

# OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

ISSUE **7** APRIL–MAY 2021

## Summary highlights



### **Shadow of the mountain: organized crime around the Jahorina winter resort.**

The ski resort at Jahorina, close to Sarajevo, was busy during the winter of 2020–2021 despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The mountain is famous as the location of the 1984 Winter Olympic Games. In the 1990s, after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Jahorina region suffered from underdevelopment and was known as a criminal hideout. Today, it is a place where high-profile criminals spend their time and where corrupt officials want to invest or launder their money. This article looks at the reasons why Jahorina has become an unlikely hotspot of organized crime and corruption.



### **Cocaine goes 'bananas' on the Adriatic coast.**

A number of major drug busts in Croatia and Albania over the past few months shows that there is a tsunami of cocaine coming through Adriatic ports. Most of the drugs are hidden in containers transporting bananas from Latin America to Europe. While cocaine consumption in the Western Balkans is relatively low, these seizures – as well as past trends – show that ports in Albania, Croatia and Montenegro are important entry

points for the cocaine pipeline into Europe. Major seizures may indicate more effective law enforcement, but they may also be a sign that the so-called 'protection economy' that enables drug trafficking is being disrupted. This article looks at a recent spate of big seizures and considers what could be behind them.



### **Digital dangers: warning signs from North Macedonia.**

As more people go online for communicating, shopping and searching for information, they also become targets for predatory and criminal behaviour. This trend has accelerated during the COVID-19 crisis, with young people being particularly vulnerable. In late January 2021, police in North Macedonia broke up a group of more than 7 000 people who were using the Telegram messaging app to share explicit pictures and videos of women and girls. This is the second time in two years that the group has been taken down. Similar cases were also reported in Serbia in March, when several offenders were arrested for sharing child abuse material. As discussed in this article, such cases show the growing dangers of tech-facilitated crime, including



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cyberbullying, sexual exploitation and sextortion in the Western Balkans, and the challenges faced by law enforcement.



#### **Western Balkan criminal groups in Greece.**

In recent years, Greece has become a theatre for a wide range of illicit activities carried out by criminal groups from the Western Balkans. Its ports and proximity to the Western Balkans make it an attractive entry point for the smuggling of cocaine, while it is also a market and transit country for cannabis smuggled from Albania. Since 2015, it has also been a key gateway for the smuggling of migrants, particularly into North Macedonia and Albania. This article shows that Greece is a further example of how the transnational tentacles of crime spread out from the Western Balkans around the world.



#### **Unburying guns from Albania's past.**

In April 2021, police in Albania made two major seizures of weapons in the capital, Tirana. Most of the weapons date from when the arsenals were looted

during civil unrest in the country in 1997. It is believed that the vast majority of killings related to organized crime that have taken place in Albania since 1997 have been carried out using guns stolen from the old arsenals. This article looks at the legacy of that problem and what the Albanian government is doing about it.



#### **Community Building Mitrovica: An open door for young people.**

More than 20 years after the war in Kosovo, Mitrovica continues to be a divided city with a Kosovo-Albanian community located in the southern part and a Kosovo-Serbian community in the northern part of the city, separated by the Ibar river. Tensions between the communities remain and rule of law is weak. As a result, the region continues to have a reputation as being a haven for organized crime. Community Building Mitrovica is a civil society organization that works with young people in the city to increase their resilience to organized crime. In our regular series of profiling the work of such organizations, we talk to two leaders of the initiative.

## **ABOUT THIS ISSUE**

Welcome to the seventh issue of the Risk Bulletin produced by the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).

The hotspot that we profile in this issue does not have many of the characteristics of the usual locations that we look at, namely socio-economic vulnerability, a strategic location along trafficking routes or weak governance. Rather, Jahorina and its famous ski resort is a popular destination near Sarajevo, making it a magnet for criminals on holiday as well as for corrupt officials looking for a profit.

In the first quarter of 2021 there have been a number of major drug busts in Adriatic ports. We examine the flow of cocaine from Latin America to Western Europe through the Western Balkans and analyze what the increase in seizures could indicate.

Thanks to increased digitalization, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, more people are spending time and money online. This is convenient, but it is also potentially dangerous: data can be stolen or exploited;

gaming platforms and social media are being abused to groom children for sexual harassment and exploitation; and young people are vulnerable to harmful and violent content, cyberbullying and radicalization. We analyze the warning signs in North Macedonia, as well as what is being done to address this threat. In May 2021, the GI-TOC will issue a comprehensive report on the commercial sexual exploitation of children in the Western Balkans.

Building on the GI-TOC's flagship publication 'Transnational tentacles: Global hotspots of Western Balkan organized crime', we occasionally review other countries that were not covered by that report. In this issue, we look at the activities of criminal groups from the Western Balkans in Greece, particularly trafficking of drugs and the smuggling of migrants.

On 1 April 2021, Albanian police carried out two operations that resulted in the seizure of a large cache of military weapons and ammunition, including sniper rifles, anti-tank weapons, Kalashnikov automatic rifles, silent pistols, police and military radio scanners, ammunition and explosives. According to the police, this

arsenal was for sale and was the source of some weapons that had been used for contract killings in recent years. We look at the legacy of more than half a million weapons that were looted from arsenals during the civil unrest in 1997 and what steps the Albanian government is taking to address this danger.

As part of our regular series profiling the work of civil society organizations strengthening resilience to

organized crime in the Western Balkans, we talk to two leaders of the NGO Community Building Mitrovica on their work in the divided community of Mitrovica in northern Kosovo.

As always, we welcome potential contributions to the Risk Bulletin. If you have a proposal for a story or would like to provide feedback, please contact [almedina.dodic@globalinitiative.net](mailto:almedina.dodic@globalinitiative.net).

# 1. Shadow of the mountain: organized crime around the Jahorina winter resort.

Jahorina, 28 kilometres from Sarajevo, is known as the mountain where the 1984 Winter Olympic Games took place. It is a popular ski resort; tourists even flocked to its slopes during the COVID-19 pandemic in the winter of 2020–2021. But the area around Jahorina also seems to attract criminals, most recently on 12 February 2021 when three members of the Škaljari clan were arrested in the town on suspicion of planning the assassination of the head of the rival Kavač clan. What makes the region a magnet for organized crime and corruption?

At first glance, it does not seem that Jahorina should be vulnerable to organized crime. The modern resort has a good reputation, well-maintained facilities and a proud history as an Olympic centre. But the very fact that the resort is considered a rare jewel in an economically depressed region seems to have made it attractive for corrupt officials as well as tourists.

Investigative journalists have reported on irregularities in procurement, privatization, building and renovation



**FIGURE 1** The Jahorina region in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



processes in lucrative infrastructure projects in the region.<sup>1</sup> A great deal of public money – at least €55 million in the past five years – has also flowed into the area, not always in a transparent way.<sup>2</sup> It has been reported that local officials from the surrounding municipalities of Pale and East New Sarajevo, as well as officials from the government of the Republic of Srpska, have participated in the purchase of land and facilities, construction of infrastructure facilities (such as ski lifts) and the procurement of equipment for hotels.<sup>3</sup> The region is also a magnet for foreign investment; some of the major construction projects are allegedly attractive for money laundering.<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps no wonder that the municipalities of Pale and East New Sarajevo have been squabbling about who controls the lucrative tax revenues from Mount Jahorina.<sup>5</sup>

Investments and improvements in the Jahorina area are welcome because the region was devastated by the war of the 1990s, such as during the siege of Sarajevo. In the post-conflict environment, the area around Jahorina, including Pale, East New Sarajevo and Sokolac suffered from low socio-economic development, poor infrastructure and weak governance. This, combined with relatively difficult terrain, made the region vulnerable to organized crime, both home-grown and as a place for criminals (including war criminals) to hide out or plan their operations in the region.

This seems to have had some nasty side effects. Between 1998 and 2008, there were 14 murders in the Jahorina region, most of which were suspected to be the result of disputes among criminals, but few of which have been resolved. Not only were a number of senior law enforcement officials killed in the region in that decade, but there were also several professional-style hits on civilians.<sup>6</sup>

Recent arrests show that the Jahorina region remains a magnet for criminals. In July 2020, a man named Nikola Ivović from Montenegro was arrested in Pale on suspicion of having committed a murder in Herceg Novi.<sup>7</sup> In August 2020, police in East Sarajevo arrested a man believed to be a member of the Škaljari clan, along with five other citizens from Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>8</sup> In March 2021, Slobodan

Milutinović (known as ‘Slobo the Sniper’) from Novi Sad, Serbia, was arrested in Jahorina.<sup>9</sup> And, as noted, on 12 February 2021 three members of the Škaljari clan were arrested for planning the assassination of a leading figure of the rival Kavač clan, Radoje Zvicer (who had survived an assassination attempt in Kyiv in May 2020). Zvicer was supposedly on holiday with his family at the ski resort.

There are other indications of criminal activity in the region. On several occasions, police have seized weapons and drugs in raids in Pale and East Sarajevo.<sup>10</sup> And in 2018, a man was arrested for facilitating the theft of weapons from the barracks of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Pale. According to the indictment, the man, who worked at the barracks, took 27 optical scopes for rifles and two suppressors and sold them to members of criminal groups near Sokolac.<sup>11</sup>

Since 2004, several organized criminal groups have developed in the area, particularly around East Sarajevo. They have been involved in car theft, trafficking in drugs and extortion. As their wealth, power and reputations grew, they managed to launder their money into the local economy and use their power to influence local politicians, members of the police and the media. A number of well-coordinated law enforcement operations, code-named Jahorina, Kargo and Lutka, resulted in breaking up several organized criminal groups in 2013.<sup>12</sup>

The ecosystem of crime and corruption around Jahorina shows the legacy of the recent history of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the temptation of corruption. But it also illustrates the evolution of crime in the country; from regions of post-conflict instability to an ecosystem of organized corruption where political, business and criminal actors rub shoulders. Unlike in the 1990s, the Jahorina region now seems to be a place where high-profile criminals like to hang out rather than to hide out – and where corrupt officials want to invest, rather than neglect. One would hope that in the future this region could attract a less notorious clientele and recapture the positive attention and reputation that the Jahorina region enjoyed in 1984 during the Winter Olympic Games.

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## 2. Cocaine goes ‘bananas’ on the Adriatic coast.

Major drug busts in Croatia and Albania over the past few months show that there is a tsunami of cocaine coming through the Adriatic ports. Most of the drugs are hidden in containers transporting bananas from Latin America to Europe. While cocaine consumption in the Western Balkans is relatively low, these seizures, taken together with past trends, show that ports in Albania, Croatia and Montenegro are important entry points for the cocaine pipeline into Europe.<sup>1</sup>

This illustrates how organized criminal groups from the Western Balkans have, over the past decade, become actively involved not only in distributing cocaine in the Western Balkans and the EU, but also in organizing large shipments of cocaine directly from Latin America.<sup>2</sup> Some of these shipments head for ports in Western Europe, the Black Sea or Greece but others are coming into the Western Balkans on container ships.

At the end of March 2021, more than half a tonne of cocaine worth around €50 million was discovered at the port of Ploce in southern Croatia hidden in a container of bananas. This was the most recent and largest seizure of several cocaine shipments that have come through Ploce.

In June 2020, in Bacina near Ploce, 25 kilograms of high-purity cocaine were seized from a passenger vehicle; the driver of the car, an Italian citizen, was arrested.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently, a number of arrests were made in Croatia and Italy. According to police, this group smuggled at least 146 kilograms of cocaine.<sup>4</sup>

In March 2021, the police in Dubrovnik exhibited almost 73 kilograms of high-purity cocaine that had been seized.<sup>5</sup> The cocaine was also found in a container full of bananas imported from South America.<sup>6</sup>

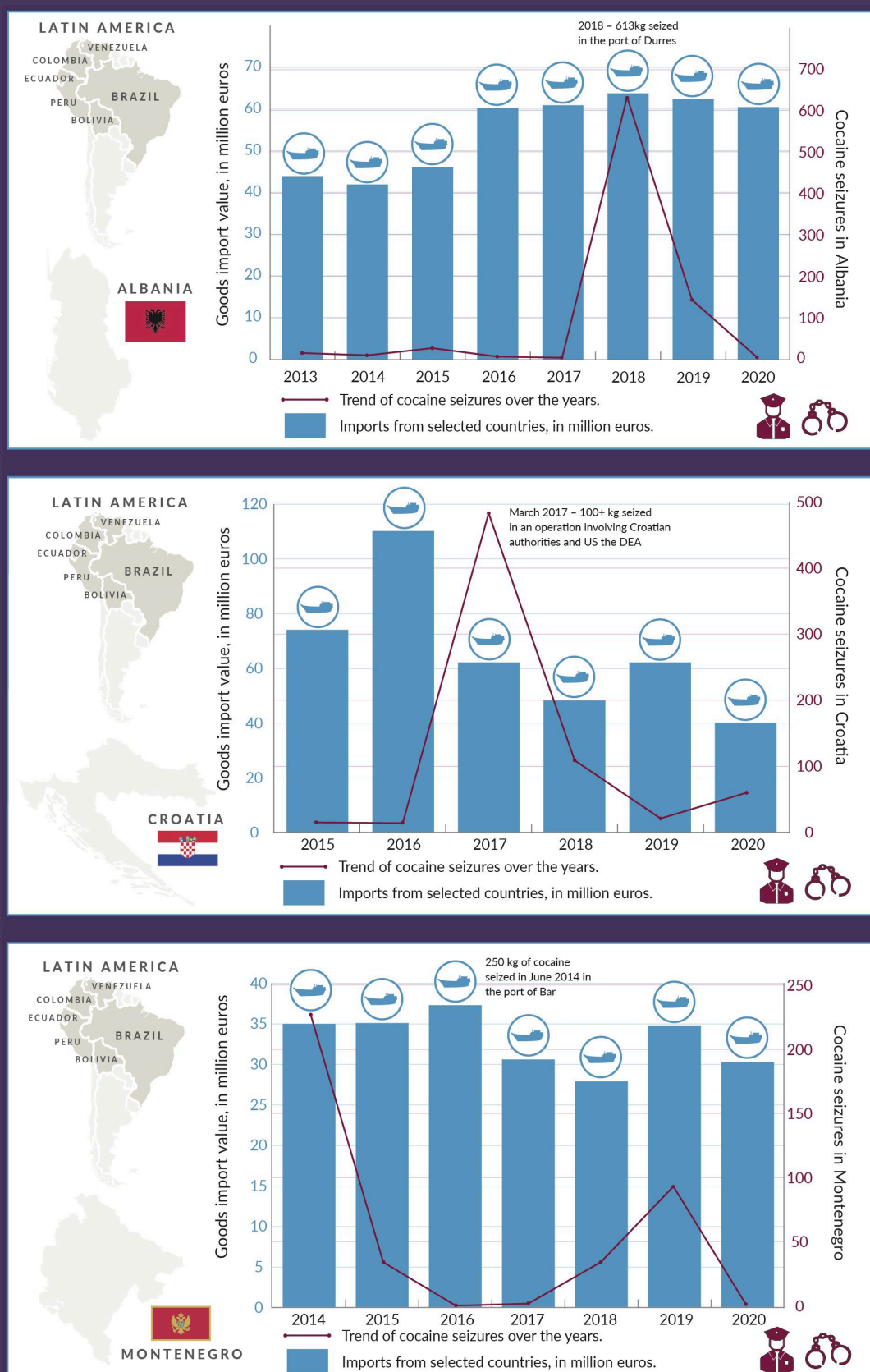
Ploce is considered vulnerable because it has a high volume of banana imports – around 1 200 containers a year – with little capacity to check them. This should soon be rectified with the recent investment in a mobile X-ray device.<sup>7</sup>

In the past, major drug busts have been made in the port of Rijeka in northern Croatia. In January 2017, 478 kilograms of cocaine were taken out of a container that had arrived from Peru.<sup>8</sup> As part of a joint operation with the Italian and Slovenian police, the container was resealed and thanks to the controlled delivery, several arrests were later made, including of suspected leaders



**The seizure of 143 kilograms of cocaine in the port of Durres on 10 April 2021 during the police operation code named ‘El Mejor’.**

Photo: Albanian State Police.



**FIGURE 2** Cocaine seizures in Albania, Croatia and Montenegro, 2013–2020.

from the Calabria region of Italy.<sup>9</sup> Further arrests related to this seizure were made in February 2021.<sup>10</sup>

In March 2018, in the port of Rijeka, police seized 100 packages of cocaine found in a container in which there were 20 tonnes of mixed metal waste. The cocaine was purchased in Panama and then shipped to Croatia. Several arrests were made, particularly of people from Croatia and Slovenia, including Stjepan Prnjat, a Croatian citizen originally from Zenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina, known as the Croatian Escobar.<sup>11</sup> In their investigation, police found a network of Zagreb-based companies that were importing cocaine in containers of fruit and scrap metal.<sup>12</sup>

Ploce and Rijeka are not the only Adriatic ports being inundated with cocaine. Down the coast, in Montenegro, the port of Bar has, in the past, been a notorious entry point for the drug. For example, in June 2014 police seized 250 kilograms of cocaine that had been shipped to Bar from Ecuador in a banana container.<sup>13</sup> Between 2015 and 2019, on at least three occasions, more than 30 kilograms of cocaine were discovered in containers that had originated in South America.<sup>14</sup> In April 2019, Montenegrin authorities seized 50 kilograms of drugs on a naval training ship in the port of Tivat.<sup>15</sup>

In Albania, the port of Durres is a hub for drug smuggling. On 10 April 2021, 143 kilograms of cocaine were seized in the port in a container full of bananas. The container had originated in Ecuador and had travelled via the mafia-controlled port of Gioia Tauro in Italy. A few days earlier, on 1 April, 49 kilograms of cocaine were also seized in the port of Durres, again from a container coming from Ecuador. These two seizures of almost 200 kilograms of cocaine in the first quarter of 2021 exceeded the entire amount of cocaine seized in Albania in 2019 and 2020 combined. In 2018, a record 613 kilograms of cocaine were seized in the port of Durres in a shipment of bananas coming from Colombia.

In Albania, as in Croatia and Montenegro, very few of the people ordering the shipments of cocaine have been caught. The administrators of the fruit import companies usually claim that they had no knowledge that cocaine was being hidden inside the same containers as their

loads of produce. Technically, this is quite possible if criminals can have access to the containers after they have been packed with fruit, but before they have been loaded onto the ships.<sup>16</sup>

But what do these seizures tell us? Is there more cocaine coming through the region than in the past? Latin American supply and European demand are certainly high. Is law enforcement becoming more effective? This could be a factor, as countries like Croatia and Albania, for example, work more closely with bilateral partners or EUROPOL and as police become more efficient at cracking encrypted messaging systems. It may also point to more effective intelligence-led policing and container security in key ports.

But an increase in seizures, as well as a growing number of high-profile arrests in some countries of the region, may also indicate holes in the umbrella of protection that has enabled criminal groups from the Western Balkans to operate with impunity in the past. Drug trafficking in the Western Balkans, as elsewhere, depends upon political protection, which (for a price) allows the trafficking machine to run smoothly: violence is kept in check and the product moves without obstacles. A low number of seizures, like a limited amount of violence, suggests an efficient market. Such protection networks often form in contexts where high-value flows (such as drugs) pass through areas of weak or corrupt governance and may involve a high degree of complicity by state actors, members of the security services or police and port officials.<sup>17</sup> If a key political patron dies or leaves office, then the hand of protection is lifted, and law enforcement can do its job. Seizures can therefore indicate that the protection economy is being disrupted. It may also point to more competition within the market as groups look for new routes and allies or provide tip-offs to knock out other traffickers.

Clearly, container traffic has not been affected by lockdowns, there is a high demand for cocaine in Europe, and Adriatic ports are considered relatively low-risk entry points. But maybe the increase in seizures and arrests also points to some tectonic shifts in criminal markets and protection economies in the Western Balkans.

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### 3. Digital dangers: warning signs from North Macedonia.

In late January 2021, police in North Macedonia broke up a group of more than 7 000 people who were using the Telegram online messaging app to share explicit pictures and videos of women and girls.<sup>1</sup> In the forum known as the 'public room' (created in 2019), members shared pornographic content and child abuse material, including nude pictures of teenage girls from the local community. The material had been previously hacked, stolen, photoshopped or otherwise obtained illegally along with victims' personal data like names, surnames and telephone numbers.

Although the group was first discovered in January 2020 and four people were arrested, by January 2021 it had re-emerged, leading to a public outcry over police inactivity. Similar cases were also reported in Serbia in March 2021, when several offenders were arrested for sharing child abuse material and were given sentences of up to 10 years in prison.<sup>2</sup> These cases show the growing dangers of tech-facilitated crime, including cyberbullying, sexual exploitation and sextortion in the Western Balkans, and the challenges faced by law enforcement in dealing with it.

In North Macedonia, which has a population of around 2.1 million people, there are 2.24 million registered mobile phones – more phones than people.<sup>3</sup> According to information from January 2020, 81% of the population of North Macedonia uses the internet and 53% of the population are active social media users. And the trend is increasing, partly because of COVID-19, particularly as children are spending more time online because of remote schooling and lockdowns. The speed and magnitude of this transition has caught the authorities, parents and children off guard.<sup>4</sup>

As in other parts of the world, young people are particularly active online. Almost 75% of all young people in North Macedonia between the ages of 15 and 19 have a profile on social networks.<sup>5</sup> The majority of those who use social media access their accounts from smartphones.<sup>6</sup> Children and youth are also spending more time gaming online and they are increasingly meeting new friends through such forums as well as via social media.<sup>7</sup>

While greater digitalization has many benefits, it also has dangers. The 'public room' case shows the risks of data being stolen or exploited and the harassment that can result.<sup>8</sup> In addition, gaming platforms – and social media more generally – are being abused to groom children for sexual harassment and exploitation. Young people are also vulnerable to harmful and violent content, cyberbullying and radicalization.

A major challenge is that the privacy of children and youths can be easily compromised. To stay recognizable among their online competitors, young people create usernames that are derivatives of their real names or that might reveal other personally identifiable information, such as their location or age. This makes it easier for online predators and cybercriminals to manipulate data, chats or photos for identify theft, grooming or sextortion.<sup>9</sup>

Young people are also vulnerable to stalking, cyberbullying or even commercial sexual exploitation. Sometimes, this is the result of information provided wittingly (albeit naively); in other cases, hackers can access webcams or microphones and use them to commit illegal activities and violate the privacy of children and youth. Only 11% of interviewed students in North Macedonia are aware of webcam or microphone hacking and the consequences this may cause.<sup>10</sup>

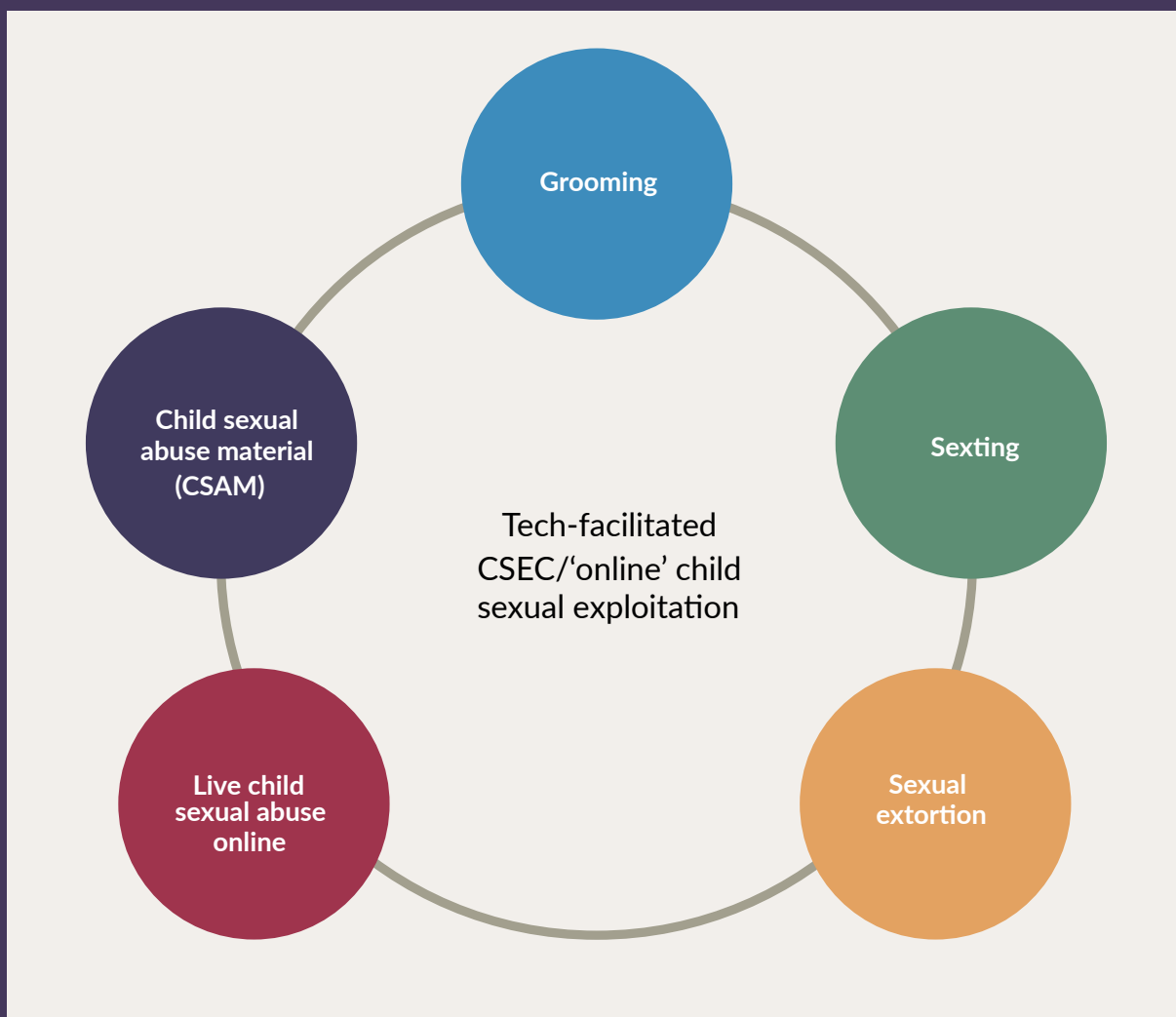
Another threat is the harvesting of data from the profiles of young people. Marketing and the collection of user data in exchange for behaviourally targeted or contextual advertising are embedded parts of modern gaming profit schemes.<sup>12</sup> To conduct behavioural targeting, multiple bits of data are acquired and combined to develop sophisticated profiles of user segments and to build a profile of the characteristics and demographics of individual users.<sup>13</sup> In the case of online gaming, some companies may collect data not only on user behavioural patterns but on their interactions with other users, online behaviour before and after playing an online game and behaviour across multiple devices and services linked to their gaming device. The problem with who owns this data, how it is protected, shared and sold (both to private companies and criminal groups) is an emerging issue that requires greater attention and regulation.<sup>14</sup>



## WHAT IS TECH-FACILITATED CSEC AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Tech-facilitated commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) usually refers to the use of the internet as a means to exploit children sexually, including cases in which offline physical child abuse and/or exploitation is combined with an online component.<sup>11</sup> Although tech-facilitated sexual exploitation is constantly evolving and shaped by new developments in technology, it often

starts with grooming (establishing a relationship with a minor victim), then 'sexting' (creating and/or sharing sexually suggestive images of the victim), sextortion (blackmailing the child victim with their own images to extort sexual favours or money) or live sexual abuse (coercing a child into sexual activities) and child sexual abuse material.



**FIGURE 3** Stages and elements of online CSEC.

ECPAT International, Online child sexual exploitation: A common understanding, May 2017, [https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SECO-Booklet\\_ebook-1.pdf](https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SECO-Booklet_ebook-1.pdf).

For example, older gamers may use video games to lure and groom younger victims. Hiding behind false identities, predators become accustomed to the platforms, phrases, habits and interests of the potential victims. They lure them into separate chats and skilfully earn their trust.

Despite important cases such as the Telegram incident, there is little comprehensive research on tech-facilitated CSEC in the Western Balkans. Countries do not provide disaggregated data on the topic. An upcoming GI-TOC report tries to fill this gap by looking at children's vulnerabilities to tech-facilitated CSEC and the responses of the child protection systems across the region.



**Information sheet on how to safely use the internet displayed at a youth center in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina.**

Photo: © Bahrudin Bandić



**A youth centre in Belgrade, Serbia, provides information and supervision for a 'safe time online'.**

Photo: © Vladimir Zivojinović

Unauthorized practices by online vendors raise concerns about the privacy of young people. The issue is gaining increasing attention from international organizations like the United Nations,<sup>15</sup> the Council of Europe<sup>16</sup> and the EU.<sup>17</sup> For example, the EU has adopted a General Data Protection Regulation, which contains rules intended to protect children from unlawful data collection, with severe sanctions on companies that do not comply.<sup>18</sup>

In short, the dangers to children online are multiple and diverse. And they are compounded by insufficient awareness by parents and children, a dearth of data, lack of knowledge and capacity by police investigating online crime, inadequate legislation and limited cooperation between law enforcement and IT providers across borders.

The first step is for governments to acknowledge the growing dangers of exploitation online. Adequate legislation is also necessary, but it is not sufficient. Greater attention needs to be given to raising awareness among parents and children about the potential risks and to improve online vigilance and literacy. In North Macedonia, several initiatives have been started to address online predation, cyberbullying and cybercrime, as well as disinformation and online radicalization. The Ministry of Interior has set up the Red Button reporting scheme on its website to report crimes related to child sexual abuse and hate speech online.<sup>19</sup> But greater awareness is needed, for example through education in schools, public campaigns and more engagement by civil

society to reduce the vulnerability of young people to online harm. And law enforcement need the skills, expertise, equipment and licence to protect citizens, young and old, in the digital domain.

The role of the private sector is essential. The tech sector should help to develop national cyber strategies and be involved in their implementation. Currently, the information and communications technology (ICT) industry in North Macedonia does not address the issue of tech-facilitated CSEC, nor is it involved in content removal or reporting mechanisms.<sup>20</sup> Service providers do not proactively monitor online content and do not have any obligation to remove content. Internet Service Providers act only upon the request of the public prosecutors and deliver data to the Ministry of the Interior's Sector for Cybercrime and Forensic Analysis for further processing.

In short, while we spend more time online, so do criminals. Reducing the risks to children requires a whole-of-society approach, including more vigilant and aware parents and young people, a solid legal framework, a forward-looking and engaged ICT sector, more effective law enforcement responses and the support of civil society.

A comprehensive report on the commercial sexual exploitation of children in the Western Balkans will be issued by the GI-TOC in May.

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## 4. Western Balkan criminal groups in Greece.

On 29 January 2021, Greek police in the port city of Thessaloniki arrested a man loading black bags into a car. In the bags and a nearby apartment, police found 324 kilograms of pure cocaine,<sup>1</sup> suspected to have come from Latin America.<sup>2</sup> A Greek, an Albanian of Greek origin and a Croatian citizen were arrested on the spot, while a fourth man from Croatia managed to escape. This is just the latest incident in a number of cases that link criminal groups from the Western Balkans to organized crime in Greece.

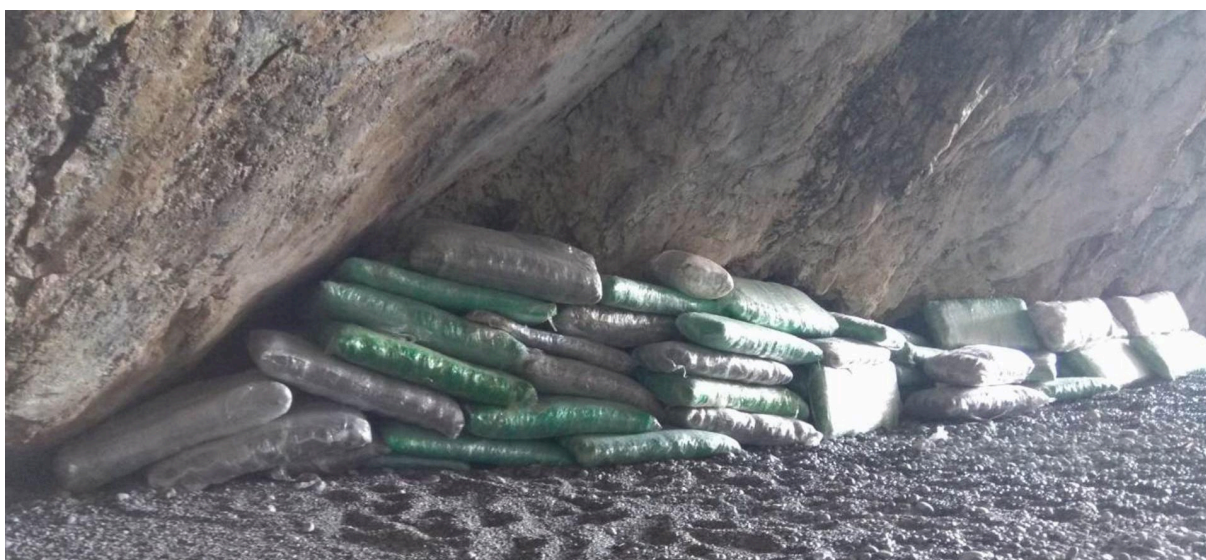
Greece seems to be an access point for the cocaine pipeline entering Europe.<sup>3</sup> The seizure of cocaine in Thessaloniki is allegedly linked to a case that was uncovered in Athens in November 2020, when Greek officers seized 254 kilograms of cocaine. The cocaine was believed to have arrived in the Piraeus port from Ecuador, hidden in a container carrying bananas.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the cases in Greece that relate to criminal groups from the Western Balkans are linked to the gang war between the Škaljari and Kavač clans, which originally hail from the Montenegrin town of Kotor. For example, on 19 January 2020, two Montenegrins were shot dead by four masked gunmen in front of their families while dining at a tavern in Vari, Athens. The two victims, Igor Dedović and Stevan Stamatović, both 43,

were allegedly members of the Škaljari clan.<sup>5</sup> They had pending international arrest warrants related to establishing a criminal organization, attempted murder and violating weapons and explosives laws.

The Greek daily *Kathimerini* reported<sup>6</sup> that the double murder in the Athens tavern may have been linked to a record seizure in Philadelphia in June 2019 in which 20 tonnes of cocaine were discovered on a Liberian-flagged container ship.<sup>7</sup> *Kathimerini*, citing unnamed police sources, reported that Dedović was allegedly held responsible for the loss of the cargo in the US and that he was killed in Athens as an act of punishment. The double mafia-style murders in Athens remain unsolved.

Dedović was reportedly leading the Škaljari clan along with Jovan Vukotić, a Montenegrin linked to a 136-kilogram cocaine haul discovered by Greek authorities in an apartment in the southern Athens suburb of Varkiza in 2017. Although the Greek authorities had issued an international arrest warrant for Dedović, when he was arrested in Antalya, Turkey,<sup>8</sup> in September 2018 he was extradited to Serbia, rather than Greece, where he was also wanted for previous offences.



**Cannabis stashed in a cave near the Greek island Alonissos, September 2019.**

Photo: Hellenic Police



Greek police say that the 136 kilograms of cocaine in Varkiza are possibly linked to another seizure of 27 kilograms in Preveza, western Greece, in March 2018. Two Serbians and two Italians were arrested for drug trafficking in connection with the seizure in Preveza. Drug law enforcement authorities believe the cocaine in Varkiza and Preveza was of the same lot, because of an embossed seal on all the packages in the shape of a bull's head.<sup>9</sup>

The Kotor clan war led to another bloody incident in Greece. In July 2020, a Montenegrin and a Serbian were killed on the island of Corfu. Alan Kožar and Damir Hadžić, both allegedly close to the Škaljari clan, were shot dead in a hail of bullets while sitting in a car in front of a resort villa. The two were wanted by Montenegrin and Serbian police for their alleged involvement in murder and attempted murder.<sup>10</sup> The fact that they were in Greece suggests that the country, with its numerous islands, is considered by criminals from the Western Balkans to be a safe place to lie low. Their double murders remain unsolved.

Greece provides a useful gateway for criminal groups from the Western Balkans to smuggle cocaine, since there are many more ports than on the Adriatic. Indeed, Greece has 15 container ports and a further 15 ports that have piers for vessels of around 20 metres' length. While attention has been on Bar and Durres, criminal groups from the Western Balkans can move their loads through Greek ports and then by truck across the region and into Western Europe.

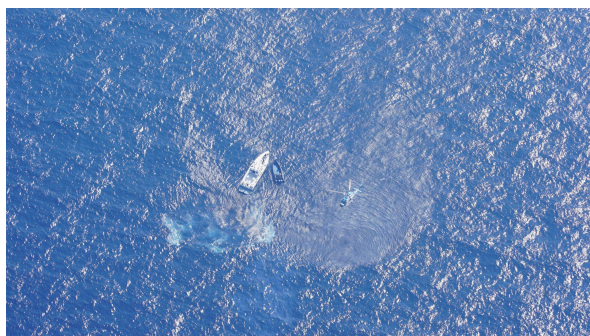
For example, in January 2020, police seized 1.2 tonnes of cocaine in Astakos port, western Greece.<sup>11</sup> Police arrested eight alleged members of an international drug trafficking group, including Albanian, Moldovan and

Dutch citizens. An Albanian nicknamed 'Doctor', who reportedly lives in Spain, is considered to be the leader of the cocaine-smuggling gang.<sup>12</sup> Raids on homes in Athens yielded an AK-47 assault rifle, three pistols and €233 000 in cash. Two undercover officers had infiltrated the gang,<sup>13</sup> pretending to be sailors for 16 months and following the cargo's route.

In other cases, cocaine from Latin America is moving via Greece into the Western Balkans. In November 2020, at the port of Pireus, Greek authorities seized 137 kilograms of cocaine in four banana containers that had come from Ecuador and were destined for arrival in Durres.<sup>14</sup> The Greek authorities replaced the load with rice and, working with their Albanian counterparts, carried out a controlled delivery that led to three arrests in Durres, including a port employee.

For the past three decades, Greece has been an important transit route for trafficking cannabis from Albania. The border between Greece and Albania is thought to be the biggest land route for cannabis trafficking in Europe. Greek police confiscated 1.5 tonnes of cannabis in 2020. Over the previous two years, they seized almost nine tonnes.<sup>15</sup> Cannabis is trafficked on foot or by mule by Albanians who live in border villages. They hide the drugs near designated spots where Greek networks then pick them up. A kilogram of cannabis costs around €1 000 wholesale in Albania, but drug barons in Greece pay double that amount.

Albanian criminal groups also smuggle cannabis by boat, both to Greece and via Greek waters to Turkey. In September 2019, Greek Coast Guard authorities discovered 1.1 tonnes of cannabis in a cave on the Piperi islet, near the island of Alonissos. The operation



**Speedboat carrying drugs are intercepted off the Greek coast. A growing trend in the region involves Albanian nationals trafficking drugs across the Aegean Sea.**

Hellenic Coast Guard

was launched by the coast guard following the arrest of an Albanian national aboard a speedboat off Agistri island, near Athens, on charges of transferring drugs from Albania to Turkey. Another three Albanian nationals were arrested on the same charges after their speedboat, which reportedly had drugs on board, was intercepted after a high-speed chase south of the eastern Aegean island of Lesbos. This seems to be part of a growing trend. Greek officers claim that high-capacity Albanian speedboats cross the Aegean transporting large amounts of cannabis to Turkey and return laden with heroin.<sup>16</sup> This suggests that there is now a maritime 'Balkan route' of Albanian cannabis being trafficked to Turkey in exchange for heroin.

A notorious case occurred in January 2019 when one of the most wanted drug traffickers in the Balkans, Klement Balili, turned himself in to the Albanian police. He was allegedly the kingpin behind the transport of 678 kilograms of cannabis destined for Northern Europe that was confiscated in May 2016 on the Greek island of Zakynthos. According to media reports, his network shipped tonnes of cannabis across Europe from Albania to Greece and Western Europe, using a network of phony transport companies. Balili, also known as 'Keli' among Greece's anti-drug law enforcement officers, had served as Transport Director in Saranda, Albania. He allegedly had close ties with high-ranking government officials.<sup>17</sup> In October 2019, Balili was sentenced to 10 years in prison for trafficking drugs to Greece and remains in custody.<sup>18</sup>

Other notorious Albanian criminals have recently popped up in Greece. On 29 January 2021, police officers who were carrying out random checks on measures against the spread of the pandemic, stopped a jeep-type vehicle in Lamia city, central Greece. Among the passengers was Alket Rizaj, an Albanian convicted for murder, who was on a five-day leave from prison. Rizaj became the most-known Albanian convict in Greece after he twice escaped from Athens' high-

security prison, in 2006 and 2009, by helicopter together with Vassilis Paleokostas, Greece's most wanted man.<sup>19</sup>

Greece is also a key hub for the smuggling of migrants into the Western Balkans. The border region between Greece and North Macedonia has been a well-travelled route since 2015. With the tightening of border control, more migrants are trying to pass into Albania.

While some smugglers are facilitating passage across the border, others are part of more organized networks transporting migrants into Western Europe. For example, on 3 January 2020, a 33-year-old Albanian was arrested while entering Greece via the Kapshtica–Krystallopigi border crossing based on a European warrant issued by Belgian authorities. He was prosecuted as a member of an international human trafficking gang whose leaders had been arrested in late 2019 in London and Brussels.<sup>20</sup> He denied all charges.

According to the court papers sent to Greek authorities, some 28 smuggling trips took place between December 2018 and March 2019.<sup>21</sup> It is unclear how many people were smuggled to the UK during that period. The migrants travelled to Belgium by plane. After staying for a few days in houses or cheap hotels around Ghent, they entered the UK via the English Channel, hidden in cargo trucks under suffocating conditions. Each migrant paid an average of €15 000. The case file includes police wiretaps in which suspects are heard saying that they gave sleeping pills to smuggled children to keep them calm while hidden in the trucks.

In conclusion, violent incidents, arrests and drug seizures show the extent to which criminal groups from the Western Balkans are major players in the Greek underworld. This is a further example of how the transnational tentacles of crime spread out from the Western Balkans around the world.

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## 5. Unburying guns from Albania's past.

On 1 April 2021, Albanian police, in an operation code named 'Complex', discovered 18 bases in Tirana where military weapons and ammunition were stored and modified.<sup>1</sup> The haul included sniper rifles, anti-tank weapons, Kalashnikov automatic rifles, silent pistols, police and military radio scanners, ammunition, explosives and even two armoured cars. According to the police, this arsenal was for sale and was also the source for some weapons that had been used for contract killings in recent years. Five people were arrested, while two others escaped the police. On 10 April, police discovered another cache of guns, grenades, explosives and ammunition in Tirana.<sup>2</sup> These operations shows that Albania is still saturated with weapons from arsenals looted during the civil unrest of 1997.

While some of the guns in the arsenals are new and are thought to have been recently smuggled into Albania, most can be traced back to 1997 when, during riots after the collapse of pyramid schemes, 549 775 weapons, more than 839 million pieces of ammunition and 16 million explosives were stolen from state arsenals that had been built up during the Communist period, mostly with weapons from China and Russia.<sup>3</sup>

In the past two decades, several campaigns have been held to encourage citizens to voluntarily return the guns and ammunition that were looted from the military depots. For example, in 2005, it was reported that nearly 223 000 guns or about 41% of those looted in 1997 were collected along with more than 118 million pieces of ammunition and 1.5 million explosives.<sup>4</sup> A smaller-scale amnesty was conducted between January and April 2017, during which time about 1 600 guns, 581 000 pieces of ammunition and 1 ??? grenades were turned in.

Nevertheless, this means that there is still a great deal of military hardware in the country that is not under government control. This has led to incidents and accidents. Furthermore, it means that criminal groups have easy access to weapons. Kalashnikovs, especially those produced in China, are highly sought after by the Italian mafia as well as criminal groups in Greece,

Montenegro, Kosovo and beyond.<sup>5</sup> It is also believed that some of the explosives stolen from military depots in 1997 have been used for mafia-style killings in Albania, although criminal groups tend to favour explosives from Montenegro, which are seen as more efficient.<sup>6</sup>

Although there are no official statistics on the matter, it is believed that the vast majority of organized crime-related killings that have taken place in Albania since 1997 have been carried out using guns stolen from the old arsenals.<sup>7</sup> A recent example took place in Shkodra on 6 April when a known criminal, Bardhok Pllanaj, was shot dead by around 100 rounds from two Kalashnikov-style automatic rifles.<sup>8</sup> In other cases, assassinations have been carried out using sniper rifles, pistols with suppressors or explosives.

The government strategy and roadmap of 2019–2024 for the control of small arms and light weapons, as well as ammunition and explosives (which is part of regional efforts undertaken in the context of the Berlin Process)<sup>9</sup> emphasizes that one of the main objectives of law enforcement authorities is to significantly reduce the number of guns and ammunition that are held illegally.<sup>10</sup> Authorities are expected to launch a new guns and ammunition amnesty after the 25 April 2021 parliamentary elections.<sup>11</sup>



**A weapons seizure in Albania. Citizens hold vast amounts of materiel stolen from state arsenals built during the Communist period.**

Photo: Albanian police

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## 6. Community Building Mitrovica: An open door for young people.

Community Building Mitrovica (CBM) is a civil society organization based in Mitrovica, Kosovo. More than 20 years after the war, the city continues to be divided, with a Kosovo-Albanian community located in the southern part of the city and a Kosovo-Serbian community in the northern part, separated by the Ibar river. Tensions remain and the rule of law is weak. As a result, the region continues to have a reputation as a haven for organized crime.

Genti Behramaj and Aferdita Sylaj Shehu talk about the work their organization undertakes, some of the challenges that they face and how CBM's activities help to increase resilience to organized crime in this difficult environment.

### **When and why was CBM founded and what does the organization do?**

Twenty years ago, CBM started as an international peace project for community reconciliation funded by the Inter-Church Peace Council. In 2003, it was registered as a local NGO aimed at bringing the different communities together and establishing dialogue between the Serbian and the Albanian communities. This was particularly important given that, since the end of the war in Kosovo in 1999, intermittent closures of the bridge over the Ibar river as well as violent attacks against those crossing it led to a de facto separation of the two communities. The bridge has become a symbol

of separation rather than connection, with many people on either side still reluctant to cross it.

Today, CBM is one of the biggest CSOs in the region, with approximately 15 employees. As the gap between the Serbian and Albanian communities remains wide, we are working on several projects designed to reduce inter-ethnic tensions and divisions within the political system, the low level of employment (especially among youth) and local trends of organized crime. CBM not only works in the city of Mitrovica, but also covers the whole region of North Kosovo. We also carry out activities in other parts of Kosovo and across the Western Balkans.

We often work with children at local high schools and primary schools to focus on prevention. We try to steer these young people away from negative influences and we work with them on issues affecting their daily lives through civic education. We also bring role models to them to discuss possible challenges. In short, we try to show them that there is another way of doing things.

CBM is also an open door for young people, for whatever they need. We support their ideas in the community, we organize peer-to-peer training sessions and workshops on how to identify vulnerability and then we try to involve them in our activities. After 20 years of operation, we are starting to see the fruits of our work.



**Genti Behramaj and Aferdita Sylaj Shehu.**

Community Building Mitrovica

Children who participated in our training years ago are now activists or peacebuilders – they are successful people working for the good of society.

**What are the main challenges for civil society organizations in an area where ethnic divisions and organized crime are so entrenched?**

One of our main challenges is to stay focused, particularly on issues concerning young people. Another challenge is to be accepted. Because of the polarized ethnic situation here, there are different perspectives. Depending on who you talk to, some people think of us as a Serbian organization, others as an Albanian one. The key for us is to build trust and to engage people from both communities. For example, until recently, institutions in the Serbian-majority areas did not work with Kosovo-registered NGOs. But CBM managed to establish a channel of communication with them and is now implementing projects and activities together with representatives of these communities.

**How do young people see and experience the division in the Mitrovica region?**

Due to the lack of contact and dialogue between the

communities, there continue to be many stereotypes and prejudices, including among young people who have grown up in an environment where they are taught to not trust each other. But when we bring them together at CBM, things change. We focus on a topic of common interest instead of forcing cooperation. Then they start to communicate and work together. To name just one example: good friendships were created through CBM Mitrovica's 'school of rock' and now there are several bands with ethnically-mixed young people playing music together.

Change takes time, but we see the results every day. You can see many people crossing the new bridge across the Ibar river. Since the 2013 agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, which included the integration of the Serb-majority communes into the Kosovo system, things have changed significantly. The city appears to be politically more stable and businesses have started to invest too. The fact that they invest in Mitrovica gives us hope that there is not going to be another conflict and so people communicate more and feel safer.



A mural in Mitrovica, Kosovo, reading 'Your story is my story. Report human trafficking', December 2020. The campaign against human trafficking in North Kosovo was supported by the Resilience Fund.

Photo: © Community Building Mitrovica



### **How is organized crime perceived and what is its impact in your community?**

Organized crime is not a key concern for local youth and many feel that it does not affect them directly. There is also a lot of misinformation or lack of knowledge about organized crime. For example, during our activities organized with support of the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund,<sup>1</sup> participants thought that there wasn't a lot of human trafficking in the community and emphasized that this phenomenon does not take place locally.

But we actually see signs of human trafficking in our daily life here in Mitrovica. It is happening all around us: near bus stops and schools. Although young people know that sexual exploitation is a crime, they often do not make the connection and do not know how to address it. This is why it is very important to raise awareness around these issues.

### **You mentioned that institutions are also reluctant to speak about organized crime. Is this topic generally a taboo?**

People are often unaware of what organized crime is and how it impacts life in the community. People do not know a lot about the topic and this is why it is not discussed. Nobody we spoke to in recent projects could actually define organized crime.

But people are also afraid to speak about the topic more openly. We recently observed the case of a local cafe where it was assumed that women were being exploited for sex work. Shortly after the news was released in the media, the journalist was threatened by the owner of the establishment.

In this sense, one of the biggest problems is prosecution. We spoke to police officers who told us that they lead investigations, file evidence and capture criminals, only to have the court decide to release the person after just a month or even 24 hours. This is why people are also afraid to talk about it, because there is a fear that after the criminals are released from prison, they will take revenge and you have nowhere to go and address your issue.

Furthermore, neither the institutions nor the police are aware of what information they can or should share. They are not properly trained for these kinds of issues. Information that should not be revealed is put into reports and the identities of witnesses are disclosed. This is why people are hesitant to turn to the police to talk about these issues.

### **How do you address the topic of organized crime in your activities?**

Last year we organized a project around the issues of human trafficking called 'Your story, my story', supported by the Resilience Fund. In just three months we organized an online awareness-raising campaign and planned two training sessions, workshops, roundtables and webinars.

One really worrying issue was that many of the institutions we invited to participate were not sure about their responsibilities and the applicable laws on the topic of organized crime. Throughout the project, we were in constant contact with all these institutions, first trying to figure out what they were already doing and then how to better organize the activities. This was a challenge, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was also a very positive experience to work with them.

There are many gaps in the laws and space for interpretation that need to be improved. And then there is neglect. But even so, these experts were willing to learn and improve. I think this project set the foundation for something important and it is vital to continue and grow this cooperation.

### **How do you motivate young people to participate in these types of activities?**

During the human trafficking project, we were surprised by the keen interest of young people, especially for the training that we designed. There was also an avid interest from the representatives of the institutions we worked with. In fact, this project was the first time that representatives from the police, the prosecution, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, civil society organizations and students got together to talk about the topic.

In total, around 60 people took part and all participants were very engaged. And in the three months that the project was running, we reached almost half a million people with our social media campaign. Our webinars had participants from other places, including from Albania and North Macedonia. They shared experiences from their own countries and we were able to compare them to what we do here.

### **What are your next steps?**

We definitely want to continue working on the issue of organized crime and address the issue of human trafficking. In particular, we would like to focus on the institutions and try to build bridges between them,

because, so far, there is no proper communication or enough awareness about their responsibilities. It's really important that we encourage them to cooperate further.

We would also like to continue working with youth to raise awareness, because there is not enough knowledge

of human trafficking. It's really important that people know that this is a crime and what it actually is, so that we can all contribute to create bigger change. After some time working on the ground, we could create a grassroots movement.

## Notes

- 1 For more information on GI-TOC's Resilience Fund, see <https://resiliencefund.globalinitiative.net>.

# Acknowledgements

This Risk Bulletin is an output of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (SEE-Obs). SEE-Obs is a platform that connects and empowers civil-society actors in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. It aims to enable civil society to identify, analyze and map criminal trends, and their impact on illicit flows, governance, development, inter-ethnic relations, security

and the rule of law. SEE-Obs supports civil society in their monitoring of national dynamics and wider regional and international organized-crime trends. SEE-Obs was launched as an outcome of the 2018 Western Balkans Summit in London, a part of the Berlin Process.

We would like to thank Safet Mušić and Kostas Koukourmakas for their valuable contributions.



Risk Bulletins are regular outputs of our regional observatories, which draw on civil society networks to provide new data and contextualize trends related to organized-crime networks, illicit trade and state responses to them. If you would like to subscribe to future editions of the Risk Bulletin, please sign up [here](#) or email [almedina.dodic@globalinitiative.net](mailto:almedina.dodic@globalinitiative.net).

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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.



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