

# OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

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## Summary highlights



### **Serbia's controversial draft law on policing has shortcomings for combating organized crime.**

In December 2022, the Serbian government's proposals to regulate policing in the country caused a public outcry over potential threats to citizens' rights and the further politicization of police work. As a result, the government is holding public consultations with civil society and police unions to revise the draft legislation. With increased power given to the interior minister, the proposed law also contains some setbacks for the fight against organized crime. Efforts to redraft the legislation should therefore be welcomed.



### **Smuggling of antiquities threatens North Macedonia's cultural heritage.**

North Macedonia's geographic position at the crossroads of historical civilizations makes it an attractive destination for people seeking to steal and traffic artefacts from archaeological sites. Organized groups operating in North Macedonia are believed to have connections with foreign dealers who sell the stolen items on European black markets and abroad. Several incidents over the past decade demonstrate the threat

posed to the country's rich cultural heritage by illicit trafficking in cultural property. Greater public awareness and international cooperation are essential for disrupting the trade.



### **Indoor cannabis cultivation is a growing industry in Kosovo.**

Before 2019, indoor cannabis cultivation in Kosovo was rare and primarily destined for personal use. However, in the past three years there has been an increase in large-scale cannabis cultivation in laboratories – most of which is destined for foreign markets. Through an analysis of primary data and interviews with key officials and experts, this article explores the reasons behind this increase, hotspots of cultivation and the profile of those arrested for this crime.



### **The Bosnian border town of Gradiška: a hotspot of organized crime and a gateway to the Schengen zone.**

Organized criminal groups are taking advantage of Croatia having joined the Schengen zone at the start of 2023 to move illicit goods from Bosnia and Herzegovina



into the EU. As a result, the border town of Gradiška, in north-western Bosnia and Herzegovina, has become a hotspot of smuggling and trafficking in drugs, weapons and migrants. Intelligence sharing and joint operations with neighbouring countries are essential to combat this rising tide of criminality.



### **Unaccompanied minors are facing perilous journeys on the Western Balkan migration route to the EU.**

Unaccompanied children who travel to the EU via the Western Balkans are at high risk of becoming victims of human trafficking and of being sexually exploited. Growing numbers of unaccompanied minors travelling on the Balkan route, particularly young boys from Afghanistan, have only exacerbated the issue. Better communication and coordination between law enforcement agencies and organizations working in

migrant camps is needed to safeguard children on the move.



### **Albanian organized crime groups have become key players in Italy's criminal landscape, prompting targeted operations from authorities.**

Albanian criminal groups in Italy have evolved from small-time criminals to significant players in certain illicit economies, such as cocaine and cannabis trafficking. These groups have expanded their area of operations from large cities such as Rome to smaller towns and rural communities, particularly in the north of the country. They have legitimized their role as equal partners of the traditional Italian mafia, leading law enforcement in the country to increasingly focus their operations on these mafia-style groups from Albania.

## **ABOUT THIS ISSUE**

The Risk Bulletin produced by the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime usually provides insights into current high-profile organized crime issues. The 15th issue instead focuses on organized crime developments in the region that have attracted less public attention but are equally in need of monitoring.

First, we turn to Serbia, where a new government proposal to regulate policing has been met with public backlash. The draft policing law is not only seen as a potential threat to citizens' rights, but it also contains several shortcomings for countering organized crime. As the government convenes public consultations with civil society and police unions to redraft the law, it remains to be seen whether the new policing regulation will help the country achieve the recommendations set out by the European Commission.

Two criminal markets that receive little attention in the Western Balkans are the smuggling of antiquities and indoor cannabis cultivation. The second and third articles shed light on these issues, exploring how the smuggling of antiquities threatens North Macedonia's cultural heritage and examining the reasons behind the increase in indoor cannabis growth in Kosovo.

Continuing our focus on hotspots of illicit economies in South Eastern Europe, we look at the Bosnian town of Gradiška, which lies near the border with Croatia. Although the town has long been a hub for smuggling, it seems to have become a gateway for smugglers wanting to access EU markets ever since Croatia joined the Schengen zone in early 2023.

Another risk that receives little attention is the plight of children moving along the Balkan route towards the EU, many of whom are fleeing human rights abuses in their home countries. This is compounded by risks of exploitation during their journey. Their stories are seldom heard because they are afraid to come forward for fear of reprisals or of being sent home.

A recurrent aim of this Risk Bulletin is to monitor the activities of Western Balkan criminal groups operating outside the region. The final article in this issue profiles the rise of the Italo-Albanian mafia, criminal groups that have permeated the Italian organized crime landscape.

As always, we are interested in your feedback and suggestions for new stories. If you would like to get in touch or if you have an idea for a story, please contact [Vanja.Petrovic@globalinitiative.net](mailto:Vanja.Petrovic@globalinitiative.net).

# Serbia's controversial draft law on policing has shortcomings for combating organized crime.

The third effort to reform legislation on policing in Serbia since 2000 has caused much public outcry.<sup>1</sup> Civil society objections to the legislation centre on the possibility that it would allow the police to enter a private residence without a court order, lead to the introduction of mass biometric video surveillance, ban the recording of police officers seen violating the law and permit police the use of excessive force.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, with increased power given to the interior minister, the law contains some setbacks for the fight against organized crime. Efforts to revise the legislation should therefore be welcomed.

The negative public reaction to the proposed Draft Law on Internal Affairs was so strong that the government has decided to hold wide-ranging public consultations on the draft, a relatively unusual step for Serbia.<sup>3</sup> In January 2023, the first consultations between the government and civil society took place. This dialogue helped to improve the draft law and build trust between the criminal justice sector and civil society.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the dialogue, two of the initial resolutions were dropped: the proposal that police should be allowed to enter a private residence

without a court order and the motion to enable the police to break up protests using sonic weapons.<sup>5</sup>

A positive aspect of the law is that it further specifies and delineates internal police responsibilities and duties. Police integrity is strengthened by regulating secondary jobs, or those performed by off-duty police officers, that are incompatible with the policing profession, and anti-corruption measures (such as integrity tests and asset declarations) have also been improved.<sup>6</sup> Parliamentary oversight of the police, crucial for maintaining police integrity, remains unchanged,<sup>7</sup> and parliamentarians can still monitor the legality of special investigative measures, such as telecommunications interception or the use of force.<sup>8</sup> In addition, external oversight has been enhanced through more detailed periodic publicly available reports, the right to access information of public importance and the right to file complaints.<sup>9</sup> Police officers have also welcomed the re-establishment of the High School of Internal Affairs,<sup>10</sup> which was closed in 2007,<sup>11</sup> believing that secondary education will improve police professionalism and enable screening of candidates.<sup>12</sup>



During protests in December 2022, Serbian citizens called for a halt to the draft law on policing.

Photo: Vesna Anđić via RFE/RL

However, while the draft law contains several positive aspects, there are four significant shortcomings in relation to the fight against organized crime, as the European Commission has repeatedly noted in its progress reports.<sup>13</sup> Some of the provisions threaten police autonomy and have consequences for organized corruption, in particular.

First, instead of allowing for operational independence of the police in line with international standards,<sup>14</sup> the draft law enables the interior minister – that is, a political figure – to issue mandatory instructions.<sup>15</sup> This undermines the functional autonomy of the police and strengthens the position of the minister, particularly since there is no provision for the police director to refuse such an instruction or report a potential violation of the law.<sup>16</sup>

Under the current draft, the minister, rather than the police director, prescribes almost all by-laws in the policing domain, such as the application of the use of force and how police work is performed. Furthermore, the government can dismiss the director upon the minister's proposal, even if the reasons for the dismissal are not prescribed in the draft law. This is a regression

from the current law, in which dismissal is possible only if the director fails to achieve results within the competencies defined for the position.<sup>17</sup>

The draft law also provides that the police director could be someone from outside the policing profession,<sup>18</sup> contrary to the current law.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, security and intelligence service affiliates with the status of authorized officials and at least 15 years of experience in management positions could apply for the position of police director. This would allow someone with strong political ties to be appointed as police director.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, the draft law indirectly undermines the subordination of the police to the prosecution in criminal investigations by specifying that police officers should carry out the orders of their superiors.<sup>21</sup> This potentially endangers the leading role of the prosecutor towards the police, since the positions of police superior and prosecutor are sometimes different, especially in politically sensitive cases. An analysis of 200 investigations showed that, in every second case, the prosecutor had to urge the police to act on his/her orders.<sup>22</sup>



**At the January 2023 consultations, civil society and government representatives discussed the future of policing legislation in Serbia.**

*Photo: Ivana Lazarević via National Convention on the European Union*

Thirdly, the draft permits the interior minister a greater role in influencing human resources, thus possibly politicizing the police. Under the draft law, the minister can also personally promote or send a police officer into early retirement.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the draft law does not remove the possibility, present in the current law, that the interior minister can influence the work of the Internal Control Sector, an important body for preventing corruption in the police force. According to the new provisions, the minister controls the head of the sector and all employees.<sup>24</sup> In managing the sector, the minister is allowed to form a commission whose composition and work procedures are unregulated, which poses a threat to the sector's political, functional and operational independence.

Hopefully, the dialogue process can overcome these shortcomings in the current draft law before the revision process is finalized in late 2023.<sup>25</sup> As noted above, the main issues to be addressed involve maintaining the operational autonomy of the police; avoiding political interference on strictly professional issues, such as human

resources and working conditions; ensuring police accountability to the prosecution in criminal investigations; and guaranteeing the independence of the bodies responsible for internal police monitoring and oversight.

The new policing regulation in Serbia is not only an opportunity to fulfil the European Commission's recommendations, but also to show that the police force is an indispensable element of stability and security that operates on the basis of democratic principles rather than fear. The consultative process could help achieve at least one of the three democratic principles identified at the beginning of police reform in Serbia in the initial years of the 2000s: decentralization, depoliticization and demilitarization. Splitting the draft law into two separate laws – as occurred in Croatia, Slovenia and North Macedonia – could provide a model for depoliticizing the police. The first law would cover police duties, for which the police director would be accountable. The interior minister would then be responsible for implementation of the second law on legislation on internal affairs and police development.

## Notes

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# Smuggling of antiquities threatens North Macedonia's cultural heritage.

North Macedonia's geographic position at the crossroads of historical civilizations makes it an attractive destination for people seeking to steal and traffic artefacts from archaeological sites. Organized groups operating in North Macedonia are believed to have good connections with foreign dealers who sell the stolen items on European black markets.<sup>1</sup> There is also thought to be a growing market in Asia for artefacts stolen from North Macedonia.<sup>2</sup> Independent investigative research suggests that over 100 000 items have been taken from historical sites in North Macedonia and transported around the world.<sup>3</sup>

Several incidents over the past decade demonstrate the threat posed to the rich cultural heritage of this Balkan country by illicit trafficking in cultural property. Most recently, in December 2022, 12 people were arrested in North Macedonia for being part of an organized criminal group involved in the theft of antiquities. The case, made public by the Interior Ministry on 13 December 2022, revealed that the criminal group had allegedly operated for a long time around the towns of Prilep, Strumica, Probishtip, Negotino, Kumanovo, Sveti Nikole, Kavadarci and Kocani. The police operation resulted in the seizure of various archaeological artefacts, including coins, metal objects and figurines, in addition to metal detectors, weapons and ammunition.<sup>4</sup>

The December arrests followed an incident in October 2022 in which four Ukrainians were arrested on suspicion of illegally digging for artefacts at one of North Macedonia's richest archaeological sites – Isar, located near the village of Marvinci in the south.<sup>5</sup> According to the official police statement, the suspects were arrested after officers caught them digging at the protected site, which features remnants of a temple and a stadium designed in the ancient Roman style. Two metal detectors, shovels and several excavated objects were found with suspects.

In 2021, the public prosecutor's office charged eight people with illegally digging to extract items of cultural heritage. The accused, who were caught digging in unauthorized exploration and excavation locations on registered and unregistered archaeological sites near Skopje, Makedonski Brod, Kichevo and Veles, face between three and five years in prison. The investigators found artefacts hidden in the homes of the accused and unveiled a network of collaborators from Greece, Turkey, Albania, Croatia, Serbia and the US, who sold the artefacts to interested buyers.<sup>6</sup>

Trafficking in cultural property has long been a problem for law enforcement in North Macedonia. In 2010, the authorities arrested 48 people, including local politicians and archaeologists, in a nationwide operation against the



**Cultural artefacts seized in police raids in North Macedonia.**

*Photo: Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia*

illegal antiquities trade.<sup>7</sup> Between then and 2014, the police carried out several major operations to expose artefact smugglers. The operations 'Phalanga' and 'Apollo' brought down a network of organized crime schemes that, in addition to illegally procured archaeological and historical objects, were offering icons for sale that had been stolen from churches. Investigations also showed that the suspects had used highly sophisticated equipment to locate metal objects buried in graves. According to official reports, the police found two highly valued icons, nine archaeological figures, three brooches, six pieces of jewellery, 17 coins and two ceramic vessels, as well as several pieces of equipment, including scanners and metal detectors, maps and sketches of archaeological sites, and weapons and ammunition.<sup>8</sup>

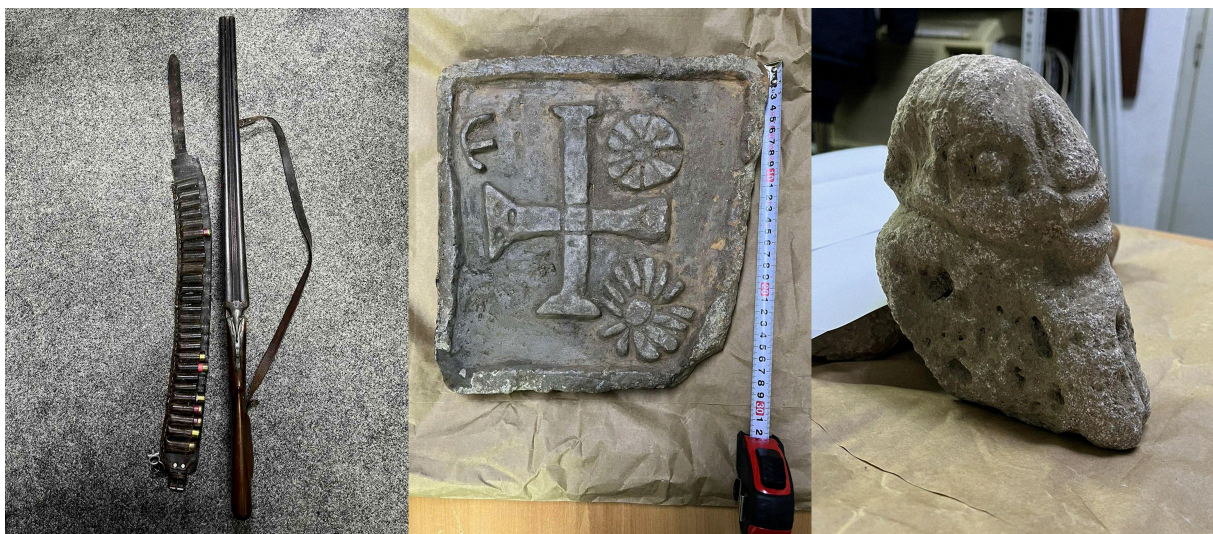
As operations 'Phalanga' and 'Apollo' revealed, religious art from North Macedonia's churches is also being targeted for trafficking. There are some 20 000 icons from Macedonian churches and monasteries that have been trafficked out of the country into private collections around the world. For example, in 2009, six icons of St John the Theologian Kaneo of inestimable value were taken from Ohrid and returned by INTERPOL, only to be stolen again and never found.<sup>9</sup> Icons stolen from the monastery of St Naum, just south of Ohrid, are also still missing.<sup>10</sup>

In 2014, Serbian daily *Blic* reported that more than 10 valuable religious objects had been stolen from churches in North Macedonia over the previous decade. The

paper cited Ohrid-based curator Milcho Georgievski, who pointed out that artefacts stolen from Macedonian churches and archaeological sites are being sold at secret auctions in Western Europe and ending up in private collections. The process of restitution or return is practically impossible.

Nevertheless, the police continue with attempts to prosecute traffickers and recover artefacts. In 2021, Macedonian police reported 160 stolen archaeological objects and icons to the INTERPOL base. Some of the icons and items that were reported stolen have been published on the Interior Ministry's website.<sup>11</sup> Also in 2021, police arrested a group of eight men in North Macedonia accused of participating in multiple illegal excavations across the country with the aim of selling antiquities abroad.<sup>12</sup> According to the official report, police raided homes and other premises linked with the suspects at 10 locations in the southern town of Bitola and the north-western town of Tetovo. They seized a large number of artefacts, including ancient figurines and jewellery, as well as firearms and metal detectors.

The serious problem of the illegal artefact and cultural heritage trade in North Macedonia appears to be part of a global trend. According to the Assistant Director-General for Culture at the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the illicit trade reportedly represents five per cent of the estimated €45 billion antiquities market.<sup>13</sup> The substantial value of the artwork and antiquities market, which has skyrocketed since the 1990s, can be attributed in part to technological



**North Macedonian police recovered historical artefacts in a raid on a suspected antiquities smuggling operation in December 2022.**

*Photo: Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia*



development, with buyers and sellers now connecting online, as well as increased globalization that allows greater communication and ease of travel.<sup>14</sup> Growing interconnectivity has also helped criminals explore the dark side of finding and collecting artefacts and cultural heritage. This trend, according to UNESCO, is ongoing, not just in established cultural heritage sites but also in places 'where we didn't know antiquities existed'.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the issue of stolen cultural property is gaining greater international attention. For example, in late 2022, the 11th Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) adopted a resolution on the trafficking in cultural property, which is not specifically covered by the convention and its protocols.<sup>16</sup> The resolution focuses on strengthening crime prevention and criminal justice responses to protect cultural property and calls on member states to categorize trafficking in cultural property as a serious crime (as defined by the UNTOC) to facilitate international cooperation. The resolution also requests that states take measures to raise public awareness, mount media campaigns and build institutional capacity.<sup>17</sup>

These two things – public awareness and international cooperation – are essential for disrupting the illegal artefact trade in North Macedonia. A lack of awareness and neglect of cultural heritage accompanied by weak institutions enables criminals to exploit opportunities that are often overlooked or even facilitated by law enforcement and government ministers due to corruption or poor governance. Combating trafficking in cultural property therefore requires a multi-sectoral

approach, involving civil society; the criminal justice system; the private sector (particularly those involved in logistics, IT platforms and auction houses); and historians, archaeologists and government agencies responsible for protecting cultural heritage.

Given that the illegal trade in cultural artefacts is not occurring in a vacuum, but rather makes use of existing organized crime routes, the response should be holistic and 'glocal'. This would involve attempts to understand specific local conditions and to strengthen local resilience, while analyzing the ecosystem in which this crime operates, including the transnational enablers, drivers and networks.

Finally, the issue should be seen and addressed within the broader context of disrupting illicit economies. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – currently chaired by North Macedonia – working with INTERPOL has observed that the illegal trade in cultural goods is sometimes linked to the illegal arms trade, human trafficking and migrant smuggling.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, UNESCO has taken the position that the illicit trafficking of cultural property contributes significantly to the funding of terrorism, organized crime and money laundering. In 2017, the UN Security Council formally recognized that threats to cultural heritage are a major security issue that the international community has a direct responsibility to protect against.<sup>19</sup> Given the security dynamics in the Western Balkans regarding organized crime, international terrorism and ongoing geopolitical competition, the region should make addressing the illegal trade in artefacts a priority.

## Notes

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# Indoor cannabis cultivation is a growing industry in Kosovo.

Cannabis is the most-consumed illicit drug in the Western Balkans and the EU, with the cannabis trade accounting for around 38% of the retail market for illicit drugs in the EU.<sup>1</sup> Globally, the growth in indoor cultivation has surpassed that of outdoor cultivation.<sup>2</sup> Criminal groups from the Western Balkans are increasingly involved in indoor cannabis cultivation in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

In the Global Organized Crime Index 2021, Kosovo – a destination and transit country for illicit drugs – scored 5.5 on the illicit cannabis trade, a score higher than the global (5.10) and European (4.88) averages and slightly lower than the Western Balkans average (5.90).<sup>4</sup> Cultivation of cannabis has been a relatively rare crime in Kosovo, prevalent mainly in remote areas near Peja, Gjakova, Podujeva, Gjilan and Suhareka.<sup>5</sup> While there were attempts to cultivate large quantities of cannabis outdoors, Kosovo police were able to identify plantations at an early stage and dismantle crime groups. The police did this despite limited capacities, including a lack of helicopters and drones.<sup>6</sup> Indoor cannabis cultivation has been even rarer and has mainly included cases of cultivation in apartments for personal use.

From 2019 to 2022, 3 990 drug trafficking cases were reported in Kosovo, for which 4 267 people were arrested. Only 2.6% of these cases and 2.1% of people arrested were related to the cultivation of cannabis (indoors and outdoors).<sup>7</sup> However, since 2022 there has been a trend towards the detection of more cannabis laboratories and increased arrests. In 2022, police found 10 laboratories and arrested 28 people. These were the highest numbers of arrests and laboratories detected since 2019, apparently due to the increasing number of such labs as well as more intense police pursuit.<sup>8</sup> Although most of the cannabis produced indoors is aimed at foreign markets in Europe and Turkey (where it is often exchanged for heroin), small quantities are also sold on the local market.<sup>9</sup>

Several factors have led to the higher rate of indoor cannabis cultivation in Kosovo. Intensified operations of the Albanian State Police to dismantle outdoor cannabis production in Albania have made it more difficult to produce and smuggle cannabis from Albania. This has led to smaller quantities being smuggled into the region at a higher price. As Kosovo is both a destination and transit country for the drug, the price of cannabis



**FIGURE 1** Number of cannabis laboratories detected and people arrested for cannabis cultivation, 2019–2022.

Source: Kosovo Police

started increasing yearly, particularly since 2019.<sup>10</sup> So far, no Albanian nationals have been arrested in cases of indoor cannabis cultivation, although several were arrested for trafficking drugs in Kosovo.

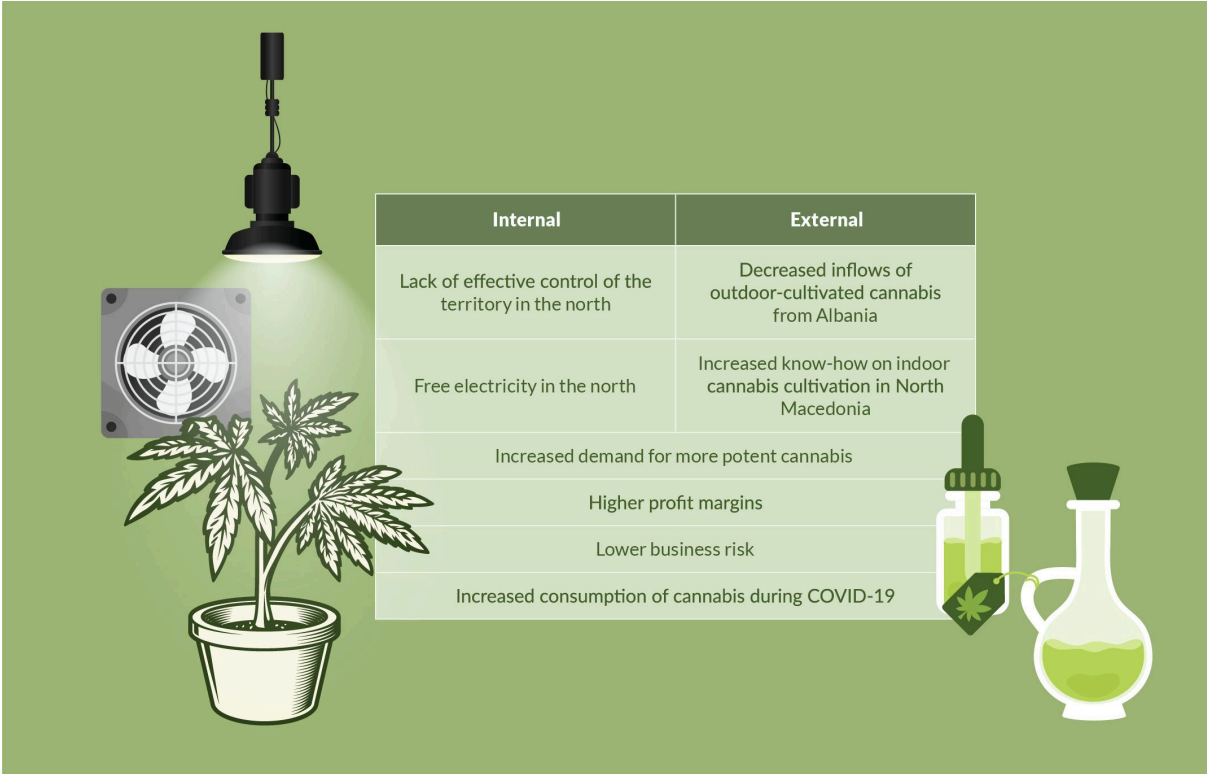
Another factor is that cannabis cultivated indoors has a higher percentage of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).<sup>11</sup> Data from European countries shows that the potency and price of cannabis have increased since 2006.<sup>12</sup> Globally, the growth in indoor cannabis cultivation has surpassed that of outdoor cultivation<sup>13</sup> and thus there is an increasing demand for cannabis cultivated indoors in Kosovo, Europe and elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> In addition, profit generated from indoor cultivation is higher compared to outdoor cultivation, as it produces higher yields and faster growth – up to six harvests per year.<sup>15</sup> On Kosovo’s domestic market, the wholesale price of 1 kilogram of cannabis produced indoors is between €2 000 and €2 500, compared to €800 to €1 600 per kilogram of cannabis produced outdoors. In the region, indoor cannabis is priced at around €3 000; in Turkey, it reaches almost €6 000 per kilogram.

There is also a lower risk of detection for laboratories compared to outdoor cannabis plantations.<sup>16</sup> Not only is it easier to protect indoor plantations, but technology enables growers to remotely control watering and

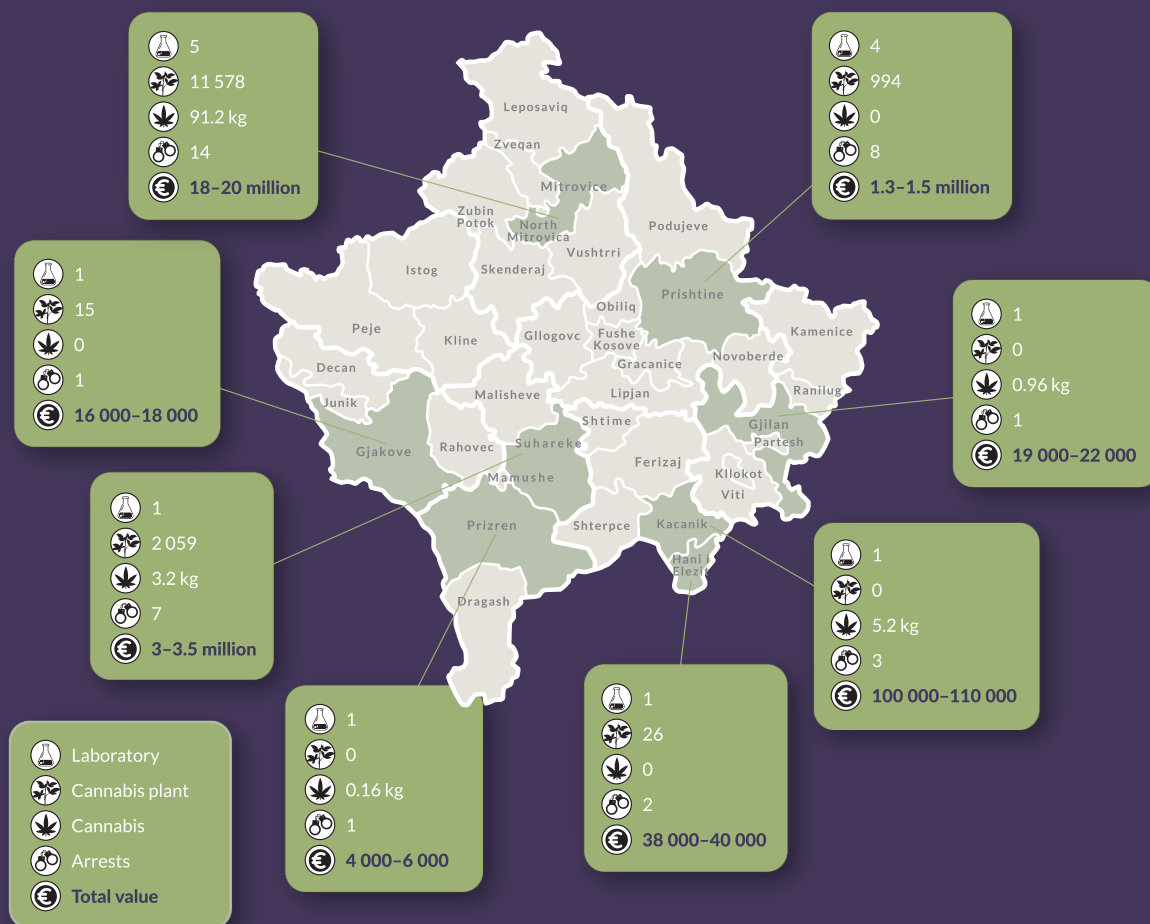
temperature and monitor lab security through cameras. It also requires fewer visits to the location, which limits growers’ exposure to law enforcement and neighbours. In contrast, outside plants are subjected to variable weather conditions that can affect yield, are visible despite often being in remote areas and require more in-person visits.

Northern Kosovo has been a hotspot for crime, smuggling of licit and illicit goods, and illegal cryptocurrency mining, and has provided a haven for criminals and fugitives.<sup>17</sup> Despite continuous efforts by government institutions and law enforcement agencies, the area remains largely uncontrolled. Territorial integrity is one of the 12 building blocks for resilience to organized crime measured in the Global Organized Crime Index, on which Kosovo scored only 3.5 points out of 10 – the lowest in the Western Balkans.<sup>18</sup> Kosovo’s lack of effective control of its territory in the north, combined with free electricity, proximity to Serbia and cooperation with criminal groups there have enabled the growth of cannabis laboratories in the region.<sup>19</sup>

The legalization of cannabis production in North Macedonia and the production of hemp extracts for medical purposes has created knowledge of and expertise in establishing laboratories. There is suspicion



**FIGURE 2** Factors influencing indoor cannabis cultivation in Kosovo.



**FIGURE 3** Detected laboratories by municipality.

Source: Kosovo Police and GI-TOC estimations

that some engineers from North Macedonia who were arrested in Kosovo provided professional support in setting up laboratories there.<sup>20</sup> In addition, 50 kilograms of cannabis from North Macedonia were confiscated in Kosovo in 2020. It is believed that it was smuggled from legal laboratories in North Macedonia.<sup>21</sup> The fact that 1.5 tonnes of cannabis were stolen from licensed warehouses in North Macedonia in 2022 indicates that legally produced cannabis is being diverted to illicit markets at home or abroad.<sup>22</sup>

Lastly, despite restrictions on movement during the COVID-19 pandemic, organized criminal groups in the Western Balkans proved resilient, adapting their operating methods to deal with disruptions to their illicit

business model.<sup>23</sup> Although less cannabis appears to have been available on the market during the first months of lockdown,<sup>24</sup> cannabis consumption grew due to more frequent and intensive use.<sup>25</sup> Since the pandemic further increased inequality and limited employment opportunities, it may have pushed some people into drug cultivation and trafficking.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it appears that the pandemic has contributed to the increase in indoor cannabis cultivation in Kosovo.

In 2019–2021, most of the four laboratories detected were small ones located in Pristina; in 2022, half of the 10 detected laboratories were found in the north of Kosovo.<sup>27</sup> It is believed that the laboratories in the north were created in late 2021 and early 2022.<sup>28</sup> Their

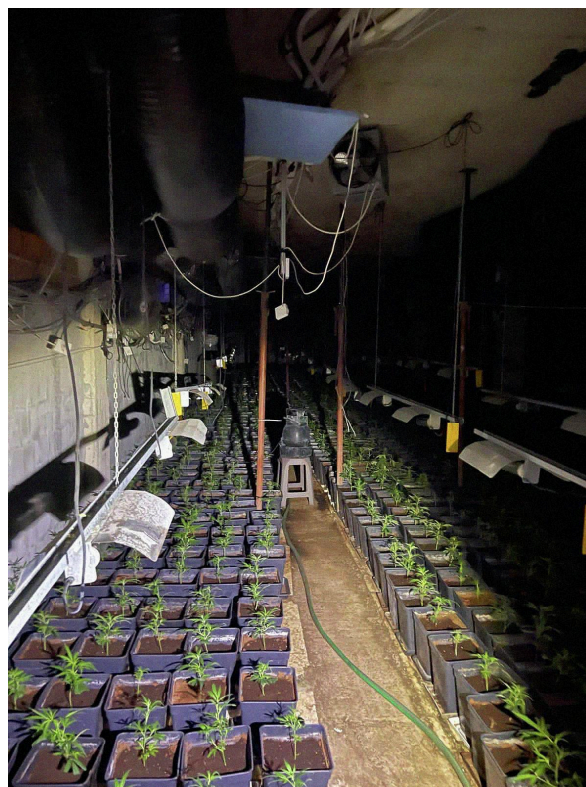
detection was a result of increased presence and operations conducted by police and customs officials, particularly to curb smuggling of illicit goods and illegal cryptocurrency mining. Of the cannabis plants and cannabis seized in laboratories across Kosovo in 2019–2022, 79% of plants and 91% of cannabis were confiscated in the north.<sup>29</sup> The lab equipment originated in Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia.<sup>30</sup>

The Kosovo police lack the capacity and experts necessary to determine the value of seized cannabis plants and equipment used in the illegal laboratories; police reports show only an approximate value of cannabis on the market in Kosovo.<sup>31</sup> Based on police estimates, the total value of cannabis and equipment seized in 2019–2022 is between €24 and €28 million.<sup>32</sup> Kosovo's prime minister has stated that the five illicit laboratories detected in the north are valued at several hundred million euros, an overestimation in discrepancy with official records of each operation.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most sophisticated laboratories was identified in May 2022 near the Izvor border crossing point with Serbia. The 9 084 cannabis plants confiscated there are assumed to be the second yield.<sup>34</sup> This lab had advanced equipment and technology, such as remote-controlled watering and ventilation, as well as surveillance cameras, which obviated the need for frequent visits to the 1 200-square metre facility.<sup>35</sup> The estimated value of the lab and its equipment is close to €1 million.<sup>36</sup> Initially, the police assumed that the facility was being used for illegal cryptocurrency mining due to the noise caused by the ventilation system. They conducted a joint operation with customs officers, during which they were shot at with firearms; the perpetrators managed to escape.<sup>37</sup> Suspects in this case have been identified but not yet arrested, as they have reportedly fled abroad.<sup>38</sup>

In February 2022, a laboratory was discovered on the seventh floor of a mill in Suhareka, near Prizren, in south Kosovo. The mill was chosen to avoid raising suspicion about the high energy consumption.<sup>39</sup> Police seized more than 2 000 plants and 3.2 kilograms of cannabis, with a market value of over €1 million.<sup>40</sup>

The profile and nationality of the perpetrators varied by the region in which laboratories were located, but all were men between the ages of 20 and 40.<sup>41</sup> Serbian citizens and ethnic Serbs from Kosovo were arrested in the laboratories detected in the north. In the Suhareka

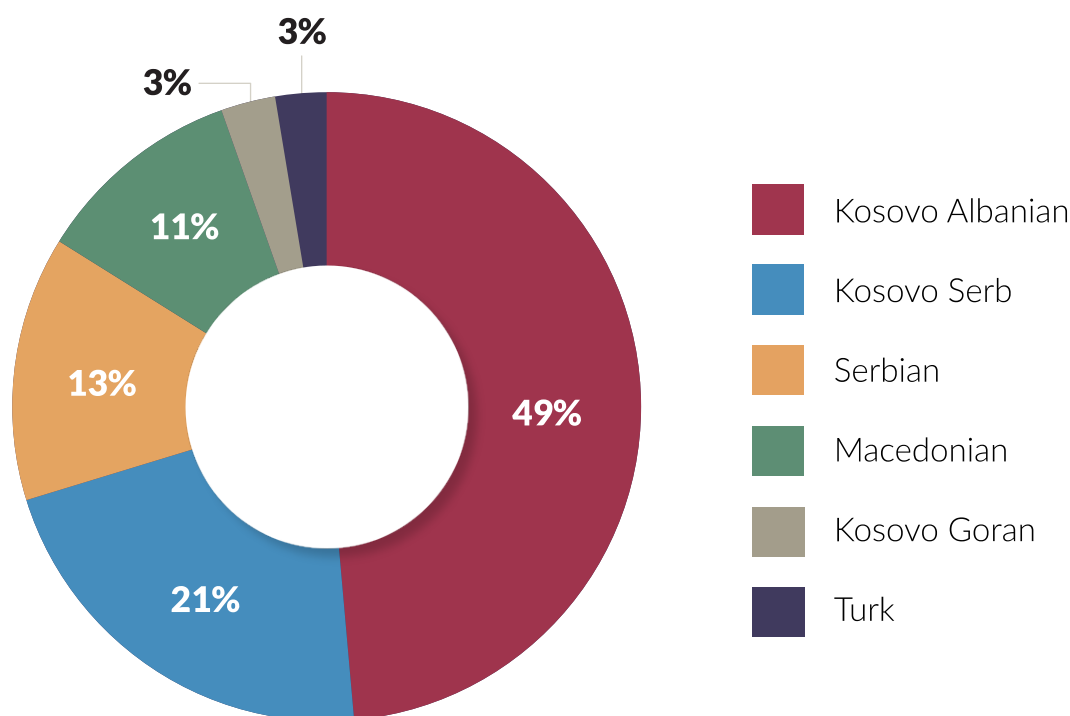


**A cannabis laboratory found near the Izvor border crossing point, northern Kosovo.**

*Photo: Kosovo Police*

laboratory, two Kosovars were arrested, along with a Turkish national and four citizens of North Macedonia. The latter, all of whom were engineers, are suspected of being experts in installing equipment and cultivation activities in Suhareka and other labs in the north. Authorities suspect that the Turkish national cooperated with this group to transport cannabis to Turkey.<sup>42</sup> Nationals of North Macedonia were also arrested in laboratories discovered in Pristina. While some of those arrested have a criminal background, there is no indication of whether they are part of a criminal organization.<sup>43</sup>

Indoor cultivation of cannabis is increasingly popular in the Western Balkans, in line with the trend in Europe and worldwide. Law enforcement agencies should allocate adequate resources and prioritize detecting individuals and criminal groups engaged in indoor cultivation, as well as their illegal drug laboratories. As we have seen in Kosovo, indoor cannabis cultivation is a transnational organized crime in which trends in one country easily affect others. Cannabis production in Albania and the transfer of know-how from legalized cannabis production in North Macedonia have affected illicit cannabis production in Kosovo and the region. Thus, law



**FIGURE 4 Nationality/ethnicity of those arrested for indoor cannabis cultivation, 2019–2022.**

Source: Kosovo Police

enforcement agencies in the region need to proactively exchange information and enhance cooperation.

Kosovo’s results in 2022 were achieved by the effectiveness of enhanced cooperation between law enforcement and the prosecution, in which the Kosovo

police played a significant role. Law enforcement agencies were thus able to keep indoor cannabis cultivation under control. However, as criminal groups continuously adapt their business model, it will be challenging for law enforcement to keep pace.

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# The Bosnian border town of Gradiška: a hotspot of organized crime and a gateway to the Schengen zone.

The town of Gradiška,<sup>1</sup> located close to the Croatian border in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was scarred by war crimes and ethnic cleansing of the Bosniak and Croat population during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> While some of the perpetrators were convicted,<sup>3</sup> other former combatants moved on to a life of crime.<sup>4</sup> This has enabled Gradiška's development, over the past 20 years, into a hotspot for trafficking in drugs, weapons and – most recently – migrants. Smugglers are taking advantage of Gradiška's strategic location, situated directly on the Sava River and along the main highway north from Banja Luka, making the town a gateway to the Schengen zone.

Over the past 10 years, Gradiška's criminal groups have become more organized and transnational, linking up with networks operating in neighbouring Croatia and Serbia, as well as Montenegro and other European countries. In

2016, for example, an international police operation, codenamed 'Crown', revealed that criminals – including members of a group led by one of Europe's biggest drug lords, Darko Šarić – were able to move easily across regional borders and evade police detection. They did so with passports and identity cards made using data stolen from Bosnian citizens. The data allegedly cost €3 000, and the documents were issued by public offices in Gradiška and the nearby town of Srbac.<sup>5</sup>

In February 2019, as part of operation 'Vitorog', officers of the Directorate for Organized and Serious Crime in the Republic of Srpska's Interior Ministry arrested five people from Gradiška and one person from Trebinje in the far south for the unauthorized production and trafficking of cannabis and synthetic drugs.<sup>6</sup> During the searches, police seized skunk, heroin and firearms.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in December 2020, Republic of Srpska police seized around



**Situated near the Croatian border, the town of Gradiška has become a gateway for smugglers seeking to access markets in the EU.**

*Photo: Elvis Barukcic/AFP via Getty Images*

460 kilograms of skunk in Gradiška,<sup>8</sup> arresting a Bosnian and a Hungarian citizen in connection.<sup>9</sup>

However, the true scope of Gradiška's role in smuggling and the strength of its transnational connections were revealed through operation 'Storage 2', led by the State Investigation and Protection Agency and the Republic of Srpska's Interior Ministry in 2021.<sup>10</sup> In December 2021, police arrested 19 people – 14 of whom were from Gradiška – for their involvement in international drug and weapons smuggling as part of an organized criminal group since 2019. They were arrested thanks, in large part, to information gained by police through decryption of Sky and Anom messaging apps.<sup>11</sup> Among those captured were the fugitives Predrag Petkovic, Milivoj Lovrenović and Dusan Lovrenović (Milivoj's son), who were all wanted for drug smuggling.

The group had reportedly procured large quantities of cannabis from Albania and Montenegro, which they brought to Bosnia and Herzegovina and stored near Gradiška. Some of the drugs were resold in Bosnia and

Herzegovina, but most were allegedly repackaged and smuggled on to Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary and Germany. Drugs and weapons were transported across the border, usually in vehicles with specially constructed compartments for concealment. The drugs were taken across by people known to the group in Zagreb and Split, and then transported on to Budapest, Stuttgart and Berlin. Guns – mostly gas pistols from Slovakia – were modified and sold to customers in Germany, the Netherlands and Serbia. According to the investigation documents, the group apparently earned a significant amount of money, which was used to purchase real estate and luxury cars.<sup>12</sup> Police discovered a laboratory for cannabis cultivation, about €50 000 in cash, weapons and 11 expensive cars, all of which were confiscated.<sup>13</sup>

A separate operation, codenamed 'Fugitiv', was carried out in the Gradiška area in December 2022.<sup>14</sup> As a result, six people were arrested, including an employee of the Intelligence and Security Agency in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for the unauthorized production and trafficking of drugs between 2020 and 2022.<sup>15</sup>

## FIGHT OR FLIGHT IN GRADIŠKA'S CRIMINAL UNDERWORLD

For decades, Gradiška has been used in the smuggling of migrants, firearms, drugs and cigarettes. Yet the history of organized crime in the town also includes mafia-style assassinations, starting with the murder in 2003 of local thug Goran Kotur. According to data from the Republic of Srpska's Interior Ministry, there have been 10 professional mafia-style assassinations in the Republic of Srpska over the past decade – all of which remain unsolved. Two of these murders, carried out in 2015 and 2018 and targeting actors from the region's underworld, took place in Gradiška. Security experts say that most of these killings follow the same pattern: the victim is tracked to identify vulnerabilities, and the only items left behind after the murder are a burning vehicle and a destroyed weapon. The assassins usually use automatic rifles or snipers and, in most cases, probably come from a neighbouring country.<sup>16</sup>

On 10 October 2015, a well-known criminal, Milan Vujičić, was shot dead in front of the Kasper café in Gradiška in a mafia-style assassination.<sup>17</sup> The assassin fired four bullets, and Vujičić was hit in the chest. Vujičić had previously been arrested and accused of extortion

around Banja Luka, Prijedor and Gradiška. Then, in July 2018, Gradiška witnessed the assassination of Senad Kobilic, a controversial businessman from Sarajevo. He was killed by a bullet from a sniper rifle while he was sitting with his friends in front of the Dom café in the nearby village of Liskovac.<sup>18</sup> Kobilic had a criminal record and had previously been arrested for kidnapping, racketeering, extortion, and possession and trafficking of firearms and explosives, and sentenced to prison for illegal possession of weapons. He was linked with high-ranked mafia actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who had been convicted of organized criminal activity.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to mafia style assassinations, several murders with direct links to organized crime have taken place in Gradiška. In September 2009, for example, Gradiška police arrested Stevo Švraka, who is suspected of killing Ilija Vujičić and seriously wounding his son with a rifle on the Sava River near the town. Švraka and Vujičić had been smuggling goods across the river, at the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, when the conflict occurred.<sup>20</sup>

## The criminals strike back

The disruption of illicit economies in Gradiška has led to acts of retribution being carried out against law enforcement officials. According to information from the Bosnian police, in May 2022, criminals set fire to two houses, one of which was owned by the chief of police in Gradiška and the other by a retired police officer.<sup>21</sup> The Republic of Srpska police believe that the attacks were retaliations against justice system officials for trying to take down criminal groups.<sup>22</sup> Owing to the large amount of drugs, money, vehicles and firearms seized, as well as the number of people arrested as a result of these attacks, it is believed that the organized criminal group responsible, whose members are mostly from Gradiška, is one of the largest in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The group appears to have a well-established network of contacts in the region and elsewhere in Europe, including within police and judicial structures.<sup>23</sup>

Although Gradiška is in a vulnerable geographical position near the Croatian border, and has a recent history of violent criminal activity, the level of cross-border police cooperation seems to be less than that among criminals. Greater cooperation – including intelligence sharing and joint operations – is crucial. The recent international conference co-organized by the International Police Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime underscored the importance of networking and cooperation between members of the police and security structures.<sup>24</sup> The challenge is to now convert this into joint action against criminal activity, particularly in border towns such as Gradiška, which act as gateways to the EU.

## Notes

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# Unaccompanied minors are facing perilous journeys on the Western Balkan migration route to the EU.

In February 2023, Slovenian police – in cooperation with law enforcement authorities from Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Italy and Romania – arrested 13 suspected human smugglers. Hailing from Slovenia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the arrested were suspected of being responsible for smuggling over 200 migrants into the EU. Along with weapons and thousands of rounds of ammunition, the police found illicit drugs and cash.<sup>1</sup>

The criminals advertised their illicit activities – including videos documenting successful transports – on various social media platforms to lure migrants into being smuggled across the borders. They moved migrants along two main routes, either from Croatia through Slovenia to Italy, or from Serbia and Hungary to Austria.

Migrants using the smuggling services paid steep prices to cross into the EU: an illegal trip from Serbia to Austria cost around €5 000 per person and the entire journey from the country of origin to the EU generally cost between €15 000 and €20 000.<sup>2</sup>

Migration on the Balkan route has been on the rise since 2019,<sup>3</sup> with the number of illegal crossings increasing during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, more than 330 000 irregular entries were detected at the external borders of the EU, which is the highest number since 2016. Illegal entries through the Balkan route also peaked, with the highest number recorded since 2015.<sup>5</sup>



Weapons seized in a Europol operation that culminated in the arrest of 13 suspected human smugglers, February 2023.  
Source: Europol

According to a border police officer in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country is a 'more favourable money' route for smugglers.<sup>6</sup> Migrants from Africa and Asia are increasingly illegally entering Bosnia and Herzegovina from Montenegro and Serbia. From there, they try to cross the border into Croatia.<sup>7</sup> According to Frontex, Syrians and Turks were the most prevalent nationalities detected, and nationals of countries such as Tunisia, Burundi and India, which were previously scarce, were registered on the Balkan route in 2022.

The profile of people on the move is also changing. A growing number of children have been trying to enter the EU, particularly young boys from Afghanistan, since the Taliban took power in August 2021. Afghans now make up around 49% of the inhabitants of refugee camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>8</sup>

Along with more people on the move, there is an increasing risk of exploitation by smuggling networks. An employee of an international organization supporting migrants said that 'people on the move are often unprotected'. Although organizations can report on the exploitation of migrants, such reports often lead nowhere: 'There is no will to further investigate such reports, by international organizations or local authorities,' said the employee.<sup>9</sup>

Migrant children with their families are often victims of violence, discrimination and human rights violations. Unaccompanied children<sup>10</sup> are even more exposed to exploitation and violence. They usually travel with extended relatives but also join strangers along the route to avoid lengthy stays in refugee camps. While this approach is taken to increase their safety, it also exposes them to new risks.

### **Migrant children at risk**

In most cases, unaccompanied children become victims of sexual exploitation at the start of their journey – a pattern that continues along the migration route, which usually takes over a year. According to a researcher investigating sexual exploitation in the Western Balkans, more than 99% of unaccompanied children who left their countries are victims of trafficking.<sup>11</sup>

A 2022 report by the NGO Save The Children also found that migrant children transiting via the Western Balkans to the EU were at high risk of suffering violence.<sup>12</sup> The children interviewed for the report mostly talked of unaccompanied boys being victims of

sexual abuse that happened on the road. None of the children surveyed said that they had been a victim of sexual abuse, but almost two-thirds reported one or more incidents in which they recognized signs of or witnessed such abuse.<sup>13</sup>

Sexual exploitation of children is often unspoken about, even to close relatives. Children may be reluctant to talk about it out of fear or shame, and to protect their privacy and psychological well-being, interviewers did not insist on answers or probe further. The children interviewed on the Balkan route often denied its occurrence or sometimes normalized it as an expected abuse of power. This context makes this type of violence particularly difficult to identify.<sup>14</sup>

Another difficulty when investigating such criminal activities is that children are rarely aware of their rights and depend on their group's elders, who are often the perpetrators.<sup>15</sup> An additional problem is that these children are not registered and do not stay in the same place or even in the same country for long. Some fear that if they report incidents to the police, they will be returned to their country of origin. It is thus difficult to get accurate information and data, even when contacting international or domestic organizations working in the camps.

According to Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 'In all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration'.<sup>16</sup> Along the Balkan route, this provision is not applied. There are, however, rare cases in which the sexual exploitation of unaccompanied children has been detected, and law enforcement and prosecutors have taken action to protect the victims.

In February 2022, cases of sexual exploitation were exposed in Orasje, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where some of the victims were minors.<sup>17</sup> Both the suspected perpetrators and victims belonged to the migrant population residing in the reception centres in the country, and were from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bosnia and Herzegovina's Prosecutor's Office and partner institutions are currently working to secure the evidence needed to prosecute the perpetrators, and to care for and protect the victims.

Such a response is unusual. For the most part, children are invisible victims: even when cases of sexual exploitation are identified, little is done. According to a



**FIGURE 1** Movement of migrant children through the Western Balkans.

Source: Save the Children

civil society representative working with migrants in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina, a smuggler based in the migrant reception centre was conducting his illegal activities in plain sight. When he smuggled people along the Balkan route, he was always surrounded by younger boys who called him ‘father’ or ‘uncle’. Identifying him as a family member eased his access to boys and avoided their separation in camps, and allowed him to exploit them sexually.<sup>18</sup> In other cases, when smuggling people across the Drina River from Serbia to Bosnia and Herzegovina, boys are put in charge of steering the boats. Minors, primarily unaccompanied children, drive the boats because if caught, they are not held

responsible under the law. Instead, they are released or placed in a refugee centre.<sup>19</sup>

According to civil society representatives working with migrants, the issue of investigating sexual exploitation of unaccompanied children suffers due to a lack of interest by law enforcement, as well as a shortage of field research: ‘Even though some organizations and individuals have obtained data on the existence of sexual exploitation among unaccompanied children, this was not enough to persuade the authorities to initiate investigations,’ said one activist.<sup>20</sup>

One of the ways to reduce the risk of sexual exploitation of children travelling to the EU via the Western Balkans is to build trust among children towards those supporting migrants in camps. This means improving communication and cooperation between institutions, organizations and individuals that are part of the protection network, and increasing the protection

system's communication with refugees and migrants. This includes raising awareness about the risks and dangers of sexual exploitation of children. To respect the best interests of children on the move, law enforcement, the social welfare system, international organizations and civil society should work together to protect and address the needs of unaccompanied minors.

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# Albanian organized crime groups have become key players in Italy's criminal landscape, prompting targeted operations from authorities.

In early March 2023, a judge in Trento, a city in northern Italy near the Switzerland and Austria borders, convicted 28 people to prison, with sentences ranging from eight months to five years, after being accused in the *Continuo a spacciare* ('I keep trafficking') anti-drug operation. The investigation, which concluded in March 2022, unveiled a complex network of criminal groups – many of Albanian nationality, in collaboration with Italians and Moroccans – involved in cocaine trafficking across Europe. According to the Italian police, the headquarters and logistic hub for the illicit trade was Café 34 in the heart of the city.<sup>1</sup>

The investigations shed light on a sophisticated system developed to efficiently run cocaine traffic from northern Europe to the Trentino area and other Italian regions over connections in Austria. As a result of the operation, the cafe was confiscated and more than 50 people were arrested. In addition, police seized 21 kilograms of drugs, €85 795 in cash and luxury goods valued at €35 000.

The permeation of criminal groups from Albania in Trento highlights the high adaption and rapid development of Albanian organized crime groups in Italy – even in an area traditionally perceived as 'mafia free'. The confiscation of Café 34 should not be considered an isolated case but as proof of the long-standing expansion of Albanian organized crime groups' influence in Western Europe and Italy in particular. According to the Global Organized Crime Index and the Italian anti-mafia division, Albanian organized crime groups are currently one of the most prominent foreign organized crime groups operating in Italy.<sup>2</sup>

Albanians are currently one of the largest foreign communities in Italy, making up 11.5% of non-EU citizens. In 2020, about 416 000 Albanian citizens legally resided in Italy.<sup>3</sup> These figures do not include children born to Albanian immigrants with Italian citizenship or mixed Italian-Albanian couples. Some analysts estimate that around 25 000–30 000 second-

generation Albanian children have been born without Italian citizenship.<sup>4</sup> The Albanian community is integrated into essential sectors of the Italian economy, such as the construction sector and the industrial field. Between 2020 and 2022, the employment rate of Albanians in Italy was at 56.2% compared to 60.1% for all non-EU citizens residing in the country.<sup>5</sup> However, vulnerability and economic precariousness drove some Albanians to explore illicit opportunities.

While Albanian criminals in large cities such as Rome receive most of the attention (see below), in the past decade, some Albanian criminal groups have moved to smaller towns in northern Italy. Albanian groups have developed a strong presence in the towns near Varese, Como and Lecco, as uncovered by operations *White Eagle* in 2010 and *Bardhy* in 2022. Operation *White Eagle* revealed the connections of Albanian criminals in Lombardy and surrounding regions: drugs were imported from the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria, and then distributed throughout the regions of Lombardy, Piemonte, Emilia-Romagna and Lazio.<sup>6</sup> Operation *Bardhy* was conducted around Como and exposed a large Albanian drug trafficking ring in Italy: cocaine was imported from the Netherlands through the towns of Brennero (Italy) and Fréjus (France), while cannabis came from Albania through the Italian region of Puglia. Heroin was imported from Turkey through Slovenia and the province of Trieste.<sup>7</sup>

In Varese, Albanian organized crime has deep roots: in November 2011, 500 kilograms of cannabis – ready to be distributed in Italy and Switzerland – were seized in a warehouse owned by Albanians.<sup>8</sup> In operations *Illyricum* and *The Diggers*, which concluded in parallel in October 2021, law enforcement authorities identified and dismantled Albanian criminal groups trafficking drugs in the Aosta area on the border with France and the town of Teramo, in rural central-southern Italy.<sup>9</sup> Operation *Kanun* in Arezzo, Tuscany, in 2002 led to the arrest of a 37-year-old Albanian boss with a regular residence permit. He was found guilty of running a drug trafficking

network consisting of more than 100 criminals of Albanian origin scattered throughout the country.<sup>10</sup>

Arezzo made national media headlines again in November 2021, thanks to the police's search of a truck stopped on a highway, which concealed 476 kilograms of cocaine with a street value of €45 million – the largest cocaine seizure in the Arezzo area to date. The driver was Albanian and a long-time resident of Florence. He was found transporting the cocaine along the A1, the most prominent highway that connects central Italy to the Brenner mountain pass, the gateway to northern Europe.<sup>11</sup>

**Violence and second-generation Albanians in Rome**

While Albanian organized criminal groups have quietly expanded their operations in northern Italy, violence and a bolder approach are evident among young, self-proclaimed Albanian bosses in Rome. Over the past decade, major police operations such as Batteria di Ponte Milvio and Grande Raccordo Criminale show how second-generation Albanians – children of refugees who arrived with a big diaspora wave of the early 1990s – have gained enough respect in the local criminal milieu to run portions of the drug market due to the aggressive control of their territories.<sup>12</sup> This generation of criminals

was born and raised in Italy. Young members of historical Albanian criminal families divided the city among themselves. They are familiar with the territory and know how to move within it; they speak the Roman dialect and neither fear competition nor the police.

In April 2022, Rome police arrested Elvis Demce, a second-generation Albanian and reckless gang leader. His arrest prevented him from killing two members of a rival clan, allegedly because of a dispute over some conflicting interests in the construction and real estate businesses. For the occasion, he had procured M16 and AK-47 rifles, various other guns and a bazooka with which he intended to 'burn the rival's house to the ground'.<sup>13</sup>

In Rome – a city historically disputed by local gangs, traditional southern Italian mafia and foreign groups – Albanians have shown the ability to collaborate opportunistically, silently imposing their presence in the most profitable drug-dealing hubs. This conclusion emerges from Rome's 2015 police investigation Mondo di mezzo, which led to dismantling a mixed Italian-Albanian criminal group. The group had forged a mafia-style alliance to control the cocaine market and systematically extort money from businesses owners in Ostia, a seaside settlement near Rome.<sup>14</sup>



Police officers of the Italian Guardia di Finanza on patrol in Ostia, near Rome.

Photo: Tiziana Fabi/AFP via Getty Images

Operation Brasile low cost in 2017 confirmed the existence of a 'long-lasting, strong collaboration' between historical Roman mafia bosses of the calibre of Fabrizio Piscitelli (aka Diabolik) and Salvatore Casamonica with the Albanian international drug kingpin Dorian Petoku, who was arrested in Albania in 2019 and later extradited to Italy.<sup>15</sup> According to the police, this high-level collaboration was meant to keep the peace between different clans competing for the supply of cocaine to European markets via central Italy and guarantee stable supply channels of the drug from Brazil through Spain.<sup>16</sup>

Over the years, Rome's outskirts became the city's primary drug market and one of Italy's most significant dealing areas. A February 2021 operation coordinated by Europol shows the level Albanians reached in the supply chain. This operation took down the secret communication server Sky ECC, which contained the encrypted conversations of 170 criminals convinced they could communicate freely. The private chats show the size and international scale of Albanian organized crime groups: cocaine, which was initially bought and picked up near Naples, arrived in Rome hidden in boxes officially carrying kiwi from Ecuador. They arrived on container ships that had stopped in Morocco, where the groups had agreements with the military. Once in Italy, they were transported on trucks from Gioia Tauro, a Calabrian port controlled by the 'Ndrangheta.<sup>17</sup>

Besides these ties with local criminals, over the years, many Albanians were able to infiltrate grey areas of Italian high society. Some public figures, Italian and Albanian, were reported to have allegedly built ties with Albanian criminal groups, including Alessandro Corvesi (a former football player) and boxing champion Oriol Kolaj.<sup>18</sup> The presence of Albanians in the Italian criminal milieu is so deeply rooted that it is safe to say they have already climbed the criminal ladder and legitimized their role as equal partners of the traditional Italian mafia.<sup>19</sup>

The choice of location for their operations seems to be no accident. Many of the small towns where Albanian organized crime groups have established themselves are close to international logistic hubs or international borders. This also shows the transnational nature of many of these groups' operations. North-eastern Italy – especially the area between Trento, Verona and Venice – is key for illicit flows, as it offers all the necessary logistical opportunities to move illicit goods. This trend of expanding to small and strategic towns is likely to continue. But as the tactics of Albanian organized crime groups evolve, so do those of the police. According to Italian prosecutor Nicola Gratteri, future investigations in Italy will heavily and progressively focus on mafia-style groups from Albania.<sup>20</sup>

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