legislation does not allow for the export of dry cannabis for recreational use.

Regulation is important to prevent legally-grown cannabis from being sold illegally and to ensure that the type of cannabis grown is for medicinal rather than recreational use. On paper, the regulations are quite strict and should be overseen by government entities, including the ministries of agriculture and health,<sup>5</sup> as well as a five-member special commission.<sup>6</sup> The

cannabis grower is obliged to keep a record of the cultivated cannabis (sowing, seedling production, transplanting and number of stems). After the completion of the hemp harvest, the special commission inspects the harvested items to determine the number of collected stems and wet mass.

But with so many producers and the fact that cannabis can be harvested up to four times a year, there are concerns that the current regulatory system is insufficient. For example, inadequate control could lead to legally-produced cannabis being placed on the black market in North Macedonia or smuggled to third countries. The risk is real: at the beginning of December 2020, two tonnes of cannabis were stolen from the warehouse of a licenced company in the village of Josifovo, in Valandovo municipality.<sup>7</sup> Allegedly, some of the cannabis ended up in Kosovo.<sup>8</sup> In a separate case, four men (two from Skopje and one each from Albania and Kosovo) stole 60 kilograms of marijuana from the warehouse of a licenced cannabis producer in the region of Krusevo.<sup>9</sup>

A high-profile case in Serbia also shows the danger of a lack of regulation and cosy relations between producers and state officials. In November 2020, less than 50 kilometres from the Serbian capital, police discovered the largest marijuana plantation in Europe at a high-profile organic farm known as Jovanjica that is owned by businessman Predrag Koluvija. A search of the property revealed almost four tonnes of raw marijuana, including 650 kilograms of ready-to-sell product.<sup>10</sup> An underground complex with dozens of basements had been converted into skunk cannabis laboratories. Marijuana was also grown in nine above-ground hangars and it was packed and stored in the warehouses and offices. Mobile-phone jammers had allegedly been installed everywhere on the property. No one could approach it without undergoing a strict check. Armed security, including former members of the Special Anti-Terrorist Unit, were deployed all around the property. They were equipped with handguns, thermal-imaging cameras for night surveillance and anti-drone rifles.<sup>11</sup>

The case has kicked up a lot of dust in Serbia because of the alleged connections between the owner of the

Jovanjica farm and the country's ruling Progressive Party, fuelling allegations about state collusion with organized crime.<sup>12</sup> A journalist covering the case has even been threatened.<sup>13</sup> The trial against Kolvija and his associates is ongoing. It is worth noting that Kolvija has been engaged in growing cannabis for medical purposes in North Macedonia.<sup>14</sup>

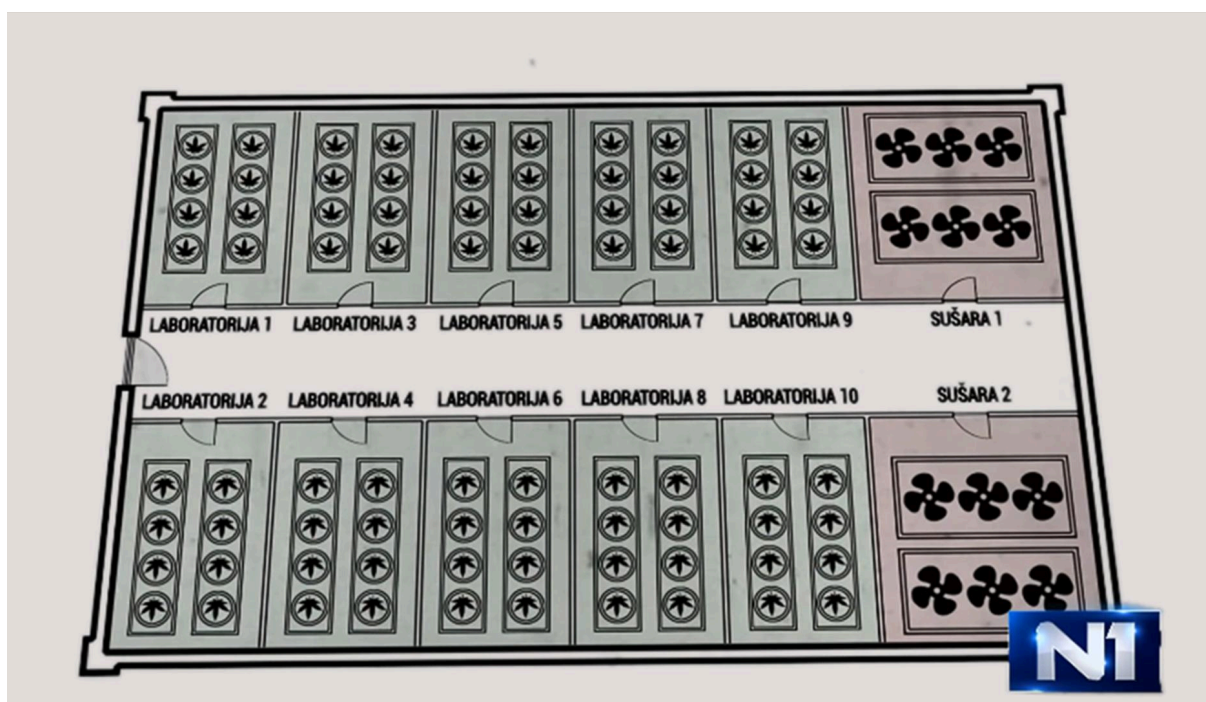
While demand for medicinal cannabis products is limited, there is a significant market for dry cannabis in the region. Marijuana is the most consumed drug in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, North Macedonia is a major transit hub for the trafficking of cannabis produced in Albania. The drugs are smuggled across the border by foot, using horses or donkeys and trucks or even boats across Lake Ohrid.<sup>15</sup> Some of it passes north through Kosovo or Serbia to central and Western Europe, while some goes through Bulgaria and Greece. Cannabis is also smuggled from Albania via North Macedonia to Turkey. There, it is often exchanged for heroin, which is brought back through North Macedonia, with the final destination being Albania.<sup>16</sup> It would be quite easy to insert cannabis produced in North Macedonia into these well-established illicit flows.

Bearing these risks in mind, from a business and security perspective it would seem prudent for the government of North Macedonia to stop issuing licences for cannabis

cultivation. Otherwise, the market will become saturated – which is unattractive to investors – and hard to regulate.

It is possible that some investors are banking on a possible amendment to the law that would enable the use and export of dry cannabis. This could open North Macedonia up to drug tourism, at a time when Amsterdam is considering going in the opposite direction by banning foreigners from entering 'coffee shops'. While legalization of cannabis would generate badly needed tax revenue, it could also accelerate public-health risks and the crime-related side effects of an increase of cannabis trafficking in North Macedonia. For example, experience from the United States shows that black-market marijuana production is on the rise, predominantly in states that have legalized marijuana.<sup>17</sup>

It is worth noting that, in May 2020, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama announced that his government was working on a draft law to legalize cannabis cultivation for medical purposes, which would soon be introduced to the public.<sup>18</sup> The announcement raised a few eyebrows since Albania has long been notorious for illegal cannabis cultivation. The opposition and other critics have expressed scepticism about the initiative, arguing that for a country with a long history of illicit cultivation, legalization of medical cannabis would further encourage illicit production and would



**The Jovanjica marijuana production complex.**

Photo: Jelena Zoric/N1 TV.

complicate the country's efforts to control the problem. Since the prime minister's announcement, there has been little follow-up and it is believed that the issue will not be revisited before the April 2021 general elections.

In short, attitudes and laws about cannabis are changing. In December 2020, the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs removed cannabis from Schedule IV of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. This decision has opened the door to recognizing the medicinal and

therapeutic potential of the drug. But challenges remain to ensure an effective regulatory framework for the production, use and sale of cannabis. Countries in the Western Balkans where there is a significant amount of cannabis cultivation, like Albania and Serbia, are no doubt closely watching the developments in North Macedonia. Any plans to legalize cannabis could have a significant impact on politics, health, tourism, economics and drug markets in the region.

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# Empowering youth in Vlora

The Vlora Youth Center (VYC) was established in this coastal city of southern Albania in 1998, at a time of instability caused by civil unrest after the collapse of pyramid schemes. In 2002, the project was registered as an NGO. In the past two decades, the VYC has contributed to youth engagement in public life, community-building resilience and gender equality. Alketa Dhimitri, director of the centre, discusses their work as well as challenges and opportunities that she sees.

## Can you tell us about the centre's early days?

In its early days, the VYC was a project of local organizations supported by the Italian Consortium of Solidarity, to give youth an alternative to crime, since the unrest had left many young men with guns in their hands and membership in powerful local gangs. While the situation has improved significantly, Vlora still suffers from a bad reputation as being a place where organized crime produces 'experts' who make use of their skills in Albania and all over the world.

## What are some of the challenges that you face in working with the youth in Vlora?

With over 22 years of experience, we have gained a good understanding of the situation here and the challenges faced by youth. Working with young people in Vlora can be difficult, in part because they lack positive role models. It can be hard to change the views and behaviour of young people who have been involved in illicit activities since an early age. It is also problematic to find viable alternatives for youth who are expected to take over the family 'business', especially in remote and disadvantaged areas.

The young generation sometimes prefers easy money instead of trying to make an honest living, and this is enhanced by the lack of legitimate job opportunities. Taking advantage of economic vulnerability, criminal groups find it easy to recruit young people by paying them cash to perform jobs such as guarding cannabis plantations, transporting the product and distributing it. Step by step, this gets young people more deeply involved in crime.

Organized crime always seems to be several steps ahead of state structures, the community and local organizations, and the consequences of this are long-lasting. Poor cooperation between the community,



**Alketa Dhimitri, director of the VYC.**

youth and local institutions hampers efforts to improve the situation. Better collaboration could bolster the overall socio-economic development of the region.

## How does your organization contribute to improving the lives of young people?

We are proud to say that over the past two decades we have contributed to many positive cases in which youngsters have managed to improve their socio-economic status. They now live safer lives oriented towards honest work in one of Vlora's numerous natural-resource-based sectors, like agriculture or mountain and marine tourism.

Our priority is helping young people to expand their vision, seek and get support, information and encouragement towards legal business opportunities and livelihoods. We connect the youth with their peers and offer them inspirational and positive models of self-development.

Furthermore, we are providing opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship in the field of agritourism, such as the processing and sale of local products. By training youth in business administration, requirements for business registration and food safety standards, we have helped young people access markets for their artisanal products. We like to make this training as hands-on and practical as possible. For example, we have carried out study tours to some of the most successful agritourism businesses in Albania to learn



from their example and experience, such as in pastry production or winemaking.

Experiencing first-hand such good examples of agriculture and tourism practices has enabled the youth to see for themselves how local products – even in remote areas – can generate sustainable incomes. We have also trained young people as chefs and tour guides to give them the skills that they need to run a guesthouse or host visiting groups. These activities have empowered them and reduced their vulnerability to getting involved in organized crime.

In 2020, with the support of the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund, we worked with youth in rural areas of Vlora to enhance their employment opportunities and better position them for entering labour markets with the support of the community and businesses. This is particularly important because in the past some rural areas of Vlora have been exploited for cannabis cultivation.

And in the village of Vajze, we created a poetry trail using ecological materials like wood to give young people from the area a pleasant and safe space to hang out with their peers. It offers a model to promote

education and culture and to inspire the youth to open themselves up to positive alternatives and changes. Hopefully, it can also spark the beginning of ecological tourism infrastructure in the village.

### **What are the main challenges facing youth today in Vlora?**

Although youth are largely recognized as agents of social change, their engagement in Albanian society is limited. Factors that contribute to youth indifference and apathy include an absence of trust in the system, alienation from politics, limited opportunities and little sense of hope or perspective. Some also lack sufficient life skills and positive role models.

In many cases, young people choose to leave Vlora for better opportunities elsewhere, either in Albania or abroad. This impacts the sustainability of some of our interventions.

Youth are an untapped resource in Albania, not just in Vlora. Much more needs to be done to engage and empower youth at the local level, as they are a valuable asset to life in the community.



**Youth participate in a Vlora Youth Center initiative.**

Photo: VYC



**What more could local and national authorities, as well as civil society, do to support youth?**

Local authorities are responsible for guaranteeing that local government serves the community. However, youth are underrepresented in local government and do not have a way to make their needs and concerns known.

Sustainable employment is vital. This requires investing in capacity-building and the economic empowerment of youth. And integrating youth into participatory processes would help engage them politically. But these things require an enabling environment.

While governments have been unsuccessful in achieving this goal, civil society organizations that have extensive knowledge of local dynamics, like the Vlora Youth Center, are finding ways to engage, promote and strengthen youth through good-governance practices at the local level.

On one hand, we try to increase the capacity of youth so that they can understand and exercise their socio-economic rights. We do this through projects such as the Vlora youth parliament, the local youth council and the youth leaders academy.

On the other hand, we mentor them to engage in participatory processes, through projects such as participatory budgeting and something called the community-based scorecard. The latter enables youth to identify their needs and advocate for concrete initiatives with the local government, for example concerning public infrastructure, youth services or employment. This gives them a voice and brings them in contact and dialogue with local officials. It also helps the local government to build more constructive and representative policies to better serve its citizens.

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