

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

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Summary highlights

1. Decryption of messaging app provides valuable insight into criminal activities in the Western Balkans and beyond.

The takedown of encrypted messaging app Sky ECC shows how such platforms are attractive for criminals and hard for police to crack. Yet, when decryption is achieved, they can compromise the activities of criminal groups and expose their collaborators. In the Western Balkans, data extracted from Sky ECC led to revelations about the operations of organized criminal groups in the region and their links to state officials.

2. Montenegrin sailors are involved in global drug trafficking schemes, damaging the reputation of Montenegro's rich maritime tradition.

Situated on the Adriatic Sea, Montenegro has a long maritime history. However, in relation to its 621 000 inhabitants, a disproportionate number of Montenegrin sailors are being arrested for smuggling drugs, including in recent major cocaine busts worldwide. The involvement of Montenegrin sailors in global drug trafficking schemes is harming the

reputation of other sailors, the country and its proud maritime tradition.

3. Arrests of police officers in Kosovo reveal a culture of bribe taking among border police and a strong internal investigation system in the police inspectorate.

In the first half of 2022, 5% of Kosovo's border police force was arrested as a result of anti-corruption operations. There is also an upward trend in complaints made against the Kosovo police over the past two years, including instances of bribery and abuse of official position or authority. Although most of the bribes were petty, more serious collusion with criminal groups has been noted in the past. Despite the police inspectorate's robust internal investigation system, more focus should be put on prevention, particularly by strengthening integrity among a younger generation of law enforcement personnel.



4. Maritime routes become more popular for trafficking through the Balkans.

COVID-19 and war in Ukraine have disrupted trafficking routes through the Balkans. At the same time, improvements in infrastructure in container terminals and access to them (such as highways and rail links) have made commercial ports in south-eastern Europe more attractive for trade, both licit and illicit. As explored in a new GI-TOC report, these changes seem to have increased trafficking along maritime routes into the Adriatic, the Aegean and Black seas, as well as along the Danube river.

5. Slovenia is a crossroads for criminality between the Balkans and central Europe.

Slovenia is usually off the radar of those analyzing organized crime in central and eastern Europe. However, this article reveals that this small alpine country in the heart of Europe is an attractive location for criminals from the Balkans to hide out, plan operations and logistics, do business and trans-ship their illicit goods.

6. Low police salaries in the Western Balkans risk increasing corruption among police forces.

The public expects a lot of the police: that they respond quickly to emergencies; that they put their lives on the line to protect their communities and enforce the law; and that they carry out their difficult and dangerous work with professionalism and integrity. But while expectations are high, the salaries of rank-and-file police in the Western Balkans are relatively low. This gap increases certain risks, including that of corruption. We look at the issue, its impact and what can be done to address it.

7. Football hooliganism in the Western Balkans reveals links between hooliganism, politics, violence and crime, although these vary across the region.

Some football teams in the Western Balkans – both at the club and national levels – have a notorious reputation for violence. But how serious is the problem, and what are the links between football hooliganism, politics and organized crime? The answers are examined in a recent GI-TOC report entitled ‘Dangerous games’, which analyzes 122 fan groups of football teams in the six countries of the region. This article offers highlights derived from this research.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

In the 13th 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), we profile two of our recent reports: ‘Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes’ and ‘Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics and organized crime in the Western Balkans’. Furthermore, additional information has been produced to accompany these reports, including visualization material and, in the case of ‘Portholes’, a short documentary film. These reports and the accompanying material can be accessed on the GI-TOC’s website.

We are interested in the impact of technology on organized crime and law enforcement. In this issue, we examine the recent takedown of the Sky app and what it reveals about the chats of criminal groups from the Western Balkans. This is a topic that we will continue to follow closely.

We have noticed in our work that sailors from Montenegro are often arrested for drug trafficking. We were therefore pleased to work with Mićan Andrijašević of the civil society organization Juventas in Montenegro to look into the problem and see what could be done to reduce the vulnerability of Montenegrin sailors to becoming involved in drug trafficking.

Since our report on global hotspots of Balkan organized crime, ‘Transnational tentacles’, published in 2020, we have continued to look for examples of criminal groups from the Western Balkans operating abroad. In this issue, we look at the activities of organized criminal groups from the Western Balkans that are active in Slovenia.

A recurrent problem that we have noticed in our work in south-eastern Europe is that police can be facilitators or collaborators of organized crime, for example by taking bribes to enable trafficking. Recent cases involving

Kosovo border police highlight the problem, as featured in this issue.

It has been suggested that one reason – though not an excuse – for corruption within the police is low salaries. We therefore decided to explore the matter and collect relevant data, although this was not an easy task. An article in this issue explores police salaries and vulnerabilities created by a gap between the cost of living and expectations of the police.

We have made a change in the style of the Risk Bulletin to make it easier to access individual articles. We hope that this will enable readers to focus on and share stories that are of particular interest to them. Please note that we are also taking steps to provide back issues of the Risk Bulletin in local languages.

If you have a proposal for a story or would like to provide feedback, please contact almedina.dodic@globalinitiative.net.

Decryption of messaging app provides valuable insight into criminal activities in the Western Balkans and beyond.

Encryption is now a fairly standard feature of messaging apps. Apps used daily by millions of people to chat to each other provide a degree of privacy. Some messaging apps advertise a type of end-to-end encryption that claims to be impenetrable,¹ which makes them desirable for criminals and difficult for the police to access.

Sky ECC was a secure messaging app developed by Canadian company Sky Global that advertised itself as the 'most secure messaging platform you can buy'.² Messages were encrypted and automatically deleted after 30 seconds. If a phone was not reachable by the network, the message was kept for up to 48 hours before being deleted. If a user entered a 'panic' password, the device deleted its contents.³ These features proved popular with people with something to hide – such as criminals – especially after a similar network called EncroChat was taken down by police in spring 2020.⁴

After a series of raids in early 2021, Sky ECC was shut down. However, before the app was stopped, in March 2021, Belgian, Dutch and French police cracked Sky ECC's encrypted messaging service, enabling them to intercept 80 million messages.⁵ This gave the police valuable information about the activities of criminal groups, including those in the Western Balkans. According to the Minister of Interior of Serbia, around 30% of the 70 000 phones using the Sky app were in the hands of criminals from the Balkans.⁶ It is thought that some politicians, prosecutors, judges and police officers from the region were also using the app.

By cracking the messaging service, police were able to monitor the activities of criminal groups and collect information on over a hundred planned large-scale criminal operations.⁷ As the *Brussels Times* reported, Belgian crime lords were using 'the world's most secure messaging app' for their illicit dealings in everything from drug trafficking to torture and murder, and the port of Antwerp was their playground.⁸ Even after Sky ECC was taken down, investigators continue to trawl through the information and make arrests. In Belgium alone, as of March 2022, information extracted from the deciphered

messages had provided evidence for 118 existing cases, led to the opening of 276 new investigations and the identification of 888 suspects. The investigators also seized more than 90 tonnes of drugs with a street value of €4.5 billion, as well as cash and goods worth almost €60 million.⁹

Revelations in the Western Balkans

The takedown of Sky ECC has also had repercussions in the Western Balkans. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there were reportedly over 2 500 subscribers.¹⁰ Information gained from decrypted messages is providing valuable data about criminal groups in the country, their transnational networks and, in some cases, their links to criminal justice officials.¹¹

In December 2021, 19 people were arrested in the Republic of Srpska for smuggling drugs and weapons as part of operation *Storage 2*, led by the State Investigation and Protection Agency and the Republic's Ministry of Interior.¹² Intercepted messages revealed an organized criminal group suspected of having smuggled drugs and weapons from Albania and Montenegro to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then on to EU countries such as Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary and Germany.¹³

In another operation in February 2022, an adviser to the former Minister of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bojan Cvijetić, was arrested for alleged links to an organized criminal group that was trafficking cocaine from Latin America.¹⁴ This was followed by another operation in April 2022 that led to the arrest of 18 people,¹⁵ including judicial officials and members of the Zemun clan, a criminal group from Serbia.¹⁶

In July 2022, police arrested alleged members of an organized criminal group in Sarajevo and Neum, a town by the Adriatic coast.¹⁷ The Prosecution of Bosnia and Herzegovina claims that the group used the Sky app in order to illegally procure and sell cannabis, cocaine, speed and heroin in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey, Croatia and other EU countries.¹⁸ Similarly, information from the Sky app uncovered members of a criminal group from Bosanska

Gradiška that was trafficking drugs and weapons from Albania and Montenegro to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, and onward into western Europe.¹⁹ In late July 2022, a member of Bosnia's border police unit in Trebinje was accused of using the Sky app to help criminals smuggle drugs across the border.²⁰

The volume of Sky ECC users in Bosnia and Herzegovina suggests that more revelations are likely to come. 'No Republic of Srpska police chief or other senior [Minister of Interior] official will be spared if it is proven that they cooperated with criminals and committed crimes through these encrypted applications', said Dragan Lukač, Minister of Interior of the Republik of Srpska.²¹

The Sky ECC decryption had major repercussions in Montenegro. The former president of the country's Supreme Court, Vesna Medenica, was arrested for abuse of office after transcripts were published of her son saying she would protect his illegal dealings in cocaine and contraband cigarettes, according to media reports.²² So far, more than 12 people are suspected of being part of a criminal group allegedly involved in smuggling and giving and receiving bribes.²³

In Serbia, decryption cast a new light on two of the country's leading crime figures, Veljko Belivuk and Darko Šarić. In February 2021, gruesome photos showing body parts were widely shared on the messaging app. It is

thought that they were from victims of a criminal group led by Belivuk, who is suspected of drug trafficking, murder and possession of illegal weapons.²⁴ Messages also uncovered criminals who were selling weapons to Belivuk's group.²⁵

Interception of messages also helped police to better understand the modus operandi of criminal groups like that of Darko Šarić, who has been on trial since 2014 and was re-arrested in Belgrade in April 2022. He is among the highest-level criminals exposed by the decryption. According to the media, the Sky app was used to coordinate his group's smuggling of cocaine from Ecuador to Europe. Messages revealed how a distributor in Latin America recorded the loading of cocaine into a container to show what the packages looked like when they were loaded, how many there were and what kind of stamp they were given. The videos were sent to the receiver in Europe as a way of providing proof of shipment and to help determine if the goods had been manipulated.²⁶

The revelations and accusations continue. Serbia was recently rocked by a new scandal when the former State Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, Dijana Hrkalo, who is on trial for influence peddling, accused Defence Minister Nebojša Stefanović of collaborating with criminals and of using the Sky app.²⁷ Stefanović denies the allegations.²⁸



A seizure of drugs facilitated by the decryption of Sky ECC.

Photo: Ministry of Interior Affairs Republic of Srpska

Sky is the limit

Information gathered from decrypting the Sky ECC messaging service has been a treasure trove for law enforcement and more revelations are sure to come. According to Europol, unlocking the encryption of Sky ECC has provided valuable insight into criminal activities across the EU and beyond, and will assist in expanding investigations and prosecuting serious and cross-border organized crime for the coming months, possibly years.²⁹ In the Western Balkans, this could include more arrests and damning revelations about links between criminals and public officials.

The fate of Sky ECC shows the extent to which criminals have become reliant on encrypted messaging services to

communicate, plan operations and evade surveillance, and the difficulties law enforcement agencies face in cracking these platforms and extracting data that could provide evidence against organized criminal groups. However, the takedown of EncroChat and Sky may have shaken the confidence of criminals and their collaborators in the secrecy of encrypted communication. It should also provide law enforcement – including in the Western Balkans – with valuable lessons on how to make effective use of technology, collect digital evidence and navigate the challenges of data protection, as well as how to work effectively with the private companies providing messaging services.

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Montenegrin sailors are involved in global drug trafficking schemes, damaging the reputation of Montenegro's rich maritime tradition.

Montenegro is a small country with a population of only 621 000. Nevertheless, a disproportionate number of Montenegrin sailors have been arrested for smuggling drugs: between 2017 and 2021, police seized over 30 tonnes of cocaine worldwide in cases where criminals from Montenegro were involved.¹ In April 2022, two Montenegrin sailors were arrested off the coast of Cape Verde as part of a crew smuggling 5 tonnes of cocaine from Brazil.² Why are so many young men from the country involved in black markets, especially as sailors? This is a question that Mićan Andrijašević of the civil society organization Juventas set out to research in 2021,³ with support from the GI-TOC's Resilience Fund. His findings were published in July 2022.⁴

Montenegro, situated on the Adriatic Sea, has a number of bays and harbours, as well as marinas and the port of Bar. It also has a proud maritime history. This is preserved, for example, by the Boka Navy – an NGO that keeps the seafaring tradition of the region alive through annual cultural events. In December 2021, UNESCO placed the Boka Navy on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, highlighting its 'memorial role for two centuries, preserving and promoting maritime history and tradition'.⁵

However, just two years earlier, Montenegrin sailors received a more dubious distinction: they were unofficially blacklisted by the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) after a series of drug busts in which Montenegrin sailors were implicated. This included one of the largest

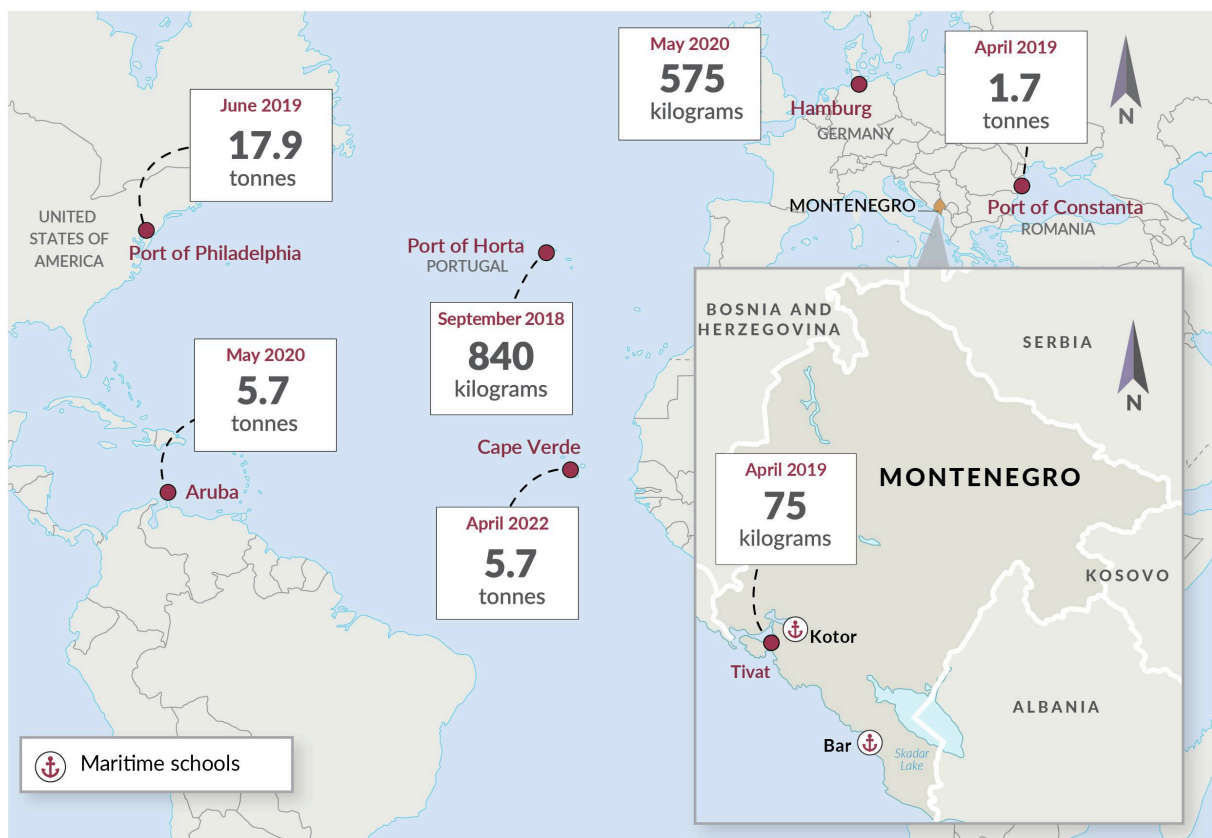


Figure 1 Recent major cocaine busts worldwide involving Montenegrin sailors.

seizures of cocaine in US history, when almost 20 tonnes were discovered on a ship in Philadelphia in June 2019.⁶ Investigations showed that crew members of the MSC-owned ship *Gayane*, including from Montenegro, helped load packages of cocaine onto the ship from speedboats that approached the vessel in the middle of the night. They stashed the cocaine in the cargo area, using fake seals to reseal the containers.⁷

The bust in Philadelphia was just one of a number in the past few years involving sailors from Montenegro. Some of the sailors work on container ships, while others are part of the crew of yachts or fishing boats. Loads may vary from a few kilograms to several tonnes. Small amounts may be concealed by individual sailors on deck whereas larger amounts involve a higher degree of sophistication and more people, including even the captain. In some cases, sailors may take on board drugs from small boats off the coast or throw drug-filled bags with a GPRS locator overboard when approaching the coast. They may also conceal drugs somewhere on the ship, for example by opening a container, hiding cocaine in it and closing it again with a fake seal.

While criminals from the Western Balkans went abroad in the early 1990s, many young men from Montenegro

went to sea. Some travelled routes that were used to smuggle cocaine from Latin America to Europe. As criminal groups from the Western Balkans became increasingly active in arranging such deals, Montenegrin sailors were in the right place at the right time to help facilitate such deliveries. Others were recruited by fellow Montenegrins (or other south-eastern Europe countries) who were higher up the ladder of crime. For example, Dragan 'Fritz' Dudić from Kotor, a close associate of Darko Šarić, the accused kingpin of a major Balkan drug smuggling organization, was a trained ship's captain and recruited Montenegrin sailors. Dudić's name came to light in 2009 when operation Balkan Warrior resulted in the seizure of over 2 tonnes of cocaine from a luxury yacht near Montevideo, Uruguay.⁸ In May 2010, Dudić was shot dead while sitting at a café in Kotor.⁹

According to Andrijašević's research, it is hard to generalize about the profile of Montenegrin sailors involved in drug trafficking. He observed that:

Some are senior members of the crew, some more junior. Some have higher incomes, some lower. Some are older, some are younger. Some come from a maritime family tradition, some don't. And some are from the coast, while some are from other



A discussion at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Kotor on the involvement of Montenegrin sailors in drug trafficking.

Photo: Juventas via Juventas.me

parts of Montenegro. They are all targets of criminal clans that recruit sailors who in turn recruit their colleagues.

Drug trafficking can be a highly lucrative business. For example, the US Department of Justice assessed that one of the convicted Montenegrin sailors on the MSC *Gayane* with 11 years of work experience and an annual salary of US\$108 000 could earn US\$1 million for facilitating the smuggling operation, while his accomplices on board could earn US\$50 000 to 60 000.¹⁰ High earnings are a solid lure for involving young sailors, according to Andrijašević.

The prevalence of Montenegrin seafarers involved in illicit activity seems well-known in society. According to a poll of high school students carried out in December 2021 in Montenegro, 41% of respondents in Kotor (where there is a maritime academy) said that they know at least one seafarer involved in drug trafficking, while 47% said that they would not report a case of illicit drug trafficking. That said, 92% of the surveyed students believed it wrong to use a weapon or force to take money or other goods from others, while 85% think that it is wrong to resell drugs.¹¹

While drug trafficking is lucrative for some Montenegrin seafarers, it hurts the reputation of the law-abiding majority who are often deemed guilty by association. As a result, they can struggle to find jobs in some companies. The sooner the issue is addressed by the Montenegrin authorities, the better it will be for the reputation of the sailors, the country and its proud maritime tradition.

In the absence of a top-down approach, Juventas is working with young Montenegrins in maritime academies to warn them about recruitment and the dangers of organized crime. For example, from February to April 2022, Juventas organized integrity workshops for more than 200 future seafarers in maritime schools in Kotor and Bar.¹² In April 2022, it fostered a discussion with law enforcement, the media and maritime schools on the role of Montenegrin seafarers in illicit activities through two public events in these cities. These events were covered by relevant local and national media.¹³ In June 2022, Juventas promoted two video features with research findings on its website and through social media.¹⁴ Together, these efforts contribute to improving the education, integrity and resilience of the next generation of Montenegrin sailors.

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Arrests of police officers in Kosovo reveal a culture of bribe taking among border police and a strong internal investigation system in the police inspectorate.

In the first half of 2022, 5% of Kosovo's border police force was arrested as a result of a number of anti-corruption operations. Recent publications also reveal an upward trend in complaints made against the police. What do these cases reveal about the Kosovo police and those who police them?

The Kosovo police, established in 1999, currently employs 9 070 staff, of whom 8 104 are uniformed and 968 are civilian staff.¹ The police force enjoys a good reputation among the people of Kosovo: between 2015 and 2021, it was perceived to be the least corrupt organization in the country,² and the second most trusted institution after the Kosovo Security Force.³

The police are overseen by the Police Inspectorate of Kosovo (PIK), which was established in 2006 as an executive agency within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Currently, the PIK employs 93 staff members, of whom half work in the Department of Investigation.⁴ The PIK contributes to ensuring the accountability and transparency of police mainly through prevention, detection, documentation and investigation of criminal offences and inspection of police structures and functions.

In May 2021, the PIK, in coordination with the Special Prosecution of the Republic of Kosovo (SPRK), initiated an investigation into police working at two border crossing points between Kosovo and Albania, namely Qafe Prush and Qafe Morine.⁵ Together with the Vermice–Morine crossing, these border crossing points have been previously identified by the GI-TOC as hotspots of drug trafficking.⁶ The investigation was initiated based on information from a credible source stating that drugs (mainly cannabis) were being trafficked through the two border crossings with the support of border police officers who ensured the transport until North Mitrovica.⁷ Hidden cameras revealed that border officials were involved in criminal activities, including more than 400 instances of bribery and abuse of official position or authority.⁸ The investigation led to the arrest of 48 border police officers and two customs officials on 14 March 2022,⁹ including

the whole team of 19 officials working in the border crossing point at Qafe Prush.

During the surveillance, the PIK also identified irregular activities at the other shared crossing point with Albania at Vermice–Morine. Since the crossing point is located on Albanian territory, the PIK worked with the SPRK as well as the Albanian Special Anti-Corruption Structure and the Agency for Supervision of Police to launch a joint investigation.¹⁰ It was conducted in line with a memorandum of understanding for cooperation in the field of internal control and police oversight¹¹ and a protocol for joint inspections signed by Kosovar and Albanian authorities.¹²

The way the operation was carried out suggests a high degree of professionalism. A task force of 12 investigators was created, who worked in a separate room within the Inspectorate and reported only to the head of the task force and the PIK's director. The fact that the integrity of the process was maintained despite the involvement of six institutions from two countries suggests close cooperation and good discipline among those who took part in the investigation.¹³

The joint operation was conducted on 8 April 2022 and resulted in the arrest of 58 border police officers. 26 Kosovo border police officers, including two sergeants, were arrested in Kosovo,¹⁴ while Albanian authorities arrested 32 border police officers on suspicion of taking bribes in more than 312 cases.¹⁵ Video surveillance shows border police officers taking bribes of €10–20 from citizens who did not possess the required documents for traveling and/or moving goods.¹⁶

According to the PIK, in most cases the arrested officials acted alone; in a few cases, they cooperated with each other and acted jointly, but there is no indication of their involvement with organized criminal groups.¹⁷ It is worth noting that the average age of the officials who were arrested was 50 years old, which suggests that it might be time for a generational change.¹⁸

Investigation of police officers, 2016–2021

The recent arrests are not an aberration. Figures from the past five years show that around 100 criminal charges are brought against Kosovo police officers every year, with several officers suspended or even arrested.¹⁹

Between 2016 and 2021, an average of 2.7% of Kosovo police staff was investigated each year. 38% of these investigations were for criminal offences while 62% were for disciplinary offences.

Since 2019, the number of complaints submitted to the PIK has increased significantly, totalling more than 2 000 in 2021. This increase is mainly due to greater public awareness of the need to report cases and strengthened trust in the PIK, as well as to an increase in police activity and fines in relation to COVID-19.

From 2016 to 2021, the Department for Management of Complaints sent 3 535 cases to the Department of Investigations, of which only 29% were followed up with criminal investigations, 48% were transferred to the Kosovo police for an administrative-disciplinary

investigation while 23% were preliminarily investigated before being transferred the following year. This has two implications: First, at least 48% of complaints/cases transferred by the Department for Management of Complaints did not meet the criteria for criminal investigations or were rejected by the Department of Investigation. Second, the PIK conducted investigations for criminal offences on fewer than 20% of the complaints it received.²⁰ Furthermore, it is worth noting that investigations carried out against police officers in Kosovo rarely deal with bribery. Rather, based on figures from 2019 to 2021, most cases are brought for abuse of official duty or authority, followed by light bodily injury and mistreatment during the exercise of official duty.²¹

On average, 13% of the investigated officers are from the border department while 80% are from operational departments. It is worth noting that the majority (76%) of those investigated are basic police officers, while only 10% are sergeants. This shows that mainly members of the lower ranks are subject to investigation.²²



A police operation at the Vermice–Morine common border crossing point between Kosovo and Albania.

Photo: Police Inspectorate of Kosovo

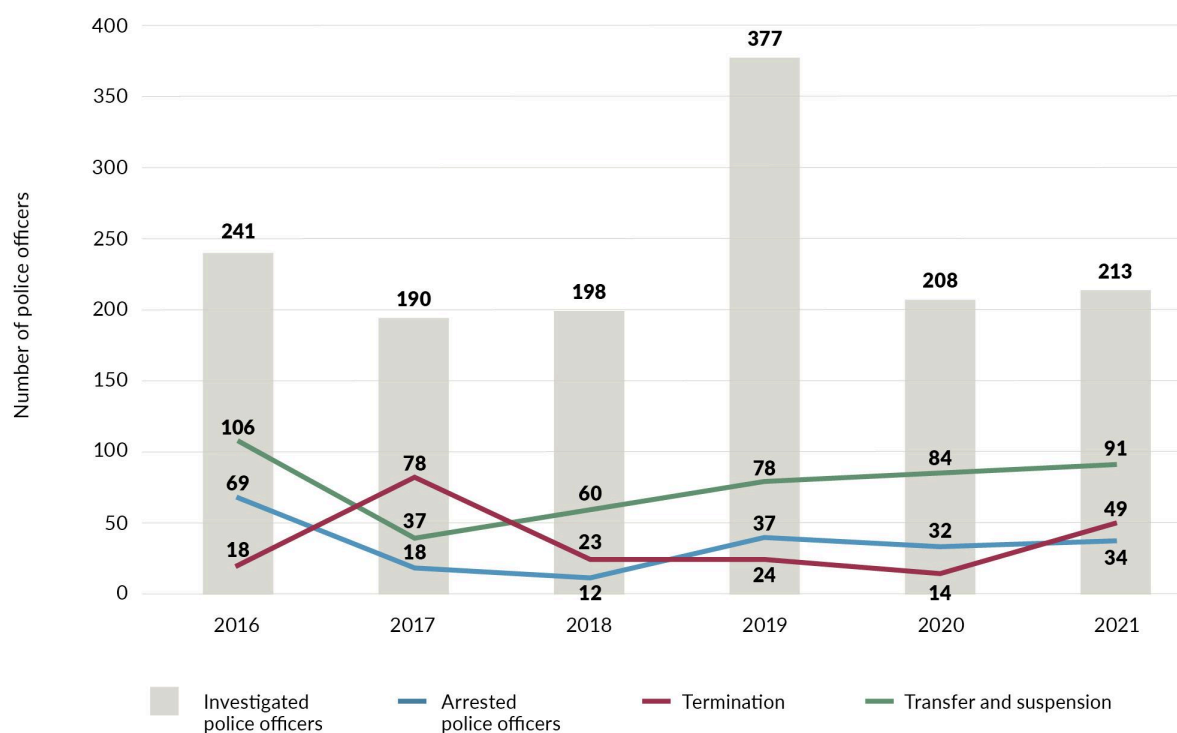


Figure 1 Number of police officers investigated and sanctioned, 2016–2021.

Source: Police Inspectorate of Kosovo

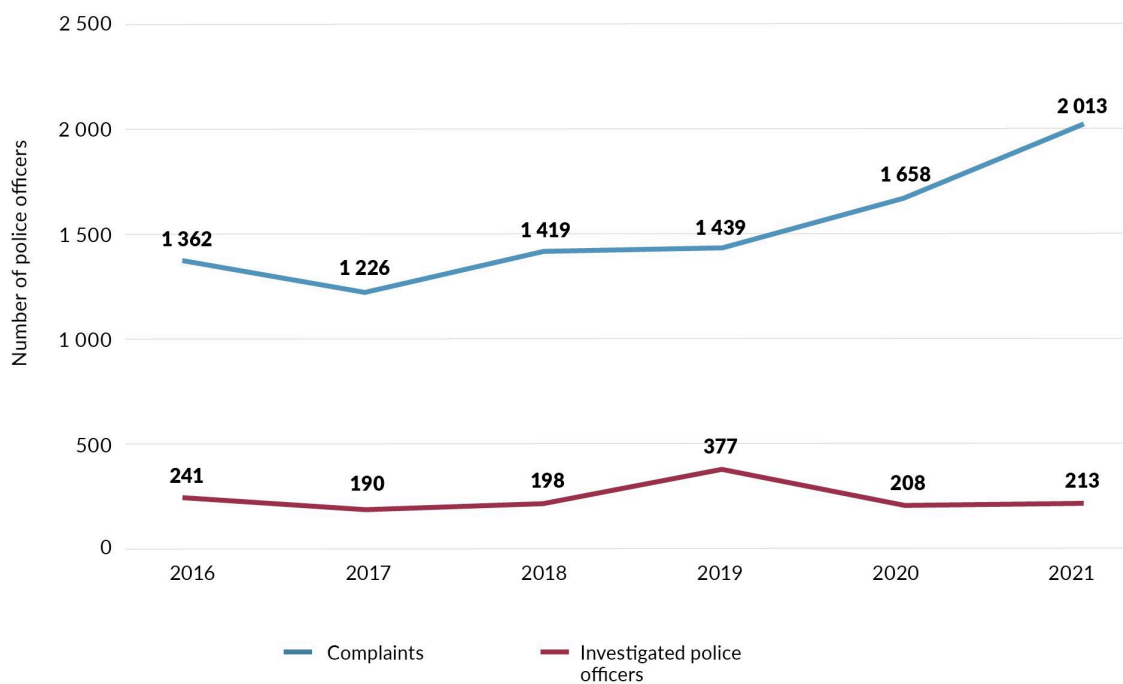


Figure 2 Complaints against police officers and the number investigated as a result, 2016–2021.

Source: Police Inspectorate of Kosovo

Steps to strengthen integrity

The two recent cases that resulted in 5% of Kosovo's border police force being arrested suggest a number of things. First, there seems to be a culture of bribe taking among border police, which undermines public trust in and support for the police. Although most of the bribes were petty, more serious collusion with criminal groups has been noted in the past.

Secondly, the internal investigation system seems to work well: the PIK operated efficiently and in close cooperation with other services, including in Albania. While the PIK deserves further support in acquiring investigative equipment and tools, a stronger focus should be put on prevention – particularly by

strengthening integrity among a younger generation of law enforcement personnel.

There could be greater scope for the use of technology to contribute to improving the integrity and professionalism of border police. The ongoing work of drafting the Law on Salaries in the Public Sector and amending the laws on the police and police inspectorates should provide competitive salaries for police and the police inspectorate as well as measures to enhance the reputation, training, accountability and integrity of the police. This would help ensure that Kosovo's police force remains one of the most respected institutions in the country and would free up resources to monitor criminals rather than the police.

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Maritime routes become more popular for trafficking through the Balkans.

The Balkan region is a natural crossroads for trade from Asia and Africa to Europe, and vice versa. Traditionally, the focus on trade in the region has been on land routes. But it is often overlooked that there are a number of sizeable ports along the Adriatic and Ionian coasts, the Aegean and Black seas, as well as along the Danube river.

Much of the infrastructure of these ports suffered with the collapse of communism and wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and later with the financial crisis of 2008. But increased investment, particularly from the European Union and China, is improving port infrastructure in the region, increasing the size and efficiency of container ports, as well as the road and rail links needed to bring goods to various markets. The major seizures of drugs and cigarettes in regional ports over the past few years show that these factors are also making these ports

more attractive for smuggling contraband into the Western Balkans.

Increasing amounts of cocaine, heroin and synthetic drugs

As analyzed in previous GI-TOC research, criminal groups from the Western Balkans are involved in the smuggling of drugs – particularly cocaine – from Latin America to western Europe on container ships and yachts. In south-eastern Europe, the main type of ‘blue crime’ (i.e., the maritime-based criminal economy) is cocaine and heroin trafficking.¹

The region's proximity to large and lucrative consumer markets in western Europe, its links to North Africa and Turkey and increased trade from Latin America and Asia, combined with vulnerabilities linked to corruption, create

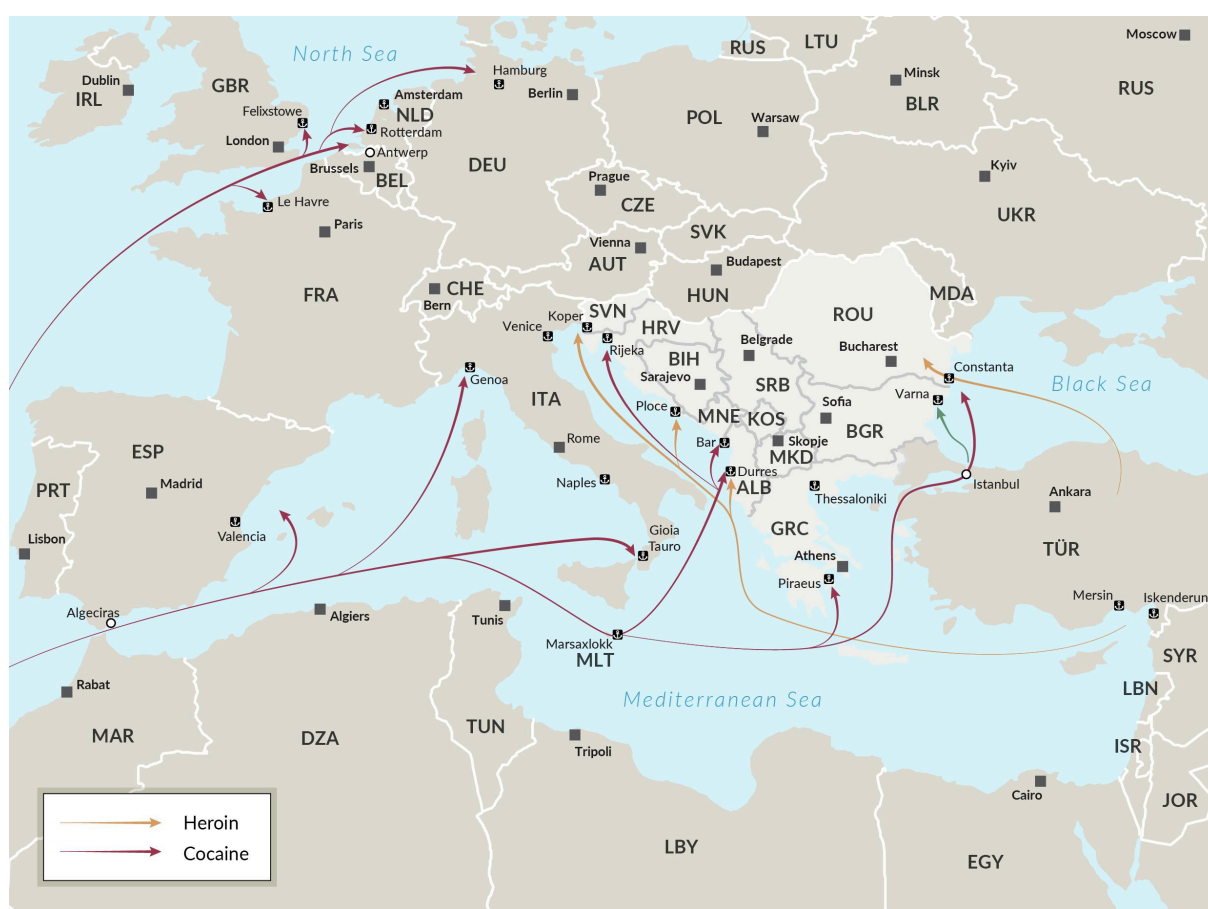


Figure 1 Illicit flows along the maritime Balkan routes.

Source: Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, *Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes*, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime/>

ideal conditions for criminal networks to engage in such trafficking. To give an idea of the quantities involved, between 2018 and 2021, roughly 8 tonnes of cocaine were seized in Western Balkan ports, with Piraeus (Greece), Durres (Albania) and Constanta (Romania)

accounting for half of that total.² However, cocaine is not the only drug entering the region through ports; heroin and, more recently, synthetic drugs are regularly intercepted in regional ports.³

BLUE CRIME ON THE DANUBE: ILLICIT FLOWS INTO THE HEART OF EUROPE?

Unlike in commercial seaports, most of the cargo moving along the Danube is stored in bulk and carried on barges, making it difficult to inspect. One would have to poke a metal rod into a pile of, for example, sand or gravel to see if something was hidden under it. Or some of the cargo would have to be unloaded, which is both time consuming and logistically challenging. In November 2021, the Hungarian National Tax and

Customs Administration seized a record shipment of 57 million untaxed cigarettes that were hidden in salt on a barge coming from Ukraine.⁷

Figure 2 shows that the extent of trafficking of goods on barges on the Danube river seems to be underestimated by law enforcement officials, since most major discoveries of contraband have been made by accident.

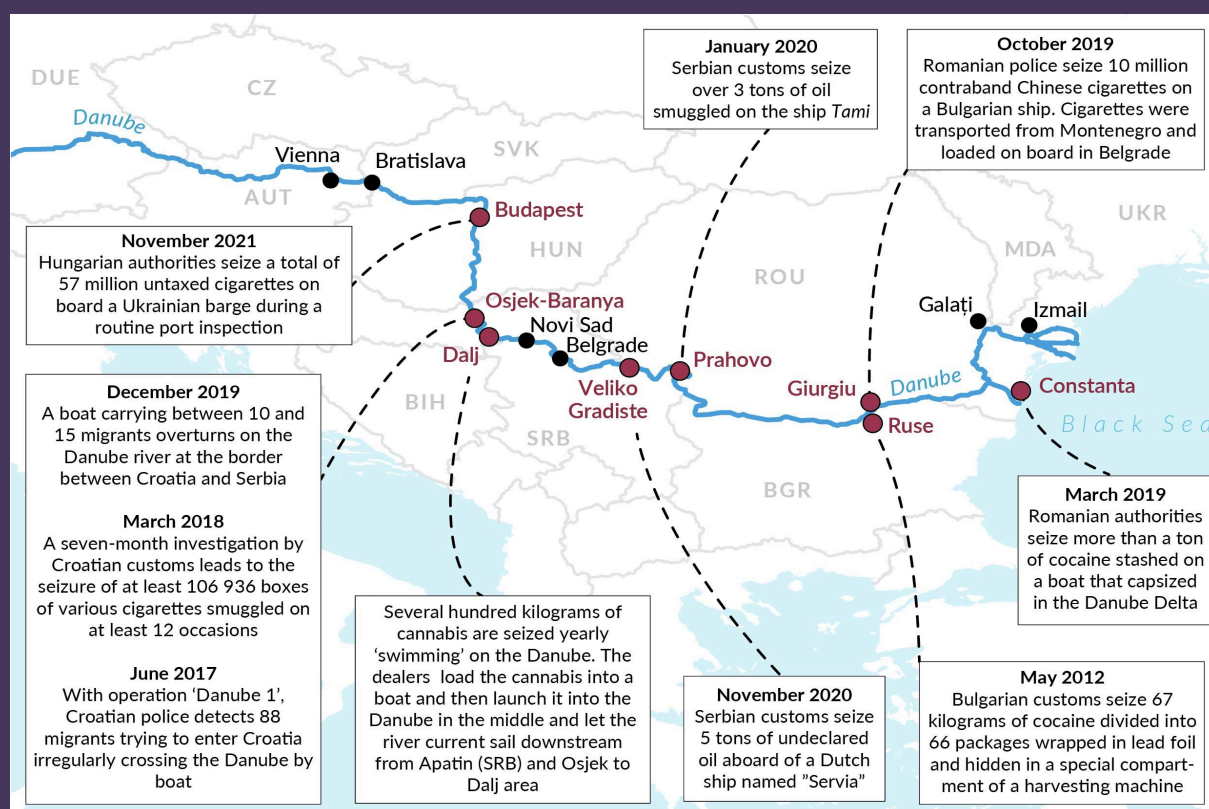


Figure 2 Examples of smuggling along the Danube.

Source: Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp, *Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes*, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime/>

The war in Ukraine could create new opportunities for smuggling of both licit goods (such as fuel) and illicit ones (such as weapons and drugs). Cooperation around the Danube and Black Sea regions therefore deserves

urgent attention and closer cooperation between states, using existing bodies such as the Danube Commission, Europol and the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center.

Figure 1 shows that heroin enters the region through two main ports: Varna (Bulgaria) and Koper (Slovenia). Varna constitutes an additional entry point from the Black Sea to the traditional Balkan route over land to western Europe. As an example, in February 2021, Bulgarian customs officials confiscated more than 400 kilograms of heroin from a ship transporting goods from Iran. The drugs were divided into 487 packages and hidden among asphalt rollers the ship was carrying – a shipment likely too big for the Bulgarian market.⁴ For its part, Koper is the ideal entry port for networks trying to avoid crossing the Balkans by land. Containers come from Turkey and Iran by circumventing the whole region and are delivered directly at the gates of western Europe. Based on information about drug busts at the port of Koper, it emerges that Slovenian authorities have seized over a tonne of heroin in the past four years.⁵

Synthetic drugs meant to supply European markets are increasingly being seized in regional ports. Amphetamines from Syria, Sri Lanka and India, headed to Europe or Libya, are concealed in different ways, including in containers of sheets, blankets and towels. Of concern for authorities are Captagon amphetamines, the so-called 'jihadist's drug'. For example, in 2019, 23 million Captagon pills were found in three containers that had been shipped from Syria and were on their way to China via Piraeus.⁶

Local and foreign criminal actors

Criminal actors that exploit the maritime Balkan routes can be categorized into four types, applying the classification provided by the GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index: criminal networks, state-embedded actors, mafia-style groups and foreign actors.⁸ Criminal networks are present in ports such as Koper, Rijeka and Ploče, where cells of what Europol and the media have labelled the 'Balkan cartel' operate occasionally. One of the main advantages of this criminal association is the absence of language and cultural barriers among Bosnians, Croats, Montenegrins and Serbs.

By state-embedded actors, the Index refers to criminal actors that operate from within the state's apparatus. The port of Bar has historically been recognized as the European hub for cigarette smuggling, a trade that has been supported and facilitated by high-ranking officials and political elites. Another example is Varna, where corruption scandals, alleged misuse of funds and allegations of money laundering characterize the recent history of the port administration.

Third, mafia-style groups are criminal groups with a defined leadership and territorial control. In SEE, commercial ports such as Bar, Durres and Rijeka fall into

SELLING CIGARETTES FROM THE PORT OF BAR

More than 2 billion cigarettes are smuggled through the port of Bar every year, which results in a loss of €300 million in customs and excise tax. As part of its campaign to stop cigarette smuggling, in July 2021 the government of Montenegro prohibited the storage of tobacco products in the port's free zone. As a result, an entire hangar is full of cigarettes. Since the owners did not come to pick them up by May 2022 (which was the government's scheduled deadline), customs seized more than 140 000 packs of cigarettes worth over €60 million on the illegal market. The question now is what to do with them.

The Montenegrin government is planning to give the owners one last chance – until September 2022 – to pick up the tobacco products and pay the required state taxes (30 cents for every package of cigarettes, €10 per kilogram of cut tobacco and €10 per kilogram of hookah flavour). At the same time, the government has drafted a

law that would enable it to sell the cigarettes and generate €15–20 million in revenue if the owners do not collect the goods and pay the tax by the deadline.

This proposal has generated some criticism from the international community, including the World Health Organization, which has argued that the confiscated cigarettes should be destroyed. They stated that putting seized cigarettes on the market is not in accordance with the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products, which Montenegro ratified in 2017. They point out that international law should take precedence over national law and that adopting this law would violate this principle and lead to the uncontrolled movement of seized cigarettes.

Paradoxically, while trying to do the right thing and crack down on cigarette smuggling, the government of Montenegro has found itself in hot water.

the traditional area of criminal 'influence' and coverage of well-defined local mafia-style groups.

Fourth, foreign actors refer to criminal actors operating outside their home country, including diaspora groups that have created roots in other countries over generations. The latter detail is particularly relevant for the Greek ports of Piraeus and Thessaloniki, where ethnic Albanians with Greek passports reportedly control most of the cocaine trade. Depending on the illicit commodity, other examples of foreign actors active along the maritime Balkan routes are Italian criminal groups in Rijeka and Piraeus, Montenegrins and Serbs in Koper, Serbs in Constanta and Serbs and Turks in Varna. Indeed, the latter ports are crime magnets for criminal groups from land-locked countries in the Western Balkans.

Focus on the flows

Concerns about maritime trafficking tend to result in a focus on increasing the security of ports. But building higher fences and installing more scanners and cameras are only part of the solution. Trade on container ships is usually transnational. The illicit goods being transported into south-eastern Europe in containers are often travelling long distances from Latin America, North Africa or Asia. Therefore, understanding and disrupting illicit trade that uses licit routes and modalities requires international cooperation. Ports should be seen as links in a chain rather than in isolation.

Governments of the Western Balkans have made great strides in the past 20 years to improve port security in line with the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code, thanks to international support from organizations such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and Europol, as well as bilateral assistance. However, the ISPS Code measures that

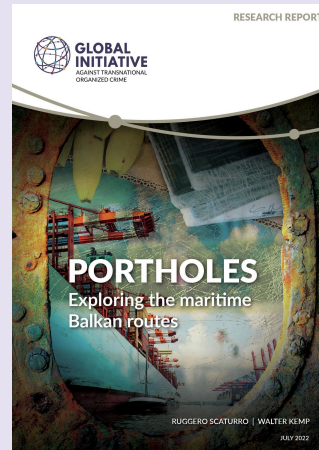
potentially mitigate some of the risks of criminal activity do not focus on the flow of containerized goods, which is where most criminal activity concentrates.⁹

At the moment, there is insufficient cooperation among security providers within and between ports, for example between customs agencies. This could be improved by creating unified task forces or joint port control units, deploying liaison officers (from neighbouring countries, countries of supply and/or relevant international organizations) and making more effective use of special investigative techniques.

Furthermore, there is a disconnect between those responsible for port security and law enforcement agencies dealing with organized crime. This could be remedied by putting a stronger focus on maritime security in organized crime threat assessments; exchanging information on concealment and interdiction techniques, as well as on criminal groups active along the maritime Balkan route; sharing updates on changes in drug production and supply mechanisms; and providing briefings on trading patterns and how they could affect illicit activity. It would also be useful to have a common database to track seizures, arrests and criminal actors along the maritime Balkan routes.

Even the best security systems will be in vain if there is corruption in a port. Therefore, it is important to have measures that strengthen integrity. Digitalization may reduce the chance of corruption, but computer programmes can be infiltrated to decrease the chance of detecting cargo hidden in containers. And thus far, artificial intelligence has not progressed to the point of replacing experienced customs and law enforcement officials with a 'nose' for making threat assessments. In short, technology should be considered as a potential asset to improve port security, but not as a panacea.

This article draws on research from 'Portholes: Exploring the maritime Balkan routes', a new GI-TOC study by Ruggero Scaturro and Walter Kemp published in July 2022. Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/balkans-maritime-routes-ports-crime/>.



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Slovenia is a crossroads for criminality between the Balkans and central Europe.

Slovenia is usually off the radar of those analyzing organized crime in central and eastern Europe. However, this seems to make the country an attractive location for criminals from the Balkans as well as to hide out, plan operations and logistics, do business and trans-ship their illicit goods.¹

Slovenia is strategically located at the crossroads of central and south-eastern Europe, touching the Alps and the Adriatic Sea. This makes it a useful transit point for goods coming from Adriatic ports – particularly Koper – and for links between the Western Balkans and Italy as

well as Austria and Germany. In July 2022, the Ljubljana District Court found eight people guilty of drug trafficking and related criminal acts – including smuggling cocaine from Ecuador to Koper and Rijeka – and sentenced them to a total of 28 years in prison.² But this is just the latest in a series of cases that reveal the role of criminal groups in Slovenia as mafia middlemen.

Police also report that there are drug storage warehouses in Slovenia.³ The region of Gorenjska, close to the border with Austria, seems to be a hotspot of organized crime.

THE GORENJSKA REGION: A CRIMINAL HOTSPOT

Gorenjska, the northern Slovenian region bordering Austria, is best known for tourism and alpine vistas, but it is also a hotspot for organized crime. In January 2020, Slovenian police uncovered the biggest synthetic drug lab in Slovenia, seizing 125 kilograms of amphetamines and precursors for producing another 300 kilograms.

The members of the criminal group made around €1.3 million in profits.⁴ Also, the Montenegrin Kavač clan is known to have used the region to store cocaine coming via the port of Koper before distribution to Austria, Germany and Italy.

Drugs, people and weapons are the main goods that are being smuggled via Slovenia and police estimate that there are around ten criminal groups operating in Slovenia.⁵ Most are connected to criminal groups from the Western Balkans, although some also have links to groups in other EU countries, as well as South America and Africa.⁶ Slovenians are usually mid-level criminals in the hierarchy of transnational networks. Whereas in the 1990s criminal networks were based on ethnic or regional ties, today the relationships are more fluid and functional. According to one expert, partnerships among criminals operating in the region are based on 'mutual trust among the members and other [criminal] organizations and the shared goal of gaining quick earnings or acquiring criminal proceeds.'⁷ The Slovenian branch of various transnational criminal groups reportedly often organize meetings for foreign members who stay several days in Slovenia, since

the country is considered a geographically attractive and safe place to meet.

Two examples show how Slovenian cells have been part of broader transnational criminal networks. In 2009, several arrests were made in Slovenia as part of Operation Balkan Warrior, in which the US Drug Enforcement Administration together with the Serbian Intelligence Agency and police in Uruguay and Argentina took down Serbian national Darko Šarić, who was known as the 'narco-king' of the Balkans. In 2010, police in Slovenia carried out over 30 house searches across the country, arrested 17 people and seized weapons and illicit drugs in a months-long investigation. One of the suspects was Dragan Tošić from Ljubljana, who was known as the leader of the Slovenian section of Šarić's criminal organization. He allegedly assisted Šarić in

trafficking cocaine from Latin America to ports in Europe, particularly in Italy. The prosecution has accused Tošić and 16 other defendants of drug trafficking and participation in an organized criminal group. Remarkably, despite 81 hearings, the court proceedings against the alleged members of the Slovenian cell of Šarić's organization have not yet concluded.

A second example shows how in Slovenia, once-rigid organized crime group structures are transforming into increasingly flexible forms of temporary and opportunistic cooperation.⁸ In May 2021, police arrested almost 60 people from Slovenia, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Croatia who were allegedly part of a cell of the Kavač



Figure 1 Smuggling routes into and from Slovenia.

clan (originally from Montenegro) that had been operating in Slovenia since 2018. The most significant contributor to the successful police operation was a former founding member of the cell who turned police informant. The latter seems to have claimed that Serbian and Montenegrin nationals with links to the Kavač clan established the cell in Slovenia and oversaw the flow of drugs and money earned from selling them.⁹

The indictment states that the cell trafficked drugs from Spain and the Netherlands first to Slovenia and from there to Austria, Germany, Italy and Croatia.¹⁰ They communicated via Sky's encrypted app and referred to each other with aliases. They smuggled at least 534 kilograms of cocaine, 2 000 kilograms of cannabis, 30 liters of amphetamine base, 10 kilograms of heroin, 96 kilograms of hashish and other drugs. They also smuggled weapons from Slovakia to Slovenia, Serbia and the Netherlands. The cash was transported from Spain

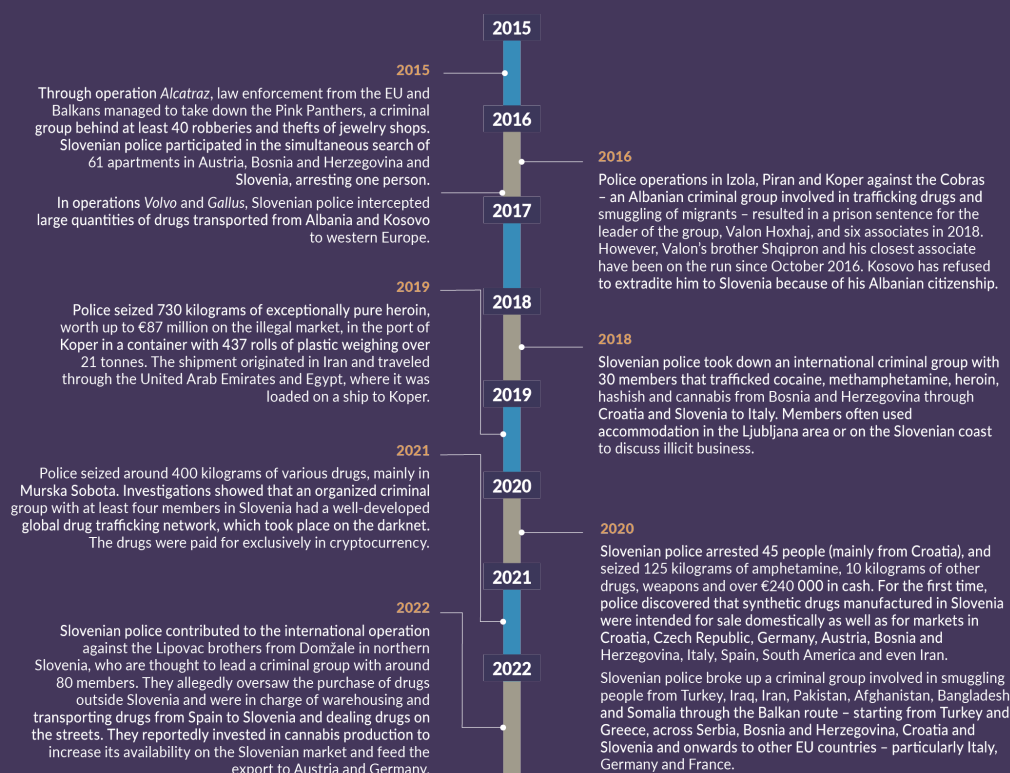
via Slovenia to Serbia.¹¹ Police estimate that the Slovenian cell's profit was at least €2 million. It is possible that they had a connection to law enforcement: In November 2021, Slovenian police arrested an employee of the Specialized State Prosecutor's Office for allegedly disclosing classified information from the criminal investigation against the Kavač clan.¹²

Criminals in the cell were well-organized and managed the whole chain of illicit activities, including purchase, transport and drug sales, for which special coordinators were in charge. The leader was from Montenegro, while the Slovenian suspects transported drugs and money by opening companies and recruiting new members.

Drugs, weapons and money were mainly transported in cars and trucks in specially modified secret compartments. In trailers, the drugs – primarily large quantities of cannabis and hashish – were hidden in

MAJOR LAW ENFORCEMENT OPERATIONS IN SLOVENIA, 2015–2022

Slovenian police, with the support of many foreign law enforcement agencies, have carried out a number of key operations against organized criminal groups since 2015. These include the following:



specialty-modified trailer compartments or the fridge trailers. Couriers picked up the cars and trucks with the cargo, for example in Spain and the Netherlands, and drove them to Slovenia, where the drugs and weapons were stored in warehouses.

The latest law enforcement operations in Slovenia show that this country is far from the perceived image of being away from the interest of international drug traffickers. Its geographical position, between the Balkans and central

Europe, makes this country especially favorable as a crossroads for trafficking of narcotics.

Trafficking is also facilitated by the port and land-developed infrastructure in the country, and its shared past with the former Yugoslavia make it a familiar destination for Balkans criminal groups. Law enforcement agencies should as a result pay more attention to these links.

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Low police salaries in the Western Balkans risk increasing corruption among police forces.

The main role of the police in a democracy is to maintain public peace and order, to prevent and fight crime and to serve the citizens whose taxes pay for public security. The police provide a service that is often risky and can involve long working hours under difficult conditions. The job can take a toll on mental health, requires endurance and good judgement and a great deal of responsibility including – in exceptional cases – the deadly use of force.

It is worth noting that, although people in the Western Balkans see room for improvement in terms of criminal justice (including fighting organized crime),¹ they have a relatively good opinion of their police.² One would expect that those who are responsible for the safety of citizens would receive a salary that is reasonable in relation to the cost of living, attractive to professional and motivated individuals and sufficient to promote job satisfaction. However, the salaries of rank-and-file police officers in the Western Balkans tell a different story.

Information on police salaries in the countries of the Western Balkans is not always easy to find. The GI-TOC has collected and compiled the information below from a number of sources; it is our best guess based on the available data (mostly from 2021). To facilitate comparisons, the salaries are presented in euros and in net value, after taxes and benefits have been deducted. There is no difference in the salary level between male and female police officers in any of the six countries in the region, since the salary is always linked to the working position within the police.

To put some of these salaries into perspective, the minimum wage in Montenegro in 2021 was reported to be €532, €360 in North Macedonia and €400 in Serbia. In 2020, the average salary in Kosovo was €416,⁶ while the minimum police salary in 2021 was €447. Conditions are even less attractive in Albania, where in 2021 the minimum police salary was 18% lower than the average salary in the country.⁷ The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina was even worse, with the minimum police salary 30% lower than the average in

Country	Number of citizens	Number of Ministry of Interior employees	Number of police officers (with law enforcement authority)	Police salaries		Number of police officers per 100 000 inhabitants
				Basic police officer	Senior police officer	
Albania	2 846 000	15 109	11 802	€406	€1 401	260
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3 281 000	19 140 ³	15 777 ⁴	€340–460	€511 ⁵	481
Kosovo	1 873 000	10 600	8 104	€447–541	€569–1 761	464
Montenegro	621 873	721	4 680	€396	€1 353	502
North Macedonia	2 083 000	12 599	9 953	€380–450	€360–1 380	341
Serbia	8 737 000	41 438	31 313	€440	€2 296	435

Figure 1 Police officers and estimated salary levels in the Western Balkans (2021).

Source: European Commission progress reports 2021

2019.⁸ With rising prices, the minimum wage is often insufficient to cover the basic needs of an average family. In short, the starting salary for a police officer in most countries of the region is unattractive.

By way of comparison, the average monthly salary for police officers in Romania⁹ or Slovenia are around €1 000 per month,¹⁰ while starting salaries of the police in Hungary are not much higher than those of their counterparts in the Western Balkans.¹¹

Salaries increase according to rank, education and the number of years in service. Officers may also be paid overtime for working long hours or undertaking risky assignments. Generally speaking, salaries for the head of the police district are double the minimum wage.

It is worth noting that salaries are generally lowest among border police and relatively high for police working in units combating organized crime. For example, in Serbia (where police salaries have had the highest growth in the region), the average salary for someone working in the border police directorate is €807 per month while the average salary in the unit for combating organized crime is €1 034. In Montenegro, comparable figures are €562 per month for border police and €784 for those working in the unit fighting organized crime.

Police directors across the region generally have salaries in the range of €1 200 to €1 700 per month. Tellingly, the head of the police inspectorate is usually paid a wage that is close to the level of the highest position in the police hierarchy.

Risk of corruption

There is widespread sentiment among police organizations in the Western Balkans that officers are underpaid.¹²

Police management structures and unions in all six countries are pushing for higher salaries in order to attract and retain good recruits, maintain the professionalism of the police service and reduce corruption.

Although salaries have increased over the past few years, several police unions argue that the profession has become more dangerous and that the work is not sufficiently compensated.¹³ This forces police officers to seek other, more lucrative jobs in order to sustain their families. It may also include moonlighting in other jobs, like private security companies. But the risk is that underpaid and disgruntled police may be more vulnerable to corruption, conflicts of interest or colluding with criminal groups. A number of recent cases – including those on the border between Kosovo and Albania highlighted previously in this risk bulletin – point to both petty corruption and more serious collusion with criminal groups. This endangers public security and undermines trust in the police.

However, one must be careful about making a correlation between low salaries and corruption. Higher salaries in themselves may not strengthen integrity. Police need job satisfaction, opportunities for advancement and recognition for their work. Furthermore, it is important to have training in ethics, as well as effective and efficient oversight mechanisms to promote integrity. The wages of police need to be attractive and commensurate with the risks and responsibilities involved. As criminals from the Western Balkans modernize their techniques and strengthen their international contacts, police from the region need to do the same.

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Football hooliganism in the Western Balkans reveals links between hooliganism, politics, violence and crime, although these vary across the region.

'Today is Sunday', a football match day. That is how an artist celebrates his favourite football club, FC Partizan, with graffiti in Belgrade, quoting the popular Serbian poet and football fan Dusko Radovic. The quote refers to the day when football matches are generally played and the mural recalls feelings of respect, resilience, loyalty and integrity.

But in the Western Balkans, football Sundays occasionally show the opposite values. Fans chant racist and nationalist slogans, while supporters of rival teams brawl with each other or the police. This is not a problem unique to the Balkans, but as shown by a new GI-TOC report, in some cases there are destabilizing links between football hooligans, politics and organized crime.¹

Our research analyzed 122 fan groups of football clubs in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia and identified 78 groups whose followers can be considered 'ultras', namely passionate and well-organized associations of football fans. Of these 78 hard-core fan groups, 21 can be considered hooligans that pose a serious security risk due not only to their propensity for violence, but also for their links to politics and organized crime.

Violence

Hooligan groups in the Western Balkans are renowned for the use of violence, with a particular critical situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia. Football-related violence often presents strong nationalistic undertones, with fans singing national anthems, displaying fascist symbols and glorifying war heroes.²

Some hooligans have also reportedly joined paramilitary groups, indicating the existence of a nexus between the use of violence and political extremism. For example, members of the Serbian United Force (supporting FC Rad from Belgrade), Firma (supporting FC Vojvodina from Novi Sad)³ and ultras based in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina (supporting FC Zrinjski), fought in the



A mural in Belgrade with the message 'Today is Sunday (match day)' celebrates the Serbian poet and FC Partizan fan Dusko Radovic.

Photo: Bahrudin Bandic



A mural dedicated to Zelimir Vidovic Keli, former player of FC Sarajevo and the Yugoslav national football team. He died at war during the 1990s.

Photo: Bahrudin Bandic

conflicts in Ukraine and Syria.⁴ Their actions are often displayed and praised on social media platforms.

Even lockdowns did not stop the violence. The COVID-19 pandemic emptied football stadiums but didn't prevent hooligan-led violence. In April 2021, antagonism between Mostar-based hooligans divided around ethnic identity resulted in vandalism.⁵ In the same month, concerns about tensions between Red Star and Partizan supporters caused the US Department of State to issue a red alert about possible violence in Belgrade.⁶

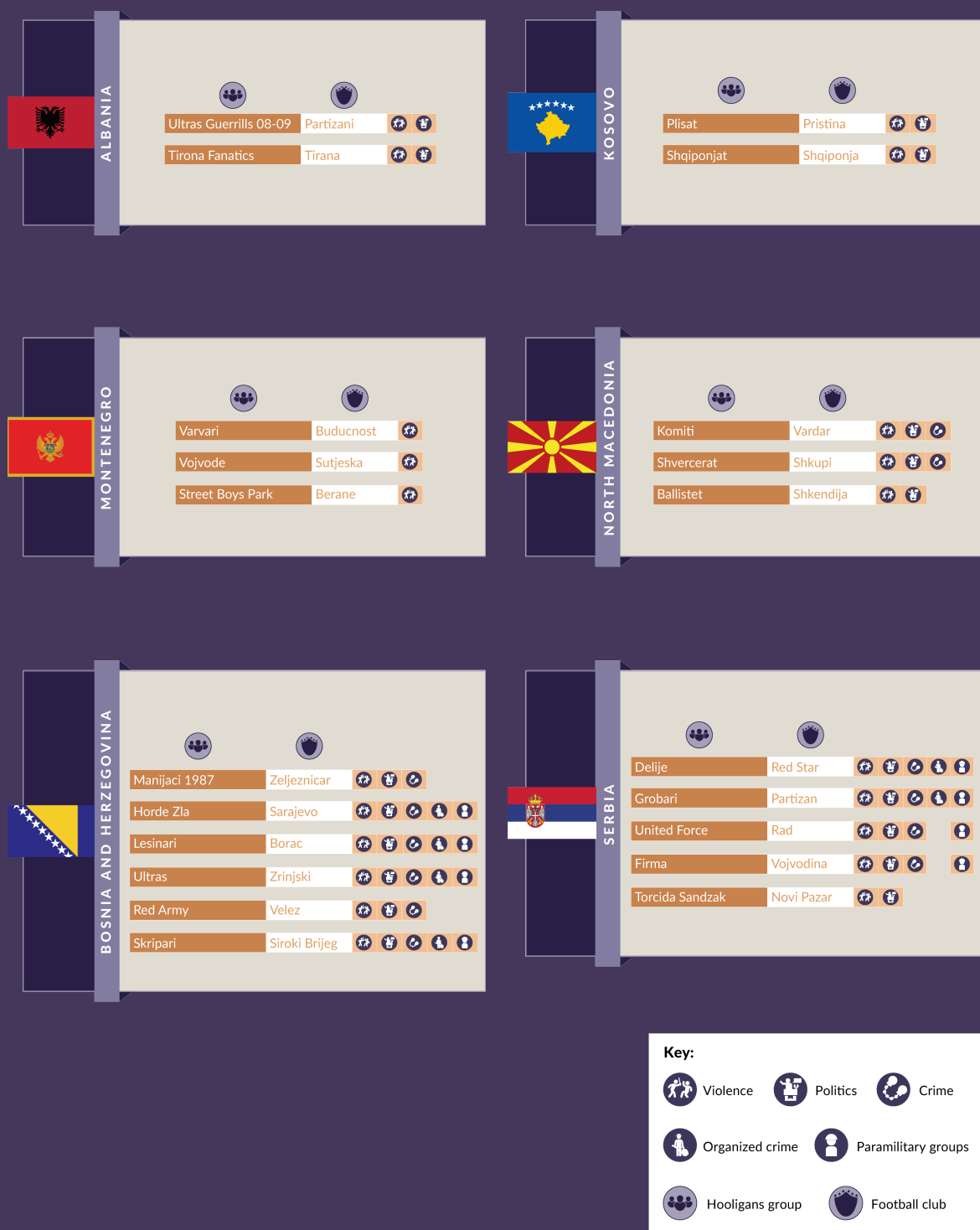


Figure 1 Hooligan groups in the Western Balkans linked with violence, politics and crime.

Source: Saša Đorđević and Ruggero Scaturro, *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics and organized crime in the Western Balkans*, GI-TOC, June 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/>

Football-hooliganism-politics-and-organized-crime-in-the-Western-Balkans-GITOC-SEEObs.pdf

SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Ultras in the Western Balkans use social media to express feelings, values or beliefs; share and comment on content; carry out group-related business such as identity-promotion activities; and recruit and mobilize supporters for particular gatherings or events.

Ultras and hooligan groups in the Western Balkans typically use Facebook and Instagram.⁸ There are both official and unofficial profiles. Official accounts usually publish news, promote the fan group and club and sell merchandise online. In contrast, many unofficial and

private accounts serve as tools for the group's functioning or internal communication.⁹

Unofficial groups are primarily closed to the public. Only trusted individuals can become part of them. They are attractive to both young generations and older nostalgics. However, it is easier for youths to join. Sometimes, it is enough to share posts and have mutual friendships with the account administrators. When older users want to join groups, the administrators first check whether they might have connections with the police.¹⁰

Politics

The GI-TOC report gives examples of the deployment of football hooligans for political ends in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. Political parties use hooligan groups to promote their agenda with chants and banners inside the stadiums and stoke ethnic or political tension before elections. They can also act as a 'rent-a-mob' to provide muscle at demonstrations. As one fan in Banja Luka in Bosnia and Herzegovina explained, football hooligans 'act as a private army to politicians'.⁷

In exchange for violent support, politicians grant leaders of hooligan groups lucrative business opportunities and

ensure that they receive political protection in case of investigations or prosecution.

Crime

The nexus between hooligans and crime is particularly strong in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. In Serbia, it has reached the level of serious organized crime.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, some Ultra members, such as Lesinari, Horde Zla and Škripari, commit petty crimes but are also part of organized criminal groups involved in drug trafficking and arms smuggling.¹¹ In North Macedonia, Skopje-based hooligan groups Komiti and

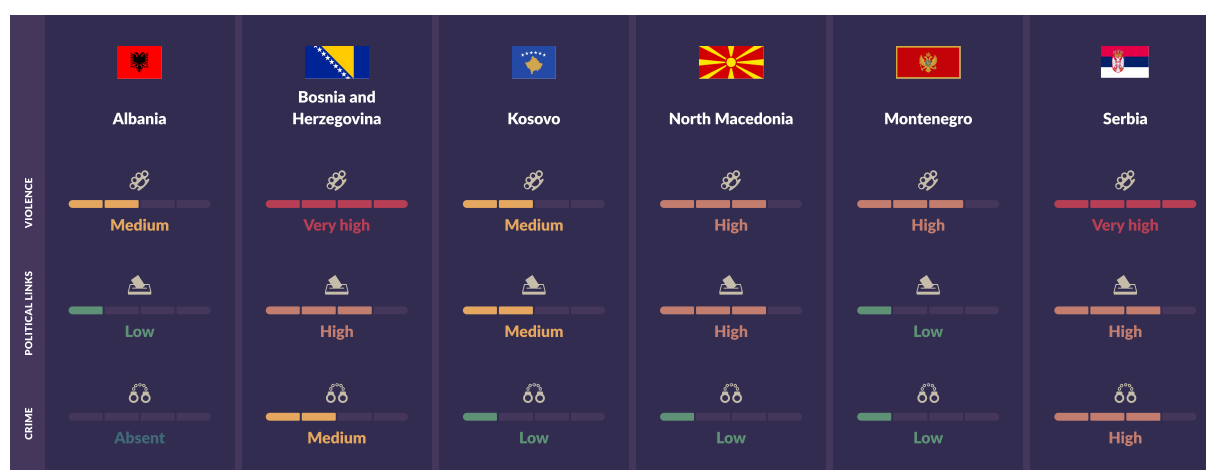


Figure 2 Level of risk due to strength of links between hooliganism, politics, violence and crime.

Source: Saša Đorđević and Ruggero Scaturro, *Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics and organized crime in the Western Balkans*, GI-TOC, June 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/>

Football-hooliganism-politics-and-organized-crime-in-the-Western-Balkans-GITOC-SEEObs.pdf

Svercerat are known to sell drugs and smuggle arms, which helps finance other illicit activities.¹²

In Serbia, there is a more concerning risk. Members of some hooligan groups engage in serious organized crime, yet they enjoy a fair degree of political protection. The Janjicari, supporters of FC Partizan, have built close ties with state officials (especially police officers) as well as the Kavač clan, an organized crime group from Montenegro specializing in trafficking cocaine from Latin America to Europe.¹³

In February 2021, Serbian police arrested the leader of Principi (supporting FC Partizan) upon his return from a

meeting with the Kavač clan in Montenegro.¹⁴ Police arrested over 20 Principi members and charged them with association for criminal purposes, drug trafficking, possession and trafficking in arms and aggravated murder.¹⁵

As seen in Figure 2, the level of risk and links between football hooliganism, politics and crime are not uniform across the region; the problem is most acute in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, while links between hooliganism and crime are absent in Albania and low in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro.

This article draws on research from 'Dangerous games: Football hooliganism, politics and organized crime in the Western Balkans', a paper by Sasa Djordjevic and Ruggero Scaturro published in June 2022. Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/hooligans-crime-balkans/>.



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