

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

ISSUE **16** **AUGUST**
2023

Summary highlights



Increasing migratory pressures in Serbia have led to conflict between people smuggling groups and crackdowns on migration.

At least 125 000 migrants passed through Serbia in 2022, twice as many as in 2021 and the most since the 2015 migrant crisis, when 600 000 people moved through the country. As a result, armed conflicts between smuggling groups have escalated, prompting police to raid migrant gathering points. The EU has also called on the Serbian government to review its visa policy with countries such as Tunisia and Burundi, to clamp down on irregular migration into the EU. The article analyzes human smuggling trends and increasing violence in Serbia following a resurgence in migration.



Squeezing the sponge: post-conflict Ukraine poses a great risk of firearms trafficking.

The war in Ukraine has opened new horizons for organized crime. One of the biggest is trafficking in firearms. While Ukraine is currently like a sponge, soaking up all the weapons that it can obtain, the day will come when the country has a surplus of weapons, which may find their way onto the black market. Lessons

in this regard can be learned from the experience of post-war Yugoslavia. It is important to monitor the flow of weapons into and out of South Eastern Europe as a result of the war in Ukraine and put in place measures to contain the problem.



Information gained from decrypted messaging apps has driven a wave of indictments and arrests in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Messaging apps such as Sky ECC have become a treasure trove of information about criminal groups and their collaborators. The decryption of these apps has revealed how criminals used them to traffic firearms and military equipment, contract hitmen-for-hire and arrange drug deals. The consequences in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been significant, rocking both the underworld and the political sphere. How officials deal with this situation could provide an opportunity for the country to strengthen international cooperation to address crime and corruption.



**GLOBAL
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Bloody clashes among Montenegrin clans have not undermined their role in the international cocaine trade.

The Škaljari and Kavač clans are powerful criminal organizations from Montenegro that deal with the global cocaine business. Their bloody clash has led to the deaths of more than 60 people since it started in 2015. Several key members are either dead, on the run or in custody, which could affect the clans' power relations and share of illicit business. This article assesses whether the conflict will continue, which clan will be better positioned in the illegal cocaine trade and what effect future institutional efforts could have on the clans' illicit activities.



Rising synthetic drug seizures in Albania suggests local demand for these substances is growing.

Albania is a well-known source of cannabis, and Albanian criminal groups are notorious for cocaine trafficking. But

recent seizures of synthetic drugs suggest that there may be a growing market for such substances in Albania, both among tourists and young people, who take various amphetamine-type stimulants, such as Ecstasy. Preventive and remedial action to address this upward trend is needed.



Human trafficking in Serbia: Interview with NGO ASTRA.

Human trafficking has received considerable attention in the Western Balkans, but the focus has usually been on sexual exploitation. Recent cases in Serbia, particularly involving migrants from Asia working in dire conditions, have highlighted the growing problem of forced labour. Marija Anđelković, founder and executive director of the NGO ASTRA, discusses human trafficking in Serbia and the shortcomings in existing approaches to address the issue.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

It has been a hot summer in the Balkans, and not only because of the temperatures. There have been shootings at the Serbian border as a result of competition among traffickers. There have been arrests of police and politicians, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a knock-on effect of revelations from decryption of chats. Furthermore, the impact of the war in neighbouring Ukraine is felt in relation to inflation, immigration and geopolitics. The summer also brings a major influx of tourists to the region. In some regions, such as Albania's Adriatic coast, this seems to have an impact on the use of synthetic drugs.

In this issue of the Risk Bulletin of the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, we start by looking at migrant smuggling through Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the growing violence associated with it. We then look at the massive influx of weapons into Ukraine and how this could have an effect in the flows of weapons through South Eastern Europe.

We also follow up on a story that we published in Risk Bulletin 13 on the revelations resulting from the decryption of the Sky ECC app. In the past few months, a considerable amount of information has come to light that incriminates key figures in the underworld but also the security services and politicians. There will no doubt

be further fallout from the decryption of this app, which we will observe closely.

For some time, we have been following the bloody conflict between two Montenegrin clans that have been competing for control of the cocaine trade. In this issue, we provide an update on the current situation and look ahead to the possible evolution of this feud.

Our coverage of drug markets in Albania usually focuses on cannabis and cocaine, but recent seizures indicate that there could be a growing incidence of the use of synthetic drugs in the country. We explore what is behind this increase and what can be done about it.

In past risk bulletins, we have interviewed key actors in civil society – often women – who are playing a vital role in their communities in the response to organized crime and corruption. In this issue, we continue this practice by interviewing Marija Anđelković, founder and executive director of the NGO ASTRA based in Serbia, about the problem of human trafficking in Serbia.

We value your feedback and suggestions for stories. If you would like to get in touch or if you have an idea for a story, please contact Vanja.Petrovic@globalinitiative.net.

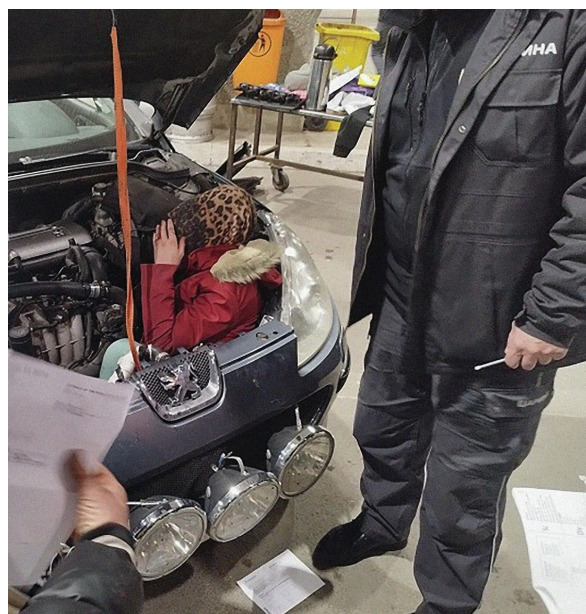
Increasing migratory pressures in Serbia have led to conflict between people smuggling groups and crackdowns on migration.

Loznica is one of the hotspots of crime in western Serbia, a place where migrants gather, meet smugglers and use illegal routes to cross the Drina river into Bosnia and Herzegovina. On 13 March 2023, an Afghan migrant was found dead with three gunshot wounds to the chest,¹ in a case police are describing as a murder.² In just 10 days in June 2023, people living in the forested area between Radanovac and Tresetište, on the border between Serbia and Hungary, twice reported hearing gunfire bursts from automatic rifles.³ In one of the incidents, three migrants were injured.⁴ These are just the latest incidents in a wave of escalating violence in Serbia since 2022, related to new migratory pressures in the country.

The Serbian Refugees and Migration Commissariat registered 124 127 migrants at 17 reception and asylum centres in the country in 2022.⁵ This is the highest number since 2016, and twice as many as in 2021, when 60 075 migrants were registered at the centres.⁶ Nearly all come from one of five countries: Afghanistan (36%), Syria (29%), Pakistan (12%), Morocco (8%) or India (4%).⁷

Afghans, Syrians and Pakistanis travel to Serbia via land routes through Turkey, Bulgaria and Greece. The most common entry points to Serbia are the border areas with North Macedonia and Bulgaria and, to a lesser extent, those with Montenegro and Kosovo. The main exit points are on the borders with Hungary, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. While some people enter the country across land borders, others – for example from Burundi, Cuba, India, Tunisia and Turkey – take advantage of Serbia's accommodating visa policies and fly directly to Belgrade via Istanbul. In the first four months of 2022, almost 1 600 Tunisians illegally entered the EU through this route, twice as many as in the whole of 2021.⁸

Demand for smuggling services rose during 2022 as increasing numbers of migrants arrived in Serbia at a time when it was becoming more difficult to enter Hungary, pushbacks intensified and there was a lack of accommodation for migrants in Serbia.⁹ As a result, the



In March 2023, Serbian customs prevented a migrant hidden under the hood of a car from illegally crossing the border to Hungary.

Photo: Serbian Customs Administration

flow of illegal migrants sped up and smuggling became more attractive.¹⁰ In 2022, police detected 191% more illicit crossings than in the previous year.¹¹ Migrants in Serbia's reception centres are staying for increasingly shorter periods – 16 days on average in 2022, half of the duration recorded in 2021 and 2020, when they stayed an average of 30 to 36 days.¹² Smuggling groups usually have members operating in the centres on the lookout for new migrants to profit from.¹³

The war in Ukraine is another factor that has influenced human smuggling. The Serbian borders became more porous after the war began in February 2022¹⁴ as institutions redistributed resources and were overwhelmed with the almost 150 000 Ukrainians and 220 000 Russians who entered or passed through Serbia.¹⁵

Date	Casualties	Location	Actors
26 June 2023	No data about casualties ¹⁸	In the forested area close to Radanovac and Tresetište, on the border between Serbia and Hungary	Unknown
24 June 2023	One migrant killed ¹⁹	Near a water reservoir in Pirot, 30 kilometres from the border with Bulgaria	Unknown
17 June 2023	Three migrants injured ²⁰	In the forested area close to Radanovac and Tresetište, on the border between Serbia and Hungary	Unknown
19 May 2023	One migrant killed, two injured ²¹	In Sombor near the reception centre in Šikara, 24 kilometres from the border with Hungary	Unknown
13 March 2023	One migrant killed ²²	In Loznica, three kilometres from the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina	People from Afghanistan
8 February 2023	Two migrants injured ²³	In Subotica Forest near Hajdukovo village, 10 kilometres from the border with Hungary	People from Afghanistan
26 January 2023	Two migrants injured ²⁴	The bridge at the channel in Sombor close to the hotel Beli Dvor, where migrants usually stay	People from Afghanistan and Syria
24 November 2022	One migrant injured ²⁵	Bele Bartoka street in Horgos on the way to the border crossing with Hungary ²⁶	People from Morocco and Pakistan
2 July 2022	One migrant killed and eight injured ²⁷	Makova Sedmica settlement near Subotica, close to the border with Hungary	People from Afghanistan

FIGURE 1 Violent incidents in Serbia involving migrants, July 2022 to June 2023.

Violent clashes among smugglers

Smugglers are apparently becoming more organized and violent. According to police, five out of the 28 criminal organizations whose work they disrupted in 2022 dealt with human smuggling.¹⁶ Furthermore, police dismantled 20 people smuggling groups from 2020 to 2022.¹⁷

The clashes are predominantly between groups of smugglers. For example, on 2 July 2022, two Afghan smuggling groups fought for control over a key crossing point.²⁸ They were armed with machetes that can be bought in local shops and automatic rifles, like Kalashnikovs, which had been trafficked from Kosovo.²⁹

As shown in Figure 1, over the past 12 months there have been a number of violent incidents that have led to deaths and injuries. These almost always occurred at night, close to the borders with Hungary, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, rather than the entry points on the borders with North Macedonia or Bulgaria. The clashes occurred near informal migrant camps, usually in remote areas close to the borders, such as in Srpski Krstur, Martonoš, Makova Sedmica, Hajdukovo, Tresetište and Mali Horgos, or in the west (Trbušnica).

PROFILE OF SMUGGLING GROUPS

Smuggling groups active in Serbia are transnational, well-organized, flexible and dangerous. Members are citizens from Serbia and the countries where the largest migrant populations originate.³⁰ The local members are often responsible for logistics, accommodation, food and moving migrants internally through Serbia. For example, in February 2023, police arrested eight transport company employees because they drove migrants from Dimitrovgrad, close to Bulgaria, to other cities in Serbia.³¹

The main foreign smugglers are from Afghanistan and Morocco, and operate in Serbia and abroad, mainly in Turkey. Those active in Serbia tend to middle-aged men – sometimes associated with radical Islamic groups – who coordinate smuggling operations. During a raid in December 2022, police arrested two people with outstanding international arrest warrants issued by France for suspicion of terrorism.³² Other members without a criminal past became smugglers because that was the only way to pay for their own ticket into the EU. High-level members usually did not cross the border into Serbia.

Media reports identified two people who allegedly led smuggling groups in Serbia. One, a certain Mohammed Tetouani, is from the Moroccan city of Tetouan. He has reportedly controlled one of the informal camps near Horgos, close to the border with Hungary, for more than two years. From there, migrants from the Middle East and North Africa paid €3 000 per person to smugglers to organize their illegal crossings. Smugglers also ensure peace and order in the camp and that migrants have food and water.³³

Another alleged smuggling leader, Al-kazaoui, is from Casablanca, Morocco. He reportedly provided similar services to those of Tetouani. In his camp, migrants paid €1 000 each for their chosen route.³⁴ Illegal crossings usually started around six p.m.³⁵

Both smugglers reportedly used apps like Facebook, WhatsApp and TikTok; made use online maps, cars, buses, trucks, ladders; and bribed border control officials to facilitate their work. Firearms were used to guard the camps.³⁶



In January 2023, during a search of migrants in Horgos and Srpski Krstur, police found automatic firearms and ammunition.

Photo: Serbian Interior Ministry

Country	Start date of visa-free regime with Serbia	End date of visa-free regime with Serbia
Burundi	2 June 2018	22 October 2022
Cuba	6 October 1965	14 April 2023
India	2 September 2017	1 January 2023
Tunisia	16 June 1965	20 November 2022
Turkey	12 July 2010 ⁴²	Still in force

FIGURE 2 Visa policy status between Serbia and countries for which the EU requested the Serbian government cancel its visa-free regime.

Response to people smuggling

While Serbia faces growing security problems along its borders, it is also dealing with increased pressure from the EU to tighten its visa policy. Serbia had established visa exemption regimes for citizens from 20 countries on the EU's visa-required list.³⁷ The result was an increase in the irregular flow of people from some of those countries, including Burundi, Cuba, India, Tunisia and Turkey, travelling to Serbia and then into the EU without completing visa procedures.³⁸ This was similar to the situation in 2017, when the Serbian government abolished visas for Iranians.³⁹

The Serbian government subsequently reintroduced visas for four of the five countries identified by the EU as critical, as shown in Figure 2. Policy shifts occurred in October 2022 after a trilateral meeting in Budapest

between Austrian, Hungarian and Serbian high-level representatives.⁴⁰ Following similar international pressure in 2018, Serbia had re-introduced visas for Iranians.⁴¹

The Serbian government responded to violent clashes among smuggling groups by raiding informal migrant camps and reinforcing law enforcement presence in border areas. After each violent incident, police detained hundreds of migrants and transported them to reception centres such as those in Presevo and Principovac, close to the borders with North Macedonia and Croatia.⁴³ In 2022, the police organized at least six major raids, at which they also seized money and weapons.⁴⁴

However, this policy does not seem to have resolved the problem. Indeed, it has even created new opportunities



In July 2022, following a raid on gathering points near Subotica, police moved migrants to reception centres.

Photo: Serbian Interior Ministry

for smugglers. The violence continues, and migrants keep coming, determined to cross the border in search of a better life.⁴⁵

Notes

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Squeezing the sponge: post-conflict Ukraine poses a great risk of firearms trafficking.

As noted in a GI-TOC report, 'since February 2022, weapons have been arriving in Ukraine at an extraordinary rate'. The report observes that 'given Ukraine's history of arms trafficking ... the risk of weapons trafficking was flagged in the early days of the war by Europol'.¹

Several GI-TOC sources indicate that small arms are moving within Ukraine – including into the illicit market – but there has been little evidence of weapons flowing out of the country. GI-TOC field research in several European countries has discovered that prices for guns on the black market are high because of demand from the war in Ukraine, as well as among drug traffickers from the Nordic countries to the Black Sea and concerned citizens in Ukraine's neighbours who are arming themselves out of fear of a potential spillover of the conflict.

In March 2022, Europol reported that currently the Western Balkans – not Ukraine – is the main point of entry for firearms smuggled into the EU.² That said, the history of past conflicts points to a high risk of arms trafficking from Ukraine in the post-conflict phase. Recent examples set a precedent, including Afghanistan and Libya, while the post-war period in the Western Balkans also provides a stark warning. In the 1990s, after the wars that marked the break-up of Yugoslavia, weapons flooded the region and found their way into the hands of terrorists and criminal groups in Europe, and insurgents in far-flung parts of the world. Even today, in countries such as Sweden, guns and grenades from the former Yugoslavia are used by criminal groups.

Already there are symptoms of the abundance of weapons in Ukraine. Records from the country's prosecutor general on offences committed with firearms and ammunition show that crimes committed with firearms rose tenfold in 2022, from 720 in 2021 to 7 003 in 2022.³

Conditions are in place

When the sponge is squeezed and weapons start flowing out of the war zone, there is a real risk that

some of those firearms could move along the existing Balkan route. Black Sea ports such as Varna (Bulgaria) and Constanta (Romania) would be obvious exit points, as well as Poland, Slovakia, Moldova, Hungary, and Adriatic ports in Croatia and Slovenia. The Western Balkans could also be an attractive route for weapons heading south and west.

The Balkan route and organized criminal groups from South Eastern Europe are known for polycriminal activities, such as the smuggling of people, drugs and firearms, not least into the EU.⁴ The necessary infrastructure and networks for a surge in firearms trafficking, once the peace comes, are already in place.

Furthermore, corruption, well-organized criminal networks (including some with links to criminal groups in Ukraine) and availability of firearms make South Eastern Europe a high-risk region for smuggling weapons from Ukraine. For example, in an April 2023 operation coordinated by Europol and led by Bulgaria and Romania, police across the region arrested 22 firearms traffickers, including several from South Eastern Europe. They seized 1 621 weapons and 24 735 rounds of ammunition, as well as 276 kilograms of dynamite, 299 detonators and over 21 kilograms of gunpowder.⁵

It is worth noting that many of the weapons seized in this operation were converted alarm and signal weapons. This is a growing problem attributed to changes in technology, legal loopholes and the cost of procuring regular firearms on the black market. The challenge in dealing with convertible weapons is also manifesting itself in other parts of Europe.⁶ However, there will be no shortage of weapons on the black market once the war in Ukraine is over.

A key lubricant for arms trafficking is corruption, particularly among state actors (such as those involved in procurement or issuing export licences) and weapons manufacturers. In some Western Balkan countries, export licences have become a commodity in their own right, allowing consortia to export to conflict zones,

circumventing international legal barriers and avoiding political scrutiny of any kind.⁷

For instance, in 2010 around 30 000 Bulgarian self-loading assault rifles were reported to have made their way to Libyan, Yemeni and Sudanese armed forces, aided by foreign investors.⁸ Reports suggest that this phenomenon continues.⁹ In 2013, *The New York Times* ran a story on how a large purchase of infantry weapons from Croatia was funnelled to anti-government fighters in Syria.¹⁰ In addition, weapons from Serbia have allegedly turned up in Yemen.¹¹ Several UN investigative reports have revealed how small arms and light weapons were sent to Syria from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia, among other countries.¹²

It is hard to speculate as to where the weapons smuggled through the Balkan route could go, but history and experience suggest four possible paths. First, small but potent quantities of weapons could be retained by criminal groups in the region that collect weapons for their own use or as status symbols. High-end criminals tend to covet the most modern weapons rather than just Kalashnikovs. What is troubling in the current context is the number of state-of-the-art weapons from NATO countries flowing into Ukraine, which could fuel an arms race among criminal groups if these weapons leak out of the region and into the black market.

GI-TOC research is already picking up some evidence of this trend in the context of its research on arms trafficking from Ukraine to central Europe, for example. This is something to watch, as drug trafficking and weapons trafficking are closely linked. Criminal groups from the Western Balkans with long tentacles around the world could exchange drugs for guns or use weapons to maintain or gain control over lucrative drug markets. This could lead to an increase in violence in regions where criminal groups from the Balkans are active, including the EU.

Secondly, weapons and ammunition could transit the region heading for war zones in other parts of the world. As noted, several countries in the Balkans have a track record in making such deals. Black Sea and Adriatic ports are potential trafficking hubs; the Danube could also be a channel. In addition to assault rifles and handguns, it will be important to guard against the export of shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank guided missiles and drones. There will also be a high number of

experienced drone pilots in the region whose skills could be attractive to criminal groups.

A third possibility is that weapons from Ukraine could fall into the hands of terrorists or paramilitaries; in this case, the Balkans could be both a region of transit and destination.

Finally, there is the potential for weapons to be stockpiled in Ukraine or its neighbouring countries for future use.

After the war in Yugoslavia, there was a delay before weapons from the region began appearing in war zones around the world. This time, the availability of the internet and social media could shorten the time lag; this increases the urgency to prepare now.

Several initiatives have been taken in the past to increase control over small arms and light weapons in the Balkans. These need to be scaled up to guard against a potential spillover of arms trafficking out of Ukraine after the war.

For example, steps should be taken to enhance border and port security, perhaps with support from EU countries from Frontex and using the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats. After all, EU states have a self-interest to ensure they are not flooded by weapons from Ukraine's battlefields.

Greater attention should also be given to tackling corruption, not least by state-embedded actors. Furthermore, law enforcement should be enhanced in countries in Ukraine's vicinity to reduce the risk of weapons trafficking, and to investigate, disrupt and prosecute illicit arms dealers. Romania, which has a long border with Ukraine and Black Sea and Danube ports, deserves particular attention and support so that it does not become the hole in the net.

All of this activity should be intelligence-led. For its part, the GI-TOC is monitoring gun prices on the black market to identify pricing trends in Ukraine and potential markets.

There is no need to invent new formats to facilitate coordination – the region has a plethora of them, including the Western Balkans SALW Control Roadmap, the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of SALW, the Southeast European Law

Enforcement Centre, the OSCE and the Regional Cooperation Council. Civil society organizations should be given greater access to these bodies to share information.

However, urgently needed is political leadership with strong law enforcement engagement, to prioritize the

containment of weapons in and around Ukraine and to anticipate, prevent and control what could – based on previous experience – be a large and destabilizing outflow of weapons from Ukraine once the fighting stops. The time to prepare is now.

Notes

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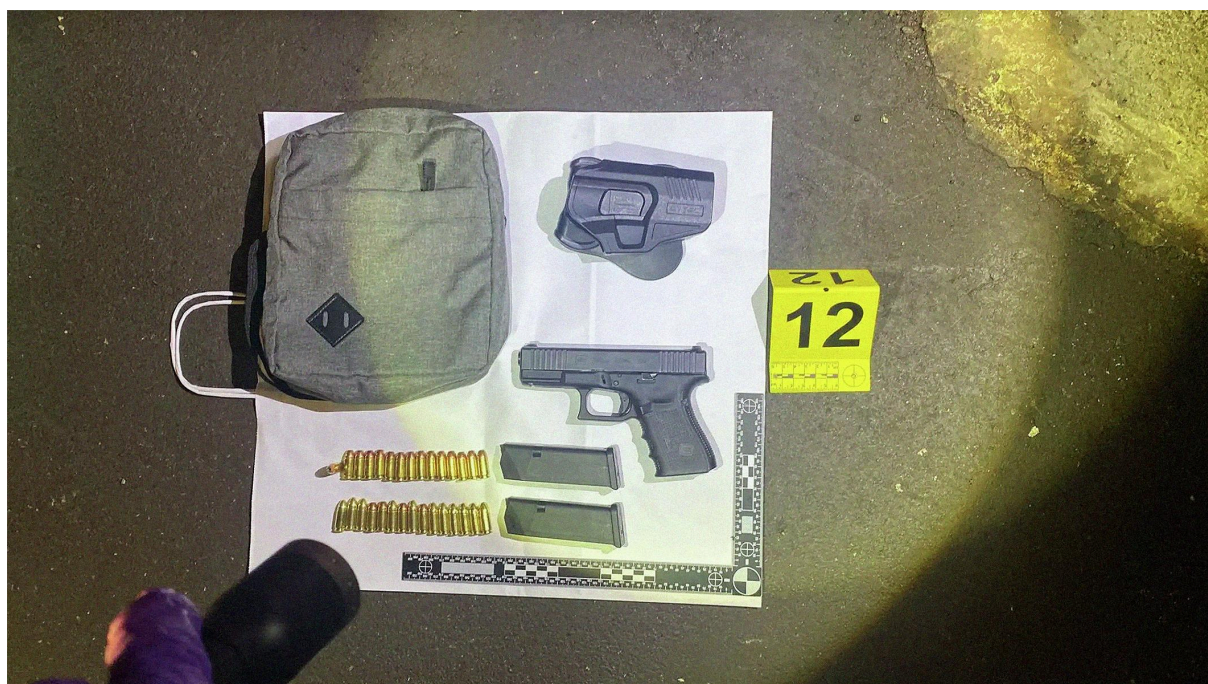
Information gained from decrypted messaging apps has driven a wave of indictments and arrests in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

According to data held by criminal justice officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina, more than 2 200 people in the country had installed the Sky ECC app since its launch.¹ What was once a platform for safe communication has become a source of incriminating messages against criminal actors and their contacts – including state officials – that have led to a number of indictments. When presenting the work of the Prosecutor's Office for 2022, Chief State Prosecutor Milanko Kajganić announced they had imprisoned over 100 members of various organized criminal groups and arrested 15 police officers. Many of these arrests were a result of information gained from decrypted apps such as Sky ECC and ANOM, another messaging service.²

In December 2022, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina brought the first indictment that drew evidence from the Sky and ANOM apps. The indictment alleged that from 2020 to March 2022, the accused, Dalibor Raičić, set up a criminal group in the country to

traffic cannabis and cocaine from Western Europe to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The case was triggered by the murder of Radenko Bašić,³ the head of the criminal police of Prijedor (Republic of Srpska), who the criminal group suspected of disrupting their illicit activities.⁴ According to the indictment, information from the Sky app revealed that Raičić had been searching for a hitman to murder Bašić.⁵

In March 2023, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina brought another indictment as a result of decrypted messages from the Sky and ANOM apps. In this case, the accused, Milan Matković, was charged with drug trafficking, money laundering, document forgery and planning murders. Between mid-2020 and the end of 2021, Matković allegedly organized a criminal group that was active in Austria, Croatia, Switzerland, Spain, the Netherlands and Germany, and had links to South America.⁶ Matković was reportedly in charge of trafficking firearms to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as



Firearms seized during a Europol operation in May 2023, facilitated by decoding messages on apps including Sky ECC.

Photo: Europol

trafficking drugs from Latin America to the EU via Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁷

In early February 2023, another indictment was filed by the Prosecutor's Office against five citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia. According to the indictment, from late 2019 to the end of 2021, information from Sky ECC revealed that the accused were smuggling large amounts of cannabis from Serbia and Montenegro via Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland.⁸ Criminal profits were laundered by buying real estate and expensive vehicles.⁹

In April 2023, the Ministry of Interior of Sarajevo Canton conducted an operation that led to the arrest of eight people, including two women, suspected of trafficking large quantities of cocaine, heroin and cannabis, as well as weapons and military equipment.¹⁰ This operation was launched as a result of information obtained by decrypting communications between suspects through the Sky ECC app.¹¹

A further operation carried out on 24 May 2023 and led by Europol resulted in the arrests of 37 members of a criminal group from the Western Balkans. The group was headed by Dino 'Caesar' Muzaferović, a citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina who is considered a high-value target.

Muzaferović directed his criminal activities from a prison in Italy, where he is serving a four-year sentence. The group, which was characterized as violent and powerful, was involved in drug and firearms smuggling. The investigation was enabled with the help of Europol's decoding of messages on the Encrochat, Sky ECC and ANOM apps.¹²

Caught in the net

Not only have the Sky ECC messages revealed the activities of criminal groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but they also raise questions about the umbrella of protection under which these groups were able to operate. Decrypted messages have implicated politicians, prosecutors and police officers in various crimes. For instance, in one message, a notorious drug lord from Trebinje wrote about contacts he supposedly had in the state prosecutor's office who would cover for him and his associates.¹³

Lawyers for the accused have challenged the validity of the evidence collected from the Sky ECC app.¹⁴ In addition, in 2022, the President of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council, Halil Lagumdžija, expressed doubts about the evidence's validity. However, after a negative reaction from partner countries, he changed his position and confirmed that the judicial bodies would take the evidence into account.¹⁵ He noted that

D	E	F	G
Igor Mastilović		Kaze i ako nema konkretnih dokaza vjece je moglo zakljucit dasam bijo drugi clan jer sam opominjo clanove organizacije da se slusaju tel i tako vodijo racuna o organizaciji.....ma fuj da nevjerijes	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Opet imam neku nadu jer sad nemogu bas tako ko sa nama	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Al me opeklo gore pa se toga bojim	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Ma bih sud je realan	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Vjeruj nece nikad nikog da osude ako nemaju validan dokaz	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Kad je hapsenje pokupe oni ljudi ako su imali kontakt neki i sumlju u njih al nece nikad podic optuznicu ako nemaju bas cvrste dokaze	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Opet tamo i ako imas djelo dosta su blaze kazne i dosta se moze završit sa lovom	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Nedaj Boze problema da znas imamo tamo prilaz do kajmakovicke i cavke a oni su glavni	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		I camoare isylto	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Imam prilaz al opet i tu necu da trosim bonus na nekog ko nije blizak jer ljudi kasnije pohvale se kako su završili a to dodje sve do njih	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Moze moze sve	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Imam bas covjeka koji je blizak sa njima	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Nedaj Boze imamo prilaz	E041AF, E1L3ND
Igor Mastilović		Malo te zguzvah porukama, iz ove dosade nemam osjecaj koliko je sati ni koji dan	E041AF, E1L3ND

Excerpt from communications between members of an organized crime group via the Sky ECC app.

Photo: Istraga.ba

evidence gathered from Sky ECC messages would be used in specific cases, upholding the highest standards enshrined in the European Court of Human Rights, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina and other legal regulations.¹⁶ Other countries have also debated the admissibility of evidence gathered through encrypted apps. For example, in June 2023, in response to concerns raised by defence attorneys, the Supreme Court of the Netherlands ruled that such messages can be used as evidence.¹⁷

As a result, the net seems to be tightening around some state-embedded actors. The Deputy Chief Prosecutor of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dijana Kajmaković, was dismissed on 27 May 2022 after her name appeared in several messages sent between members of a criminal group from Trebinje. A subsequent search of her possessions, by order of the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, found information that led to the opening of 14 new cases. After this incident, another prosecutor, Oleg Čavka, was transferred from the Department for Organized Crime to the Special Department for War Crimes.¹⁸ It is assumed that the reason for this transfer is the same as for Kajmaković – the mention of their names in the deciphered communication,¹⁹ in this case, by members of an organized crime group.²⁰

In another case in April 2022, nine people from Bosnia and Herzegovina were arrested, including Jovan Savić, judge of the Basic Court in Bijeljina. This group is suspected of smuggling drugs from the Netherlands and Germany to Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as smuggling weapons and disclosing official secrets.²¹

In May 2023, a high-profile case involved a local mayor, Ibrahim Hadžibajrić, who is also vice president of the People's European Union party. He is the first politician from Bosnia and Herzegovina to be arrested due to evidence from the Sky ECC app. Six other people were arrested with him on corruption and crime charges.²² The arrests were the result of several months of intensive cooperation with international police partners, primarily Europol but also the FBI.²³

While the Sky ECC messages reveal important information about criminal groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the alleged lack of integrity of some politicians and criminal justice officials, they also provide an opportunity for the country to strengthen international cooperation to counter crime and corruption. This was highlighted by the US Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Michael J Murphy, at a regional conference on organized crime held in Sarajevo in April 2023. Addressing law enforcement officials, he stated: 'Through your partnerships with the FBI, as well as the Europol-led Sky ECC operation, you have access to a historic amount of potential evidence, which can be used to roll back the influence of transnational organized crime networks.'²⁴ The ambassador underlined that future arrests connected to the messaging apps could have a 'transformational effect' on efforts to address criminal structures. It remains to be seen whether new revelations will come to light and how law enforcement will respond to them.

Notes

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Bloody clashes among Montenegrin clans have not undermined their role in the international cocaine trade.

Montenegro's Kavač and Škaljari clans used to be part of a larger criminal organization, the Kotor clan, formed in 2010. The Kotor clan was allegedly linked to the drug trafficking operations of notorious drug kingpin Darko Šarić. In 2009, after Šarić fled the country in response to a police operation, the Kotor clan continued his work. However, quarrels soon arose between members because there was no longer a clear hierarchy.¹

The first struggle within the Kotor clan occurred in 2012,² but the final break happened in 2014 in Valencia, Spain, over a cocaine deal. At that time, the alleged leader of the Kotor clan, Jovan Vukotić, believed that another member, Goran Radoman, tried to sell 200 kilograms of cocaine without his knowledge. In February 2015, Radoman was assassinated in Belgrade, Serbia, becoming the first victim of a bloody clash that split the Kotor clan into the Škaljari and Kavač factions.³

Vukotić held a key position in the Škaljari clan until September 2022, when he was killed in Istanbul. Turkish police suspect that members of the Kavač clan were behind his murder. Six proceedings were conducted against Vukotić for crimes including criminal association, attempted murder, incitement to murder and tax evasion.⁴

Radoje Zvicer is considered the leader of the Kavač clan. He has been repeatedly targeted by the Škaljari, as well as by the judicial authorities of Serbia and Montenegro, which issued international warrants for him. There are at least four criminal proceedings against him.⁵ The Montenegrin prosecution accused him of forming the Kavač clan as a group involved in murders, drug trafficking, embezzlement and extortion.⁶

With the death, flight or imprisonment of key clan members, what will the future look like for these clans?

Strong odds that the clans maintain their cocaine business

Montenegrin clans run like businesses, where some members or associates act as investors, providing funds to buy cocaine in South America. Others are contractors and subcontractors responsible for packaging,

transporting and selling cocaine in Europe. Their advantage is a proven international logistic network for purchase and distribution.²³ Although the conflict among clans has weakened the groups overall, some key members are still at large and have shown resilience, thanks to their financial resources and ability to ensure political protection.

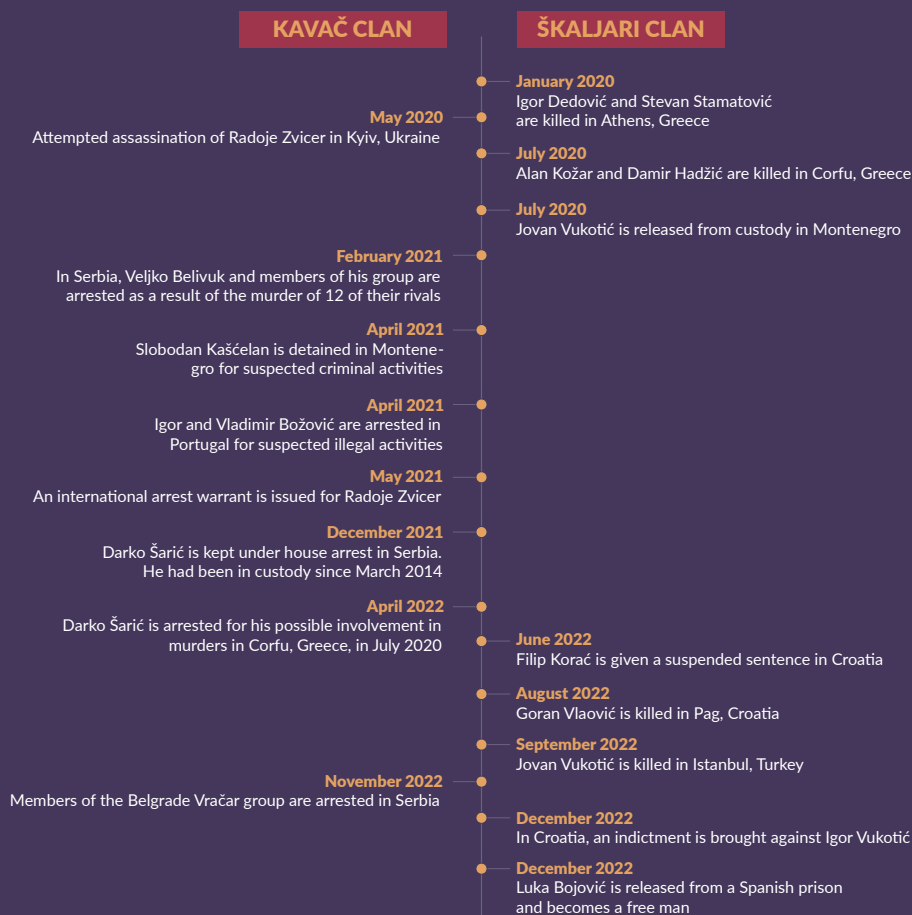
The cocaine business is a golden ticket that the Škaljari and Kavač clans will not give up. The supply and demand for cocaine are growing.²⁴ Because it is profitable, the clans will continue the trade, blocking the appearance of other players. Lost resources will be replenished through new partnerships with other criminal groups or from their ranks, which are not negligible – it is estimated that the Škaljari and Kavač clans have 105 and 140 members, respectively.²⁵ They will continue to closely watch political events and elect politicians willing to use their money for personal or political interests. Recent violence in Ecuador may even be helping the clans consolidate their position in the drug trade.²⁶

The bloody rivalry will continue

Reconciliation after seven years of clashes is unlikely, especially when some of the assassinations were committed in front of family members. Moreover, no one is powerful enough to pacify or dismantle the clans. The conflict will remain, but killings will not increase due to their sheer cost – targeted hits on rivals are reported to cost over €1 million.²⁷ In addition, some of the main targets have already been killed. Those still at large or on the run will be more careful about their movements and communications and invest more in protection. There is also the risk that hired assassins will be killed to prevent their potential testimony in courts. A member of the Kavač clan and alleged assassin, Igor Mančić, was killed in January 2023 in Ljubljana, Slovenia.²⁸

It is likely that members will hide outside the Balkans, especially Serbia and Montenegro, where they are known to law enforcement. When choosing a location to hide or run a business, criminals gather information about the political climate and ensure sufficient protection by bribing security sector officials. They tend to choose

KEY EVENTS RELATED TO THE KAVAČ AND ŠKALJARI CLANS, 2020–2022



SOURCES: January 2020⁷; May 2020⁸; July 2020⁹; July 2020¹⁰; February 2021¹¹; April 2021¹²; April 2021¹³; May 2021¹⁴; December 2021¹⁵; April 2022¹⁶; June 2022¹⁷; August 2022¹⁸; September 2022¹⁹; November 2022²⁰; December 2022²¹; December 2022²²

countries where corruption is relatively high, such as Greece,²⁹ there are fewer people from the Balkans and international police cooperation is undeveloped.³⁰

Some members have chosen to hide in Ukraine. Assassination attempts have occurred there, possibly involving high-ranking police officials.³¹ So far, there are no indicators that Montenegrin criminals have worked in either Ukraine or Russia, but if they are in hiding there it could present new business opportunities.³²

Changing fortunes

Until 2020, the Kavač clan seemed to be winning the war, and was better positioned in the cocaine business. High-ranking members of the Škaljari clan had been killed, while the alleged leader of the Kavač clan survived an assassination attempt in Ukraine. There are doubts that the detained members could work unhindered behind bars in Montenegro, as shown by the confiscation of mobile phones hidden in their cells in June 2021 and November 2022.³³

Although the leader of the Škaljari clan was killed in 2022, power has shifted in their favour with a series of arrests of Kavač members in 2021 and 2022 and the

issuance of an international warrant against their suspected leader. The trials of Kavač members in Serbia, Montenegro and Slovenia have weakened their position in law enforcement and customs. Meanwhile, some believed to be close associates of the Škaljari clan, such as Filip Korać and Luka Bojović, are no longer detained. The brother of the murdered leader of the Škaljari clan, Igor Vukotić, continues to evade justice despite an outstanding warrant against him since 2018.³⁴

The current situation appears to favour the Škaljari clan, despite the fact that they suffered more significant casualties during the conflict and were burdened with international warrants – a disparity exacerbated by their smaller membership. The future balance of power depends in part on the level of agreement between the Montenegrin and Serbian members of the Škaljari group, but mostly on who is better at managing the cocaine trade and ensuring personal security and political protection as the conflict continues. It also depends on Darko Šarić's future influence in the cocaine business.³⁵

A successful response depends on criminal justice institutions

The poor performance of the criminal justice system in Montenegro and Serbia makes countering the activities of clans even harder. Court proceedings take a long time. The accused are on the run, and there are few cooperating witnesses, meaning it is tough to prove indictments in court. Lower-ranking members, who mainly act as couriers, take responsibility for monetary compensation and legal protection. This is the opposite of what happens, for example, in the US and Romania, where clan members are more effectively prosecuted.³⁶

Four factors will shape the institutional response to the clans. First, the results of Serbian and Montenegrin cooperation with foreign criminal justice institutions.³⁷ Second, whether Sky ECC communications are deemed admissible as evidence in court.³⁸ Third, whether high-ranking members have information that can be used to suppress terrorism, in exchange for leniency for their own crimes. Finally, members' use of information about the possible involvement of political actors could enable them to get out of custody earlier or to slow down court processes.



Montenegrin police investigate a crime scene after a shooting in the capital, Podgorica.

Savo Prelevic/AFP via Getty Images

If communications from the Sky ECC app are excluded from court cases, it is probable that most of the charges against suspected clan members will be dropped. This will only strengthen the clans. In future investigations, law enforcement should rely on more than just Sky ECC and work to secure new evidence and witnesses. Judges are likely to insist on more proof than communications, as shown in the case against a police inspector in Serbia who allegedly provide confidential police data to third parties in exchange for money.³⁹

In that context, law enforcement in Serbia and Montenegro should continue participating in international investigations. They should use more joint investigation teams, mirror investigations and controlled

deliveries. Judicial cooperation through mutual legal assistance is crucial since it is the only way to provide full evidentiary strength at the court. Additional undercover investigators – preferably foreign citizens – and domestic training could help deliver results.

Past discussions about a Balkan arrest warrant – a simplified cross-border judicial surrender procedure – for prosecution or execution of a custodial sentence or detention order should be renewed.⁴⁰ There is also a need to improve integrity, not only in the police but also in the courts, prosecution and security intelligence agencies. Supporting the Bulgarian initiative of a network for enhanced regional cooperation of internal security units could be beneficial.⁴¹

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Rising synthetic drug seizures in Albania suggests local demand for these substances is growing.

Albania is no stranger to drugs. It is well-known as a supplier of cannabis and Albanian criminal groups have made a reputation in cocaine trafficking. However, the production, trafficking and use of synthetic drugs has not been common in the country. But an increase in seizures of synthetic drugs in Albania suggests either that local demand for these substances is increasing or police are becoming more vigilant and effective in intercepting such drugs.¹ Based on arrests, consumers seem to be mostly young people taking various amphetamine-type stimulants, such as MDMA tablets also referred to as Ecstasy. The trend corresponds with an increase in tourists flocking to the Albanian coast during the summer but is now spreading to other parts of the country.

According to the 2022 UNODC World Drug Report, the prevalence of Ecstasy use in South Eastern Europe is lower than in Western and central Europe.² In Albania, a study published in 2022 by the Institute of Public Health

shows that 7.4% of people aged 15 to 18 had consumed cannabis at least once; 4.2% had tried Ecstasy, 3.2% cocaine and 1.2% heroin.³ However, experts note that Albanian high school students are increasingly consuming Ecstasy.⁴

A leading indicator of the growing flow of synthetic drugs into Albania is an increase in Ecstasy seizures since 2021. As shown in Figure 1, almost no seizures were made between 2014 and 2021, while 2 200 grams were confiscated in 2022. In January 2023, Albanian authorities seized over 1 000 Ecstasy tablets that were ready for distribution in Tirana from three youths aged 17 to 25.⁵

Other relatively recent synthetic drug seizures in the country include over 97 kilograms of drug precursors (2015); 1 300 kilograms of Alpha-Phenylacetoacetonitrile precursor chemicals (2017); more than 3 litres of ketamine (2018); 95 grams and 19

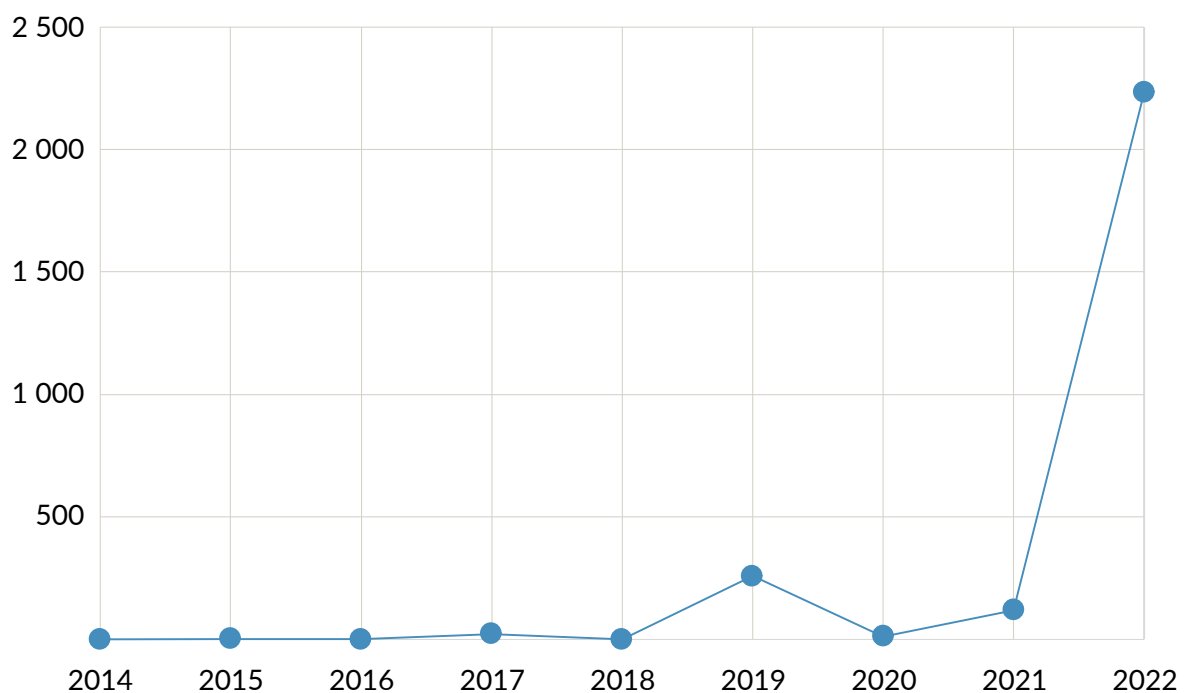


FIGURE 1 Ecstasy seizures, 2014–2022, in grams.

Albanian State Police

tablets of methamphetamine (2020); 84 grams and 258 tablets of methadone (2021); and 481 grams of Ecstasy (2022).⁶ The relatively small amounts indicate that the drugs were likely to be destined for domestic consumption. Nevertheless, the seizure of 1 300 kilograms of precursors raises the possibility of larger-scale production.

There have also been isolated cases of local laboratories producing synthetic drugs. The most notorious case was in 2018 and involved two US citizens (one of Albanian origin) who were arrested while trying to set up a drug lab in Tirana.⁷

Where do the drugs come from?

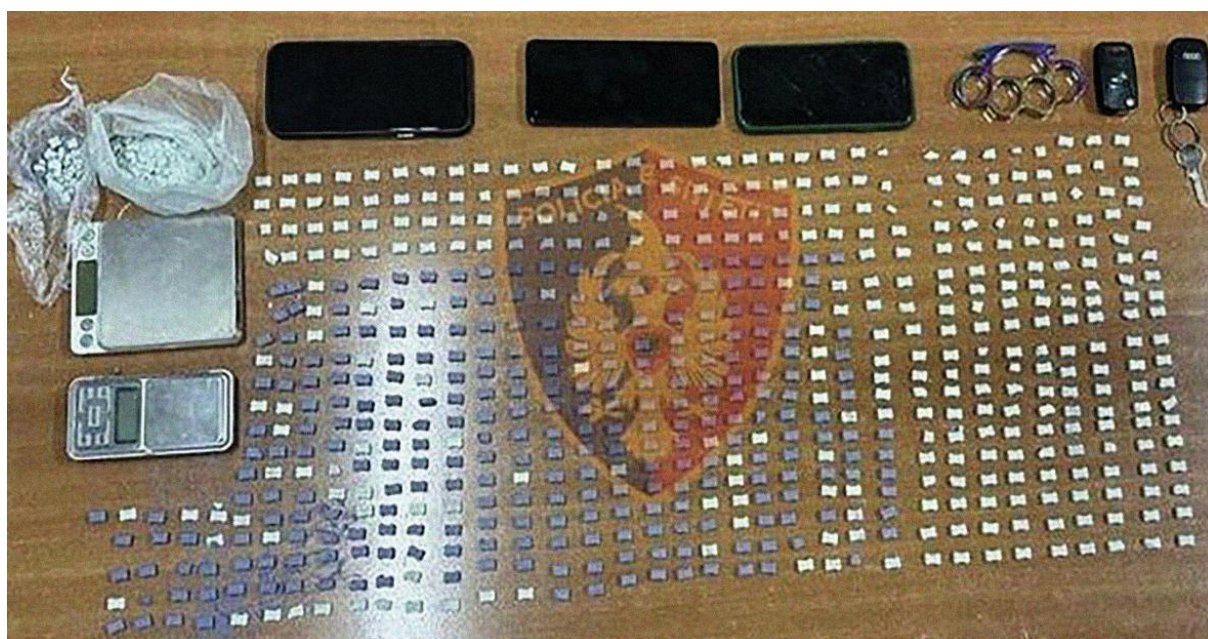
Most of the amphetamine-type stimulants and new psychoactive substances that are being smuggled into Albania seem to originate in Bulgaria, Serbia and North Macedonia,⁸ with additional small quantities coming from other European countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium and the Czech Republic.⁹ There appears to be a growing availability of relatively cheap synthetic drugs in South Eastern Europe, as shown by a notable increase in production in Serbia and North Macedonia.¹⁰ A record quantity of more than 1 tonne of the precursors needed to produce amphetamine-type stimulants was seized in a joint operation by authorities from North Macedonia and Turkey in February 2022 at Skopje International Airport. The chemicals were sent from Shanghai through Istanbul.¹¹

There are also signs of increased production of LSD in Serbia and North Macedonia, which is feeding the local market in Albania.¹² It is suspected that a portion of these drugs and their precursors are smuggled with the complicity of pharmaceutical companies.¹³ The Albanian National Agency for Medicines and Medical Devices has been criticized for exercising insufficient controls and failing to eradicate counterfeit medicine,¹⁴ which might also facilitate the smuggling of precursors.

A major rise in tourism may have contributed to higher consumption and trafficking of synthetic drugs in Albania. The country is an increasingly popular destination for tourists – the number of foreign visitors more than doubled from 3.4 million in 2014 to 7 million in 2022.¹⁵ There are also more music festivals being organized in the country, which are popular for synthetic drug consumption. However, what started mostly as a tourist fad seems to have crossed over to the local population, particularly among youth in big cities. For example, Tirana's city centre, where most clubs are located and youth regularly gather, is known as a hub for buying, selling and consuming synthetic drugs.¹⁶

Who is distributing the drugs?

Arrests of Albanian and foreign nationals for trafficking and distributing Ecstasy are becoming more common. Most perpetrators are young people caught distributing synthetic drugs close to schools, universities and night clubs. Drugs are also being sold via social media. In



Ecstasy tablets seized in a police operation in Tirana, January 2023.

Albanian State Police

January 2023, three youngsters (including a 17-year-old) were arrested in Tirana after being caught with 1 007 Ecstasy tablets, which authorities suspect were imported from the Netherlands.¹⁷ In 2019, a 24-year-old who had targeted high school and university students was arrested in Shkodra with 990 Ecstasy tablets.¹⁸ The same year, a 22-year-old was arrested for distribution of 100 Ecstasy tablets in Vlora.¹⁹ Other dealers are older, but also target young people. In 2022, a 52-year-old was arrested in Dhërmi (a popular summer destination for young people) for possession of 4 840 Ecstasy tablets, MDMA, ketamine, amphetamine, LSD and suspected cocaine.²⁰

Foreign nationals have also been caught possessing and distributing drugs, primarily after music festivals.²¹ Most recently, in June 2023, nine foreign nationals were arrested in Dhërmi for distribution of synthetic

drugs. Around €45 000 in cash in various currencies was seized.²²

Although the use of synthetic drugs in Albania currently seems relatively minor, there is clearly an upward trend. This is a new phenomenon and therefore requires quick action to raise awareness – particularly about the types of drugs and their harms – and set up treatment facilities. In addition, police need better capacity to identify hotspots and traffickers, exchange information on drug types with foreign colleagues, and improve testing for synthetic drugs and precursors. Since this problem seems to stem in large part from external factors such as increased tourism and drug production in neighbouring countries, preventive and remedial action to address it effectively could benefit from cooperation with regional countries as well as external partners.

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Human trafficking in Serbia: Interview with NGO ASTRA.

In Serbia, sexual exploitation has been the dominant form of human trafficking for 20 years. Women and girls, the latter typically between 12 and 13 years old, are the main victims. In recent years, however, the country is seeing increasing cases of labour exploitation. Between 2020 and 2022, a total of 77 victims of human trafficking were reported, with 43 of them being subjected to forced labor. The majority of these victims were men originating from India and Vietnam.

The GI-TOC spoke to Marija Anđelković, founder and executive director of ASTRA, a Serbian civil society organization countering human trafficking through victim assistance, education, prevention and research. ASTRA runs helplines for human trafficking and missing children.¹ Anđelković spoke about ASTRA's achievements, human trafficking trends, the work of institutions, and the possibility of introducing a new public-warning system for missing children in Serbia.

It has been over two decades since ASTRA was founded. What are you most proud of?

In 20 years, close to 57 000 people have called our helpline and we supported almost 600 human trafficking victims. We received over 4 000 calls to assist in finding missing children and confirmed 143 cases. The children were found in almost all cases. We were among the first to raise human trafficking issues in Serbia, which led to policy changes. Twenty years ago, the police did not even have data on sex trafficking. Today, this topic is addressed by experts. Through two decades of education, research and networking, we have helped support victims. We are respected as a partner and our organization is credible.

In the 2021 Global Organized Crime Index, Serbia received a score of 5 (out of 10) on human trafficking. The score is slightly lower than the global average of 5.58. Have you noticed new trends and forms of human trafficking in the country?

Sexual exploitation continues to be the dominant form of human trafficking in Serbia. The victims are predominantly women and girls. However, labour exploitation has increased following economic crises and migration flows. According to our data, from 2020 to 2022, 43 of 77 human trafficking victims were



Marija Anđelković, founder and executive director of ASTRA.

Photo: Supplied

specifically subjected to labour exploitation. These are mainly workers from India and Vietnam.² In addition, the number of minors among the victims and domestic trafficking within Serbia are increasing.

What can you tell us about regional trends?

Sexual exploitation is the most prevalent form of human trafficking in the Balkans, representing 80% of the 520 recorded human trafficking cases in the region. Forced begging, forced marriage and labour exploitation follow. Over 80% of victims are women and girls. However, the number of male victims is increasing, mostly in the realm of labour exploitation. Over 40% of victims are children under 18 years old and the median age is getting lower. For girls, it is 12 or 13 years old. Domestic trafficking is also increasing. The number of identified victims by state authorities varies, but most cases go unnoticed.

How are human traffickers perceived in Serbian mainstream media?

Due to sensationalism in the media, convicted human traffickers are promoted as businessmen, ordinary people who are wrongly understood and accused. One of them has even been nicknamed the 'pop pimp' and has become a prominent speaker on legalizing prostitution. With this approach, potential sexual

exploitation victims are being placed in the entertainment domain. The names of women sex workers were published, along with prices for their sexual services. Civil society appealed for an investigation on these media outlets but, as far as we know, the prosecution did not respond to it.

You mentioned labour exploitation as an emerging issue. The case of a Filipino woman has currently drawn the public's attention in the country, raising conflicting opinions. Prosecutors claim that there are no elements of human trafficking. What is this about?

In the case of this foreign worker, there are clear indications of labour exploitation. The employment contract is unlawful because the job description does not correspond to the victim's work. Her employer took her passport. It was returned when the employer decided to send her back to her home country, dissatisfied with her complaints about poor working and living conditions. Instead of the agreed 8 hours, she worked 14 to 16 hours daily. Her duties were constantly expanding and her salary was not paid regularly. On top of that, her movement was restricted. She was not allowed to leave her employers' house without their permission.

Does this case point to systemic problems in Serbia?

Public institutions responsible for identifying victims did not follow legal procedures, thus violating the rights of the potential victim and putting her in a less favourable position than when she arrived in Serbia. Due to the fact that a politically active family was involved in the exploitation, there is a justified suspicion that external pressures influenced the outcome of this case.

ASTRA has been analyzing court verdicts on human trafficking for 11 years. What are the main findings?

About half of the cases initially qualified as prostitution were reclassified as mediation in prostitution, a lesser offence. The female victim is thereby discredited because it is interpreted that she was acting voluntarily. Out of 587 victims supported by ASTRA, three received a decision on compensation in a civil court procedure, but only one managed to implement that decision. She received €2 000 in three instalments. In the other two cases, the traffickers managed to get rid of the property before the victims received compensation. Victims are also subject to criminal prosecution. The process of rehabilitation and reintegration of victims is lengthy, challenging and

often relies on the capacities of civil society and the perseverance of individuals from state institutions.

What are the main challenges for victims of human trafficking in Serbia?

When victims leave the trafficking chain, they are often socially stigmatized and met with prejudice. They may be discriminated against, insulted and faced with suspicion. In public spaces, they may hear degrading comments, such as at the doctor and even in the courtroom, where they do not get the status of a compassionate witness. In trials, some are sat next to abusers. All of this traumatizes and revictimizes them.

In January 2023, an initiative was launched in Serbia to introduce Amber Alert, a system for alerting the public in specific cases of missing children. What are your thoughts?

Child abductions that would meet the criteria for alerting the public via an Amber Alert are extremely rare in Serbia. Also, it is unknown whether an Amber Alert will be declared only if there is a suspicion of child abduction or if the criteria will be expanded. But it is crucial to carefully assess the benefits and potential harms of triggering such an alarm.

Another concern with the Amber Alert system is expanding the video surveillance network that uses biometrics and facial recognition to find a missing child. In our opinion, Amber Alert should not necessarily be associated with enhanced video surveillance because it is primarily directed to activate citizens in a specific region and invite them to pay attention to suspicious circumstances in case a child is missing.

Research shows that Amber Alert has pros and cons. A significant number of missing children have been found, particularly in the US, where the system is mainly used. However, the system also has its downsides. Too frequent advertising in certain territories encourages citizens to tune out, may disturb the public and may contribute to the abductor's feeling of panic. It can encourage abductors to assassinate a kidnapped child.

The country's strategy to combat human trafficking expired in 2022. Moreover, the action plan for 2021 and 2022 was never adopted, while the Council for Fighting Human Trafficking did not meet for several years. What does this say about efforts to counter human trafficking in Serbia?

The issue of human trafficking is a low political priority in Serbia. We are disappointed that we have not received any feedback on the action plan outcomes, except that we were informed that it was not formally adopted due to financial resources. As a result, all stakeholders were left without insights into the results. We have repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that the Council has not met for the fourth year in a row despite circumstances that required regular meetings and planning responses to numerous challenges.

What are the main weaknesses of the existing institutional system?

Lack of knowledge, and prejudices and misperceptions from a number of officials from the police, prosecution, judiciary, social protection services and the health, labour and education sectors are the main weaknesses

of the current system. This prevents these officials from recognizing the vulnerabilities of people at risk and victims of trafficking, and reacting appropriately to protect their rights and provide support. There is also low awareness of the consequences of exploitation and limited support services for victims.

What is the solution?

The government needs to focus its efforts on designing an intersectoral, comprehensive and targeted prevention programme, because once a person falls into human trafficking and goes through various forms of exploitation, the damage has already been done. Support is weak and life circumstances in Serbia are challenging. Institutions inevitably push victims into further risks.

Notes

- 1 For more information about ASTRA, see <https://astra.rs/>.
- 2 Indian workers exploited in the Serbian road construction, ASTRA, 2023, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1seOwE_vZ4-gPHoFpHvJXldWxbodfRZzZ/view?usp=sharing;

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Acknowledgements

This Risk Bulletin is an output of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime's Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (SEE-Obs). We would like to thank Safet Music for his valuable contribution.

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This publication was produced with the financial support of the United Kingdom's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the GI-TOC and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Kingdom.



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