

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

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Summary highlights



An increasing number of Albanians are crossing the English Channel from France using small boats.

Since July 2022, the large number of Albanians illegally crossing the English Channel from France to the United Kingdom has received a great deal of attention in both the media and in British politics, where the focus has been on improving border control and curbing illegal immigration. In this article, based on interviews and a granular analysis of Albanian language social media sites, we look at how this illegal business is conducted, the prices and publicity techniques used (such as social media), as well as the push and pull factors bringing Albanians to the UK.



Western Balkans criminal groups are contributing to drug-related violence in Ecuador.

In 2022, Ecuador was plagued by outbreaks of violence connected to organized criminal groups, including bomb attacks, prison riots and the assassination of three prosecutors. The 'narco' violence became so acute that the government declared a state of emergency in

November 2022. While this small Latin American country is situated more than 10 000 kilometres from south-eastern Europe, its instability stems partly from the activities of criminal groups from the Western Balkans that have become big players in cocaine smuggling from Ecuador to Western Europe. Based on first-hand research in the region, we look at how and why this is happening and explain why the recent violence may be helping these groups to consolidate their position in the lucrative local drug economy.



Kosovo takes steps to increase value of assets seized related to organized crime.

The criminal legislation of Kosovo regulates the confiscation of criminal assets and the proceeds of organized crime, but so far, the country's criminal justice system has produced few results. Moreover, there is a major discrepancy between the value of assets temporarily seized and those that were permanently confiscated, due to the reluctance of courts to issue decisions regarding the final confiscation of assets and the lack of specialized judges and prosecutors. The government of Kosovo has taken a number of steps to



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close this gap. Will these initiatives be able to increase the value of assets seized and confiscated? And following the example of other countries in the region, such as Albania and Serbia, can more be done to improve the social reuse of confiscated assets?



Balkans fighters are taking up arms in Ukraine, with risks for organized crime.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has been going on for nearly a year, has stirred up illicit economies in the latter two countries, with knock-on effects in the wider world, including in south-eastern Europe. Observers, including the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), have been following this situation closely. However, less attention has been paid to the several thousand men from south-eastern Europe who have taken up arms to fight on either the Russian or Ukrainian side. In this issue we look at this phenomenon and explore the links with organized crime as well as the challenges of dealing with the return of these fighters to the region.



Fraudulent or illegally obtained Balkans documents are permitting ease of travel for criminals worldwide.

Police investigating organized criminal groups in or from the Western Balkans repeatedly point to a common thread – the ease with which many criminals travel using fake passports or illegally obtained immigration documents from countries in the region. There are two main ways in which criminals obtain such documents. Either they physically alter a valid passport that is stolen

or purchased on the black market by changing the photo or biographical data, or they illegally purchase a valid passport in their own name or under an alias by bribing a corrupt official. We look at why and how this problem exists in the region, and what can be done to curb it.



Bosnia and Herzegovina faces law enforcement challenges in countering human smuggling.

Smuggling of migrants via Bosnia and Herzegovina is on the rise. Since it has become more difficult to transit the country in recent years because of tougher border controls from Croatia – which has recently joined the Schengen zone – as well as the erection of fences in some areas, there has been an increased demand for smugglers to facilitate border crossings. In November 2022, the GI-TOC, in partnership with the Ministry of Interior Affairs of the Canton of Sarajevo, organized a meeting that brought together a wide range of stakeholders dealing with this issue in order to discuss the problem and promote more effective cooperation in dealing with it.



The GI-TOC co-organized a colloquium in Athens to address the lack of topics on organized crime in Western Balkans higher education.

While organized crime and corruption are major challenges in the Western Balkans, these issues are insufficiently analyzed. Part of the problem stems from a dearth of education on these topics in higher education. To address this issue, the GI-TOC co-organized a scientific colloquium in Athens. We summarize the main topics raised at the meeting as well as ideas for follow up.

An increasing number of Albanians are crossing the English Channel from France using small boats.

Since July 2022, the British press has been raising concerns about an increasing number of Albanians illegally crossing the English Channel from France.¹ The number jumped from 50 in 2020 to around 13 000 as of 13 December 2022.² Of these, around 10 000 are single, adult men; the remaining 2 000 are women and children.³ Irregular immigration from Albania is nothing new: the UK has long been a magnet for Albanians – particularly young men. Until recently, they had mostly been smuggled in trucks crossing the Channel by ferry, but now many migrants are attempting the crossing in small boats.

In November 2022, the UK and Albania engaged in a public debate about the large influx of Albanians into the UK. The UK Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, referred to this crisis in the Channel as an ‘invasion of our southern coast’,⁴ and characterized the immigrants from

Albania as being ‘either part of organized criminal gangs and procuring their journey through those nefarious means, or [...] coming here and partaking in criminal activity, particularly related to drugs’.⁵ Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama retorted that the British government was using Albanians as scapegoats for failed UK immigration policies.⁶

Certainly, one factor encouraging Albanian migration to the UK is the possibility of recruitment by Albanian organized crime groups seeking compatriots to assist with indoor cannabis growth.⁷ There have recently been a number of arrests of Albanians allegedly leading organized criminal groups who facilitated the illegal entry of Albanian nationals into the UK to work on cannabis farms.⁸ Large numbers of people from Afghanistan and Iran have also been arrested in Channel crossings.⁹



Migrants move a smuggling boat into the water as they embark on the beach of Gravelines, near Dunkirk, northern France on 12 October 2022, in an attempt to cross the English Channel.

Photo: Sameer al-Doumy/AFP via Getty Images

While the situation of Albanian immigration has garnered a lot of media and political attention in both Albania and the UK, there is less focus on changes in the methods used to cross into the UK – more specifically, why large numbers of Albanians are now risking the crossing using small boats, instead of routes and methods popular in the past. First-hand research carried out by the GI-TOC in both Albania and the UK has identified several factors behind this shift, including reduced cost and the existence of viral marketing.

One of the main factors is price. According to people familiar with the modalities, crossing by boat is considered relatively cheap, quick and easy. Whereas smuggling by truck on board a ferry costs between €22 500 and €28 000, the journey by small boat – usually an inflatable dingy – costs between €3 000 and €4 500. To undertake the arduous crossing, Albanians usually travel by bus through Kosovo or North Macedonia, then on to Serbia, Hungary, Germany and finally Belgium, a total of more than 2 200 kilometres. This route is popular because controls at the Hungarian border are considered less strict than elsewhere.¹⁰

Previously, travelling by air or road involved securing fake passports and engaging intermediaries. It also became risky as border controls were tightened in both the UK and France. Now in the case of small boats, many of the arrangements are made over social media. Furthermore, the 80% reduction in price seems to have opened the market up to people willing to take the risk without having to take out large loans, sell land or livestock or become indebted to smugglers or relatives, which was the case in the past.¹¹

The GI-TOC has come across a number of social media accounts – particularly on TikTok – that advertise services for Albanians trying to get to the UK by boat.¹² In the typical short and punchy style of TikTok videos, the advertisements post messages such as ‘... to England. 4 000 pounds. With boats. Every day’ or ‘... to London. [It’s] 100% sure, no chance of failure. These are the best prices in the market.’ Some posts advertise the next dates of departure while others simply contain contact information. Most of the accounts reviewed by the GI-TOC were created within the past year.¹³

This low-budget technique of advertising is attractive for the smugglers as well as the end-users.¹⁴ The videos are cheap to produce, the use of recurrent hashtags enable the videos to spread virally and they appeal to youth, who

are the main target audience.¹⁵ Algorithms allow smugglers to direct their material towards the ‘For You’ feed of the specific audience they are trying to reach. Advertising online also gives the smugglers a degree of secrecy since the content can be posted anonymously or under a fake name. Furthermore, young people are lured with images of a glamorous UK lifestyle.¹⁶

While the advertisements are probably produced by Albanians, it is thought that the cross-Channel smuggling business is led and controlled by Iraqi Kurdish organized criminal groups.¹⁷ Migrants seeking to cross the Channel assemble in informal camps – for example, in the suburbs of Dunkirk, France – which are controlled by these criminal groups, and wait there until an Albanian middleman comes to inform them of the time, date and place of the crossing. They are also provided with a GPS device and a boat, which one of the immigrants is trained to pilot.¹⁸

A major push factor encouraging migration to the UK is economic inequality in Albania, which is one of the poorest countries in Europe. In 2022, it was ranked as the 90th poorest country in the world, with a GDP of just US\$17 858 per capita (adjusted for relative purchasing power).¹⁹ The average income per year in Albania is US\$6 110, compared to US\$45 380 in the UK.²⁰ A recent Balkan barometer showed that for 59% of Albanians, the country’s difficult economic situation is their biggest concern.²¹ Young people who see few opportunities at home will seek them abroad.²²

Moreover, the large Albanian diaspora in the UK is a magnet for compatriots; many Albanian entrepreneurs in the UK prefer to hire their relatives.²³ While the media like to highlight the statistic that there are more than 1 000 Albanians in prison in the UK, it is worth noting that, according to Prime Minister Rama, Albanians lead around 1 200 businesses in the UK.²⁴

Notably, criminals running the smuggling market seem to be targeting women, using the argument that they have a high chance of them having their asylum claims accepted. Although Albanians are overall less likely to be granted asylum,²⁵ the claims of Albanian female and child asylum seekers have a 90% success rate (compared to 14% for Albanian adult males).²⁶

Addressing this politically charged crisis will require greater practical cooperation between the countries involved rather than public recriminations. This includes



FIGURE 1 The route from Albania to the UK.



A small boat packed with people is rescued in English waters on 13 November 2022.

Photo: Andrew Aitchison/In pictures via Getty Images

joint law enforcement efforts between Albania, France and the UK to identify and disrupt smuggling networks. It will also require the creation of more legal options for Albanians seeking employment in the UK (such as seasonal work), public awareness campaigns to highlight the risks of the journey and efforts to create more jobs in Albania. Furthermore, it is important to

reduce young Albanians' vulnerability to becoming involved in crime by strengthening resilience in remote communities and providing young Albanians with sufficient educational and employment opportunities at home. These types of initiatives are already being taken, but not to the extent necessary.

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Western Balkans criminal groups are contributing to drug-related violence in Ecuador.

In 2022, Ecuador was plagued by outbreaks of violence connected to organized criminal groups, including bomb attacks, prison riots and the assassination of three prosecutors. The 'narco' violence became so acute that the government declared a state of emergency in November 2022. While this small Latin American country is thousands of kilometres away from south-eastern Europe, its instability stems partly from the activities of criminal groups from the Western Balkans that have become big players in cocaine smuggling from Ecuador to Western Europe. Rather than disrupting their activities, the recent violence in Ecuador may be helping these groups to consolidate their position in the lucrative local drug economy.

Big players in a major cocaine hub

Positioned between two key major cocaine-producing countries, Colombia and Peru, Ecuador has become a

major hub for the shipment of cocaine to Europe.¹ The port of Guayaquil, the largest in Ecuador, is both an important departure point for drugs and the epicentre of drug-related violence. From January to August 2022, 145 bomb attacks were recorded in Ecuador, half of which took place in Guayaquil.² The city has been wracked by gang violence, gruesome murders, kidnappings and extortion. On several occasions – for example, in August 2021 – the government been forced to declared a state of emergency because of the violence.³

Violence has also spilled over into prisons where criminal groups coordinate cocaine trafficking.⁴ In 2021, some 316 inmates were killed inside the country's often overcrowded prisons. This trend continued in 2022, including with a bloody clash in October that was thought to be triggered by a power struggle over drug distribution.⁵



The port of Guayaquil in Ecuador is the epicentre of drug-related violence.

Photo: Michele Westmorland

For some time, Ecuador has struggled with political instability and weak criminal justice; it is considered to be one of Latin America's most unstable democracies.⁶ In 2021, the country ranked 31st in the world on the Global Organized Crime Index.⁷ One of its highest criminality scores (7.5 out of 10) was related to the influence of foreign actors. Some of the most powerful and violent foreign actors are criminal groups from Mexico which are shipping cocaine from Ecuador to the US.⁸ However, criminal groups from the Western Balkans are also present and active in Ecuador. While they have managed to keep a relatively low profile, their presence and activities have left a trail of blood. In the past five years, five Balkan nationals have been killed in Ecuador: three Albanians, one Serb and one Montenegrin. A citizen of Kosovo has also been injured. All these cases are believed to be linked to cocaine trafficking and the disputes that it has created among foreign actors and between them and local criminal gangs.⁹

It is thought that much of Ecuador's narco violence is related to competition among local groups as to who will provide protection to the powerful foreign actors.¹⁰ Criminal groups from the Balkans work closely with local gangs to ensure smooth functioning of their operations. For example, local groups help with obtaining cocaine, transportation, logistics and security, as well as providing links to corrupt politicians and allies in the security sector and justice system. Since this is a lucrative business, there is competition among local entrepreneurs in the market for violence.

Thus far, the country's criminal justice system has been unable to get a grip on the situation. Interviews with senior law enforcement officials in Ecuador reveal insufficient understanding of criminal groups from the Western Balkans and little cooperation with their counterparts in south-eastern Europe. There is also a track record of corruption. Those brave enough to stand up to the criminals are often targeted. Three Ecuadorian prosecutors were killed in 2022 – two of them in Manabi and one in Guayaquil.¹¹

Crisis as an opportunity for Balkan groups

Paradoxically, the latest flare up in violence may be an opportunity for criminal groups from the Western Balkans operating in Ecuador. First, they are not the

targets of the violence. Rather, local Ecuadorian gangs are fighting to protect the Western Balkans criminal groups and facilitate their operations, from which the Ecuadorian gangs profit. If the Balkan groups keep their heads down and ride out the storm, they may benefit from the fierce gang rivalry by getting lower prices for cocaine and finding violent entrepreneurs who are willing to provide them with protection.

Second, violence on the streets and in prisons keeps law enforcement agencies busy, thereby enabling foreign actors to exploit the situation. The identification of Balkan traffickers in Latin American countries has not been straightforward, owing in part to their multiple identities (including fake documents), deep pockets and good connections. The new wave of violence makes it even more difficult for law enforcement officials to target discreet foreign groups when they have their hands full with violent local ones.

Third, criminal groups from the Balkans benefit from the general chaos that has swept Ecuador as a result of the increase in violence. The borders are reportedly becoming more porous and port security less strict. The chaos has also enabled some criminals to slip through the net of the justice system. For example, notorious Albanian drug trafficker Dritan Rexhepi, who has been in prison in Ecuador since 2014, was granted house arrest at the end of 2021. According to the media, he has since disappeared from his house in Guayaquil, leaving him free to carry on his criminal activities.¹²

The recent violence in Ecuador shows the transnational nature of organized crime and the disjointed state of international law enforcement. Law enforcement officials in western and south-eastern Europe will not be able to disrupt major drug shipments unless they cooperate more with their counterparts in source countries such as Ecuador. Meanwhile, police in Ecuador will find it difficult to reduce the violence in their own country unless they understand that the narco violence is being driven in part by competition among local groups to protect foreign criminal actors. In short, this is good example of a 'glocal' problem, one in which local conditions are affected by global flows. As such, it requires a coordinated, multilateral solution.

Notes

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Kosovo takes steps to increase value of assets seized related to organized crime.

Although the criminal legislation of Kosovo regulates the confiscation of criminal assets and the proceeds of organized crime, the criminal justice system has so far produced insufficient results. The analysis of data from 2017 to 2021 reveals that €6.3 million worth of assets were confiscated in 28 cases, including trafficking in narcotics, smuggling of goods and trafficking in arms. However, the statistics also show a major discrepancy between the value of assets temporarily seized and those that were permanently confiscated. To close this gap, the government of Kosovo has taken a number of steps, including initiating the State Bureau for Verification and Confiscation of Unjustified Wealth and allowing non-conviction-based confiscation. Will these initiatives be able to increase the value of assets seized and confiscated? And following the example of other countries in the region, such as Albania and Serbia, can more be done to improve the social reuse of confiscated assets?

Discrepancy between seized and confiscated assets

The recovery and confiscation of the proceeds of organized crime deprive criminals of the profit and wealth generated from criminal activity. In theory, this should act as a deterrent to crime as it increases the risks and lowers the benefits of illicit activity. However, in Kosovo, despite relevant legislation and institutions in place, few assets have been confiscated. With the aim to increase confiscation of assets and further advance the legislation, in 2019 a law entered into force that enabled extended confiscation.

Standard confiscation is regulated by the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC), by which authorities can confiscate assets and material benefits that have been acquired as a result of the criminal offence for which the person was found guilty (see Box: Main legislative and institutional framework for confiscation of assets).¹ On the other hand, extended confiscation can be used when the CPC is insufficient; it allows the confiscation of assets that are not related to the criminal offence for which the person was found guilty. Temporary seizure is procedurally carried out at the request of the state prosecutor and with the approval of the pre-trial judge. In addition, prosecutors have the option to take investigative measures to temporarily freeze assets or

issue restraining orders valid for a period of 72 hours to prevent the sale, transfer of ownership, or withdrawal from an account.²

As shown in Figure 1, the data from 2014 to 2021 reveals a discrepancy of €185.98 million between the value of assets seized compared with that of final confiscations.³ In other words, only 3.3% of seized assets were ultimately confiscated. At the EU level, the percentage is closer to 50%.⁴ More importantly, although the Law on Extended Powers for Confiscation of Assets Acquired by Criminal Offence provided more resources to prosecutors,⁵ there have been no cases since the law entered into force in 2019.⁶

Between 2017 and 2021, there were only 28 confiscations out of 1 695 cases of seized assets (or 2%), as shown in Figure 2. 'Many cases are still at different stages of adjudication, due to delay of court proceedings, reluctance of courts to issue decisions for selling assets, and lack of specialization of judges,' according to the National Coordinator Against Economic Crime.⁷ On the other hand, a judge from the Court of Appeals highlighted the lack of evidence-based investigations and prosecution of cases based on the law on extended confiscation, as well as deficiencies in applying and correctly interpreting the relevant standards.⁸ The lack of results was stressed by independent senior experts from EU member states during the peer review mission in Kosovo on countering organized crime and corruption. The experts noted that neither value-based, third-party nor extended confiscation are used, and that there is no willingness on the part of the judiciary to make real progress.⁹

The highest value of seized assets was achieved in 2016, with a total of between €60.4 million and €70.4 million in assets seized in two major operations. The Office of the State Prosecutor initiated a case for the release of 65 illegally occupied properties with a total value of just under €42 million.¹⁰ On the other hand, the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) seized 39 land parcels that year with a total value of between €15 million and €25 million.¹¹

Management of seized or confiscated assets

The Agency for Management of Seized and Confiscated Assets (AMSCA), as an executive institution within the Ministry of Justice, preserves and administers the seized and confiscated assets.¹² The AMSCA currently employs 26 staff; the position of General Director has been vacant since April 2021.

A 2022 report on social reuse of confiscated assets published by the GI-TOC identified several challenges in

the countries of Western Balkans, some of which are particularly evident in Kosovo. These include insufficient transparency in the management and transfer of confiscated assets, and a lack of provisions to allow social reuse and cooperation with civil society.¹³ The current law does not envisage social reuse of confiscated assets for public purposes, so assets are reused by the government only for the compensation of injured parties. Moreover, the transfer of confiscated



Main legislative and institutional framework for the confiscation of assets, Kosovo.

assets is not regulated by any bylaw or standard operating procedure.

The AMSCA has not yet created its website and the information provided on the ministry website is limited to basic facts, the mandate and competencies and a link

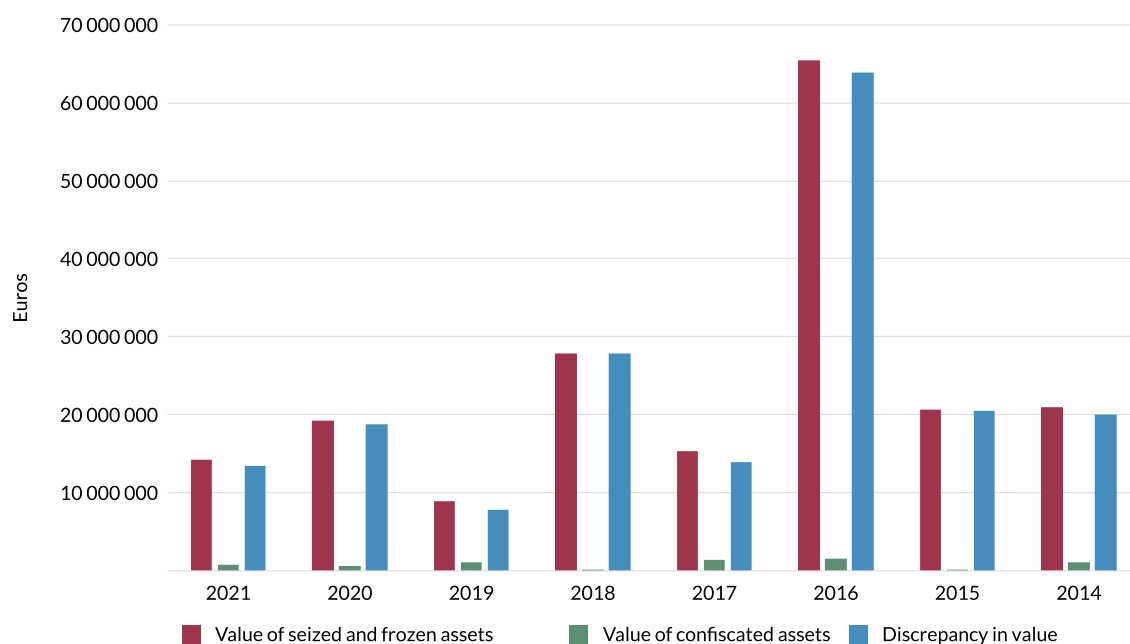


FIGURE 1 Discrepancy between the value of seized and frozen assets with final confiscations.

Source: Kosovo Prosecutorial Council

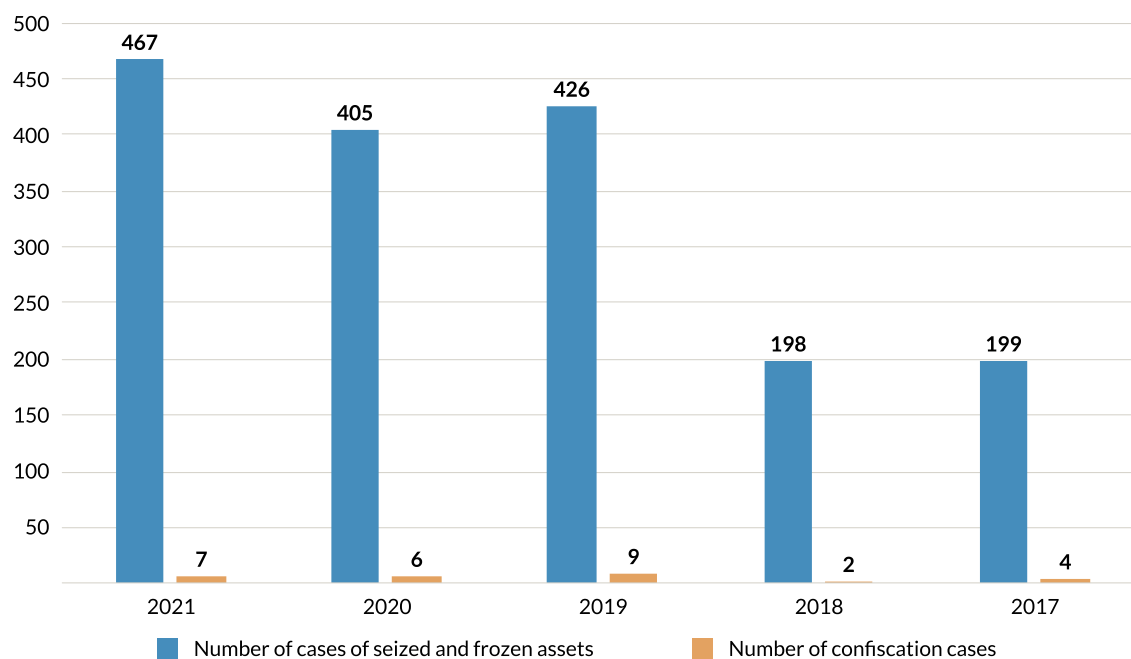


FIGURE 2 Number of cases of seized, frozen and confiscated assets.

Source: Office of the State Prosecutor

to calls for auction. Until April 2022, 67 calls had been published.¹⁴ However, there is no public information available on the outcome of these auctions.

New developments

The lack of results on permanent confiscation of assets led the new government to initiate in 2021 a draft law to establish a State Bureau for Verification and Confiscation of Unjustified Wealth and allow non-conviction-based confiscation.¹⁵ Once operational, this would allow confiscation of unlawfully obtained assets in civil proceedings and in the absence of a criminal conviction. When the bureau during its verification procedure notices a discrepancy between income and assets of more than €25 000, it sends the case to the court for civil confiscation proceedings.¹⁶ This law would be applicable only to official persons,¹⁷ their family members, politically exposed persons and third parties, and would enable the bureau to confiscate unexplained wealth accumulated since 2008, until 10 years after cessation of their official function.¹⁸

In October 2021, the European Commission emphasized that the draft law should be in line with the constitution and fundamental rights and envisage clear safeguards against possible misuse and abuse.¹⁹ The new draft law has been scrutinized by the Kosovo Law Institute, which identified insufficient measures to ensure independence of the bureau as well as concerns regarding the provision of proof in the confiscation procedure.²⁰ The opposition parties opposed the draft law on the grounds that it violates the constitution and lacks provisions to ensure its independence from political interference.²¹ As a result, the Speaker of the Assembly, following the request of opposition parties, sent the draft law for an opinion to the Venice Commission. On 20 June 2022, the commission issued its opinion and identified a number of shortcomings that could result in infringements of fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of Kosovo and the European Charter for Human Rights. Moreover, the commission argued that if the government proceeds with the establishment of the bureau, it should provide strong guarantees for the bureau's independence, a sufficient number of specialized staff and adequate powers.²² The assembly adopted the draft law in July 2022 on the first reading. It remains to be seen how the Venice Commission's recommendations will be addressed before the second and final approval.²³

The National Coordinator on Combating Economic Crime supports this initiative, which he views as an important

piece to complete the legislative framework. However, he noted that limiting the scope only to official persons, their family members, politically exposed persons and third parties is a major shortcoming.²⁴

In parallel, the government is pursuing the establishment of a confiscation fund and has adopted the Concept Paper on Confiscation Fund on June 2022.²⁵ A government grant will be established within the AMSCA that would enable assets to be reused for social purposes and the needs of institutions, including capacity-building activities.²⁶ The initial proposal to distribute by a specific percentage the confiscation fund for compensation of victims, judiciary and law enforcement agencies, social reuse and state budget was removed from the final adopted draft.²⁷ The criteria for application and distribution of funds and assets should be regulated by the new law or bylaw which will ensure transparency and accountability as well as unbiased decision making. A GI-TOC report on social reuse of confiscated assets details some good examples in this regard from countries in the region, which could provide inspiration to Kosovo.²⁸

Steps ahead

In order to improve results, confiscation of assets needs to be prioritized, especially by the prosecution and judiciary. Prosecutors' performance needs to be strengthened by developing and strictly implementing a system with specific targets and indicators for asset confiscation. There should also be more joint training between law enforcement agencies, prosecutors and judges. It is important that the office of the National Coordinator on Combating Economic Crime is fully staffed with representatives of law enforcement agencies in line with the regulation in order to effectively implement its mandate.

The list of seized or confiscated assets managed by the AMSCA needs to be easily accessible by the public in order to ensure transparency and accountability, especially for those assets that are sold, rented or transferred. The ongoing legislative changes could ensure social reuse of confiscated facilities and funds that would give significant support to NGOs providing shelter to victims of crime, rehabilitation of drug users, youth projects or other social services at local and national level. This could be an important step in increasing the risks and lowering the benefits of organized crime and corruption and using some of the ill-gotten gains for the benefit of society.

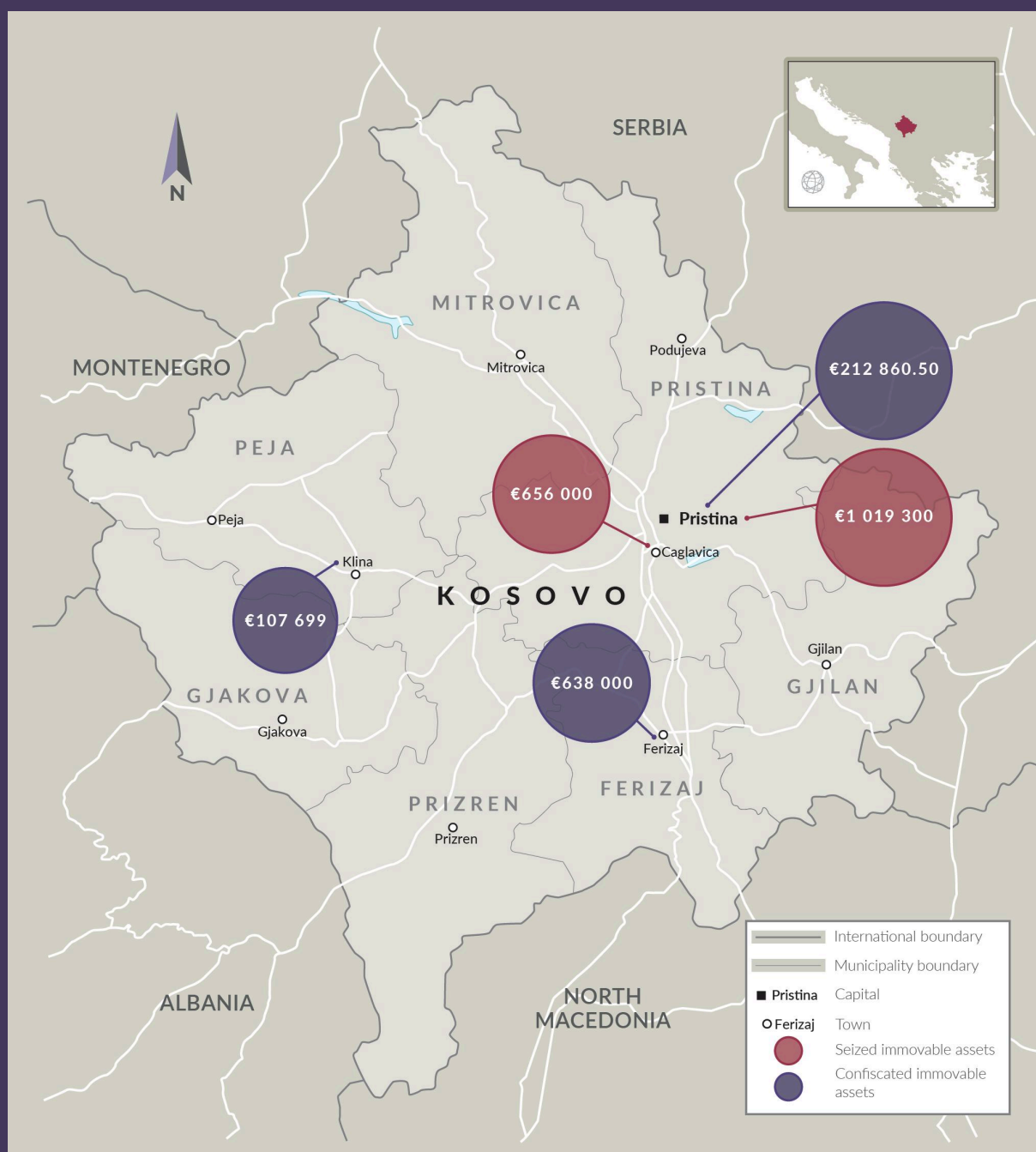


FIGURE 3 Seized and confiscated immovable assets in Kosovo under the management of AMSCA until April 2022.

Source: AMSCA

Notes

- 1 For the purpose of this article, 'seizure' is used instead of 'sequestered', which is the term used in Kosovo's legislation.
- 2 Code no.04/L-123 Procedure Code, Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo, 28 December 2012, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2861>.
- 3 In 2016, the value of seized and frozen assets was between €60 411 328 and €70 411 328. For the purpose of analysis and visualization of data in Chart 1, the median value (€65 511 328) was selected.
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- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Law no. 05/L-049 on the Management of Sequestered and Confiscated Assets, Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo, 14 April 2016, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=12360>.
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- 17 The draft Law on the State Bureau for Verification and Confiscation of Unjustified Assets has defined official persons as: those who perform official duties in a state body; a person elected, appointed or nominated to a state body, a local government body or a person who permanently or temporarily performs official duties or official functions in those bodies; a person in an institution, enterprise or any other entity entrusted with the exercise of public authority, who decides on the rights, obligations or interests of natural or legal persons or in the public interest an official person is also considered the person entrusted with the actual performance of certain official duties or affairs, a military person.
- 18 Government of the Republic of Kosovo, Draft Law on the State Bureau for Verification and Confiscation of Unjustified Wealth, 29 December 2021, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Projektligji-per-Byrone-Shteterore-per-Verifikimin-dhe-Konfiskimin-e-Pas....pdf>.
- 19 European Commission, Kosovo Country Report 2021, 19 October 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/kosovo-report-2021_en.
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- 25 Office of the Prime Minister, 84th meeting of the Government, 22 June 2022, <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/blog/mbledhja-e-84-te-e-qeverise>.
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Balkans fighters are taking up arms in Ukraine, with risks for organized crime.

The war in Ukraine has displaced some criminal markets (such as heroin trafficking) and created new opportunities for organized crime, for example for the trafficking of weapons, synthetic drugs and people. Indeed, a recent European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) meeting convened by EUROPOL warned that the war in Ukraine may have an impact on 10 criminal markets and 'high-risk criminal networks'.¹ As dire as this warning is, it fails to mention the potential threat to security and political stability in the Western Balkan Six (WB6) posed by fighters returning from the war in Ukraine. The threat seems not to have been addressed by EU policymakers or the governments of the WB6,² whether in national anti-terror strategies or organized crime threat assessments.³

Recent studies have shown that organized criminal groups, including those from the WB6, have sophisticated modus operandi and recruitment methods. For example, groups from the WB6 have extended their networks as far as Latin America, South Africa and the Middle East.⁴ In the past, young men with combat experience from the wars in the former Yugoslavia became foot soldiers for criminal groups, both in the WB6 and abroad. They were entrepreneurs in the market for violence, and were hired as thugs, bodyguards, snipers, hitmen and communications experts, as well as for smuggling weapons and setting explosives. Today, criminal groups from the WB6 operating in the region and abroad seek individuals with military skills, including firearms and explosives training, communications and counter-surveillance, or the ability to smuggle cash or drugs and to neutralize adversaries using sophisticated killing methods.⁵ Some of the most powerful criminal organizations in the region and in other major criminal markets such as Latin America are led by – or have been composed of – militarily trained individuals.⁶ Organized criminal groups are increasingly looking to such people;⁷ returned foreign fighters may therefore be a target group. While there is no strong evidence to suggest that there is a direct link between returned foreign fighters and organized criminal groups in the WB6, this risk should be taken seriously, not least because of the region's history as both a source of and destination for foreign fighters.

In the past, the WB6 has been both a destination and source region for foreign fighters. It is believed that the number of foreign fighters engaged on all sides during the wars in the former Yugoslavia did not exceed 5% of the total number of all fighters.⁸ Nevertheless, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnic Serbian fighters were supported by foreign fighters known as 'kontraktniki' or contracted fighters arriving mainly from countries that shared an Orthodox religious affiliation, such as Russia, Greece, Romania, Ukraine and Poland.⁹ Around 700 Russian foreign fighters participated in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone, according to the Republic of Srpska government.¹⁰ The Bosniak side was supported by a few hundred foreign fighters (estimates range from 400 to 1 200), mainly from the Middle East.¹¹ During the war in Kosovo in 1998/99, hundreds of foreign fighters joined the Kosovo Liberation Army, mainly from Albania, North Macedonia, Sweden, Belgium, the UK, Germany and the US.¹² Even during the conflict in what was then the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 2001, fighters came from Kosovo to support the ethnic Albanian side, while the Macedonian Security Forces were supplied with air power from Ukraine until July 2001.¹³

On the other hand, the WB6 is also a region that 'exports' foreign fighters. For example, it is estimated that around 1 000 young men and women from the WB6 joined the Islamic State in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq between 2012 and 2016.¹⁴ There have been concerns about the radicalization of those who returned.¹⁵

Furthermore, there are indications that Serbian citizens who sided with the pro-Russian forces in Crimea in 2014 came from Serbian paramilitary forces.¹⁶ Therefore, the danger of foreign fighters is not only that they may return with radicalized ideological or political views, but also that they former criminals may return to a life of crime with heightened combat experience, new networks and thus access to new illicit economies.¹⁷

Balkan fighters in Ukraine

It is estimated that about 1 500 foreign fighters from around the world joined the fighting during the first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (up to June 2016).¹⁸ In the second invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there were

about 36 000 as of July 2022.¹⁹ When viewed alongside the estimated 40 000 foreign fighters who joined the Islamic State during its four-year presence in Syria and Iraq (2014–2018), the number of foreign fighters who joined the second conflict (2022) in Ukraine in just the first months of the war is relatively high. Already in the first years (2022) of the crisis in and around Ukraine, it is thought that around 300 individuals from the WB6 took part in the fighting, some of them joining pro-Russian separatists and others the Ukrainian volunteer battalions.²⁰ Serbia was among the principal providers of combatants fighting alongside pro-Russian separatists with approximately 100 men.²¹ It is alleged that some of them contributed also to the annexation of Crimea in 2014.²²

It is not yet clear how many foreign fighters from the WB6 have been engaged in the fighting in Ukraine since February 2022. According to the press, many ethnic Serbs from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina volunteered to join the Russian side,²³ including as part of the Wagner Group.²⁴

On the other hand, during the outbreak of the war in February 2022, the Foreign Minister of Russia, Sergei Lavrov, declared that mercenaries from Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are recruited and

transferred to Donbas in Ukraine to fight against Moscow-backed rebels.²⁵ Representatives of Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina have denied that there are mercenaries from their countries in Ukraine, and alleged that claims by Russia to the contrary are 'false accusations'.²⁶

Profile and motivation of foreign fighters

In his detailed study of foreign fighters with extremist ideological backgrounds in the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, Kacper Rekawek notes that Western foreign fighters on both sides came from different ideological backgrounds, including the far right, far left and red-brown national communist. Those arriving in 2022, however, seem less radicalized and politicized.²⁷

When it comes to the background and motivations of the fighters from the WB6 joining the current war in Ukraine, some seem to have been motivated by nationalistic, ideological (such as right-wing extremism) or religious reasons, while others are simply mercenaries. Some fighters from Croatia claimed to be supporting Ukraine because it was 'among the first countries to acknowledge Croatia's sovereignty' in 1991 and had later helped the country 'after the earthquakes in Zagreb and Banovina' in 2020.²⁸ Some pro-Russian fighters



Several thousand men from south-eastern Europe have taken up arms to fight on either the Russian or Ukrainian side in the war in Ukraine.

Photo: Goran Uzunovic/EyeEM

from Serbia are allegedly motivated by Slavic solidarity,²⁹ gratitude for support from Russia in previous conflicts (for example, the Republic of Srpska crisis),³⁰ revenge against the West or links to far-right organizations such as Serbian group the People's Patrols.³¹ Although participants are mainly young people under the influence of propaganda and ideology, some are veterans from the wars in the former Yugoslavia.³² There is a danger that individuals who participate in units with a high degree of political and ideological orientation will – if they survive – return home with both combat experience and radicalized views.³³

Studies on the motives of foreign fighters from the WB6 joining the Islamic State and the 2014 invasion of Ukraine also show that some foreign fighters with criminal backgrounds joined conflicts abroad in order to escape criminal prosecution at home.³⁴

Effectiveness of the WB6 in dealing with returning fighters

The countries of the WB6 have had some experience in dealing with the return of foreign fighters who had joined Islamic State in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Almost all affected countries in the WB6 are carrying

out rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for people repatriated from areas of conflict since 2020, mostly non-combatant minors and women, but also adult male fighters.³⁵ This is particularly important as in some cases, such as in Kosovo, repatriated men and women have been imprisoned on terrorism charges.³⁶ These programmes include psychological and religious counselling for inmates, social support for families and development of new employment programmes for those re-entering society.³⁷

It should be noted that all WB6 countries adopted UN Security Council resolutions 2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017) aimed at preventing the recruitment and travel of foreign terrorist fighters and ensuring that states develop prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies to deal with returning fighters.³⁸ However, most WB6 countries have not signed the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, which entered into force in 2001.³⁹ The risk of not signing this Convention paves the way for countries in the region to allow the use, financing and training of mercenaries who can be hired by international organized crime groups to commit criminal actions and destabilize the rule of law.



The training of officers for the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Photo: Ministry of Defence of Ukraine

The WB6 have amended their legislation to criminalize all forms of participation in armed conflict abroad,⁴⁰ with Serbia the only country in the region that has not explicitly criminalized public support for travelling abroad to conflict zones. Criminal offences for foreign fighters vary, but Albania and Kosovo have the harshest punishments, with prison sentences of between five and 15 years.⁴¹

The issue of the return of foreign fighters – which received considerable attention when hundreds of people from the region joined the Islamic State – deserves a closer look. It can be argued that the risk of

radicalization of men fighting in Ukraine is lower than among those who fought in the Middle East. Indeed, thus far the links between organized crime and foreign fighters in Ukraine from the Balkans appear to be weak. Nevertheless, the return of young men from the WB6 fighting in Ukraine could swell the ranks of paramilitaries, heighten inter-ethnic tensions and increase the pool of potential foot soldiers for criminal groups, as witnessed after the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Therefore, threat assessment strategies on fighting organized crime and terrorism should monitor and analyze the potential risks posed by returning foreign fighters.

Notes

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Fraudulent or illegally obtained Balkans documents are permitting ease of travel for criminals worldwide.

Police investigating organized criminal groups in or from the Western Balkans repeatedly point to a common thread – the ease with which many criminals travel the world using fake passports or illegally obtained immigration documents from countries of the region. By definition, transnational organized crime moves across borders. Some of this illicit activity is carried out virtually, using cyberspace, encrypted communication networks or cryptocurrencies. But for many activities associated with crimes like trafficking, criminals need to physically move across borders and they do not want to be detected. Therefore, they may need fake documents.

According to some investigators consulted for this article, the frequency of the problem in the Western Balkans suggests that there are groups that prepare forged documents as a criminal service. Criminals combine real and fabricated identification information to create so-called synthetic or fake identities which they can use to travel under the radar or to pass a financial institution's identity verification processes. However, with the introduction of biometric documents, the production of fake documents is not as common as it used to be. Instead, criminals tend to use genuine documents or modify them to carry out illegal activities.¹

There are two main ways that criminals obtain such documents. Either they physically alter a valid passport that is stolen or purchased on the black market by changing the photo or biographical data, or they illegally purchase a valid passport in their own name or under an alias by bribing a corrupt official. In doing so, a criminal wanted abroad may change their identity and move around undetected as a citizen of a Western Balkans country. Alternatively, criminals from the Western Balkans may obtain travel documents from an EU country and move freely within the Schengen area. It is also not unusual for criminals from the region to have multiple identities to avoid detection and enable them to commit fraud.

Identifying such people is made more difficult by the fact that there is little sharing of data among law enforcement officials in the Western Balkans region. There is a tendency to work through INTERPOL rather than collaborate directly.²

Recently, there have been a number of cases that revealed that corrupt officials have been illegally issuing passports to people to enable them to avoid criminal prosecution in other countries. The biggest problem identified has been in North Macedonia in the case



FIGURE 1 Comparative ranking of WB6 passports.

Source: Passport Index, <https://www.passportindex.org>

known to the public as 'Dvojnik'. In April 2021, North Macedonian opposition party VMRO-DPMNE alleged that at least 215 passports had been issued by the Ministry of the Interior to foreign criminals and high-risk individuals, including a number of top bosses of criminal groups.³ Exposing the depth of the scandal is the case of Turkish crime lord Sedat Peker, previously convicted of criminal underworld-related activities, who received a North Macedonian passport using a fake identity.⁴ Photos posted on social media showed an off-duty policeman acting as a bodyguard to Peker as he walked through the streets of Skopje.⁵

Another high-level criminal identified in this scandal was Jovan Vukotić.⁶ Vukotić was allegedly the head of the Montenegrin Škaljari clan, one of the two biggest drug trafficking groups in the Western Balkans, and was wanted in Greece on suspicion of drug trafficking and other serious crimes. He was arrested in Turkey in 2018 and sent to Serbia, where he served a 15-month sentence for using a fake passport, before being extradited to Montenegro in February 2020. He was wanted in Montenegro for attempted murder, but the prosecution suspended the proceedings against him in July 2020. After he was released from jail in January 2022, the prosecution charged him with evading €22 800 in taxes. A few months later, he was killed in Istanbul.⁷ According to information from the Turkish police, Vukotić had illegally entered Turkey with a passport from North Macedonia which he had obtained in Kosovo under the false name Predrag Popović.⁸

In November 2022, the media revealed that Ukrainian businessman and politician Oleksandr Onyshchenko had obtained his third North Macedonian passport under questionable circumstances.⁹ Onyshchenko has been on the US sanctions list since January 2021 for being a 'member of the Russian network meddling in the US presidential election'. Additionally, Onyshchenko is wanted in Ukraine; he fled the country in 2016 after the anti-corruption commission opened an investigation into him for money laundering and corruption related to the sale of gas.¹⁰ Just five months after receiving citizenship from North Macedonia in May 2022, Onyshchenko competed for his new country at a show jumping competition in Saint-Tropez, France.¹¹ However, on 3 December 2022, North Macedonian authorities withdrew the citizenship granted to the Ukrainian fugitive and revoked his passport.¹²

The scale of the practice of selling passports to shady individuals has raised eyebrows both in North Macedonia and among the country's friends.

North Macedonia is not the only country in south-eastern Europe to have a problem with fake passports, however. In 2022, the Hellenic police, supported by EUROPOL, dismantled a criminal network that was involved in the production and dissemination of fake documents in Greece. EUROPOL had initiated the investigation in March 2021 and discovered that the gang had established a print shop in Athens for the forgery of different travel documents. In June 2022, the authorities arrested eight suspects who had supplied migrant smugglers with travel documents and thus facilitated illegal entries from Egypt to the EU, seizing 362 forged documents.¹³

In early November 2022, Serbian police officers from the Department for Suppression of Organized Financial Crime, in cooperation with members of the Service for Combating Terrorism and Extremism, arrested three criminals from Novi Pazar on suspicion of producing and selling forged documents. Serbian media reports on the case claimed that the criminal group had been selling the documents on the black market for €500 each.¹⁴

In Albania, over 1 200 people have been arrested since 2016 for visa and passport fraud. A major investigation carried out in 2021 revealed that the highest demand for fake passports was coming from Asian citizens reaching out to criminal groups in Albania, as well as people seeking travel documents to access the UK and the US.¹⁵ Albanians are the most common victims of trafficking in the UK, with some of the victims having forged passports. Rather than claiming asylum, some migrants choose to disappear and work illegally in the UK, before returning home. The cost of buying a fake passport or a forged transport document for the UK varies between €5 000 and €10 000.¹⁶

Balkan mobsters are allegedly buying Croatian passports to facilitate their entry into the EU.¹⁷ The Croatian passports enable easy access to the EU, especially now that Croatia is part of the Schengen area. In the past, several reportedly high-profile crime figures from Serbia have been arrested with fake Croatian passports, including Sinisa Petric, Vladimir 'The Fool' Milisavljević and his boss, Luka 'The Baker' Bojovic.¹⁸ More recently, there have been a number of cases in which Croatian documents were obtained illegally,¹⁹ including the high-

profile case of Filip Korać (who is reported to have links with key criminal actors in the Balkan underworld), who was handed a one-year suspended prison sentence in June 2022 for forging a Croatian passport.²⁰

The Croatian Bureau for Combating Corruption and Organized Crime carried out an investigation which revealed that between 2017 and November 2019, at least 42 Croatian identity cards and more than 40 passports based on fake Serbian identification documents were produced and sold at a cost of at least €3 500 per document.²¹ The investigation led to the arrest of 19 people.²²

It has also been reported that hundreds of people, including criminals, have managed to obtain counterfeit Bosnian identity and travel documents, which resulted in raids and arrests by Croatian police officers as part of the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA).²³ For example, Balkan mobsters from the notorious Kavač clan, Almir Jahović and Radoje Živković, were arrested in Turkey on suspicion of murder and found to be using fake passports issued in Bosnia and Herzegovina.²⁴

Another factor influencing the illegal take-up of Bosnian identity is that unlike in neighbouring countries, in Bosnia and Herzegovina a prison sentence of less than one year can be avoided by paying a fine.²⁵ According to research by the Center for Investigative Journalism, courts in Bosnia and Herzegovina allowed convicts to buy out a total of 263 years of imprisonment at a cost of almost €4.6 million between 2017 and 2019.²⁶ Criminals from Serbia and Croatia therefore use Bosnian citizenship, transferring their sentences there in order to avoid prison time.²⁷

Bosnia and Herzegovina is also being used as a transit point for people with forged documents trying to enter the EU. According to Bosnian border police, ethnic Chechen citizens of Russia have recently been trying to enter Bosnia and Herzegovina through Sarajevo and Tuzla airports using the visa-free regime.²⁸ They carried falsified residence permits from some EU countries and travelled with the intention of entering the EU.

The security risks posed by fake passports issued by countries in south-eastern Europe deserve closer attention and tighter controls. Forged travel documents or



A customs officer checks a passport at the Horgos crossing at the Serbia–Hungary border in December 2009. The EU allowed visa-free travel inside the 27-country bloc for Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro from 19 December.

Photo: Reuters/Djordje Kojadinovic

dubiously acquired genuine documents are a key facilitator of organized crime. They enable criminals or politically exposed persons to move undetected. Furthermore, such documents become a criminal market in themselves: fraudulent documents are used and traded extensively among organized criminal groups. This practice also damages the reputation of the countries where these documents are being produced or issued.

National authorities in the region need to develop better control assessment strategies, and to work with partners in the region (such as the EU and Turkey) to monitor the situation. There is also a greater need to share information on fake travel documents and aliases. This is a topic that should be a priority for regional cooperation – for example, through the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center and the Migration Asylum Refugee Regional Initiative, both of which have called for closer law enforcement cooperation on travel document security.

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Bosnia and Herzegovina faces law enforcement challenges in countering human smuggling.

In 2015, thousands of refugees and migrants moved along the so-called Balkans route, trying to reach Western Europe. While the issue has received less attention in recent years, the number of people on the move through the region increased in 2022 and with it concern about what to do. Since it is now much more difficult to transit the region than it was five years ago, because of increased border controls (including more pushbacks)¹ and the erection of fences in some areas, there is an increased demand for smugglers to facilitate border crossings. Indeed, since Croatia joined the Schengen area on 1 January 2023, its border with Bosnia and Herzegovina takes on added significance as the EU's outer border. The market for migrant smuggling was estimated by the GI-TOC in 2020 to have a value of at least €50 million.² One of the most lucrative routes for smugglers is between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia.³

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains one of the key transit countries through the Western Balkans. To discuss the law enforcement challenges of coping with migrant smuggling, the GI-TOC teamed up with the International Police Association in Bosnia and Herzegovina to co-

organize the seventh Balkan Adriatic international conference.⁴ The meeting, held in Sarajevo from 18 to 20 November 2022 in partnership with the Ministry of Interior Affairs of the Canton of Sarajevo, brought together over 110 representatives from law enforcement and security agencies from countries along the Balkans route as well as key destination countries.⁵ Held under Chatham House rules, the meeting enabled participants to share views on dealing with common challenges, enhancing cross-border cooperation and improving coordination between relevant domestic stakeholders, particularly between law enforcement and civil society.

Among the points discussed was the origin countries of people on the move through the Western Balkans (such as Afghanistan, Algeria, Burundi, Cuba, Iran and Pakistan), as well as the modalities of smuggling migrants. There are reports of a growing number of Russian citizens arriving by plane – for example, from Istanbul and Belgrade – and trying to transit Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the EU.⁶ According to police estimates, in 2022, over 90%⁷ of migrants entering



Delegates of the seventh Balkan Adriatic international conference, held in Sarajevo in November 2022.

Photo: supplied

Bosnia and Herzegovina paid to be smuggled across the border from Serbia.⁸ There have also been reports of criminal groups selling weapons to migrants. These weapons are allegedly used to enable some migrants to engage in criminal activity, including extortion, smuggling their compatriots or dealing in cell phones, cigarettes or forged papers.⁹

It was also noted that an increasing number of migrant smugglers are from countries outside the Western Balkans region, but that they have regional connections in transit countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. In some cases, these criminal groups are recruiting migrants (including minors) to act as guides, lookouts and liaisons, or for rowing boats or rafts across rivers, for example, between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As reported in a previous Risk Bulletin, the Brcko region appears to be a weak link here. This self-governing district, which borders Croatia, is alleged to be a hotspot for smuggling of migrants, particularly Turkish citizens, across the Sava River into Croatia.¹⁰

Discussions were also held on the grey area between migrant smuggling and human trafficking, particularly how migrants who draw on the services of traffickers may become victims of human trafficking if they get stuck along the route (for example, if they run out of money), or when they arrive at the country of destination and are indebted to a trafficker. In the latter case, they may become victims of forced labour, prostitution, debt bondage or extortion, or be compelled to commit criminal acts.¹¹ The line between smuggling and trafficking is thin, and it presents a complex problem for law enforcement and prosecutors in investigating

and building cases, but also for further prosecution and conviction by the judiciary. The situation is complicated by the fact that the jurisdiction for migrant smuggling in Bosnia and Herzegovina is at the state level, while the responsibility for human trafficking lies with the entity or cantonal judicial institutions. This perhaps helps to explain why there are few convictions for human trafficking and smuggling in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹²

Participants discussed the practical and legal challenges of addressing the issue, and the role of civil society in providing support to people on the move while also countering human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is also the challenge of researching and reporting on the topic. First-hand accounts were given at the meeting by two migrants who are now seeking asylum in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Women from law enforcement who took part in the meeting spoke up about the need to have more women in decision-making roles in law enforcement, and for more women to be engaged in the field, particularly to deal with vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied children.

Among the conclusions of the meeting was the need for a multi-sector response to the problem, and closer cooperation between government, law enforcement and civil society actors, as well as greater cross-border cooperation to cope more effectively with this transnational challenge. On 15 December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was formally accepted as a candidate to join the EU. Moving forward, one of the biggest challenges will be to more effectively manage its more than 1 500 kilometers of land borders.

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The GI-TOC co-organized a colloquium in Athens to address the lack of topics on organized crime in Western Balkans higher education.

It is often said that there is a need for evidence-based policies and greater analysis of organized crime and cooperation. Nevertheless, these topics are difficult to research, owing to the covert nature of organized crime. To address this dilemma, the GI-TOC, the European Public Law Organization and Panteion University's European Centre for Criminal Justice co-organized a scientific colloquium in partnership with Balkan Criminology and the South Eastern Europe Academic Anti-Corruption Network on 21–22 October 2022 in Athens. The event brought together over 80 individuals, including academics from the region, international organizations, Greek university students and representatives from the Greek justice department and government entities (such as the National Transparency Authority) to create a forum for the exchange of knowledge and to further develop learning opportunities.

As documented in a forthcoming GI-TOC report, 'Gap analysis of research on illicit economies in the Western Balkans', 'criminological research capacity in the field of organized crime is generally weak' in the Western Balkans. The gap analysis shows that between 2017 and 2021, 514 research works on illicit economies were published by researchers from academia, civil society, governments and international and regional organizations. Academic journals make up just 36% of the total number of publications. However, PhD theses account for less than 5% of the total, showing the lack of young researcher interest in topics related to corruption and organized crime. Furthermore, research is predominantly donor-driven. According to one researcher, 'if it were not for donors, there would be no research into organized crime and corruption' in the Western Balkans.¹



Constantine Palicarsky, Ugljesa Zvekic, Dimitris Ziouvas and John Collins take part in a colloquium in Athens in October 2022 designed to enhance collaborative research on organized crime.

Photo: supplied

One reason for limited research on organized crime and corruption in the region is the general lack of educational programmes focused on teaching courses on organized crime and corruption at all levels of academia in the region. This could be attributed to the absence of state support for studying these topics, limited information exchange and lack of cooperation between academics in the region, insufficient development of methodology in specialized faculties over the past 30 years, shortage of attractive programmes of study or the perception of a lack of viable career paths after graduation. Furthermore, academics from the region tend to publish in their native languages, which limits access by peers from other countries of the region or by internationally recognized journals.

To address these shortcomings, the symposium in Athens enabled scholars to showcase their work and discuss how to expand research on organized crime and corruption. Over the course of the two-day event, academics teaching at universities in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia had the opportunity to present to both an in-person and online audience the specialized organized crime and anti-corruption masters and PhD courses offered at their respective universities. Examples include the University of Milan's three-year doctoral programme in Studies on Organized Crime. They also shared experiences and good practices on research methodologies, skills and knowledge and were able to strengthen their networks.

In addition, participants learned about resources offered by international organizations. For example, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime presented their Global Resource for Anti-Corruption Education and Youth Empowerment initiative, which features organized crime, corruption and integrity teaching modules and manuals available for academics, educators, anti-corruption authorities and youth. Transparency International Greece spoke about the use of grand corruption cases for teaching purposes, and presented their Corruption Perception Index.² The Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative delved into the role of education in enhancing regional cooperation against corruption, while the International Anti-Corruption Academy presented their specialized anti-corruption master's degree courses. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit spoke about its broad youth-engagement efforts, and contributed to a thought-

provoking panel on the potential effects on organized crime of cannabis legalization in the region. Last, but not least, the GI-TOC presented its flagship report, the Global Organized Crime Index,³ as well as the main findings of its forthcoming Balkans gap analysis report and recent anti-corruption publications, namely, the 'Infrastructure of integrity' series.⁴

One of the recurring themes of the symposium was the need for greater education on corruption and organized crime to strengthen the knowledge base on these topics and to enhance prevention and a culture of integrity. This point was also made at the May 2022 Šibenik Conference on a 'Culture of Integrity', which brought together justice ministers, specialized anti-corruption agencies, international organizations, academia, law enforcement and civil society from the Western Balkans and the surrounding region. The earlier students and public servants are exposed to and learn about the harms and consequences of organized crime and corruption, the more likely it is that we can successfully bridge the disconnect between the education system and the job market on these issues.

Another reason to improve higher education on organized crime and corruption is to increase the pool of potential experts who could find employment in relevant criminal justice and law enforcement jobs, as well as more specialized fields such as financial intelligence, cybersecurity and criminology. That said, the challenge is to shape the curricula in ways that provide students in tertiary education with the skillset that they need to analyze and combat crime in the real world.

Increasing the knowledge base on organized crime and corruption can also improve evidence-based policy and contribute to more effective strategic responses. A challenge in this respect is to break down the barriers between academia, civil society and law enforcement in order to encourage more cross-fertilization between the respective fields – to their mutual benefit.

Among the ideas for follow up include specialized organized crime and corruption summer schools, and the development of tailored curriculum development. The colloquium model tested in south-eastern Europe could also be replicated in other parts of the world to promote the regional and global exchange of knowledge between academia, international organizations and students.

Notes

- 1 See Gap analysis of research on illicit economies in the Western Balkans, GI-TOC, forthcoming.
- 2 See <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021>.
- 3 See <https://ocindex.net>.
- 4 See, for example, Uglješa Ugi Zvekić and Sunčana Roksandić Vidlička, Corruption and anti-corruption pledges in the Western Balkans, GI-TOC, October 2020, [https://globalinitiative.net/wp-](https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Infrastructure-of-Integrity-GI-TOC.pdf)

[content/uploads/2020/10/Infrastructure-of-Integrity-GI-TOC.pdf](https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Infrastructure-of-Integrity-GI-TOC.pdf).

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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.

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