

# OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

ISSUE **11** DECEMBER 2021

## Summary highlights



### **Links between politics, ethnicity and organized crime in northern Kosovo.**

In mid-October, Kosovo police swooped into the city of Mitrovica as part of a series of operations designed to crack down on organized crime. What started as a targeted law enforcement operation quickly turned into a stand-off between the police and angry citizens. Northern Kosovo is often characterized as a hotspot of organized crime, but what does the criminal underworld look like in the area north of the Ibar river?



### **What could be the impact of the Open Balkan initiative on organized crime?**

Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia are forging ahead with the idea of an Open Balkan initiative to create an economic zone that would further improve political and economic relations and strengthen cultural ties between the three states. Efforts to promote greater regional integration, whether through the Open Balkan initiative or the Common Regional Market, should also be used as an opportunity to strengthen regional law enforcement cooperation in the fight against organized crime.



### **Blood feuds in Albania exploited by criminal groups.**

Albanian society is sometimes portrayed as violent because of its harsh cultural norms, such as the blood feud. But this practice is mostly limited to northern Albania and its use is diminishing. Nevertheless, the blood feud is instrumentalized by organized criminal groups to enhance their fear factor, and it has been abused by some asylum seekers using fake attestation letters to claim that they are victims of blood feud.



### **Local initiatives: Resilience dialogues in the Western Balkans.**

In October and November, the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe continued its in-person 'resilience dialogues' in the six capitals of the Western Balkans. Lively discussions were held in Tirana, Belgrade, Sarajevo and Pristina. The meetings provided an opportunity for civil society organizations (CSOs) to come together and share views on current activities as well as to discuss challenges that they face in their work. Some of the most dynamic discussions were between representatives of civil society and the government on



how to work together more effectively on issues like migration, corruption and drugs.



### **Kicking out crime: Using martial arts to empower young Albanians.**

As part of our series of conversations with representatives of CSOs in the Western Balkans who are

strengthening local resilience to organized crime, we talk to Elion Puka, martial arts master and head of the Vllaznia tae kwon do club in Shkodra, Albania, about his work using martial arts to empower young people and keep them away from crime.

## **ABOUT THIS ISSUE**

Welcome to the eleventh issue of the Risk Bulletin produced by the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (SEE-Obs) of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). As usual, we begin with a profile of a hotspot of organized crime, this time the region of northern Kosovo. We explore what is going on behind the political rhetoric and take a closer look at the criminal economy in this subregion, particularly the smuggling of licit goods.

While there has been a lot of fanfare about the Open Balkan initiative, there is also scepticism. We look at the potential implications of more open borders on criminal markets and emphasize the need for greater regional law enforcement cooperation. We caution that what is not required, at least at the outset, is the creation of yet another regional law-enforcement body – there are enough if not already too many. Nevertheless, greater cooperation and coordination is needed, and could be enhanced by more effective use of bodies like the Integrative Internal Security Governance process, which is part of the EU's efforts to improve security cooperation in the Western Balkans.

We also provide an overview of four resilience dialogues that the Observatory organized in October and November following the September kick-off meeting in Skopje. These meetings in Tirana, Belgrade, Sarajevo and Pristina were held under the Chatham House Rule (under which information disclosed may be reported but the source may not be identified), so it is difficult to give the reader a sense of the energy in the room or the lively discussions, particularly between civil society and government representatives. But the meetings were crucial in building bridges between investigative journalists, academics and NGO representatives, as well

as between civil society and government. They also provided an opportunity to showcase the GI-TOC's work in the region after almost two years of COVID-19, to renew contacts, create new partnerships and strengthen networks against organized crime. The last meeting in the series will be held in Podgorica, Montenegro, in mid-December.

Blood feud in Albania is a practice that remains shrouded in a degree of secrecy and mystery. Based on a custom dating from the 15th century, blood feuds still exist in a few places in Albania, particularly in the north of the country. Potential victims stay in their homes in a permanent state of lockdown or flee – either to other parts of Albania or abroad. Based on first-hand research, we look into how common the practice is, its links to organized crime and what steps the Albanian authorities are taking to address it.

We conclude with an interview with a Resilience Fund recipient, Elion Puka, a tae kwon do master who moved back from Italy to his hometown of Shkodra, Albania, to teach martial arts to young people in the community. We talk to him about the threat posed by organized crime in Shkodra, and how sports can strengthen the resilience of young people to organized crime and violence.

References to Kosovo in this Risk Bulletin are made without prejudice to positions on status, and are in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on Kosovo's declaration of independence.

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# 1. Links between politics, ethnicity and organized crime in northern Kosovo.

The town of Mitrovica in northern Kosovo has often been a flashpoint for inter-ethnic tensions between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians, or between the local population and the international community. Mitrovica North, as well as the municipalities of Leposavic, Zubin Potok and Zvečan in northern Kosovo (with an estimated population of 80 000),<sup>1</sup> are also considered hotspots for organized crime.<sup>2</sup> In October 2021, as part of a crackdown on organized crime in different parts of Kosovo, the police carried out a raid against criminal groups in the Mitrovica area that resulted in violent clashes. What are the links between politics, ethnicity and organized crime in this volatile region?

## **Grey economy in a grey zone**

Since the end of the war in Kosovo in 1999, the northern part of the country has been divided along ethnic lines. The fault line is the Ibar river separating predominantly Serb communities in the north from Albanian ones in the south.<sup>3</sup> For a long period, bridges

spanning the river in Mitrovica were seen by Serbs as 'symbols of resistance' whereas Albanians regarded them as 'symbols of unity'.<sup>4</sup>

The disputed status of the region and the existence of de facto authorities (often backed by Serbia), as well as the presence of parallel security structures has enabled a high level of de facto self-government. This has also created a permissive environment for illicit activity for Serb and Albanian traffickers.<sup>5</sup> The region has also been considered as a good place for fugitives, for example from Serbia, to hide out.

The situation started to change in 2013 due to an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina reached in Brussels that, among other steps, dismantled the parallel security structures.<sup>6</sup> This has given the Kosovar government and its executive structures a greater footprint in the region. Nevertheless, unresolved disputes between Pristina and Belgrade have resulted in



**View of Mitrovica. The city is divided between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians.**

Photo: Pierre Crom/Getty Images



**FIGURE 1** Mitrovica, in northern Kosovo, and its neighbouring municipalities are hotspots for organized crime in the country.



simmering tensions that sometimes boil over. Furthermore, the lack of cooperation between Serbian and Kosovar police and judicial authorities 'makes these bodies paralyzed and unable to fight criminals'.<sup>7</sup>

Yet tensions at the bargaining table have not stopped illicit trade under the table. Northern Kosovo is used as a buffer zone between Kosovo and Serbia for the smuggling of goods, medicines, cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. With the exception of cannabis, most goods being smuggled into the jurisdiction are licit products that are moved on small secondary roads in order to evade customs and excise taxes. Some of the trafficking is carried out by organized groups, but much of it is being done by private persons bringing in appliances, medicines, food items and alcoholic beverages from Serbia. Weak rule of law and free electricity have also reportedly made the region a lucrative hub for mining of cryptocurrencies.<sup>8</sup> The situation deserves a more granular analysis in order to shed more light on the region's reputation as a black hole of organized crime.

#### **Links between organized crime and politics**

Northern Kosovo receives financial support from Serbia. Furthermore, in line with the 2013 Brussels Agreement,

four municipalities in the north also have access to funds from the Kosovo state budget earmarked for local self-government. On top of this financial support, the area receives funds from international donors (particularly the EU) and an additional development fund. The latter is made up of the customs paid on goods imported for consumption in northern Kosovo. However, these funds have been steadily decreasing since 2014,<sup>9</sup> which seems to be in line with the smuggling activities described above. These funds are intended for regional development, yet there is little data on how the money is being spent.

Since there is very little industry in this region (mostly only small businesses), whoever controls public resources in this rent-seeking economy holds considerable power. Businesses depend on links to political patrons for survival. Indeed, for most people in the north, it is more profitable to gain access to public funds than to do business. This situation incentivizes corruption through clientelism and creates a political economy of dependency.

Politics in northern Kosovo is dominated by one political party, Srpska Lista, which has close links to the Serbian



**The river Ibar separates predominantly Serb communities in the north of the country from Albanian ones in the south.**

Photo: Lekic Dragan/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

Progressive Party led by Serbian President Aleksander Vučić.<sup>10</sup> The deputy head of Srpska Lista is Milan Radoičić, whose close partner is Zvonko Veselinović, a notorious Serbian businessman who has won several public contracts for construction projects and highways in Serbia and owns a well-known hotel in Kopaonik.<sup>11</sup> In 2019, Radoičić and Veselinović were indicted for allegedly leading an organized criminal group that was responsible for the murder of rival Serb political leader Oliver Ivanović in January 2018.<sup>12</sup> Before his death, in an interview for the Balkan Investigative Reporters Network, Ivanović described Radoičić as 'North Kosovo[s] dark ruler' and a 'key figure in an intimidating system of power in northern Kosovo'. Ivanović further claimed that Radoičić represented an informal centre of power and decision-making over the region.

In November 2018, Kosovo police tried to arrest Radoičić in Mitrovica, but he eluded them and kept a low profile for two years.<sup>13</sup> In early 2021, the warrant for his arrest was cancelled and he returned to Kosovo, where he was unanimously re-elected as vice president of Srpska Lista in July 2021.<sup>14</sup>

On 8 December, the US put Radoičić, Veselinović and a number of other Kosovo citizens on a blacklist, as part of its strategy for cracking down on corruption. In a statement, the US Treasury Department described Veselinović as the leader of an organized criminal group that 'is engaged in a largescale bribery scheme with Kosovar and Serbian security officials who facilitate the group's illicit trafficking of goods, money, narcotics, and weapons between Kosovo and Serbia'. The statement also said that he has 'conspired with various politicians in several quid pro quo agreements, including the early 2019 bribery of Kosovar security officials to allow their smuggling operations between Serbia and Kosovo and the late 2017 bribery of Kosovar border security officials to allow safe passage for smugglers'.<sup>15</sup>

### Crackdown on crime

While past governments in Pristina have been wary of taking on the political economy of northern Kosovo, the government led by Prime Minister Albin Kurti has pledged to tackle organized crime and corruption. According to Kurti, since he took office in March 2021, there have been 437 police operations that have dismantled 31 criminal groups.<sup>16</sup>



**A damaged car following clashes between police and local protestors during an operation against the smuggling of goods, Mitrovica, 13 October 2021.**

Photo: Reuters/Laura Hasani via Alamy



A major operation was carried out by the Kosovo police on 13 October 2021, primarily in the municipalities of Pristina, Peja, Mitrovica South and Mitrovica North.<sup>17</sup> Media attention focused in particular on the action in Mitrovica North. The raid came against a backdrop of heightened tensions between Pristina and Belgrade following a dispute over licence plates and just before local elections on 17 October.

When Kosovo police units moved into Mitrovica, they were blocked by crowds that started shouting and throwing stones at the police officers.<sup>18</sup> Tensions were further heightened when the municipality's emergency alarm was activated, bringing more people into the streets. In response, the police were reinforced by more heavily armed police special operations units from the nearby 'Belvedere' camp in South Mitrovica.<sup>19</sup> What was supposed to be a targeted anti-organized crime operation took on the character of a showdown between the police and angry members of the local population. Violence escalated to the point that the special operations units came under attack; a senior commander and nine other police officers (three of them ethnic Serbs) were wounded as a result of an explosion and rockets were fired against police armoured

vehicles.<sup>20</sup> A number of civilians were also injured. Several arrests were made, and police said that a number of smuggled goods and evidence worth hundreds of thousands of euros were seized.<sup>21</sup>

Although such raids support the government's agenda to be tough on crime, they also help local forces play the nationalist card. In an open discussion between Vučić and representatives of Srpska Lista held on 16 October 2021 at the military barracks of the Serbian Army in Raska (close to the border with Kosovo), Radoičić warned that if police raids continue, 'people will organize and defend the interest of Serbs in Kosovo'.<sup>22</sup> In short, such operations help to make Kurti's government look tough on crime while they play into the hands of politicians and criminal groups in the subregion who profit from the status quo.

The situation in northern Kosovo continues to demonstrate the tangled links between organized crime and politics. It also features the characteristics of a hotspot of organized crime: an area where weak governance, socio-economic vulnerability and trafficking routes overlap. And it highlights how criminals have better cross-border cooperation than the police or politicians.

## Notes

- 1 This is an estimated number because the four northern municipalities boycotted the latest census in 2011. These estimates stem from a profile of municipalities prepared by the OSCE Mission in Kosovo in 2018. OSCE, *Municipal Profiles 2018*, October 2018, [https://www.osce.org/files/Municipal%20Profiles\\_2018.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/Municipal%20Profiles_2018.pdf).
- 2 GI-TOC, *Hotspots of organized crime in the Western Balkans. Local vulnerabilities in a regional context*, May 2019, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Hotspots-Report-English-13Jun1110-Web.pdf>.
- 3 International Crisis Group, *Kosovo's Linchpin: Overcoming Division in Mitrovica*, Balkans Report No. 96, 31 May 2000, 3, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/96-kosovo-s-linchpin-overcoming-division-in-mitrovica.pdf>.
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- 5 Walter Kemp, Mark Shaw and Arthur Boutellis, *The elephant in the room: How can peace operations deal with organized crime?*, International Peace Institute, 3 June 2013, 46–55, [https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/elephant\\_in\\_the\\_room.pdf](https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/elephant_in_the_room.pdf).
- 6 Isidora Stakic and Maja Bjelos, *The Future of Civil Protection in North of Kosovo*, Kosovo Centre for Security Studies and Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 4 October 2015, <https://www.balkansecurityplatform.org/Publications/354/The-future-of-Civil-Protection-in-North-Kosovo.shtml>.
- 7 Ivana Jeremić, *An unexpected cooperation: Albanians and Serbs 'Affairs' in Kosovo*, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 15 October 2021, <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/an-unexpected-cooperation-albanians-and-serbs-affairs-in-kosovo/>.
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- 10 *Pobeda Srpske liste 100%*, *gradonačelnici u 19 opština u prvom krugu*, ni u jednoj LVV, *Kossev*, 17 October 2021, <https://kossev.info/danas-su-kosovski-lokalni-izbori-biralista-se-otvaraju-u-7/>.
- 11 *Od „čuvara mosta” do međunarodne poternice: Ko je Zvonko Veselinović*, *BBC*, 2 December 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-50633650>.
- 12 Rada Trajković, a local Serbian politician from Kosovo, repeatedly alleged that Radoičić is behind the assassination of Ivanović. See Radoičić glavnoosumnjicheni za ubistvo Olivera Ivanovića, *Radio Free Europe*, 23 August 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/pristina-sud-radoicic-ivanovic/30125833.html>.
- 13 *Three Serbs arrested in Oliver Ivanovic murder investigation*, *EU-OCS*, 23 November 2018, <https://eu-ocs.com/three-serbs-arrested-in-oliver-ivanovic-murder-investigation/>.
- 14 *Pristina court withdraws warrant for Kosovo Serb List official*, *Kossev*, 1 March 2021, <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/pristina-court-withdraws-warrant-for-kosovo-serb-list-official/>.

- 15 US Department of the Treasury, Treasury targets corruption networks linked to transnational organized crime, 8 December 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0519>.
- 16 Interview of Prime Minister Kurti on 7 November 2021, see Kurti: Beogradi dëshiron ta ketë një shtet në Kosovë, s'mund të ketë Asociacion, pike, Gazeta Express, 7 November 2021, <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/kurti-nuk-mund-te-kete-asociacion-mbi-baza-etnike-pike/>.
- 17 DEKLARATA/ Policia e Kosovës për tensionet në Mitrovicë: Grupet kriminale kanë qëlluar me armë dhe granata, janë plagosur 6 efektivë, Dritehije, 13 October 2021, <https://www.dritehije.com/2021/10/13/deklarata-policia-e-kosoves-per-tensionet-ne-mitrovice-grupet-kriminale-kane-qelluar-me-arme-dhe-granata-jane-plagosur-6-efektive/>.
- 18 For more details, see statement of the General Director of the Kosovo police, Mr Samedin Mehmeti, Drejtori i Policisë: 10 policë u lënduan në Mitrovicën Veriore gjatë aksionit kundër kontrabandimit me mallra, Shqip.com, November 2021, <https://shqip.com/drejtori-i-policise-10-zyrtare-policore-u-lenduan-ne-mitrovicen-veriore-gjate-aksionitkunder-kontrabandimit-me-mallra/>.
- 19 These special intervention units are called Njësia Speciale Operative (NJSO). The NJSO is widely known in the Serbian media as the ROSU – an acronym dating from Kosovo's period under international administration, when the special forces were called the Rapid Operational Support Unit. The unit has since been reorganized. Nevertheless, ROSU still represents a 'force of fear' in the eyes of many Serbs in northern Kosovo, with the unit's negative connotation embedded in the vernacular of Serbian politicians and the narrative of Serbian media tabloids.
- 20 For more details, see the statement of Mr Besart Ahmeti, NJSO Operational Commander, Komandanti i Njesisë Speciale, Besart Ahmeti tregon se si u plagos në aksionin kundër kontrabandës në veri, Telegrafi, 3 November 2021, <https://telegrafi.com/komandanti-njesise-speciale-besart-ahmeti-tregon-se-si-u-plagos-ne-aksionin-kunder-kontrabandes-ne-veri/>.
- 21 Bekim Shehu, BE reagon për tensionet në veri të Kosovës, Deutsche Welle, 13 October 2021, <https://www.dw.com/sq/be-reagon-p%C3%ABr-tensionet-n%C3%AB-veri-t%C3%AB-kosov%C3%ABs/a-59497238>.
- 22 For more on the Raska meeting, see Vučić sa Srbima u Raški: Čuvaćemo mir, ako krene nasilje zaštite narod, N1, 13 October 2021, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/vucic-kosovo-sever-policija-akcija-srbi-albanci/>. While the meeting was broadcast live, Radoičić made his intervention publicly alongside other members of Srpska Lista.



## 2. What could be the impact of the Open Balkan initiative on organized crime?

On 4 November 2021, the flags of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia flew from lamp posts in Belgrade, welcoming high-level delegations from Tirana and Skopje to the latest meeting of the Open Balkan initiative. The idea, formerly known as Mini-Schengen, was born in 2019 in Novi Sad, Serbia, when Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev agreed to create an economic zone to further improve political and economic relations and strengthen cultural ties between the three states.<sup>1</sup>

The initiative's new name was first used at a meeting of the Economic Forum on Regional Cooperation in Skopje in June 2021. While the initiative clearly has its merits, would more open borders and markets also facilitate illicit flows?

Some see the initiative as a stepping stone to EU accession. Others see it as a distraction or a duplication

of existing arrangements like the Common Regional Market. Prime Minister Albin Kurti of Kosovo, for example, has been highly critical of the initiative.<sup>2</sup> Montenegro has been monitoring developments, while Bosnia and Herzegovina seems sceptical and preoccupied with internal issues.

### **Criminals without borders**

The main aim of the Open Balkan initiative is to remove all border obstacles between the three countries by 2023. This would eliminate long and tedious waits for travellers and complicated paperwork for companies. Border crossings would remain, but fast lanes for citizens and goods coming from participating countries would be established at border points where no checks would be conducted. In addition, the leaders signed three documents on facilitating import, export and movement of goods, labour market access and cooperation in disaster protection.<sup>3</sup> As a result, goods and people will flow faster, a common market of 12



**The Open Balkan initiative aims to remove all border obstacles between Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia.**

Photo: [militaryingermany.com](https://militaryingermany.com)

million people will be created and trilateral cooperation will be enhanced.<sup>4</sup>

With the exception of the agreement on cooperation in disaster protection, the Open Balkan initiative is almost identical to the EU-backed Common Regional Market. However, the Open Balkan initiative seems to be motivated in part by the slow process of EU accession and, in the case of Albania and Serbia, discontent at perceived obstructionism from Pristina. The danger is that there are two competing, parallel processes that will deepen divisions rather than cooperation in the region. Turning the initiative into reality will require institutional cooperation, legal harmonization and inter-operability (particularly for information exchange). It will also require resources. But will the removal of barriers also make it easier for criminals to operate across borders?

With or without the Open Balkan initiative, criminals in the Western Balkans already move and cooperate across borders, with border areas tending to be hotspots of organized crime. Would more open borders reduce incentives for traffickers to congregate around border areas? (For example between North Macedonia and Serbia – for trafficking of drugs and migrants – or between Albania and North Macedonia – particularly for cannabis smuggling.) Fewer border controls could reduce corruption among border guards but it would also decrease their ability to detect drugs and other smuggled goods during routine checks. Furthermore, since licit and illicit flows follow similar routes and use similar infrastructure, opening up borders without greater security cooperation will create more opportunities for transnational organized crime.

Bringing Kosovo into the initiative – which seems unlikely at the moment – would open possibilities for reducing tensions related to border and boundary issues. It could also facilitate illicit flows, since Kosovo borders four of the other five jurisdictions and has excellent roads. On the other hand, if Kosovo does not join the initiative, it would become a less attractive hub for trafficking from Albania or North Macedonia, since traffickers could circumvent it in a relatively risk-free way.

If borders between countries signatories of the initiative become more open, the entry points to those markets could become more contested. For example, after entering an Albanian port, the next border check for citizens of Albania, North Macedonia or Serbia could be at the crossing point between Serbia and Hungary.

Weapons or cigarettes smuggled from Serbia or North Macedonia could reach the Adriatic without any border checks. This could increase competition among criminal groups for access to the ports or key land border crossings on the outside of the zone rather than between countries within the zone. (For example, if Albanian and Serbian groups operating in Latin America would collude to ship cocaine via Albanian ports and then cooperate to distribute it to Western Europe via Open Balkan countries.) This could either strengthen cooperation among Balkan criminal groups – as is already the case in Latin America – or potentially ignite a war between them, for example over control of cocaine trafficking through Albanian ports.

### **Increased law enforcement cooperation**

In the same way that removing borders within the EU led to greater cooperation among law enforcement agencies, not least through Europol, Frontex and the Schengen Borders Code,<sup>5</sup> discussions on more open borders or a common regional market should be seized as an opportunity to create an integrated border control system, enhance intelligence-led policing, joint operations and afford one another mutual legal assistance with respect to investigations, prosecutions, judicial proceedings and asset recovery.

Existing institutions like Europol and the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), as well as the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe could facilitate this process. It may also be necessary to create a common regional intelligence database for tracking wanted criminals and foreign terrorist fighters and exchanging information to help investigations. With a reduction in the number of border controls, law enforcement and border officials could be redeployed to form mobile teams.

What should be avoided, at least at the outset, is the creation of yet another regional law-enforcement body. There is already SELEC, the Southeast European Police Chiefs Association, the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe (and its Secretariat) and the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative, as well as the Berlin Process.

However, discussing greater economic integration without considering the security implications is short-sighted. It would make sense to use an existing body like the Integrative Internal Security Governance process, which has a pillar on countering serious organized crime

in the Western Balkans, to coordinate policies and merge the efforts of all relevant security actors. If the countries of the Open Balkan initiative want to move faster, their cooperation should be part of a wider regional strategy. Although increased openness could be

exploited by criminal groups, the Open Balkan initiative and other efforts to promote greater regional integration should be seized as an opportunity to strengthen regional law-enforcement cooperation in the fight against organized crime.

## Notes

- 1 Nikola Mitkovic, Open Balkan: Who benefits from it?, CGTN, 31 July 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-07-31/Open-Balkan-Who-benefits-from-it-12lawyWuzGo/index.html>.
- 2 RSE: Za vladu Kosova Open Balkan je inicijativa bez vizije, Danas, 29 July 2021, <https://www.danas.rs/politika/rse-za-vladu-kosova-open-balkan-je-inicijativa-bez-vizije/>.
- 3 The three documents are: Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation on Facilitating Import, Export and Movement of Goods in the Western Balkans, a Memorandum on Free Access to the Labour Market and an Agreement on Cooperation in Disaster Protection.
- 4 Sinisa Jakov Marusic, Balkan 'Mini-Schengen' leaders eye open borders by 2023, BalkanInsight, 29 July 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/29/balkan-mini-schengen-leaders-eye-open-borders-by-2023/>.
- 5 The Schengen Borders Code is available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016R0399&from=EN>.



### 3. Blood feuds in Albania exploited by criminal groups.

Albanian society is sometimes portrayed as violent because of its harsh cultural norms like the blood feud. This custom dates back to the 15th century and is known as the Kanun of Leke Dukagjini.<sup>1</sup> As in other mountainous and remote communities (such as Montenegro, Kosovo or parts of the Caucasus), this practice developed as a way of protecting families in the absence of a strong central state.<sup>2</sup> The fear of reciprocity was designed to be a deterrent against acts of violence: one risked triggering a tit-for-tat spiral of revenge by taking someone's life.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the notion of an 'eye for an eye', blood feuds do not necessarily stop at a single act of retribution but may carry on for generations until there are no male family members remaining on either side.<sup>4</sup> This custom was designed to prevent chaos, not to cause it. It was effectively an early version of a mutually assured destruction pact, closely linked to the values of honour and the family.<sup>5</sup>

#### **The instrumentalization of blood feuds**

Today, the idea of a blood feud is part of the fear factor of Albanian criminal groups. It helps their image to be seen as potential dispensers of violence – hunting down their opponents and taking revenge.<sup>6</sup> It also puts a gloss of customary or traditional norms on their violent behaviour.<sup>7</sup> That said, criminal groups do not tend to recruit people connected to families involved in blood feuds since they do not want to be drawn into these protracted disputes.<sup>8</sup> They are also wary of taking on powerful families in areas of the north of Albania because of the risk of triggering a blood feud: it's bad for business.<sup>9</sup>

However, recent research has shown that sometimes criminal groups apply their own version of a blood feud.<sup>10</sup> According to the Kanun, you cannot take revenge for a family member who is killed while committing an immoral act (e.g., while stealing property). However, organized crime sometimes misuses the Kanun to exact



**The custom of blood feuds is still present in parts of northern Albania such as Shkodra, pictured above.**

Photo: Marka/Universal Images Group via Getty Images



revenge: there have been cases when an organized crime group is unable to find an opponent and instead kills one of the person's family members, justifying it as blood

feud. In this situation, the family members of the victim often go into hiding or emigrate in fear of further retaliation from the organized crime group.<sup>11</sup>

## WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A BLOOD FEUD AND A VENDETTA?

In Albania, a blood feud is called *gjakmarrja*, which means 'blood-taking' or 'blood feud'. Revenge or vendetta, on the other hand, is called *hakmarrja*. The latter is the obligation to 'take life to right an earlier wrong, to salvage honour'. The terms are used interchangeably and sometimes can be confusing, as in both cases the killing is made to restore justice and

honour. The key difference, however, is that blood feud is a protracted series of family-based revenge killings that can last for generations, whereas a vendetta is retaliation for a killing – a tit-for-tat killing. The lines are blurred when a vendetta conducted for the sake of a family member triggers a blood feud.

For example, in the turf war between two powerful organized crime groups in the city of Shkodra,<sup>12</sup> leaders of criminal group A killed a key member of criminal group B. In retaliation, the leaders of criminal group B, when they were unable to locate members of criminal group A, instead killed the father and uncle of one of the key members of that group. Now, that person considers the murder of his family members as a blood feud and will therefore try to kill family members of the leaders of criminal group B. In other words, even if the criminal groups could end the conflict between them, the cycle of violence will continue. As a result, what started as a revenge killing related to a criminal act (which may have been falsely depicted as a blood feud) has become a real blood feud.<sup>13</sup>

Another blurring of the line between assassinations and blood feuds is related to drug trafficking. It occurs when disputes from abroad are settled in Albania or when blood feuds that started in Albania are exported abroad. For instance, relatives of members of criminal organizations are seeking asylum in EU countries in order to evade the threat of retaliation. According to a 2017 report from Operazione Colomba, these are credible threats. From 2013 to 2017, it reported that blood feud murders were committed in the following countries: 11 in Italy, four in Greece and two each in Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands, as well as one each in Kosovo, Montenegro, the UK, the Czech Republic, Sweden, Switzerland, Canada and the US.<sup>14</sup> However, it

should be noted that criminal groups generally prefer not to expose themselves abroad and therefore continue the vendetta or blood feud in Albania.

But the lines are blurred. Is every revenge killing between criminal groups a blood feud in the tradition of the Kanun, or is it merely the 'normal' spiral of violence between mafia groups? Are all killings ostensibly related to blood feuds connected to organized crime or do some reflect the settling of scores between families?

### The scope of the problem

Between 1991 and 2008, at least 9 500 people were killed as the result of blood feuds. In the same period, almost 1 000 children were virtually imprisoned in their homes for protection as a result of ongoing blood feuds.<sup>15</sup> However, the practice seems to be declining. According to a report from 2018, the problem is mostly concentrated in the Shkodra district in northern Albania.<sup>16</sup> The data shows that at the national level, 704 families are engaged in blood feud, 113 of which have moved abroad. The high number of families in areas where blood feud is not culturally entrenched (i.e., in Tirana and Durrës) can be explained by the fact that families have moved to these areas from the north of the country, bringing the feuds with them.

It is not only criminals that abuse the reputation of the blood feud for their own ends. Citing a fear of retribution because of blood feuds has long been used

as grounds for seeking asylum. In some cases, families even obtained fake attestation letters to support their claims.<sup>17</sup> The situation changed after several individuals were arrested and the law was modified in 2014 to only allow prosecution offices to issue such certificates. Furthermore, a number of host countries (France, Belgium and Sweden, among others) now also ask Albanian authorities to verify the certificates. In case the certificates are forged or not based on facts, the persons responsible will be criminally investigated by Albanian authorities.

In addition, between 2012 and 2016 the government took steps to criminalize and ensure heavy penalties for blood feud-related offences. For example, pursuant to Article 78/a of the Criminal Code, the offence of 'murder for blood feud' is punishable by at least 30 years imprisonment.<sup>18</sup> Article 83/a specifies that a 'serious threat of retaliation or blood revenge, against a person [obliged to be] locked up at home, shall be punished by up to three years' imprisonment'. In addition, under Article 83/b, 'incitement to blood feud', which covers inducing others to engage in a vendetta or blood feud, when it does not constitute another criminal offence, is punishable by imprisonment of up to three years. All these legal amendments to the Criminal Code entered into force in 2013.

The government also prepared an action plan 'on the prevention, detection, documentation and crackdown on criminal activity against criminal offenses of murder committed for motives of blood feuds and revenge'.<sup>19</sup> The state police were tasked with preparing a strategy for implementing this action plan in 2017.<sup>20</sup> Some of the action points called for the state police to collect evidence on families engaged in blood feud, monitor the affected families and update the database of ongoing cases. Moreover, all children affected by blood feud were to be provided with education at home. In addition, the Parliament adopted a resolution in 2015 to

prevent the phenomenon of blood feuds in Albania.<sup>21</sup> However, the Ombudsman reported later that year that after the resolution, 'no concrete solution has been made by state institutions to implement the tasks set by the Parliament to prevent this phenomenon and to issue bylaws'.<sup>22</sup> In its 2018 progress report, the EU noted that 'the resolution and recommendations on blood feuds still require follow-up'.<sup>23</sup>

In the meantime, there has been an increase in the number of registered cases of murder for blood feud from 2017 to 2020. From five registered cases in 2017, the number increased to seven in 2020. However, the conviction rate for those accused of this crime has declined. Only one of the five cases registered for investigation in 2017 resulted in a guilty verdict. Of the seven cases registered in 2020, only one was sent to court; the defendant was found not guilty. Similarly, only one of the four cases registered for 'incitement to blood feud' in 2020 was sent to court.<sup>24</sup> From 2017 to 2020, the highest number of cases of incitement registered in one year was 11 cases in 2018. Only one of these was sent to the court, where it resulted in a guilty verdict.<sup>25</sup>

Blood feud is still a phenomenon in Albania, albeit mainly limited to the north of the country. Its practice remains shrouded in a degree of secrecy and mystery. More detailed research is required to get a clear picture of the situation, and to be able to estimate the extent and the spillover effect to family members of the victims both in Albania and overseas.

What is clear is that current state policies are insufficient to uproot the phenomenon. While protection is provided to the victims, trust in the justice system is low. This impedes the necessary cooperation between the community and relevant state agencies. If blood feuds developed in environments where the rule of law was weak, a more effective criminal justice system would reduce the validity of this pretext for violence.

	Tirana	Durres	Lezha	Dibra	Kukes	Shkodra	Total
Families in blood feud	68	86	105	89	87	156	591
Isolated	5	6	6	-	3	17	37
Families overseas	8	6	33	3	16	47	113

**FIGURE 2** Number of families affected by blood feud at the national level, 2018.

NGO working with affected families in Shkodra.

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## 4. Local initiatives: Resilience dialogues in the Western Balkans.

In October and November 2021, the SEE-Obs continued its series of resilience dialogues with meetings in Tirana, Belgrade, Sarajevo and Pristina. These meetings enabled the GI-TOC and its civil society partners to re-engage in person after almost two years of COVID-19, to strengthen cooperation between NGOs, investigative journalists and academics doing work on organized crime and to build bridges between civil society actors and the government in the common fight against organized crime and corruption. In each capital, the GI-TOC also held discussions with representatives of the diplomatic community, public officials and civil society to present its recent activities.

### Fighting corruption in Albania

On 28 and 29 October, the resilience dialogue in Tirana, Albania, brought together civil society representatives from around the country. The meeting focused on challenges faced by youth in Albania and what CSOs are doing to reduce their vulnerability to organized crime.

Among the main issues raised were the need for positive role models, alternatives to the 'get rich quick' narrative, the opportunities and dangers of migration, the necessity of support for small business start-ups and the impact of cannabis on some (mostly rural) communities as well as youth. Participants also shared experiences on the social re-use of assets confiscated from criminal groups. The CSO representatives, mostly women from communities outside the capital, discussed the need for civil courage and the challenges of interacting with local government, as well as the difficulties in turning short-term funded projects into sustainable long-term initiatives.

The meeting also touched on how to build bridges between CSOs and the government in preventing and combating corruption. Opening remarks from Adea Pirdeni, Deputy Minister of Justice, and Jorida Tabaku, Chairperson of the National Integration Council and of the parliamentary committee on European integration, were followed by a discussion on how to strengthen a



Round-table discussion during the resilience dialogue in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Photo: Bahrudin Bandic



culture of integrity in public institutions and the private sector; how to increase public awareness of the impact of corruption; the need to involve civil society in the drafting and implementation of anti-corruption laws and strategies; and how to maintain the 'watchdog' function of anti-corruption CSOs while still having the government consider them as constructive partners.

Among the issues raised were corruption in the media and the need for more effective whistle-blower protection as well as a more independent anti-corruption body. The deputy minister and CSO representatives thanked the GI-TOC for convening the meeting, which they saw as a rare and necessary step in enhancing dialogue and trust between civil society and the government on preventing and combating corruption.

In a meeting with a wider audience, the SEE-Obs invited Albanian journalists to share their experiences investigating the activities of Albanian organized crime groups operating in the country and abroad. Information on the modalities of cocaine trafficking from Latin America to Europe was particularly revealing. Among the points raised in the subsequent discussion were the difficulties in accessing information; the protection provided to some criminals by public officials; the lack of high-level prosecutions for serious organized crime; the vulnerability of impressionable youth to organized crime (including glamourization of crime and deviant role models in social media); and the dearth of in-depth investigative reporting in the field compared to superficial discussions about organized crime in television studios.

### **CSOs as service providers in Serbia**

The resilience dialogue in Belgrade, Serbia, held on 4 and 5 November, also brought together CSO representatives from around the country and focused on the role of CSOs in supporting drug users; post-penal reform; and youth who are vulnerable to organized crime. Other topics included loan sharking, football hooliganism, illicit financial flows, trafficking in human beings and the impact of corruption and criminal groups on local and central government.

A number of participants noted the difficulties faced by CSOs in Serbia, including lack of access to information, limited resources, lack of communication with local government officials, confusion caused by government-organized NGOs, a hesitancy by donors and civil society

to address issues of organized crime and even harassment and lawfare against CSOs.

That said, in a session involving a limited number of public officials, good cooperation was noted between CSOs and the government on issues relating to drug treatment and post-penal reform. Public officials acknowledged the added value of CSOs as service providers in the communities where they are active. However, there was less acceptance of CSOs working on issues related to organized crime or calling out corruption.

In the public session, SEE-Obs representatives underlined the need to promote more debate and analysis of issues related to organized crime and corruption as well as more constructive engagement between the government and civil society. It was noted that CSOs can be an important 'corrective factor' to government policies and can propose solutions to improve the situation.

### **Focusing on migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The resilience dialogue held in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on 15 and 16 November, included CSO representatives from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republic of Srpska as well as Brcko District. NGOs representing the police also participated. As in other capitals, civil society representatives were critical of the lack of access to information, limited resources and limited opportunities for engagement with public officials. They also noted that cooperation against organized crime was hindered by the polarized political situation in the country and the multi-layered system of government.

Among the points raised was the need for more active participation of young people on issues related to raising awareness of the harms of organized crime and corruption; greater support for investigative journalism; and more opportunities for communication between CSOs and public institutions, for example concerning information and support for drug users and migrants.

A discussion was held on the topic of building bridges between the government and civil society to deal more effectively with the challenge of migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Civil society representatives from one of the most affected regions, Una-Sana canton, close to the border with Croatia, detailed the dire humanitarian situation faced by people on the move. Public officials, including members of the border police, described the

challenges that they face in dealing with the issue, including insufficient cooperation with some neighbouring countries and the international community, and insufficient resources and corruption at border crossings. Nevertheless, it was noted that the number of mixed migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina decreased in 2021. Participants also discussed human trafficking in the country, including the vulnerability of migrants to exploitation for sex or forced labour.

Participants appreciated the opportunity to meet and have a constructive exchange of views, and discussed ideas for possible future cooperation. Although they emphasized the importance of civil society maintaining its independence, they agreed that on issues such as drugs, migration and corruption, civil society organizations and public officials 'have the same goal'.

While in Sarajevo, GI-TOC staff met with the country's minister of security, the head of the political department of the Regional Cooperation Council and the senior anti-corruption advisor at the Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative.

### **Strengthening anti-crime coalitions in Kosovo**

The fifth resilience dialogue took place in Pristina, Kosovo, on 25 and 26 November. The main focus of the meeting was how to build coalitions and develop narratives in the fight against organized crime and corruption. The meeting brought together a diverse group of participants from around the country – investigative journalists, experts from think tanks and activists from grass-roots organizations.

Participants emphasized that the media needs to focus more attention on organized crime in Kosovo, beyond

covering issues such as bribery and the lack of transparency in public procurement processes.

Journalists were encouraged to cover organized crime groups operating in Kosovo and criminal markets such as trafficking in drugs and counterfeit goods as well as environmental crime. A number of participants agreed that Kosovo should develop its own discourse on organized crime, rather than just looking at the problem in neighbouring countries like Albania or Serbia. They also stressed that more attention should be devoted to organized criminal groups from Kosovo operating abroad.

Participants discussed ways to strengthen the relationship between the media and NGOs. It was noted, for example, that if journalists focus more on organized crime and corruption, NGOs should better promote their work and increase pressure on the government to take action on the findings revealed in investigative reporting.

In a meeting with public-sector officials, CSO representatives had a rare opportunity to interact with the deputy minister of justice, a member of the anti-organized crime police and a representative of the national anti-corruption agency, as well as a whistleblower. Participants discussed their challenges in dealing with organized crime and corruption, and engaged in a constructive dialogue on improving accountability and transparency in the public sector and fostering greater cooperation between the public sector and society at large.

### **Working towards a resilient Balkans**

These dialogues revealed the challenges faced by CSOs working on issues of organized crime and corruption, many of which have been compounded by COVID-19. But they also underlined the courageous and dedicated



**Resilience dialogues in the Western Balkans revealed challenges faced by CSOs working to counter organized crime and corruption.**

work that CSOs do in their communities. The meetings reinforced the need to build bridges between civil society and the government and to work collaboratively towards a common goal. Participants discussed potential follow-up activities after the dialogues.

During the resilience dialogues, three recurrent themes came up: youth, gender and the social re-use of stolen assets. As a follow up to the Observatory's February 2021 report 'Stronger together: Bolstering resilience among civil society in the Western Balkans', the SEE-Obs will publish thematic reports on these topics in early 2022 as part of a new series entitled 'Resilient Balkans'.

## 5. Kicking out crime: Using martial arts to empower young Albanians.

As part of our series of conversations with inspiring CSO representatives who are strengthening local resilience to organized crime in the Western Balkans, we talk to Elion Puka, martial arts master and head of the Vllaznia tae kwon do club in Shkodra, Albania.

### **What inspired you to open the club and focus on youth?**

The youth were who inspired me to open a martial arts club in Shkodra. I started taking tae kwon do lessons in 2000. After three years, I emigrated to Italy, where I continued to practice the sport. Every time I went back home, young people asked me enthusiastically about learning this sport. The conditions at that time were poor, so I found a free space outdoors where I could organize a small group of young people and teach my first classes. They asked me to demonstrate techniques and practice with them. They were eager to learn something new. Every time I went back to Italy, I had the feeling that I should return to my city and open a martial arts club for young people. After years of practice, my coaches in Italy told me that I was ready to open a club of my own.

### **Why are young people motivated to join the club?**

#### **What is their background?**

Club members come from a variety of backgrounds and have different motivations. Some come because they have friends in the club who encourage them to join. Others see martial arts on television and want to try it. The social background of our members is diverse: some are from rich families, some are middle class and others are from less advantaged backgrounds. We also have young people from the Roma community. We treat all members equally and try to integrate them. We are very happy to have such a diverse membership that reflects the Shkodra community.

### **Are some young people in the area particularly vulnerable to organized crime?**

I think the main reason why some young people exhibit deviant behaviour is the poor level of education. There is also a lack of job opportunities. A growing number of youth are moving towards violence and organized crime. This is not only hurting the reputation of our city, but is also harming the identity of our youth. As a society, we



**Elion Puka, martial arts master and head of the Vllaznia tae kwon do club in Shkodra, Albania.**

need to invest more in education, including sports. Young people need more opportunities for social, cultural and sport activities.

### **What role does sport – and clubs like yours – play in providing young people with alternatives to crime?**

#### **What is the importance of sport in a young person's life?**

Practicing sport helps young people discharge negative energy and keeps them away from dangers like crime and violence. As a club, we distance ourselves and our members from any kind of criminal activity. Our club has made it clear to each member that we believe in hard and honest work. This approach has helped our students to nurture virtues and share those in the community. We also encourage them to look for positive role models in society, and to be good models themselves.

### **Do you approach the training of young men and women differently?**

We treat our female and male members equally. It has



been great to see a growing number of girls join our club and doing very well. A lot of credit goes to my wife, who is also a coach and co-founder of the club. Her example challenged the male-dominated mentality of martial arts in our city. Beyond being a great athlete and coach, her presence brings a lot of positive energy to the club. Thanks to her, the number of girls in the club is growing and we have many success stories.

#### **How do you raise awareness about organized crime through your training?**

We take care of every individual who wants to train at our club; we try to understand their thinking and their training goals. We explain the benefits of sport and the dangers of abuse – for example, using their skills in an unethical or illegal way. Fortunately, so far we have not had any cases where our sport has been weaponized or misused for criminal purposes. On the contrary, martial arts tend to strengthen self-discipline.

#### **Do you ever worry that by training young men in martial arts they may simply become better fighters on the street?**

Some people who have approached our club were hyperactive and had behavioural problems. Such difficult individuals require special attention because they are easily exposed to violence, and they can do harm if they are not trained professionally. In such cases – and there have only been a few – we have succeeded in channelling their energy through dialogue and one-on-one coaching. In rare cases, people have quit the club. But most stay, and we work with them to discuss their problems, give them a safe space to train and stress the importance of ethics, discipline and hard work. Bringing about a positive change in such difficult cases can create good examples in society.



**Through tae kwon do, the club seeks to promote discipline and to provide youth in Shkodra with positive role models.**

#### **What are the challenges you face in dealing with young members of your club and how do you overcome them?**

Our main challenge is to instil zero tolerance to violence and organized crime. This is why we applied to the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund. We communicate constantly with our club members so that they build a good character and we try to inspire and motivate them with positive role models. We also challenge them to bring us concrete examples of their contributions to society, especially at school. We encourage them to work hard to achieve good results in sports and at school, and to become constructive citizens in society.

#### **How do your trainers include messages about empowerment and staying away from drugs and crime into what is, after all, a sports class?**

When explaining a technique or move, we also convey important messages on how to keep their body in shape and we make them aware of things that harm the body and mind. That said, this is an area where we could benefit from more training. We also try to strengthen team spirit, both among our coaches and students. Our approach is to promote a combination of discipline and harmony; together, they can create a positive vibe in the team, empower young people and change the behaviour of problematic youth.

#### **Do public institutions support using sports as a way of keeping young people away from crime?**

Cooperation with public institutions has been poor but is improving. On our own initiative, we have often organized groups of athletes and conducted open-air demonstrations to promote sport to youths during national holidays. Unfortunately, before the Resilience Fund, we were never approached by local authorities to cooperate on promoting positive role models in society. With this project we have progressed and cooperation is increasing.

#### **What opportunities have been enabled by your work with the Resilience Fund?**

This project has given us the opportunity to build the capacity of our coaches in managing young people who are exposed to organized crime. In cooperation with different experts, we will be organizing special training for our coaches on the risks posed by organized crime to youth, as well as on teaching and communication skills to manage young people with behavioural issues. In addition, through this project we are taking the initiative to approach local institutions with the goal of

establishing long-term cooperation in promoting positive models to youth and informing them about the threats posed by organized crime.

We are signing memoranda of cooperation with high schools in local hotspots of crime to provide free classes

to promote sport and positive role models in society. We also have plans to expand our outreach by organizing an open competition for youth from all over the country where messages against crime and violence will be delivered by celebrities.

# 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).

The 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. The SEE-Obs supports civil society in their monitoring of national dynamics and wider regional and international organized-crime trends. The 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 Florian Qehaja, Ivica Simonovski and Fabian Zhilla 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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