

# OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

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## Summary highlights



### Balkan criminal networks are gaining ground in Australia's drug market.

Two major consignments of cocaine seized offshore Australia in the last two to three years involving ships captained by Montenegrin sailors signal increased law enforcement scrutiny of Western Balkan criminal organizations' involvement in supplying cocaine to the country. Offshore drop zones and drop-at-sea techniques are used to evade maritime security, while decoded messages indicate coordination and planning through communication applications. Subsequent cases suggest that these hauls are the tip of an expanding iceberg of Western Balkan criminal influence in Australia, driven in part by inter-group cooperation.



### Balkan countries lack the tools and drive to combat crypto fraud.

Criminal networks in the Western Balkans are increasingly exploiting the anonymity of cryptocurrencies to conceal the origins of illicit funds, supplementing or even supplanting traditional laundering methods. Regional law enforcement agencies are finally starting to wake up to this threat, but are finding it difficult to keep

up with the fast-changing nature of crypto-related crimes, which pose unique challenges: legal gaps, lack of institutional expertise and limited operational resources. The development of a crypto regulatory architecture across the region and cooperation between financial intelligence agencies, law enforcement and the private sector are urgently required.



### Balkan countries are key destinations for the trafficking of Latin American women for sexual exploitation.

The recent dismantling of a network that allegedly trafficked numerous women from Colombia to Albania for sexual exploitation has highlighted a significant yet largely overlooked trend. A Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) investigation into online listings for sexual services has revealed a significant presence of Colombian sex workers in Albania and Kosovo, as well as Brazilian nationals in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. While many of these women are listed as 'independent' on these websites, they are in fact controlled by criminal networks that operate unhindered.



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ORGANIZED CRIME



## Bosnia and Herzegovina faces cannabis cultivation challenges

Bosnia and Herzegovina is undergoing a significant shift from being primarily a transit country for illicit cannabis to becoming a producer, with both outdoor and indoor cultivation expanding across the country. Seizures by law enforcement — ranging from the discovery of cannabis plantations to multiple indoor laboratories across the country over the past five years — point to an increasingly organized and diversified illicit cannabis market. As domestic consumption grows and criminal networks adapt, the country's policy responses (notably including the new Canton Sarajevo strategy, which has been developed with civil society input) aim to reverse these trends through prevention, enforcement and cross-sector collaboration.



## Western Balkan criminals are fuelling London's illicit tobacco trade.

The involvement of criminal networks from the Western Balkans in various illicit economies in the UK is well documented. Criminal proceeds, typically in cash, are moved out of the UK and into the wider region, while illicit goods flow in the opposite direction. Recent cases have revealed a significant pattern of cigarette smuggling from the Western Balkans to the UK. Airports in Pristina and Skopje have become key transit points for passengers smuggling large quantities of this form of contraband, facilitated by lax customs inspections at London Luton Airport. Additionally, large quantities of cigarettes produced in Albania are being smuggled across EU land borders and on to the UK by sea.

## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This issue focuses on a wide range of illicit economies, both within the Western Balkans and influenced by criminal groups from the region.

We begin by looking at another example of how the tentacles of Western Balkan criminal groups spread around the world, this time to Australia. The story highlights how, over the past few years, organized crime groups from the Western Balkans have become active players in Australia's lucrative cocaine market.

In the past, we have reported on the increasing impact of cryptocurrencies in the Western Balkans, not least for money laundering. In this issue, we look at the region's vulnerability to crypto fraud and the challenges of dealing with this growing threat.

Over the past few months, there has been growing awareness of an increase in the number of foreign sex workers present in South Eastern Europe. In this issue, we explore this phenomenon, highlighting the well-organized movement of women, particularly from Latin America, into exploitative situations in the region. We

underline the urgent need for action to address the expansion of cyber-enabled human trafficking and sexual exploitation in the Balkans.

In previous issues of this Risk Bulletin, we have looked at cannabis cultivation in Albania and North Macedonia. In this issue, we consider the challenges relating to the substantial increase in indoor and outdoor cannabis cultivation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly those related to law enforcement and public health.

Our fifth story examines tobacco smuggling from the Western Balkans to the UK, particularly from airports in Pristina and Skopje to London Luton Airport. Undeclared cash is meanwhile moving in the other direction, from London to airports in the Western Balkans. This two-way smuggling system enables criminal networks to maximize their profits in both directions.

If you would like to get in touch or if you have an idea for a story, please contact [Almedina.Dodic@globalinitiative.net](mailto:Almedina.Dodic@globalinitiative.net).

# Balkan criminal networks are gaining ground in Australia's drug market.

Australia is one of the top consumer markets for illicit drugs globally,<sup>1</sup> making it a prime target for organized crime. In 2023/24, organized crime cost the country up to AU\$82.3 billion, with drug-related activities accounting for nearly AU\$19 billion.<sup>2</sup> Australia saw one of the sharpest increases in cocaine trafficking scores in the Global Organized Crime Index between 2021 and 2023.<sup>3</sup> The influence of foreign criminal actors also increased during the same period.<sup>4</sup> Authorities have estimated that at least 70% of organized crime threats in Australia are linked to foreign criminal networks.<sup>5</sup>

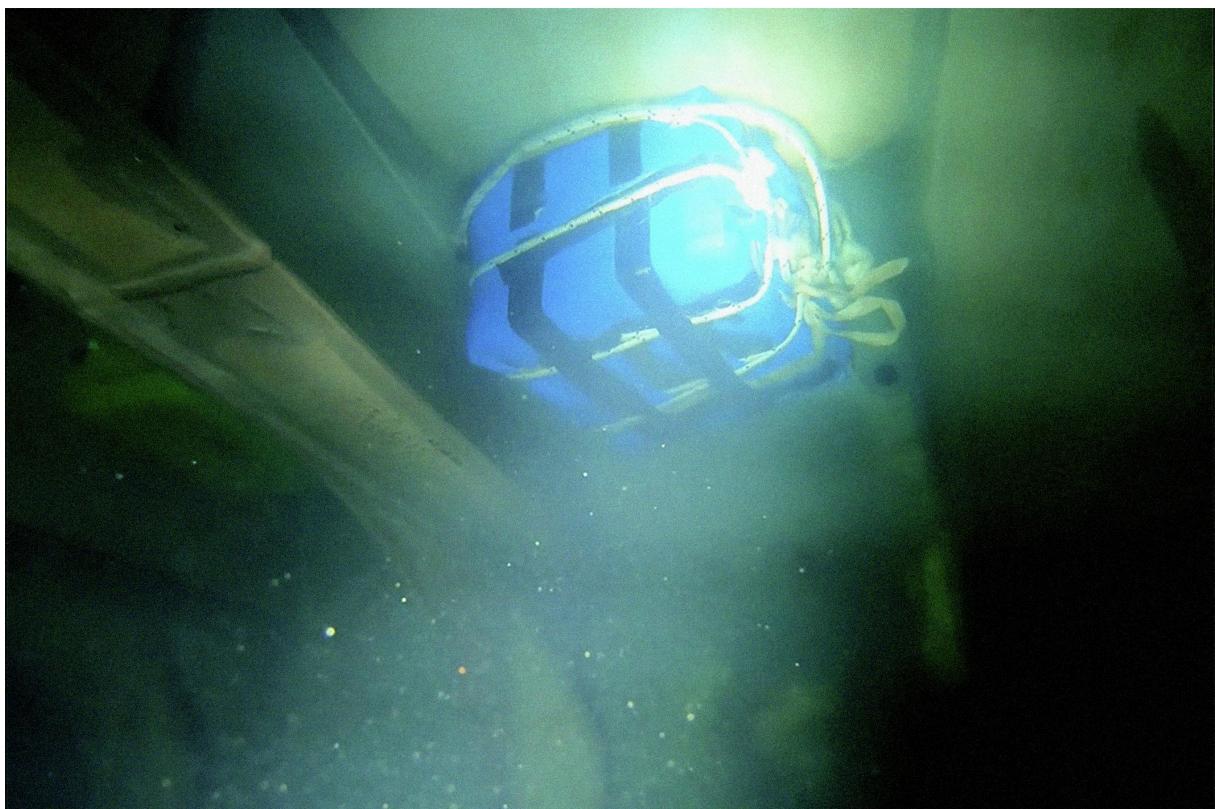
High demand, isolated geography and high street prices make Australia particularly profitable for international drug traffickers. Therefore, it is no surprise that Balkan criminal networks, which are among the key players in the global cocaine trade,<sup>6</sup> have a presence in the country, although the nuances of their role requires more investigation.

Balkan networks — consisting of Albanian-speaking members mainly from Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, and Slavic-speaking groups primarily led by Serbs and Montenegrins — excel at drug trafficking to Europe.<sup>7</sup> Both of these categories are active in Australia.

## Montenegrin sailors

In May 2023, Australian authorities intercepted 849.5 kilograms of cocaine offshore.<sup>8</sup> Two Montenegrin crew members — the captain and the chief engineer — had planned to dump the drugs into the sea near Fremantle, ahead of collection by another ship. When the transfer failed, the captain flooded the ballast tank to hide the drugs and ordered the crew to falsify the logbook.<sup>9</sup>

A year earlier, in May 2022, Australian authorities disrupted a trafficking scheme involving 320 kilograms of cocaine.<sup>10</sup> A Montenegrin ship captain allegedly loaded the cocaine onto a bulk carrier at an international port



**In May 2023, a Montenegrin ship captain reportedly tried to hide cocaine destined for Australia by filling the ballast tank with water.**

*Photo: Screenshot from an Australian Federal Police video via Hightail. View the video here.*

and dropped the packages into the sea near Port Hedland, also in Western Australia. Two men – a German and an Australian – retrieved the drugs using a small boat. All three were arrested and charged.<sup>11</sup> Both cases demonstrate how senior crew members bypass cargo controls that are meant to regulate international shipping.

In September 2024, an international police operation codenamed Kraken penetrated Ghost, an encrypted communications platform.<sup>12</sup> The platform was reportedly used by criminal networks, including those associated with Albanian organized crime, to coordinate illegal activities. Based on intelligence from Ghost, Australian nationals with suspected links to Albanian groups were arrested in September 2024 and February 2025 for alleged involvement in cannabis cultivation and trafficking.<sup>13</sup>

This case not only presents further evidence of Balkan criminal groups' activity in Australia, but also demonstrates how technology has facilitated international cooperation among criminals of different nationalities.

Balkan criminal networks are not a new phenomenon in Australia. Their presence can be traced back to the Yugoslav diaspora from the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Over time, some individuals became involved in organized crime, often through outlaw motorcycle gangs, which Australian police see as a major threat.<sup>15</sup> A key figure was Zeljko Mitrovic, a high-ranking Hells Angels member of Serbian descent. He was killed in 2013 by his former methamphetamine cook, Michael Basanovic,<sup>16</sup> who was sentenced three years later to a minimum of 21 years in prison for his murder.<sup>17</sup>

Balkan groups currently compete in Australia with other powerful actors such as Italy's 'Ndrangheta, while Middle Eastern, Asian and Chinese syndicates also remain highly active.<sup>18</sup> More recently, Brazil's Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), Latin America's biggest criminal organization,<sup>19</sup> has also emerged as a significant threat to Australia.<sup>20</sup>

Balkan networks could gain even more influence in Australia if they extend collaborations in Western Europe and Latin America, where they have respectively already worked with the 'Ndrangheta and the PCC.<sup>21</sup> Such partnerships provide Balkan networks access to established routes and logistics, alongside protection in new environments.

## Relying on diaspora

Montenegro's organized criminal networks have a long history in Australia. Over time, criminal groups have strategically expanded their areas of operation using their strongholds in Latin America, wider international connections and diaspora communities in Australia itself. By leveraging existing kinship and social ties, these groups aim to strengthen their presence in Australia's illicit drug market, facilitating logistics, transportation and distribution efforts.

For example, Vaso Ulić, a Montenegrin of Albanian descent, has been linked by law enforcement to international drug trafficking for more than two decades.<sup>22</sup> He has drawn the attention of police in both the Western Balkans and Australia, where he is considered a key figure in transnational cocaine smuggling networks.<sup>23</sup>

Ulić reportedly moved to Australia in 1979, initially engaging in petty crime in Sydney.<sup>24</sup> Over time, he allegedly became the head of a network involved in large-scale drug trafficking.<sup>25</sup> Although primarily based in Sydney, his network reportedly operated across Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia. Ulić left Australia in 2004 and returned to Montenegro, where he is suspected by the Montenegrin authorities of continuing his involvement in international drug smuggling.<sup>26</sup>

Around 2020, he allegedly partnered with the Kavač clan, one of two major Slavic-speaking criminal organizations from Montenegro, in the cocaine trade.<sup>27</sup> Between 2020 and 2022, he was suspected of leading a group of more 10 members that smuggled at least 2.47 tonnes of cocaine from Colombia to Australia via Ecuador.<sup>28</sup>

The cocaine was allegedly purchased for €4 500 per kilogram and sold in Australia for up to €80 000 per kilogram, with around 20% of these revenues used to cover extraction costs in Australia.<sup>29</sup> For coordination operations, the group members reportedly used two encrypted communication platforms: Sky ECC and ANOM.<sup>30</sup> In May 2025, the Podgorica Higher Court confirmed a cocaine trafficking indictment against Ulić, two alleged high-ranking members of the Kavač clan and 17 other suspects.<sup>31</sup> In October 2025, Ulić stated before a judge in Podgorica that he was not guilty of the police accusations.<sup>32</sup> The trial against Ulić is ongoing.

Ulić had also been charged and convicted for earlier drug shipments to Australia. In 2019, he received a two-year prison sentence after admitting to organizing drug smuggling to Australia in 2008, specifically the maritime transport of 60 kilograms of high-purity MDMA powder.<sup>33</sup>

Another relevant example is Gjelosh Nikollaj, who, like Ulić, has roots in the Montenegrin-Albanian community and a history of drug trafficking. Nikollaj was imprisoned in 2006 for importing 161 kilograms of MDMA into Australia and was out on parole at the time of his arrest in 2021.<sup>34</sup> The arrest took place as part of an operation code-named Ironside,<sup>35</sup> which intercepted millions of messages on the ANOM app.<sup>36</sup> He was arrested alongside two other people when he attempted to collect a shipment believed to contain 3 tonnes of cocaine from a storage facility in Sydney. The group allegedly sourced cocaine in Colombia, transported it to Ecuador using fast boats and intended to ship it on to Australia inside toilet paper rolls.<sup>37</sup> Nikollaj was granted bail in March 2025 after spending almost four years in custody awaiting trial. His bail conditions included an AU\$3 million surety, electronic monitoring and home detention.<sup>38</sup>

The cases of Ulić and Nikollaj suggest a pattern in which Montenegrin-Albanian actors serve as facilitators in global drug supply chains to Australia. The same applies to two individuals from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Edin Gaćanin and Sani al-Murda.

Gaćanin, a Bosnia and Herzegovina native with Dutch citizenship, is a major figure in international drug trafficking and leads the Tito and Dino cartel.<sup>39</sup> His drug network is connected to Latin America, South Africa and Australia. It reportedly established front companies in Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, posing as legitimate exporters of berries, cocoa and coal to conceal substantial cocaine shipments. Some of the alliances that support his outreach in Australia connect to Dubai, where some high-ranking members of Balkan criminal networks reside.<sup>40</sup>

South Africa has become an important transit hub for cocaine moving from Latin America to Australia, as evidenced by Gaćanin's operations relying heavily on Durban's port,<sup>41</sup> where cocaine shipments were repackaged before being sent to their final destinations in



 **Australian Federal Police**  
7 September 2017 · 

This is Vaso Ulic.

He was arrested in Montenegro by local authorities late last month.

We need your help piecing together a puzzle, so we're asking anyone with information about Mr Ulic to contact us. We're particularly interested in any information related to his activities while based overseas over the past 13 years.

Mr Ulic, 57, was born in Albania. He moved to Australia in 1979, and left the country in 2004.

It is suspected Mr Ulic led a global criminal syndicate suspected of smuggling drugs and firearms into Australia. His alleged activities were mostly based in Sydney, NSW, but also extended to Victoria, Queensland, and Western Australia.

Anyone with information about Mr Ulic is urged to contact police via Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000 or [www.crimestoppers.com.au](http://www.crimestoppers.com.au). You can remain anonymous. [See less](#)

In 2017, the Australian Federal Police publicly requested more information about Vaso Ulić's activities in Australia since 2004.

Photo: Australian Federal Police Facebook page

Australia. Allegedly, his influence over specific ports and terminals in Durban enabled his organization to manipulate shipping procedures and minimize detection.<sup>42</sup>

Gačanin reportedly introduced Sani al-Murda – an associate of the Škaljari clan, Montenegro's second strongest criminal organization – to the cocaine business.<sup>43</sup> Australia was a key destination for al-Murda's operations, as evidenced by Sky ECC communications within his network. In February 2021, al-Murda claimed he sent 600 kilograms of cocaine to Australia and awaited confirmation. He stated that his network could smuggle between 1 000 and 1 500 kilograms aboard fishing vessels, but was cautious about increasing shipments above that range.<sup>44</sup>

In November 2023, a Dutch court sentenced Gačanin in absentia to seven years in prison for drug trafficking from Latin America to Europe.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Belgium is searching for al-Murda on the basis of an INTERPOL Red Notice.<sup>46</sup> Gačanin, al-Murda and their lawyers have not issued any statements regarding the accusations.

## Further growth ahead?

Seizures, arrests and criminal proceedings in Australia and the Western Balkans point to the growing presence of both Albanian-speaking and Slavic-speaking criminal groups in Australia's cocaine trade. While Balkan criminal networks do not yet dominate Australia's drug market, their influence is rising steadily. The history of their criminal activities demonstrates their ability to expand and to adapt swiftly. Their growing influence is built on three interrelated dynamics: strategic alliances with non-Balkan organizations, inter-group cooperation between Slavic and Albanian groups, and technological adaptation.

Technological advances – especially encrypted apps – have been crucial to these groups' activity in Australia. This technology facilitates the planning of maritime shipments and drug transfers while minimizing detection risks. Although these tools can be risky if hacked, Balkan groups are quick to adapt to new communication methods.

Collectively, these developments indicate that Western Balkan networks are strategically positioned to expand further in Australia, leveraging alliances, cooperation, technology and new trafficking routes.

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# Balkan countries lack the tools and drive to combat crypto fraud.

Western Balkans' criminal and procedural codes do not contain provisions that specifically refer to crypto-related crimes. Some prosecutors argue that this shortcoming makes it difficult to seize virtual assets and creates legal uncertainties that undermine their ability to bring cases to court.<sup>1</sup>

While some recent prosecutions have enabled seizures under current laws, such cases remain the exception rather than the norm. Across the region, only seven cases of virtual asset confiscation have been recorded to date: three in Albania, two in Kosovo, one in Serbia, and one in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>2</sup>

A recent case in Albania, led by the Special Structure Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK), resulted in the seizure of US\$10 million in cryptocurrency with the assistance of a global stablecoin company and a major international exchange.<sup>3</sup> The case highlights that success sometimes depends less on legal gaps than on the resourcefulness and persistence of law enforcement, backed by international cooperation and private sector buy-in.

A failure by national authorities to set up sovereign cryptocurrency wallets remains a critical operational barrier throughout the Western Balkans. Without them, virtual asset seizures are technically possible but require partnerships with other countries or private companies. Criminal proceeds in cryptocurrency have been seized by several Western Balkan nations with the support of other countries, but Albania remains the only regional country that has built a partnership with the private sector to seize virtual assets.<sup>4</sup>

However, challenges in seizing virtual assets are dwarfed by a lack of regional commitment, cooperation, procedures and operational resources dedicated to tackling crypto crime. The lack of commitment by Western Balkan governments is noticeable by an absence of legislative frameworks and allocation of financial and operational resources to financial intelligence units, law enforcement and supervisory institutions.

This sits alongside a more general failure by regional countries to assess the vulnerabilities of the crypto

sector to organized crime, particularly money laundering, despite the Financial Action Task Force's explicit requirement that such risks be evaluated as part of national anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism assessments.<sup>5</sup>

Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia are the only countries among the six Western Balkan nations to have conducted threat assessments of money laundering and terrorist financing related to virtual assets. Serbia was the first country to adopt the assessment in 2021.<sup>6</sup> Conducted in 2024, the assessment in Bosnia and Herzegovina found that suspicious and crime-related transactions in this space remain relatively small.<sup>7</sup> North Macedonia completed its assessment in 2025, but it has not yet been published.<sup>8</sup>

## Fragmented probes of crypto crime

In the Western Balkans, the understanding of cryptocurrencies within police structures remains generally limited.<sup>9</sup> Expertise is concentrated largely in specialized cybercrime units, which have developed some investigative capacity, helped by UK support.

Recently, the UK provided financial intelligence units (FIUs) in Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia with blockchain analysis tools, enabling the tracing and identification of cryptocurrency transactions and leading to initial investigations.<sup>10</sup> North Macedonia's criminal intelligence sector and FIU acquired two such tools. The country's criminal and intelligence sector supports the cybercrime sector with intelligence and analysis for crypto-related investigations, as the latter often lacks access to specialized tools. They receive data extracted from phones to check for digital wallets and cryptocurrency transactions.<sup>11</sup> In Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro, FIUs and cybercrime units have also received technical tools, enabling some level of proactive analysis.

However, police units that are responsible for financial investigations face existing staff shortages, leaving them with limited capacity to acquire or integrate cryptocurrency expertise into their investigatory toolkit.<sup>12</sup> This has left crypto-related probes largely confined to cybercrime cases, rather than integrated into broader financial crime or organized crime investigations.

Currently, the region lacks clear procedures or guidelines for investigating crypto cases or integrating them into financial system investigations. Instead, cryptocurrency stashes typically come to light when cybercrime units uncover them during the investigation of cybercrimes, notably scam call centres, frauds, illicit online marketplaces and other similar cases.

For example, the two cases in Kosovo in which cryptocurrencies were seized stem from cybercrime investigations conducted in cooperation with US authorities.<sup>13</sup> In both cases, the value of the seized holdings was not disclosed and the seizures were carried out by US agencies, as Kosovo lacks both a national crypto wallet and agreements with international exchanges to secure and manage crypto assets.<sup>14</sup>

Albania's SPAK is the leading institution within the Western Balkans in seizing cryptocurrencies, albeit with a very modest track record so far. In addition to its landmark case involving the seizure of US\$10 million in crypto assets, it has handled two other cybercrime cases that have involved confiscations. One case saw the seizure of a mere US\$15 000, while the other yielded an

undisclosed amount linked to the disruption of the Rydox illicit marketplace, with US and Kosovan authorities also participating in this operation.<sup>15</sup>

Serbia's sole successful seizure came as part of a joint operation against a cryptocurrency fraud network with German, Cypriot and Bulgarian law enforcement.<sup>16</sup> Strongly supported by Eurojust and Europol, this operation resulted in the arrest of 14 people in Serbia and one person in Germany, along with the seizure of several crypto wallets containing a total of approximately US\$1 million. These examples highlight how crypto seizures usually stem from international collaboration and support rather than originating from a domestic financial investigation into serious and organized crime.

Proactive investigations into cryptocurrency fraud remain rare, although Serbian prosecutors are required to conduct parallel financial investigations in every organized crime case. This has, since 2022, included explicit instructions to examine the risk of crypto misuse for money laundering, theoretically embedding digital assets into the core of financial crime investigations.<sup>17</sup>



**A Bitcoin exchange in Pristina, Kosovo. Proactive investigations into cryptocurrency fraud are still a rarity in the Western Balkans, where countries lack the necessary legislative frameworks to investigate this form of crime.**

*Photo: Armend Nimani/AFP via Getty Images*

At the regional level, fragmentation is exacerbated by poor cooperation between cybercrime units and other law enforcement agencies. Police intelligence and analysis units, which play a vital role in serious and organized crime cases, are only marginally involved in crypto-related inquiries. Most lack both the tools and the expertise to contribute meaningfully, apart from in North Macedonia, where UK support has centred specifically on bolstering the criminal and financial intelligence sectors.

Cooperation between the police and FIUs is generally good but needs to be enhanced specifically for cryptocurrency-related crimes.<sup>18</sup> Specific aspects of crypto investigations are not included in the current frameworks for exchanging information.

Public-private cooperation in crypto-related investigations is almost non-existent across the Western Balkans. Virtual asset service providers, many of which operate without licences or oversight, are viewed with suspicion rather than as potential partners.

Formal cooperation channels do not exist, although there are some informal exchanges of information. The Kosovan police, for example, are exploring partnerships with universities to draw on students' knowledge.<sup>19</sup> A structured mechanism for dialogue between public authorities, the private sector and academia is missing across the region.

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## From fragmentation to coordination

The lack of systematic financial investigations in parallel with organized crime cases has long been flagged by the European Commission as an issue in the Western Balkans, but the integration of crypto into such investigations is even rarer. Sporadic seizures of criminal proceeds held in cryptocurrencies and ad hoc investigations demonstrate that progress is possible, but systemic weaknesses persist, most notably inadequate legislation, an absence of national wallets, limited expertise, and insufficient coordination between law enforcement and supervisory bodies.

Courts across the region, already overburdened with complex organized crime cases, face additional challenges in handling crypto-related prosecutions that require technical expertise and cross-border cooperation. Without stronger national strategies, standardized procedures and mechanisms for public-private collaboration, the region risks becoming a safe haven for crypto-enabled laundering.

Ultimately, only a coordinated regional approach that integrates financial intelligence, law enforcement, regulators and the private sector can close the gaps that organized criminal groups are exploiting. Otherwise, crypto will continue to serve as an attractive store of value – or cash-out option – for illicit wealth in the Balkans.

# Balkan countries are key destinations for the trafficking of Latin American women for sexual exploitation.

In October 2025, a taskforce led by Europol – working alongside police in Albania, Colombia and Croatia, and supported by Eurojust – dismantled a major human trafficking network operating across Europe. The group, which was mainly composed of Colombian nationals, had recruited young women in Latin America and lured them to Albania under false pretences.<sup>1</sup> Once there, they were forced into sex work, often under the threat of violence against their families back home.

In some cases, the gang took relatives of the victims hostage to ensure compliance.<sup>2</sup> Following an eight-month investigation by Albanian and Colombian authorities, seven suspects were arrested. Women who had been exploited were found in hotels and rented apartments. During the operation, 54 victims from Latin America were identified: 44 in Albania, five in Croatia and five in Colombia.<sup>3</sup>

The network employed brutal methods of control, including drugging and violently assaulting victims, while the profits from sex work were systematically collected and transferred in cryptocurrency to the Colombian gang leader.<sup>4</sup> During searches in Colombia, investigators uncovered Bitcoin codes and numerous receipts for money transfers linked to the operation, indicating illicit gains of more than €1 million since January 2025.<sup>5</sup>

This case is just the tip of the iceberg. As indicated by the GI-TOC Organized Crime Index,<sup>6</sup> human trafficking for sexual exploitation is an established trend in the Western Balkans, and there has been a significant increase in the number of foreign women arriving in the region to work in the sex industry, particularly from Latin America. In fact, a review of media reports of police operations and victim testimonies, as well as an assessment by a shelter organization, clearly showed that by far the most sex workers in the region are recruited and controlled by criminal networks.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, what was once an underground trade has now moved online, with global digital platforms enabling a sophisticated and profitable system of sexual exploitation. Here, the term 'independent escort' is often

used to deceive clients, website operators and authorities into believing that the women are not working under duress.<sup>8</sup>

## The implications of online sexual services

In addition to fuelling human trafficking, online sexual services facilitate money laundering and tax evasion. Prices on these platforms generally range from €200 to €800, with overnight sessions usually costing more. While payments are usually made in cash, the growing use of cryptocurrency and prepaid services is complicating efforts to track financial flows.<sup>9</sup>

The websites are well-maintained and professional, featuring profile photos, service listings, prices, contact details, real-time availability and even customer ratings. They provide various search categories, ranging from nationality and age to levels of accreditation. One particular platform has nearly 3 500 verified accounts listed across the Western Balkans, mainly in Albania, Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>10</sup>

The growing number of tourists in Albania and Montenegro, particularly in their capital cities and coastal zones, has driven the demand for online sexual services. The growth is particularly notable in Montenegro, which, despite having the smallest population in the region, at around 600 000, ranks among the countries with the highest number of registered accounts on these platforms. The women originate from a wide range of areas, mainly Latin America, followed by Asia, Europe and Africa. Some countries of origin have visa-free agreements with Schengen and Western Balkan countries, meaning their travel is unrestricted – a factor exploited by traffickers.

The fact that many trafficking victims are foreign nationals and thus unfamiliar with the local environment makes it easier for transnational organized crime groups to maintain control. In addition, the small size of the Western Balkans, coupled with its high level of interconnectedness and porous land borders, means that people can be moved from one nation to another within hours, evading detection by the security forces.



**Ulcinj, a popular holiday destination in Montenegro. The growing number of tourists in the region, particularly in their capital cities and coastal zones, has led to increased demand for sex work, particularly online.**

*Photo: Maxim Konankov/NurPhoto via Getty Images*

Victims are sometimes recruited with the false promise of legitimate employment.<sup>11</sup> They are often accommodated in low-cost apartments for short periods of one to two months before being replaced by others.<sup>12</sup> This practice provides anonymity, due to a lack of sufficient tenant verification by property owners, and significantly hinders law enforcement efforts, as it becomes more difficult to trace individuals or uncover the networks behind these activities.

Local and foreign criminal networks collaborate on every aspect of the process, from recruitment, travel and accommodation to facilitating client meetings. They reportedly collect profits ranging from 30%–50% of the sex worker's earnings.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Brazil and Colombia: main source countries**

In recent years, authorities in Kosovo have noticed a pattern of Latin American women arriving from Albania and leaving again after just a few days.<sup>14</sup> A GI-TOC review of listings on a popular sexual services website revealed that most verified accounts in Kosovo and Albania – whether affiliated with an agency or working independently – belonged to Colombian nationals.

Brazilians constituted the largest group in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the second-largest group in North Macedonia, where most so-called 'independent escorts' were Brazilian. In Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, the most prevalent nationality was Russian, while Latin American nationalities were among the top three in North Macedonia and Serbia.<sup>15</sup>

In late 2024, North Macedonia's interior ministry announced the arrest of three Macedonian nationals and a Brazilian woman suspected of setting up a network to recruit, transport and house five Brazilian women in Skopje for the purpose of sexual exploitation. According to officials, the Brazilian woman was the primary suspect, allegedly responsible for managing the victims' online profiles and arranging appointments. In exchange for these services, she took a 30% commission from the victims' earnings, which she then shared with the other two suspects.<sup>16</sup> The authorities alleged that some of the proceeds were funnelled electronically to recipients in Portugal and Brazil, while the rest covered local expenses such as rent and operational costs.

In October 2022, Croatian authorities uncovered a case of sexual exploitation in Split involving five Brazilian women and a 32-year-old coordinator from Peru. The investigation expanded in 2023, resulting in further arrests, including a 19-year-old man from Šibenik and a 23-year-old Serbian woman. They were both accused of facilitating sex work by Brazilian women in Šibenik and Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>17</sup>

Interviews with law enforcement officials and individuals familiar with local criminal networks in Mostar revealed a consistent pattern over the past three years.<sup>18</sup> Women from Latin America, often posing as tourists, frequently travel from Split to Mostar by bus or rental car, where they rent apartments for short stays of one to two weeks. After returning to Split, they often repeat this cycle, maintaining a strategy of short-term residence and relocation between the two cities to avoid detection.

Apart from Latin America, many of the victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in the Western Balkans appear to originate from Asian countries. In January 2025, for instance, Albanian authorities in Tirana arrested a Turkish national suspected of recruiting women from China and Kazakhstan for the purposes of sexual exploitation.<sup>19</sup> Troublingly, nine women were also detained for engaging in sex work, demonstrating how victims are often criminalized in regions where the activity is illegal. Prosecutions such as this make it more difficult for trafficked women to escape their situation, and they appear to be particularly common in Albania.<sup>20</sup>

Another case in Tirana in 2024 involved Chinese perpetrators and victims. A network led by two Chinese women was dismantled after one was arrested and the other fled. The pair allegedly recruited young women from China and the Philippines, intimidating and terrorizing them and their families. In one instance, an accomplice of the ringleaders extorted €15 000 from a victim by threatening to share explicit photographs of her should she attempt to leave.<sup>21</sup>

At the time of writing, between four and six Asian women were renting apartments in Mostar to provide sexual services, according to interviews with local sources. These cases are reportedly not isolated or

spontaneous, but form part of a broader, cross-border criminal network.<sup>22</sup>

Responses vary by country. Although a number of networks have been dismantled regionally, in Belgrade in Serbia – the origin point for the largest number of online sex work profiles in the region – the issue has received little attention from the media or the authorities, who have made no significant efforts to dismantle sex trafficking networks. In Montenegro, a local media outlet reported on the presence of sex workers in one of the capital's most prominent and densely populated neighbourhoods. When asked about the situation, the Higher State Prosecutor's Office in Podgorica stated that it had no information about the website in question or any similar platforms and confirmed that no investigations were currently underway.<sup>23</sup>

### **Robust, collective response is needed**

The expansion of cyber-enabled human trafficking and sexual exploitation in the Western Balkans requires a stronger and more coordinated response from law enforcement and social services than has been seen so far. Law enforcement agencies must move away from criminalizing victims and towards strengthening their sporadic efforts to identify and disrupt criminal networks. Border authorities should conduct more thorough entry checks on people arriving from countries that are commonly used to source victims of human trafficking. Transnational trafficking networks in the region exploit legal loopholes and weak cross-border cooperation. The exchange of information and the establishment of national and regional joint investigation teams will be essential to dismantling this form of organized crime.

A comprehensive response would also include robust support systems for victims. Many trafficked people are unable to seek help due to language barriers, fear of the authorities or a lack of access. Social services should be staffed with trained professionals and interpreters, particularly those who speak Spanish and Portuguese, in order to provide urgent, culturally sensitive support. It is also crucial to ensure that victims are protected and empowered to testify, both for their recovery and for the successful prosecution of those responsible.

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# Bosnia and Herzegovina faces cannabis cultivation challenges.

Authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina seized more than 5 tonnes of various drugs in raids across the country's three geographic entities in 2024, a significant portion of which comprised cannabis seizures. Across Bosnia and Herzegovina, roughly 97% of the drugs seized in 2024 were cannabis or cannabis plants. Most of it, over 3.1 tonnes, was confiscated by the Federal Police Unit, with additional seizures made by the Border Police, Brčko District Police and the Republic of Srpska Ministry of Interior. These operations, including several with international scope, dismantled multiple organized crime groups and uncovered 11 drug production laboratories, underscoring intensified efforts to combat drug production and trafficking networks across the country. Synthetic drugs such as amphetamines and ecstasy made up a smaller, but still notable, portion of the total seizures.<sup>1</sup>

According to the latest security report published in 2023 by Bosnia's Ministry of Security, the country remains primarily a transit route for drugs – especially cannabis – smuggled from Albania, mostly through Montenegro and to a lesser extent through Serbia, en route to major consumer markets in Western Europe. Although drug consumption in Bosnia and Herzegovina is rising, it remains relatively low compared to other European countries.<sup>2</sup> Previously, domestic drug production was largely limited to small-scale cultivation of cannabis, both outdoors and in improvised indoor laboratories, which allows for year-round harvesting. The historical volume of cannabis plants seizures suggests that these were minor plantations until 2021, when a significant up-trend became apparent alongside seizures.<sup>3</sup>

Cultivation continues to be concentrated in areas with a Mediterranean climate, notably in the Herzegovina region of southern Bosnia and Herzegovina. In just a few days in June and July 2025, over 110 plants were seized in Čapljina and Čitluk, located 20 kilometres apart in south Herzegovina.<sup>4</sup> But according to seizures, cannabis production has spread across the rest of the country, with increasing use of makeshift outdoor laboratories and even indoor setups in apartments, warehouses, basements and other similar locations.<sup>5</sup>

One of the earliest and largest cannabis seizures from outdoor cultivation in Bosnia and Herzegovina was in 2013, when around 1 tonne of domestically grown cannabis was seized in a forest near Laktasi in the Republic of Srpska. This was an early example of large-scale cannabis cultivation, but still represented an isolated occurrence.<sup>6</sup> One major operation in 2024 brought the second-largest ever seizure of cannabis plants cultivated outdoors (3 000), worth €1.5 million. This seizure took place in Bihać, a town bordering Croatia in the west of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, criminals often cultivate cannabis in minefields, exploiting local knowledge of these areas in a context where law enforcement lacks the equipment to navigate safely.<sup>8</sup>

Between 2021 and 2025 there appears to have been a notable increase in outdoor cultivation, as seen in the outcomes of several major law enforcement operations. One of these, a police operation code-named Escobar conducted in Velika Kladuša in 2021, resulted in over 6 000 cannabis plants being seized along with more than 5 kilograms of cannabis and cultivation equipment, leading to the arrest of four individuals. Authorities stated that the drugs were intended for both the domestic market and distribution to EU countries, underscoring the transnational dimension of the operation.<sup>9</sup>

While outdoor cultivation appears to be increasing, indoor cultivation has also experienced rapid growth across the country, reflecting growing demand and profitability within the domestic market. For example, in Sarajevo Canton, houses and apartments are being rented and adapted into laboratories for indoor cultivation of cannabis.<sup>10</sup> In March and April 2025, one of the largest law enforcement operations yet, code-named Koko, led to the arrest of 10 men aged between 30 and 40. Police uncovered two extensive indoor cannabis laboratories that were cultivating a combined total of around 1 000 plants; they also seized more than 30 kilograms of cannabis and synthetic drugs with a total value estimated of more than €500 000.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the apparent rise in both indoor and outdoor cannabis cultivation across Bosnia and Herzegovina, certain areas show a worrying lack of enforcement results. For example, no cannabis seizures were recorded in Tuzla Canton and Brčko District in 2023, indicating potential gaps in detection, resource allocation, or investigative priorities.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Rising criminality and shifting role in the region**

Bosnia and Herzegovina has transitioned from primarily a transit country to both a source and destination for cannabis. It remains the most used and seized drug, with trafficking routes originating in Albania, passing through Montenegro or Serbia and extending toward Western Europe. Moreover, there are growing reports of indoor cannabis cultivation, particularly in the southern and western parts of the country, including the production of sour cannabis, a more potent variety. This shift has coincided with a rise in violent confrontations among criminal networks vying for market control, indicating an increasingly competitive and volatile illicit drug landscape.<sup>13</sup>

Law enforcement indicates that cannabis trafficking remains a highly lucrative criminal activity. Current data suggest that the street price of cannabis ranges between €7 and €10 per gram, while bulk prices range from €1 200 to €2 000 per kilogram. These profit margins continue to drive production, distribution and cross-border trafficking, particularly within well-organized criminal networks operating across the Western Balkans.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the Republic of Srpska's Ministry of Interior highlights that recent police operations have produced notable results, driven by intelligence derived from deciphering communications on encrypted messaging platforms ANOM and SkyECC. These efforts have revealed various trafficking techniques, operational plans and more individuals involved in drug smuggling.<sup>15</sup>

Decrypting the Sky app enabled the prosecution of key drug trafficking figures in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Between December 2022 and July 2024, eight separate indictments related to encrypted Sky and ANOM messaging platforms were filed at the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, exposing large-scale organized criminal



**Albanian police destroy a field of cannabis plants. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a main transit country for cannabis from Albania, but production is now also spreading across the country.**

Photo: Gent Shkullaku/AFP via Getty Images

networks involved in trafficking drugs, including cannabis and cocaine. Digital evidence from Sky and ANOM have been used to substantiate trafficking charges and secure multiple plea agreements and convictions.<sup>16</sup>

### Cannabis consumption and institutional response

Since the early 2000s, there has been a significant increase in both cannabis production and trafficking. Law enforcement agencies lacked proper coordination and inter-agency cooperation remained weak, allowing criminals to expand their illegal cannabis operations.<sup>17</sup>

According to European Union Drugs Agency data for Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2019, the average age of first cannabis use was 20, while overall consumption rates remain relatively low compared to other European countries.<sup>18</sup> However, the data indicates a significant level of frequent cannabis use among existing users across both genders and regions. For example, over a 30-day period, 43% of men reported using cannabis daily or nearly every day, while 52% of women reported consuming it several times week. In terms of regional trends, Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole recorded a slightly higher rate of daily use (33%) compared to the Republic of Srpska (28%), pointing to a concerning pattern of regular consumption among the surveyed population.<sup>19</sup>

As part of its institutional response to the growing challenges of drug use and trafficking, the Sarajevo Canton has adopted a strategy for the prevention of drug abuse covering the period 2024 to 2028. This strategic document serves as a comprehensive policy framework designed to reduce drug demand, prevent addiction and enhance law enforcement and public health responses. The strategy was developed through an inclusive working group process that engaged relevant institutions, civil society actors and independent experts, including the GI-TOC. The strategy outlines key priorities including prevention in schools, early intervention, inter-agency coordination and support for recovery and reintegration, reflecting a balanced and sustainable approach to addressing drug-related consequences in the canton.<sup>20</sup>

### Scaling up the policy response

Civil society's role in shaping prevention programmes, promoting community resilience and ensuring transparency is key to a long-term and sustainable impact. Going forward, scaling up such approaches from the cantonal level to the national level and investing in stronger data systems, cross-agency cooperation and community-led responses will be essential to containing the expansion of illicit cannabis cultivation and its related harms.

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# Western Balkan criminals are fuelling London's illicit tobacco trade.

Between the second half of 2024 and April 2025, authorities in Kosovo conducted an investigation into cigarette smuggling through Pristina International Airport. The operation exposed a trafficking route that was being used by nationals from several Western Balkan countries to supply the illicit tobacco market in London.<sup>1</sup> The probe began after three UK nationals of Iranian origin, who had previously been suspected of theft, were flagged by airport officials. They were then subjected to an additional luggage inspection before boarding their flight to London Luton Airport.

The passengers were found to be in the possession of 190 cartons of cigarettes. One individual was carrying 64 cartons that had been purchased at the airport's duty-free shop, which far exceeded the legal limit of one carton per person.<sup>2</sup> The case raised questions about compliance and oversight within retail operations at Pristina airport, as the acquisition of such a large quantity of tobacco products strongly suggested complicity or negligence among the staff.

The incident prompted an escalation in security and an intensified information exchange with customs authorities in several countries – including the UK – in order to identify additional suspects and establish smuggling patterns.<sup>3</sup> Border authorities, including the police, customs and Kosovo's National Centre for Border Management, launched joint operations, partly based on risk assessments of outbound passengers. The limited presence of customs officials at Luton airport, particularly in the late evening, was identified by Kosovan border authorities as a major factor contributing to cigarette smuggling attempts by passengers.<sup>4</sup>

Between July 2024 and April 2025, authorities at Pristina airport identified 18 smuggling attempts and

seized a total of 1 510 cartons of cigarettes.<sup>5</sup> Passengers found with stamped cigarettes were issued misdemeanour fines, while those carrying unstamped cartons faced criminal charges.<sup>6</sup> The smuggling of unstamped cigarettes suggests a greater likelihood of organized criminal activity, which often extends to the illegal production of tobacco. The absence of a stamp also makes it more difficult to determine the country of origin, the networks involved and the routes taken.

In several cases, smugglers attempted to bypass controls by placing only a few cartons in their hand luggage, or none at all, in the hope of avoiding suspicion. However, minor detections and the subsequent risk analysis often led to discoveries of larger quantities hidden in checked baggage.<sup>7</sup>

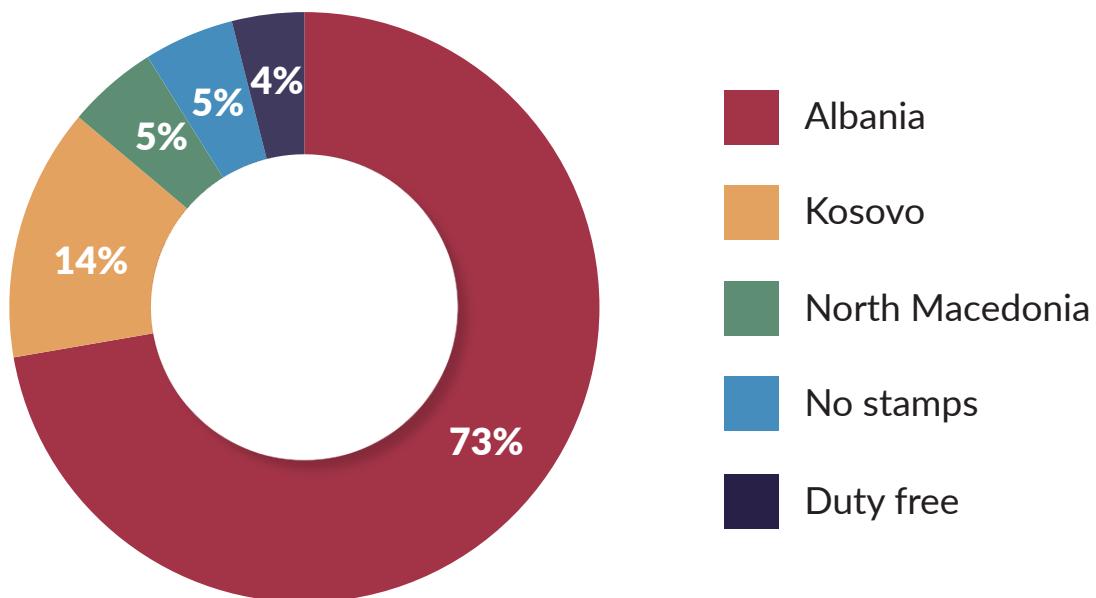
Of the 18 people caught smuggling, six were from Albania, five from the UK, three from Iran, two from Bulgaria, one from North Macedonia, and one held dual Bulgarian and North Macedonian citizenship. Four were Albanian women. In March 2025, an Albanian woman was found to be in possession of a large quantity of undeclared cigarettes in her handbag. Authorities found a further 124 cartons in her checked luggage.<sup>8</sup> The following month, two more Albanian women were found to have checked bags containing 200 cartons of cigarettes.<sup>9</sup>

Cross-border cooperation proved crucial in identifying repeat offenders. In one instance, North Macedonian authorities alerted their Kosovan counterparts about a passenger who had previously been caught smuggling cigarettes on flights from Skopje and Belgrade to London.<sup>10</sup> When this person arrived at the airport, a search of his baggage revealed 12 cartons of cigarettes.

Year	Cases	Cartons
2024	7	596
2025	11	914

**FIGURE 1** Cigarette seizures at Pristina International Airport (flights destined for London).

Source: Kosovo Customs



**FIGURE 2** Origin of cigarettes seized at Pristina International Airport.

Source: Kosovo Customs



Cigarettes seized at Pristina International Airport from an Albanian woman bound for London in March 2025.

Photo: Official Kosovo Police Facebook page

### Increased detections at Skopje airport

There has been a long history of attempts to smuggle cigarettes from Skopje International Airport to London. One of the most notable early cases was in 2013, when border officials intercepted four passengers – all dual citizens of North Macedonia and Bulgaria – who were attempting to carry 748 cartons of cigarettes onto a flight to Luton airport. Of these, 615 had North Macedonian tax stamps, while 133 were unstamped.<sup>11</sup>

Recently, there has been an increase in detected smuggling attempts. Between January 2024 and May 2025, customs officials at Skopje airport recorded 21 separate incidents involving flights to Luton alone. Each case was uncovered during routine inspections before departure.<sup>12</sup> Macedonian nationals and foreign citizens, including passengers from Kosovo and Romania, have been implicated, suggesting a regional trend. Customs officers intercepted a Kosovan citizen attempting to smuggle 60 cartons of cigarettes and two Romanian citizens carrying 144 cartons of cigarettes out of North Macedonia on a flight to London. The contraband was discovered during baggage checks.<sup>13</sup>

Another emerging trend at Skopje airport is an increase in the seizure of loose tobacco, which is often transported in bulk and without commercial packaging. This could be a way of evading the scrutiny directed at boxed cigarettes.<sup>14</sup>

On 26 March 2025, authorities at Skopje airport seized the largest quantity of cigarettes in two years. During a luggage inspection, officials discovered 231 cartons of cigarettes and 1.5 kilograms of tobacco in the possession of two North Macedonian passengers travelling to London, with one of the passengers carrying 203 cartons and all of the tobacco.<sup>15</sup>

### Albanian criminal networks shift to land and sea routes

On 10 June 2024, an Albanian national was arrested at Luton airport for attempting to smuggle 1 700 packs of cigarettes from Tirana International Airport in Albania.

The 38-year-old suspect was stopped during a routine baggage inspection on arrival. Working in coordination with the Albanian State Police, British border officials seized the illicit cargo. The man remains in custody while the investigation continues.<sup>16</sup>

Although flights to London's three airports, as well as to Manchester and Edinburgh, are usually cheaper from Tirana, smugglers still favour Pristina and Skopje. This is partly because intensified cooperation between the UK and Albania in tackling organized crime has resulted in heightened security at Tirana. Additionally, traffickers prefer to exploit the existing vulnerabilities at Pristina and Luton.<sup>17</sup> Recently, however, there has also been a shift away from air travel.

In May 2025, Albania's Special Structure Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPA) dismantled a large-scale cigarette smuggling network involving 36 people. The suspects are alleged to have caused around €36 million in excise and other customs losses to Albania, and over €10 million to the EU market, across just four documented cases.

At the centre of the case is a factory in Albania that allegedly operated under contract with a front company based in Dubai, and owned by a Ukrainian national. Officially, the facility produced cigarettes for export to Cyprus. However, the shipments were diverted by land to Kosovo and by sea through Italy to western EU states and the UK.<sup>18</sup>

SPA alleges that every consignment produced by the network between 2021 and 2023 was smuggled. A total of 35 shipments were diverted from their declared routes. The factory specialized in counterfeit cigarettes, allegedly with the help of a former technician of an international brand. Production ran day and night, reportedly with the benefit of informal protection from the local police. None of the products carried fiscal stamps, and they all entered the illicit European cigarette market, either for sale there or transit to the UK.

Year	Cases	Cartons	Loose tobacco (grams)
2024	11	652	6 750
2025	10	444	17 460

**FIGURE 3** Seizures at Skopje International Airport of tobacco destined for London.

Source: North Macedonia Customs

The scheme relied heavily on systemic corruption. Several customs officials, including the deputy director general and the head of the operations department, were accused of disguising the movement of the contraband goods. Trucks were reportedly falsely recorded as having crossed the Kakavia border post into Greece.<sup>19</sup>

Most of those arrested were Albanian nationals, alongside a dual Albanian–North Macedonian national, a Kosovan representative of the Ukrainian company owner, two Serbian drivers and two North Macedonian drivers. One of the defendants also faces charges of bribing public officials.

SPAК's findings suggest that the network operated across multiple jurisdictions, routinely exploited corrupt state structures and had direct access to lucrative illicit markets in Western Europe. SPAК described it as a highly coordinated scheme designed to defraud both national and European tax systems.<sup>20</sup>

The smuggling of cigarettes in large quantities is rarely the work of lone individuals.<sup>21</sup> Coordinated efforts are required in both the country of origin and the destination to transport and sell the products on the black market. The pattern, quantities and methods used



**Cartons of smuggled cigarettes seized by officials at Skopje International Airport in November 2024. The products were destined for London Luton Airport.**

Photo: North Macedonia Customs via Makfax

Airport	Cartons	Local value	UK black market value	Potential profit	Damages to the UK
Pristina	1 510	€45 300	€105 700	€60 400	€207 872
Skopje	1 096	€32 800	€76 720	€43 920	€150 909
<b>Total</b>	<b>2 606</b>	<b>€78 100</b>	<b>€182 420</b>	<b>€104 320</b>	<b>€358 780</b>

**FIGURE 4** Potential criminal profit and tax losses from cigarettes seized at Pristina International Airport (July 2024–April 2025) and Skopje International Airport (January 2024–May 2025) destined for London airports.

to smuggle cigarettes to Luton airport indicate the involvement of organized criminal networks.

Undeclared cash being moved from London to airports in the Western Balkans, especially Tirana, has been detected on multiple occasions. Money couriers travelling with sums just below the legally permitted threshold of €10 000 are also common. This suggests a pattern of two-way smuggling activity – cash flowing out of the UK and cigarettes flowing in – which would enable criminal networks to maximize their profits in both directions and cover courier fees. However, formal investigations to date have not established direct operational links between the cigarette and cash smuggling networks.

The financial incentives driving the smuggling operation are considerable. A single carton of cigarettes costs around €30 in the Western Balkans, but the same product can cost around €200 on the legitimate UK market or €70 on the black market. Therefore, the gross profit on each carton is at least 130%.

The 1 510 cartons seized in Kosovo between July 2024 and April 2025 had an estimated local market value of around €45 300.<sup>22</sup> In the UK, their resale value on the black market would be around €105 700, representing a potential gross profit of €60 400. Meanwhile, the 1 096 cartons seized at Skopje airport and destined for Luton from January 2024 to May 2025 had a local value of

around €32 800. These cartons would have been sold on the black market in the UK for around €76 720, generating a potential gross gain of €43 920.

The UK Treasury incurs significant losses in terms of excise duty and VAT on smuggled cigarettes. Had the cigarettes seized at Pristina and Skopje airports slipped through the net, the fiscal damage would have amounted to no less than €358 780 (see Figure 4).<sup>23</sup>

### Cross-border cooperation is critical to tackling smuggling

Although modern scanners and detection equipment are crucial for identifying smuggled goods, effective prevention requires cross-border cooperation. National authorities must enhance their joint intelligence gathering and risk analysis efforts to identify smuggling patterns and profile high-risk passengers. These measures must be integrated into national and bilateral operations to identify and disrupt criminal networks.

The timely exchange of information with neighbouring countries is equally important, particularly given the Western Balkans' high degree of interconnectedness, as well as with destination markets like the UK. The authorities in both regions should also intensify their cooperation to investigate the links between cigarette smuggling into the UK and the outflow of cash to the Western Balkans by transnational criminal networks.

## Notes

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- 4 Interviews with police and customs officials, Pristina, 21 May 2025.
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- 21 Albania's General Customs Directorate, Freedom of Information Act request response, 9 June 2025, email.
- 22 The calculation is based on the brand and the local price. In Kosovo, 93% of seized cigarettes were different types of Marlboro. These are sold at approximately €3 per packet or €30 per carton. In London, UK, the average price of a packet of Marlboro cigarettes is around £16.80 (€20).
- 23 The calculation is based on a cost of £446.67 for 1 000 cigarettes, assuming a retail price of £16 incorporating 20% VAT. See Gov.uk, Guidance: Tobacco products duty, 3 April 2025. The conversion from British pounds to euros was made on 9 June 2025.

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