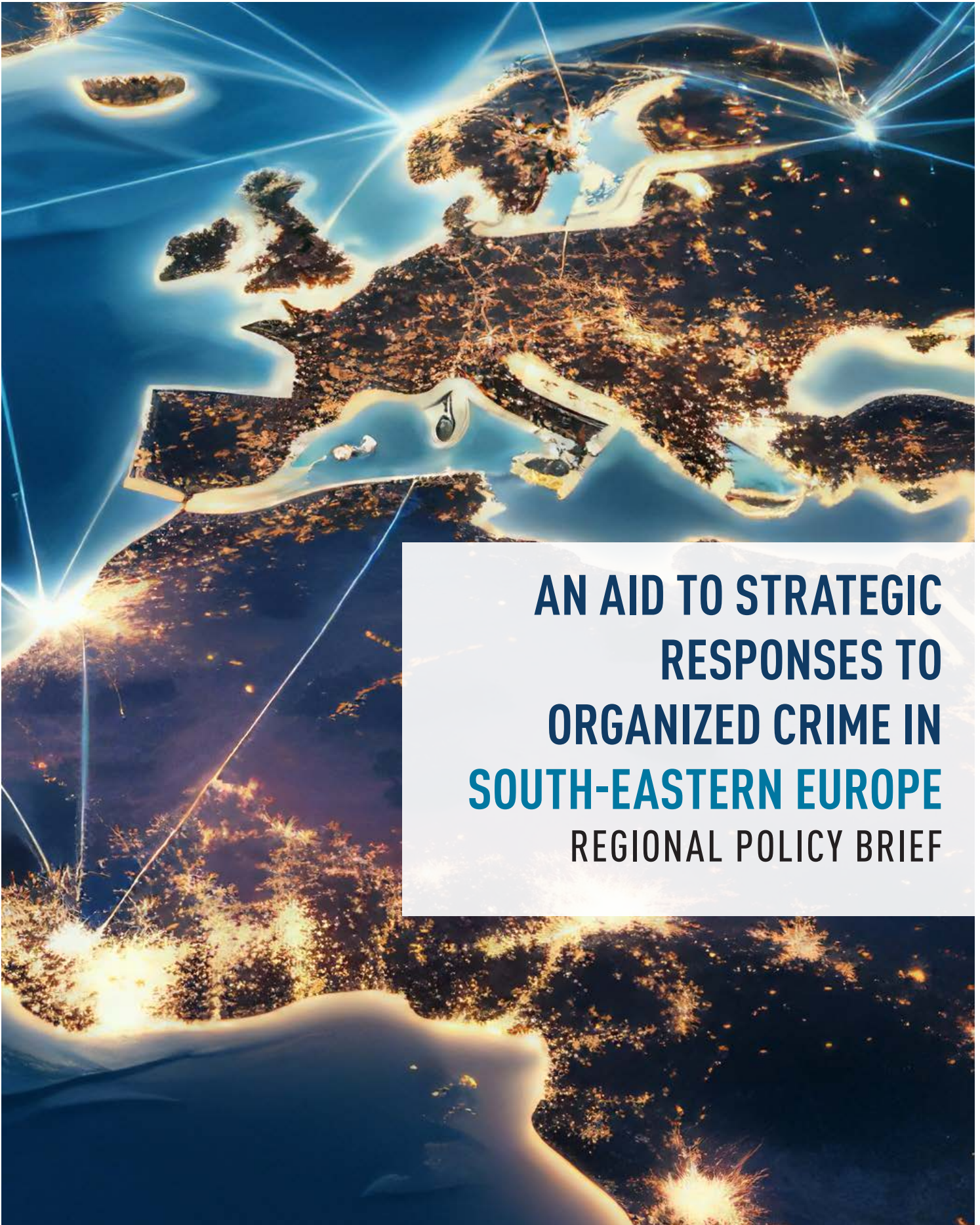




**UNODC**

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



**AN AID TO STRATEGIC  
RESPONSES TO  
ORGANIZED CRIME IN  
SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE  
REGIONAL POLICY BRIEF**



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME

# **An aid to strategic responses to organized crime in South-Eastern Europe**

REGIONAL POLICY BRIEF



UNITED NATIONS  
Vienna, 2024

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## Executive summary

The present regional policy brief was produced as an aid for the development of strategies and response frameworks against organized crime in South-Eastern Europe. As such, it comprises the following components:

- A description of the character and main manifestations of, and harms resulting from, organized crime in the region
- A summary of current responses to the phenomenon in the region
- An exploration of certain strategic opportunities, including with respect to regional cooperation. The latter recommendations draw heavily on discussions with regional experts held as part of a multi-stakeholder event organized by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Skopje in December 2021.

The South-Eastern European region is severely affected by organized crime, having become a key hub for a number of illicit activities and well-known trafficking routes, including what is known as the “Balkan route”. Organized crime in this region has grown more and more transnational in nature and is deeply connected with Western Europe, Latin America, the United States of America and Asia.

Organized criminal groups exploit the region’s vulnerabilities for a number of purposes:

- As a planning, operating and recruitment base: traditional ethnic, national, language and cultural ties provide the basis for strong relationships, making organized criminal groups that rely on such ties more resilient to disruption.
- As a transit area, especially through seaports, for the illegal import of large consignments of drugs, including cocaine: the region’s geostrategic location and its porous borders have further contributed to establishing its position as a “revolving door” for illicit goods.
- As a breeding ground for money-laundering operations through investments in multiple sectors, including real estate, construction, tourism and gambling, often involving dedicated front companies.

A sizeable international diaspora, mainly in Western Europe, has provided organized criminal groups with the means of securing strategic footholds and conducting illicit business across the continent. Those groups have also established and maintained strategic alliances with other international criminal organizations, such as mafia groups in Italy and cartels in Latin America.

Knowledge regarding organized crime in the region has increased significantly in recent years, and a number of attempts have been made to establish regional cooperation platforms and strategic frameworks to combat such crime. Future efforts to fill current gaps should include an analysis of structural drivers and enablers and the effectiveness of States’ responses to bolster resilience to organized crime. In this context, it should be emphasized that the ideal evidence base for a strategy is a dedicated and comprehensive analysis of organized crime



dynamics in the national context. Using other forms of more general evidence creates a risk of developing and investing in policy responses that are not targeted and will eventually prove ineffective.

The region displays some notable examples of strategies for tackling organized crime in its entirety, as well as ongoing efforts to that end, although responses have traditionally tended to focus on securing law enforcement and criminal justice outcomes rather than on preventive efforts and a whole-of-society approach. Furthermore, available analyses of organized crime trends in the region, combined with the main findings and recommendations stemming from the UNODC multi-stakeholder event in South-Eastern Europe, point to persistent strategic challenges. These challenges include endemic corruption, political interference in the functions of key State organs, ease of penetration of the economy by organized criminal groups, and the speed at which those groups seize new economic opportunities. Experts at the multi-stakeholder event and beyond have also emphasized that the lines between political and/or national elites and organized criminal groups have become quite blurred in some instances, eroding confidence in governments and stifling economic growth.

Based on these considerations, key strategic opportunities for the region include:

- Inclusive and systematic whole-of-society responses and improved understanding of both economic and financial vulnerabilities (PREVENT)
- Taking full advantage of the measures contained in the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and other relevant instruments in order to enhance cross-border cooperation, including joint investigations, and to close loopholes that allow organized crime to infiltrate the licit economy, as well as a more consistent use of financial investigations in organized crime cases (PURSUE)
- Expanding the protection of victims, witnesses and whistle-blowers and promoting investigative journalism and the freedom of the media (PROTECT)
- Enhancing international and national cooperation and coordination mechanisms, including through the adoption of inclusive and comprehensive strategies against organized crime (PROMOTE)

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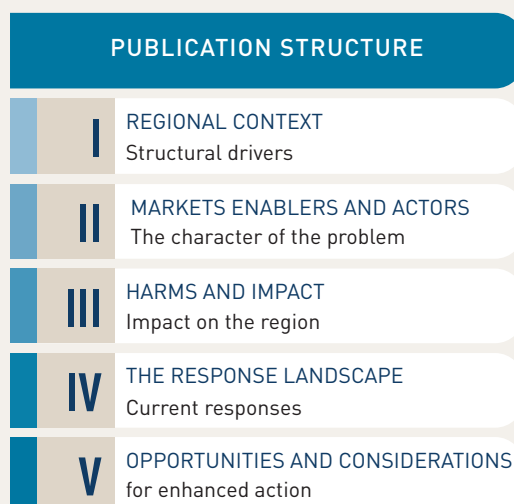
## Overview and approach

The present publication is part of a series of regional policy briefs summarizing the character of organized crime and formulating considerations relevant to the development of national and regional frameworks and strategies in key regions around the world. It is designed to accompany the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit for Developing High-impact Strategies and is aligned with the UNODC Strategy 2021–2025. It was prepared on the basis of the findings of a dedicated regional multi-stakeholder event organized by UNODC, which was held in December 2021 and which brought together experts and representatives from across South-Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> The policy brief reflects both an analysis of existing threats and responses and the insights provided at that event as the basis for concrete recommendations. It should be emphasized, however, that the information provided below is not meant to replace a dedicated and comprehensive analysis of the most relevant forms of organized crime at the national level, as such an analysis provides the ideal evidence base for a strategy.

The policy brief comprises the following components:

- (a) A description of the character and main manifestations of, and harms resulting from, organized crime in the region (sections I–III);
- (b) A summary of current responses to the phenomenon in the region (section IV);
- (c) An exploration of certain strategic opportunities, including with respect to regional cooperation. The latter recommendations draw heavily on discussions with regional experts held as part of the multi-stakeholder event in December 2021 (section V).

The primary aims of the present policy brief are to support continued regional cooperation to counter the problem and to provide an aid for the development of robust multisectoral strategic responses.



<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the present policy brief, “South-Eastern Europe” includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia, as well as Kosovo. All references to Kosovo in the present publication shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).



# I. Regional context: structural drivers of organized crime

## A. General overview

### South-Eastern European States members of the European Union

Romania and Bulgaria became States members of the European Union in 2007 but have yet to join the Schengen area, which guarantees the free movement of persons within the European Union, although the Schengen *acquis* has already been applied to a great extent in those countries. Croatia, a State member of the European Union since 2013, officially joined the Schengen area in January 2023.

The South-Eastern European region is often described as two blocks of countries and territories: those that have become members of the European Union (Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia) and the Western Balkans “group of six”: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, as well as Kosovo.<sup>2</sup> Despite some substantial differences in levels of political stability, socioeconomic development and standards of living, the countries and territories of the region face similar challenges with respect to the character, influence and structure of organized crime.

The region is situated at the crossroads of major trafficking routes, making it a gateway from and to Central and Western Europe. Its strategic geographical location and its porous borders make the region very attractive for the trafficking operations of organized criminal groups. The “Balkan route” is one of the routes most used for trafficking from east to west and, increasingly, from south to north. High levels of drug trafficking (including heroin, cannabis and, increasingly, cocaine and new psychoactive substances), trafficking in persons, smuggling of migrants, firearms trafficking and trafficking in a number of goods (e.g. tobacco, counterfeit goods and fraudulent documents) inflict immeasurable harm on the region and its people, including by fuelling corruption and money-laundering and posing a direct threat to its stability, including its economic stability.<sup>3</sup> Another route that directly affects countries in the region – in particular Bulgaria

<sup>2</sup> All references to Kosovo in the present publication shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

<sup>3</sup> Uglješa Ugi Zvekić and Sunčana Roksandić, “Infrastructure of integrity: political economy of organized corruption and anti-corruption in the Western Balkans”, Part 2 (Geneva, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2021).

and Romania – is the Black Sea route, which is used primarily for heroin trafficking from east to west, but also for eastbound shipments of precursors.<sup>4</sup> The conflict in Ukraine is likely to create new opportunities for organized criminal groups across South-Eastern Europe, particularly in countries bordering Ukraine, such as Romania, and early reports already contain warnings about the potential for traffickers to exploit the vulnerabilities of people fleeing the war.<sup>5</sup>

## B. Roots

The organized crime problem in South-Eastern Europe needs to be understood in the light of the region's recent authoritarian past and turbulent transitions to democracy. Modern organized crime in the region can be traced back at least to the recent wars in the Balkans, in which individuals and groups previously led by the security services were given the opportunity to increase their power by consolidating their control over illegal markets.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the wars, the secret services called upon many of those individuals to return to the former Yugoslavia and tasked them with establishing special parapolice and paramilitary units built on pre-existing networks of influence. Such units would take on a central role in shaping the organized crime landscape and trafficking flows during and in the aftermath of the conflicts.

Illicit revenues acquired during the wars would later be invested in businesses and the licit economy, in some cases enabling criminals to become legitimate entrepreneurs, influential members of political parties and public figures. In that context, ethnic, national and religious denominations did not create divisions, but were instead harnessed in order to improve intra- and interregional criminal cooperation.<sup>7</sup> After the wars, political instability and insecurity, accompanied by weak rule of law systems, national and ethnic tensions, and the devastating economic repercussions of those conflicts, had a synergetic effect on the rise of organized crime and the consolidation of its spheres of influence. The transitions to democracy in the region were also accompanied by rapid processes of economic privatization, in which party functionaries were awarded State-owned companies, finance and concessions at non-competitive rates, thus furthering a general sense of a lack of accountability and eroding trust in public institutions.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ben Crabtree, "Black Sea: a rising tide of illicit business?", Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 1 April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> International Organization for Migration, "IOM warns of increased risk of trafficking in persons for people fleeing Ukraine", 16 March 2022.

<sup>6</sup> A body of evidence highlights the way in which the State Secret Service of the former Yugoslavia cultivated relationships with Yugoslav criminals, including for the purpose of targeting political opponents across the world in exchange for protection and immunity. This was recently reiterated in the report of the European Parliament on cooperation on the fight against organized crime in the Western Balkans (2021/2002(INI)), adopted in December 2021, in which the Parliament noted that links between organized crime, politics and businesses existed before the break-up of Yugoslavia and have continued since the 1990s, condemned the "apparent lack of will of the responsible authorities to open the former Yugoslav archives" and reiterated in particular the call to grant access to the files of the former Yugoslav Secret Service and the Yugoslav People's Army Secret Service.

<sup>7</sup> As an example, the legal vacuum created by conflicts and institutional crises in Albania and in Kosovo in the 1990s was quickly filled by the exercise of customary law as defined in the Kanun, a set of traditional Albanian laws. While the legal order was later restored, the premises of this customary law still serve as the principal code of conduct among Albanian organized criminal groups.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of the origins of organized crime in South-Eastern Europe, see United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Crime and its Impact on the Balkans and Affected Countries* (Vienna, 2008).

### C. Enduring systemic weaknesses

While South-Eastern European countries have made significant progress in addressing rule of law shortcomings in recent decades, the inability to fully meet rule of law standards has been highlighted as a persistent issue for many countries in the region.<sup>9</sup> As a result, levels of confidence in public institutions remain low on average. In the Western Balkans, those levels are far below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and European Union averages.<sup>10</sup> European Union countries in the South-Eastern European region face similar difficulties.<sup>11</sup> In the Western Balkans, the judiciary emerges as the least trusted institution, which is likely a consequence of the limited success in investigating, prosecuting and sanctioning high-level cases of organized crime and corruption in those countries. Indeed, corruption remains a serious cause for concern in the region, with a number of countries having yet to repeal or amend legislation that makes them vulnerable to cronyism and other corrupt practices and thus effectively close loopholes that allow organized criminal groups to operate successfully.

### D. Poverty and marginalization

Socioeconomic conditions constitute one of the principal drivers of organized crime in the region. Many South-Eastern European countries struggle with high unemployment, especially among young people, and with poor living standards and low incomes. This is particularly the case in the Western Balkans, where the break-up of the political and economic union, conflicts and other adverse internal and external shocks are causally connected with high economic instability, slow progress in transition-related economic reforms and delayed integration with the European Union.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See the European Court of Auditors, *Special Report: EU Support for the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans: Despite Efforts, Fundamental Problems Persist*, published in 2022; and the European Union “Expert report on rule of law issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, published on 5 December 2019.

<sup>10</sup> The average level of confidence for the region is 33 per cent, in contrast to, for instance, 89 per cent in Denmark. See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Government at a Glance: Western Balkans* (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> According to the 2016 European Quality of Life Survey, Croatia and Slovenia – together with Greece – scored the lowest in terms of trust in the government. See European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Data and resources, European Quality of Life Survey: Data explorer, Trust and social tensions, Trust in the government, European bar chart. Available at [www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/european-quality-of-life-survey](http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/european-quality-of-life-survey).

<sup>12</sup> Milica Uvalic, “Economic development in the Balkans: is it possible to grow faster, smarter, better?”, Regional Cooperation Council, June 2015.



## II. Markets, enablers and actors

### A. Dynamic and adaptable networks

Organized criminal groups from the region can be broadly described as modern, adaptable, profit-driven, innovative and technology-oriented networks, often with loose organizational structures and less visible hierarchies, interacting on an ad hoc and opportunistic basis. These features usually vary depending on the nature of the criminal business, with groups primarily involved in migrant smuggling being more sophisticated and hierarchical than, for example, those primarily involved in trafficking in persons or drug trafficking.<sup>13</sup>

### B. Ethnic and national dimensions

National, ethnic and familial ties are key factors in the membership and structure of organized criminal groups in the region. An example of a criminal organization strongly relying on those attributes is the so-called Albanian mafia, or *mafia shqiptare*, a heterogeneous denomination of Albanian-speaking groups originating in Albania and Kosovo. Albanian organized criminal groups place an emphasis on the principles of *besa* (“faith” or “oath”, meaning “keeping the promise”) and *nderi* (honour), which stem from the Kanun, a set of traditional customary laws that has regulated all aspects of Albanian tribal society for centuries. In addition, there is a general distrust towards foreigners and non-Albanian speakers, as well as a hesitance to accept anyone who is not a member of the same family or tribe. Nonetheless, the profit-driven nature of such groups has led them to establish strong operational ties with organized criminal groups in other countries and even on other continents, and those ties have contributed to the groups’ resilience and expansion (see section C below).

Compared with Albanian groups, groups from countries of the former Yugoslavia are generally less homogeneous, although they can be broadly divided along religious and country lines (e.g. Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, Muslim Bosnians, and Montenegrins). Much like the Albanian groups, they benefit from large diasporas in Western Europe resulting from economic and social migration in recent decades. Despite their commonalities, there have been instances of rivalry and ruthless competition for

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<sup>13</sup>UNODC, *Measuring Organized Crime in the Western Balkans* (Vienna, 2020).



market control among these groups. This is best evidenced by the years-long violent clashes between the Škaljari and Kavački clans, two notorious organized criminal groups from Montenegro, which have resulted in over 50 murders all over the world in the past decade.

### C. Global reach and connections

#### Example Transnational trafficking

As an illustration, on 17 June 2019, law enforcement agents from the United States seized about 20 tons of cocaine worth more than \$1 billion from the shipping containers of the *MSC Gayane* when it docked in Philadelphia, in one of the largest drug seizures in United States history. In August 2021, two Montenegrin citizens were sentenced on charges of conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine on a vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States.

Source: United States Department of Justice, “Two *MSC Gayane* crew members sentenced for conspiracy to smuggle \$1 billion worth of cocaine into the United States”, 2 August 2021.

Reports highlight the extent to which, over the past 20 years, criminals from the Western Balkans have moved up the organized crime value chain in Latin America, Western Europe and Southern Africa and, in some cases, managed to establish control over entire drug market supply chains from source to destination, effectively applying an end-to-end business model.<sup>14</sup> In the light of this alarming expansion, media outlets and some practitioners in the field have referred to the emergence of “Balkan cartels” involved, inter alia, in cocaine trafficking from South America to Europe and the United States. Such claims were met with reservations by some researchers, pointing to the fragmented nature of organized criminal groups in the region and their lack of solid hierarchical structure and organization, while recognizing the clear inter-ethnic patterns of cooperation among groups.<sup>15</sup>

#### Example Operation Los Blancos

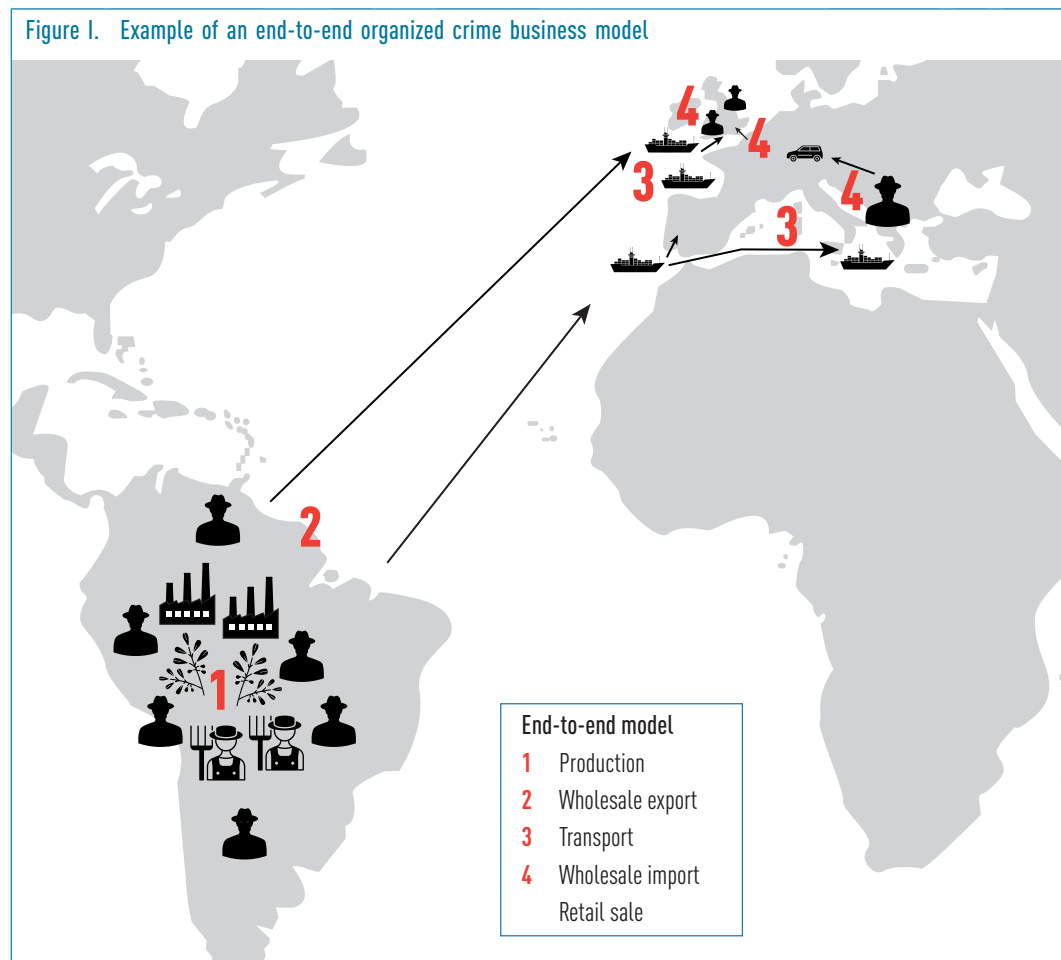
In September 2020, the operation code-named Los Blancos dismantled Kompania Bello, one of the most active Albanian cocaine-trafficking networks in Europe. Using encrypted communication means, the organization’s leader negotiated directly with South American drug cartels for large shipments of cocaine to be sent to major ports across Europe, where the drugs were later concealed in vehicles and distributed throughout the continent. The criminals laundered their proceeds using an underground remittance system of Chinese origin, known as *fei chien* or *fei qian*, in which money is deposited in a network agency in one country and another operator withdraws the equivalent amount elsewhere in the world and passes it on to the intended recipient. The five-year operation resulted in 20 arrests and pretrial detentions throughout Europe and in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, as well as the seizure of nearly 4 tons of cocaine and more than 5.5 million euros in cash.

Source: European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust), *Eurojust Annual Report 2020*, sect. 7.4.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Kemp, *Transnational Tentacles: Global Hotspots of Western Balkan Organized Crime* (Geneva, Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, “Observatory of illicit economies in South-Eastern Europe”, *Risk Bulletin*, No. 10 (2021).

Organized criminal organizations that were able to successfully establish transnational operations include well-known groups such as the “Group America” and “Tito and Dino” clans, as well as a number of less famous ones, such as Kompania Bello, a sophisticated organized criminal group recently brought down by a joint investigative team set up by Italy and the Kingdom of the Netherlands and supported by the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) and the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust). Aside from intraregional cooperation, some regional groups have also secured operational alliances and agreements with other major criminal organizations, including the ‘Ndrangheta (arguably the most powerful Italian mafia today) and South American cartels.<sup>16</sup> Initiative, entrepreneurship and a reputation for violence cultivated during the armed conflicts, as well as access to arsenals of weapons, have all contributed to the ascent of these groups in the criminal underworld.<sup>17</sup>



The end-to-end business model mentioned above – going all the way from production to retail sale – is perhaps best documented using the example of Albanian organized

<sup>16</sup>Tony Siggers, “An assessment of the extent of Albanian(-speaking) organised crime groups involved in drug supply in the European Union: characteristics, role and the level of influence – background paper commissioned by the EMCDDA for the EU Drug Markets Report 2019” (2019).

<sup>17</sup>In addition to the illicit economic activities that connect Latin America and Europe, there is also evidence that the groups in the Balkans are extending their operations to Asia as well. In this regard, see, for instance, European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol), “Balkan cartel trafficking cocaine around the globe in private planes busted”. Available at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/balkan-cartel-trafficking-cocaine-around-globe-in-private-planes-busted>.

criminal groups taking control of a substantial part of cocaine trafficking in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Albanian organized criminal groups were able to enter into direct agreements with cartels in Latin America, while simultaneously establishing control over local London-based groups, such as the “Hellbanianz” (predominantly in charge of street or retail sales), effectively closing the supply-demand circle and managing to offer a sustained supply of purer cocaine at a lower retail price.

#### D. Corruption and professional enablers

Corruption remains a crucial enabler of organized crime in the region, in particular in the Western Balkans.<sup>18</sup> Although efforts have been made to create legal mechanisms and more transparent and accountable institutions in recent years, effective rule of law often remains challenging in practice. A recent European Commission enlargement report highlighted elements of State capture in the Western Balkans, including links with organized crime and corruption and a strong entanglement of public and private interests.<sup>19</sup> Organized crime is facilitated across the region by members of the political elite and criminal justice system, and by a sizeable cadre of key professional enablers, including local security actors, specialist money-launderers, lawyers, civil servants, port insiders and many other individuals who, together, assist and support the activities and growth of organized criminal groups. In addition, allegations of corruption in public procurement, including in major infrastructure projects, are not new to the region, while weak mechanisms for protecting whistle-blowers from retaliation further discourage reports of wrongdoing and reinforce mistrust in institutions.

#### E. Economic infiltration

Illicit financial flows constitute a serious socio- and macroeconomic threat for countries in the region. They undermine efforts to reduce economic inequalities and cripple the capacity of Governments to support development and foster inclusive growth, while significantly undermining the rule of law.<sup>20</sup> There are numerous indications that illicit profits have been injected into the construction, real estate and hospitality sectors (including hotels and restaurants), the betting and gambling industry, and football clubs (including through overinflated payments for player transfers), as well as reports that the renewable energy sector may be vulnerable to similar investments.<sup>21</sup> South-Eastern European countries, while already facing major challenges in addressing illicit financial flows, are also likely to become increasingly vulnerable to them as the region becomes more integrated into the global economy and attracts a diverse range of trading partners and foreign investors, thus increasing both opportunities and risks for the economies and people of the region.

<sup>18</sup> See UNODC, *Measuring Organized Crime in the Western Balkans*.

<sup>19</sup> European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: a credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”, (COM(2018) 65 final). Enabling factors for State capture include impunity for high-level corruption and tailor-made laws, which are the highest expression of State capture since they ultimately make the capture legal. On this topic, see Nieves Zúñiga, *Examining State Capture: Undue Influence on Law-Making and the Judiciary in the Western Balkans and Turkey* (Berlin, Transparency International, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and UNODC, “Conceptual framework for the statistical measurement of illicit financial flows” (October 2020).

<sup>21</sup> On this topic, see Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, “Illicit financial flows: the lifeblood of crime and corruption” (July 2021).

Figure II. The organized crime landscape in South-Eastern Europe



**Drug trafficking.** The involvement of organized criminal groups from the region in cocaine trafficking is under worrisome expansion, while the region continues to play a significant role in the production and trafficking of other illicit drugs. The infamous Balkan route is one of the most established routes for the trafficking of drugs, especially heroin, from Asia to Europe. The region has also witnessed an increase in the production of synthetic drugs (including amphetamine), which generally remains relatively unsophisticated, although there have been instances of larger-scale operations.



**Arms trafficking.** Conflicts in the Balkans left the region awash with weapons and military equipment, including those held in private possession. Firearms trafficking in the Western Balkans is mostly intraregional, although the high price of weapons in external markets resulted in trafficking to countries outside of the region, particularly the rest of Europe. For organized criminal groups in the Western Balkans, firearms trafficking is typically complementary to other criminal activities, such as drug trafficking.



**Counterfeit goods.** The region provides fertile ground for the manufacturing of and trafficking in counterfeit goods and is generally an attractive market for organized criminal groups owing to its low risk, mild penalties and high profitability. Counterfeit goods seized by law enforcement ranged from cigarettes, clothing, footwear, watches, sunglasses, handbags, toys and mobile phone accessories to industrial commodities, cash and official documents.



**Waste trafficking.** Several countries in South-Eastern Europe have been left with an increasingly alarming waste problem, especially after the waste import ban in China, which was previously the world's largest importer of plastic waste. Large quantities of waste are offloaded to countries in South-Eastern Europe with lower wages and weak enforcement of environmental legislation, and organized criminal groups are using illegal waste exports for increased profit.



United Nations Cartography Section

*Note:* The boundaries shown on the map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.



**Human trafficking and migrant smuggling.** The region has long served as a point of origin, destination and transit for human trafficking, primarily for the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation both within and outside the region, including to Western Europe, although minor increases in the share of victims trafficked for forced labour or for other purposes have recently been reported. In recent years, organized criminal groups in the region have become increasingly involved in the smuggling of migrants on their way to European Union countries. The same groups typically operate as looser, chain-like networks, interacting in small clusters and often set up on an ad hoc basis.



**Cybercrime.** There is growing evidence of sophisticated organized criminal groups getting involved in cyber-dependent or cyber-enabled organized crime in the region. The limited capacity of law enforcement agencies in this area and the low general awareness of such crimes and cybersecurity threats constitute a source of concern and will require targeted efforts.

*Note:* The findings and analysis are supported by UNODC publications, including *Measuring Organized Crime in the Western Balkans*, the *World Drug Report 2022*, the *Global Study on Firearms Trafficking 2020* and the *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*.



### III. Harms and impact

The consequences of organized crime in South-Eastern Europe are significant and manifest themselves at the regional, national and local levels. Its impact and most significant harms are summarized below.

#### A. Erosion of governance and public confidence

Organized crime undermines good governance across the region by co-opting or eroding State institutions and key public functions. The entanglement of public and private interests and scandals pointing to links between public administration and organized crime feed a sentiment of impunity and mistrust in public institutions, further fuelled by reports of political interference in and control of the media. If left unpunished, such instances erode the values of democracy, further weakening the rule of law and threatening legislative, administrative, judicial and other State processes.

#### B. Impact on economic, social and political stability

Evidence clearly shows how illicit financial flows drain resources from the State that are needed to provide basic services, directly affecting the lives of many people.<sup>22</sup> Illegal income and criminal influence stifle social mobility, price out law-abiding citizens, erode economic competition, distort markets and undermine democratic institutions. In States with small economies in particular, organized criminal groups may have the financial strength to pose a genuine threat, especially if they have historical links to political groups. Great fortunes were made in the previous era of instability in the region. The influence of those who would benefit economically from further political conflict needs to be effectively limited to avoid further disruption.

Furthermore, the expansion of shadow economies creates an environment where marginalized and/or economically disadvantaged individuals may see crime as the only possible means of increasing their chances of upward social mobility. The failure of States to provide responses to these issues, including by addressing the reinvestment of illicit financial flows into the legal economy, further stimulates the expansion of criminal

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<sup>22</sup> OECD, *Illicit Financial Flows from Developing Countries: Measuring OECD Responses* (Paris, 2014).

organizations. In turn, the more the State is absent or deficient in the provision of goods and services, the more susceptible communities are to becoming dependent on and supporting organized criminal groups.

### C. Human rights and individual victims

Organized crime activities in the region can have an adverse impact on the enjoyment of human rights and can have serious implications for the health and well-being of people across South-Eastern Europe. Trafficking in persons results in some of the most heinous violations in this regard, with the region recording high levels of domestic trafficking while remaining a source of trafficking victims for Western and Southern Europe. While sexual exploitation is the most prevalent form of trafficking in persons in South-Eastern Europe, labour exploitation cases have become increasingly common, as responsible authorities have intensified their detection efforts in this area. Trafficking for the purpose of forced criminality is the third most common form of exploitation in the region, with children still being the most vulnerable to this type of exploitation.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, the impact of organized crime on basic human rights reaches far beyond human trafficking. Organized criminal groups have been taking advantage of expanding migration flows, preying on vulnerable migrants to secure new sources of profit, while often exploiting them throughout the course of their journey. Furthermore, the expanding drug market in the region threatens and affects the health and well-being of millions, while crimes that affect the environment are an increasing source of concern for the region and, if left unchecked, will lead to serious human rights violations, with the primary victims likely to be impoverished and marginalized communities.

### D. Waste trafficking: an emerging threat posed by organized crime

Globally, crimes that affect the environment are among the most serious and lucrative criminal activities. Organized criminal groups are taking advantage of gaps, loopholes and discrepancies in national legislation and insufficient penalties for these crimes, as well as weak enforcement and detection capacities, to generate millions of dollars in profits, thereby seriously undermining socioeconomic development and causing immense damage to the environment. South-Eastern European countries are particularly affected by waste trafficking, mainly as transit or destination countries for waste coming from the European Union by train and truck, while the different ports of the region serve as hubs for the illegal trans-shipment of waste to other regions, including South-East Asia and Africa. Along with waste trafficking, other types of crimes that affect the environment, such as illegal logging, illegal mining, crimes in the fisheries sector and crimes related to pollution, also represent growing threats to biodiversity, ecosystems and the well-being of people in the region.

<sup>23</sup> UNODC, *Exploitation and Abuse: The Scale and Scope of Human Trafficking in South Eastern Europe* (May 2022).



## IV. The response landscape: strategies, policies and institutions

### A. Knowledge and research

Knowledge of organized crime and its characteristics has increased significantly in South-Eastern Europe in recent decades. Countries in the region systematically collect information on the key illicit activities in which organized criminal groups are involved, thus providing a fundamental evidence base to guide policy interventions. Such data are also an important starting point for the elaboration of frameworks for measuring organized crime, such as the one presented in the final report of the UNODC project on measuring and assessing organized crime in the Western Balkans, which is a rare example of a comprehensive measurement of the level, structure and markets of organized crime in the Western Balkans.<sup>24</sup>

International, regional and civil society organizations and think tanks have produced several analyses and threat assessments regarding the problem at the regional level, and such efforts need to be sustained in order to continue to capture the evolving nature of the phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, many South-Eastern European countries and jurisdictions regularly produce updated national organized crime threat assessments, generally relying on the Europol methodology, which recommends an analysis of the criminal markets, networks or individual criminals carrying out organized criminal activities, and of the factors that shape the nature of organized crime.<sup>26</sup> While available assessments primarily focus on these criminal activities, there is generally a dearth of detailed studies focusing on the drivers and enablers of the phenomenon, as well as its manifestations at the local level, including its impact on individual districts, cities and border areas. Fewer still are assessments that compare the efficacy of policy interventions in different contexts, in particular when it comes to preventive measures, and that provide an evidence base for higher-impact strategies and interventions.

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<sup>24</sup> UNODC, *Measuring Organized Crime in the Western Balkans*.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Regional serious and organized crime threat assessment” (2016).

<sup>26</sup> Europol, *European Union Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment: A Corrupting Influence – The Infiltration and Undermining of Europe’s Economy and Society by Organised Crime* (Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2021).

## B. Strategic and policy frameworks

Countries in the region have a long history of producing strategic documents for countering organized crime, as well as specific typologies of offences usually committed by organized criminal groups, such as corruption and human trafficking.<sup>27</sup> Alongside their national strategies and plans, European Union member States also refer to the European Union umbrella strategic frameworks, in particular the European Union strategy to tackle organized crime for the period 2021–2025.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, several Western Balkan jurisdictions are currently either implementing organized crime strategies and the accompanying action plans (e.g. Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Kosovo) or drafting new ones for the upcoming multi-year cycles (e.g. Montenegro), including as part of efforts to comply with European Union pre-accession requirements.

### Example Strategies integrating preventive and protective approaches

As an example, the new strategy for countering organized crime in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the period 2023–2026<sup>29</sup> relies on the four-pillar structure put forward in the UNODC Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit and includes a significant focus on preventive and protective measures. The strategy was formulated with UNODC support, in cooperation with the Office of the European Union Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It was adopted by the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina in February 2023.

Moreover, the Albanian strategy against organized crime and serious crimes for the period 2021–2025 integrates the imperatives of preventing organized crime and protecting the most vulnerable. Protective measures apply to at-risk individuals, such as victims of crimes, witnesses, justice collaborators and law enforcement authorities and magistrates, while preventive measures encompass investments in alternative development and the reuse of assets confiscated from organized criminal groups for social purposes.

<sup>29</sup> Available in the strategies database at <https://sherloc.unodc.org/>.

The implementation of these instruments remains fragmented, much like their monitoring and evaluation processes, which are seldom used systematically as the basis for the development of subsequent instruments. Furthermore, such strategic responses have tended to focus primarily on securing criminal justice outcomes through security and policing interventions, whereas relatively few strategies include measures specifically related to tackling the fundamental drivers and enablers of organized crime (in line with the scarcity of research on those issues) or aimed at integrating a preventive approach to the problem. Although such responses are noteworthy and at times involve the establishment of new or dedicated policy leads and responsible departments within key ministries, they often lack a whole-of-society dimension, with a tendency to limit civil society's involvement in both the development and the implementation of national strategies. Recent efforts undertaken by a number of States in South-Eastern Europe seem to be moving towards addressing and reversing this trend, which represents a missed opportunity to leverage civil society's potential and formulate a more inclusive and effective response.

<sup>27</sup> Notably, UNODC supports countries in the development of strategies against both organized crime and corruption. While the Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit is the primary UNODC tool for the development of strategies to prevent and combat organized crime, UNODC has also made available a specific publication on anti-corruption strategies. See UNODC, *National Anti-Corruption Strategies: A Practical Guide for Development and Implementation* (Vienna, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the EU strategy to tackle organised crime 2021–2025" (COM(2021) 170 final).

### C. Regional cooperation and initiatives

The region has a number of regional initiatives and platforms. Apart from the numerous political initiatives for regional cooperation relating to the rule of law, most initiatives consist of law enforcement cooperation networks, such as the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe, the Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association and the Southeast European Prosecutors Advisory Group. Examples of more permanent entities include the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre, headquartered in Bucharest, as well as the Joint Centre for Police Cooperation between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, located in Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Additional examples of relevant initiatives include the Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative, the Regional Centre for Security Cooperation in South-Eastern Europe, the European Union Integrative Internal Security Governance process for the Western Balkans, aimed at coordinating donor assistance, and the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative, which promotes a common, comprehensive and harmonized approach in these areas.

In addition to formal initiatives and networks, there are also a number of relevant projects with an emphasis on law enforcement and security authorities (again underlining the focus on securing criminal justice outcomes), including those under the European Union Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, such as the Countering Serious Crime in the Western Balkans project, which focuses on operational support, strategic coordination and the interoperability of information systems. Against this backdrop, the continued engagement of UNODC in South-Eastern Europe – where it has had a continuous presence since the early 1990s – is aimed at strengthening national and regional capacities in key sectors, promoting European Union-related reform agendas, and ultimately reinforcing the ability of Governments to cooperate more effectively with the full range of international partners in the global fight against organized crime and related threats.

### D. Enduring challenges

Despite all these efforts, a number of challenges and obstacles continue to impede attempts to effectively address organized crime in the region. In this regard, a UNODC-organized multi-stakeholder regional event conducted during the drafting of the present policy brief, which brought together policymakers and experts from different communities of practice (i.e. the security sector, non-governmental organizations, civil society, academia and policymaking units), consistently highlighted the following key strategic challenges: endemic corruption, political interference in the functions of key State organs, such as the judiciary, the ease with which the legitimate economy was infiltrated by organized criminal groups, the networked and cross-border nature of modern organized crime and the speed at which criminal groups seized new economic opportunities.

Additional challenges arise from political instability and national and ethnic tensions at the national and regional levels. These issues continue to impact communities across the region, which are at the front line of the response. This is especially the case in vulnerable areas and hubs, such as impoverished neighbourhoods and communities or border-crossing areas.



## V. Opportunities: implications for regional cooperation and strategies

A number of opportunities and recommendations can be drawn from the analysis above. They are organized according to the main principles set out in the UNODC Organized Crime Strategy Toolkit. The opportunities highlighted in this section are not exhaustive, but they do capture key areas and recommended actions. They build on the issues and dynamics identified in the previous sections of this policy brief while also reflecting the input contributed by experts and stakeholders from across the region at the UNODC regional multi-stakeholder event.

Efforts should be targeted at addressing corruption at all levels to ensure good governance, the rule of law and the protection of fundamental human rights. New legislation, by-laws, rules and regulations, strategies and action plans will have little or no impact if they are not effectively implemented and their implementation regularly monitored, and evaluated. The lessons learned from such evaluations need to represent the starting point for the formulation of subsequent measures or, if possible, the adjustment of those in force.

### A. PREVENT

#### 1. Stimulating a whole-of-society, community-focused response to organized crime

The response to organized crime in South-Eastern Europe and beyond has relied predominantly on criminal justice interventions and has generally been considered to be the sole responsibility of the criminal justice sector. While that understanding is slowly shifting towards a more inclusive response, there are opportunities for a more targeted approach to both identifying and mitigating the impact of organized crime at the local and community levels, including by increasing participation in crime prevention activities. Policymakers should therefore ensure that the socioeconomic and behavioural dimensions of the organized crime problem are properly reflected and addressed in national strategies, while opening and safeguarding spaces for civil society participation in the formulation and implementation of responses to organized crime. Examples include the possibility of bringing about change through popular legislative initiatives and participation in the legislative process, the involvement of academia and researchers

in assessing organized crime threats and the possibility of civil society organizations providing oversight when there is a lack of independent public bodies.

## 2. Addressing social marginalization and exclusion

Research highlights the connection between organized crime and political and social exclusion, including the inability of the State to provide basic services and opportunities to its population. In such instances, organized crime can play a role in facilitating upward social mobility and increasing social status. There is, however, a poor record of public campaigns and other tools aimed at raising awareness of the risks and threats of organized crime, including through mainstream media channels, while criminals are at times portrayed as role models in popular culture. Such campaigns are unlikely to yield results unless they are accompanied by decisive and sustained interventions and investments, particularly in the most vulnerable communities, areas and sectors of society, including through salary reforms and increases in minimum wages, if necessary.

## 3. Improving understanding of economic and financial vulnerabilities

As highlighted above, illegal income and criminal influence can price out law-abiding citizens, erode economic competition, distort markets and undermine democratic institutions. Future organized crime assessments should explore these dynamics, including through sector-specific studies and by engaging with relevant stakeholders (e.g. academic experts, civil society and professional associations).

## 4. Strengthening the integrity and resilience of political institutions

Targeted action is needed to further promote a culture of accountability within institutions. Introducing protective measures aimed at increasing transparency and integrity is of vital importance as a major step towards achieving more solid, just and corruption-free institutions.

# B. PURSUE

## 1. Making full use of international treaties

Relevant international treaties, such as the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the United Nations Convention against Corruption, and regional instruments<sup>29</sup> are crucial to combating transnational organized crime more effectively. They should be used not only for international cooperation, but also to close loopholes that allow organized crime to infiltrate the licit economy. Challenges in the effective national implementation of international commitments persist, leaving the full potential of those instruments underutilized. The effective engagement of South-Eastern European States parties in the review mechanisms<sup>30</sup> for both the Organized Crime Convention and the Convention against Corruption (with the former currently in its

<sup>29</sup> Including relevant rules, standards and policies that make up the body of European Union law (*acquis communautaire*), in particular chapters 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (Justice, freedom and security).

<sup>30</sup> These are peer review processes that support States parties in implementing these instruments effectively, as well as in identifying and substantiating specific needs for technical assistance and in promoting international cooperation.

early stages and the latter well under way) and the implementation of relevant recommendations will be crucial to overcoming such challenges and enhancing frameworks and measures to combat organized crime more effectively.<sup>31</sup>

## 2. Prosecuting cases of corruption

On a similar note, there is a need to systematically investigate and prosecute cases of high-level corruption and shield the economy from infiltration by organized crime. A number of jurisdictions in the region have introduced legislation to prevent and fight corruption and organized crime infiltration more effectively, but challenges remain, in particular with regard to reporting requirements, beneficial ownership registries, the financing of political parties and electoral campaigns, public procurement, conflicts of interest and personal enrichment. Targeted interventions should also be carried out to protect particularly vulnerable economic sectors, such as real estate and the gambling and betting industries, through the enactment and implementation of legislative and regulatory frameworks aimed at closing loopholes that facilitate infiltration by organized criminal groups.

## 3. Strengthening financial investigations

The effective detection, investigation and prosecution of organized crime requires systematic financial investigations with the goal of depriving criminals of their financial gains. Opportunities exist across the region to increase the quality of financial investigations as well as the tracing, seizure and confiscation of criminal assets, thus curbing the potential for future expansion and undermining the narrative and appeal of organized criminal groups. Typically, this will require efforts to improve the skills and training of financial investigators, as well as to mainstream financial investigations as a standard part of wider criminal investigations.

## 4. Strengthening information collection and sharing

The “know your enemy” principle should be at the heart of efforts under the “Pursue” pillar. An improved understanding and detection of criminal activities should constitute the starting point for the design and implementation of policies and interventions. This endeavour could include integrated and regular organized crime threat assessments aimed at building strategic knowledge of the phenomenon (e.g. through a regional analytical hub or platform; see also the opportunities under the “Promote” pillar), while also encompassing improved mechanisms and procedures for the exchange of evidence and intelligence, as well as the establishment of joint investigative bodies alongside case-driven joint investigative teams.

<sup>31</sup> In 2021, representatives of the Western Balkan jurisdictions met in Ohrid, North Macedonia, to adopt a regional road map on anti-corruption and illicit finance flows. The regional anti-corruption and illicit finance road map for the Western Balkans jurisdictions, also known as the “Ohrid road map”, supported by UNODC, is aimed at fast-tracking the implementation of the Convention against Corruption, the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) evaluations, the Financial Action Task Force recommendations and the European Union directives on anti-money-laundering and public procurement, in support of the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 in the Western Balkan jurisdictions. The road map will require robust implementation efforts over the coming years to translate the political commitments into practice.



## C. PROTECT

### 1. Strengthened protection of witnesses, whistle-blowers and victims

Protection policies in the region can be broadly placed in three categories: the protection of witnesses in criminal proceedings, including collaborators of justice; the protection of whistle-blowers, including in cases of high-level corruption; and the protection of direct victims from (further) abuse and harm, predominantly in human trafficking cases. Therefore, there are clear opportunities to expand the scope and applicability of the assistance and protection afforded to victims, witnesses and whistle-blowers, including by building on the record of international and regional assistance programmes in the field, in particular those of the European Union.<sup>32</sup> Among others, measures related to the compensation of victims of organized crime are in need of further development and expansion, as only limited legislative solutions and instruments are currently in place.

### 2. Protecting and promoting investigative journalism and the freedom of the media

Protecting the media from political interference and creating a safe environment for investigative journalists to operate and for researchers and role models to stimulate anti-crime dialogues and narratives should be a policy priority, in particular with respect to high-profile cases and links between organized crime, politics and business.

## D. PROMOTE

### 1. Promoting international and region-wide cooperation, including the collection and exchange of information and analyses

International and regional cooperation are crucial to effectively addressing a phenomenon that is increasingly transnational in nature. States should make full use of available mechanisms for cooperation against organized crime, including those provided in the Organized Crime Convention, to tackle common risks, threats and challenges posed by organized criminal groups that operate across the region and beyond. This may lend itself well to approaches using transnational task forces (e.g. through the establishment of elite inter-agency units trained and equipped to fight transnational organized crime and to coordinate their activities in an international framework) and joint campaigns against the phenomenon, as well as enhanced intelligence-sharing mechanisms. In addition, better and more sustained intelligence and data exchange throughout the region would prove crucial to the recovery and return of illicitly obtained assets, the implementation of effective border surveillance strategies and the conduct of complex financial investigations. In parallel, scientific research into and analysis of organized crime in the region could be broadened and deepened and conducted with an intersectional gender-sensitive approach. Of value here would be mechanisms and platforms (e.g. excellence hubs or research pools) that are able to provide additional knowledge and analysis in support of strategic and policy efforts across the region, which could be placed within existing

<sup>32</sup> European Commission, “Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II) 2014–2020: multi-country witness protection” (2016). Thanks to financial support from the European Union, the Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative also works to enhance frameworks and culture in relation to whistle-blowing in the Western Balkans and the Republic of Moldova.

structures in order to avoid duplication of initiatives. Enhancing the potential to obtain, analyse and share specific sets of data on organized crime is crucial to better adjusting and tailoring responses to the problem.

## **2. Enhancing cooperation with the European Union and alignment with European Union instruments**

Cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkan jurisdictions in the fight against organized crime has increased substantially in recent years. In 2021, the European Union Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance – the means by which the European Union has been supporting reforms in the Western Balkans and Türkiye with financial and technical assistance – was reconfirmed with a new budgetary envelope for the period 2021–2027. During that period, there will be a number of opportunities for the Western Balkans to further build capacities and enhance law enforcement and judicial cooperation against organized crime. This might entail the replication of promising initiatives, such as the liaison prosecutors from Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia seconded to Eurojust, as well as the establishment of new initiatives, including relevant frameworks for cooperation with the European Public Prosecutor’s Office. Similarly, such enhanced cooperation should also encompass the full implementation of existing agreements, such as those between Europol and Western Balkan countries and the working arrangement with the law enforcement authorities of Kosovo. Such initiatives should become vehicles for both inter- and intraregional cooperation. Western Balkan jurisdictions might wish to further consider aligning with the policy cycles of the European Multidisciplinary Platform against Criminal Threats, especially considering the relevance of the periodic organized crime threat assessments organized by the European Union to further understand the use of modern technologies as sophisticated enablers for empowering organized criminal groups.<sup>33</sup>

## **3. Promoting national coordination and partnerships**

Cooperation at the international and regional levels can only go so far if not accompanied by a coordinated, system-wide national response. This might be particularly important in federations, as well as in jurisdictions with multiple and at times complex layers of institutional responses against organized crime. Strategies against organized crime can be (and continue to be) used as an effective means of coordinating such responses and mobilizing actors across civil society, the private sector, the media, academia and research institutes to achieve more just and peaceful societies. Whenever possible, public-private partnerships should be used as an effective way to, inter alia, disrupt the organized crime supply chain, detect suspicious activities and carry out effective financial investigations. Civil society organizations should also be encouraged to establish stronger networks – within and across borders – and share experiences and best practices to improve knowledge and exchange information on the nature, drivers and enablers of organized crime in the region.

<sup>33</sup> The European Multidisciplinary Platform against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) has introduced an integrated approach to European Union internal security, involving measures that range from external border controls, police, customs and judicial cooperation to information management, innovation, training, prevention and the external dimension of internal security, as well as public-private partnerships, where appropriate. The Platform follows a four-year cycle and consists of four steps, starting with the development of the European Union Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment. See Europol, “EU policy cycle – EMPACT: EMPACT 2022+ fighting crime together”, 20 January 2022. Available at [www.europol.europa.eu](http://www.europol.europa.eu).











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