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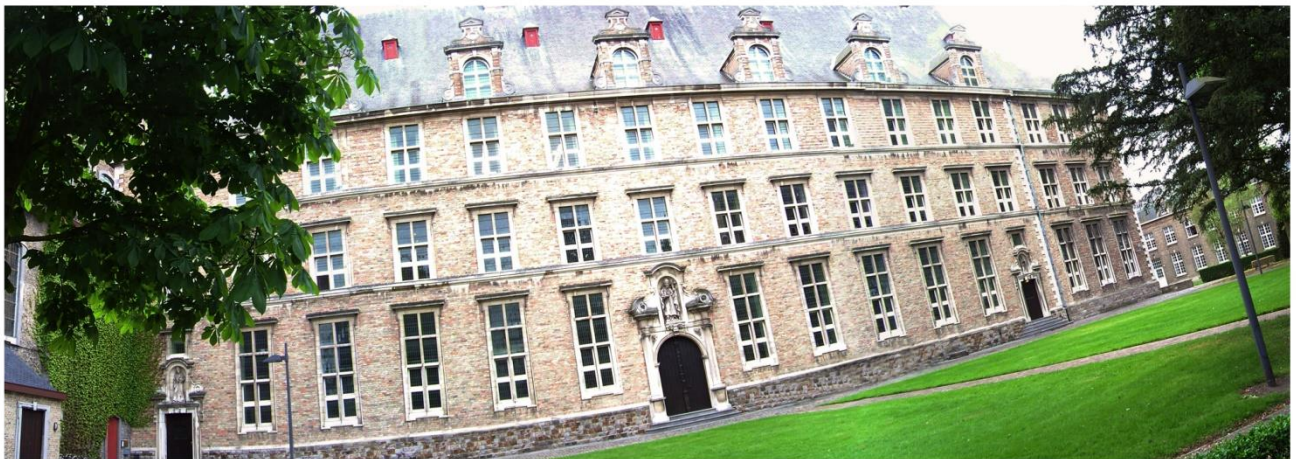
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The Balkan Route: Organized Crime in South-Eastern Europe -
Root Causes, Current Developments and Future Prospects



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Abstract

The paper proceeds as follows: a brief analytical framework will present the two main concepts underlying this research: the Balkans and organized crime. Following a brief sketch of the current situation of organized crime in the Balkans, the analysis will then look at the roots of the phenomenon, focusing on the above-mentioned factors. To conduct this research, I employ a longitudinal study starting from the mid-1900s until today. The process-tracing involves different sources: reports from researchers, governments or international organizations, online newspapers from different countries and in different languages, blogs, European laws and international conventions acting in or relevant to South-Eastern Europe, here considered as composed of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo. After having analyzed root causes, the paper discusses the current Balkan Route, which crosses all the countries of the region, before presenting regional, European and international responses to counteract organized crime, and discussing their prospects for success.

1 Introduction

The region of South-Eastern Europe, or the Balkans, has been at the centre of various studies (i.e. Mazower, 2000; Glenny, 2000; Biondich, 2011), which have looked in turn at the debated origins of the Yugoslav wars, the economic consequences of the transition towards a market economy, the political results of the democratization process, the relations between the different ethnic groups inhabiting it, or whether or not its countries should be eligible for EU membership. Only more recently has the analysis also focused on the powerful influence organized crime has exerted and is exerting on the region.

Starting from the assumptions that organized crime is today one of the major problem affecting the Balkans, considered as "an organized crime gateway to Europe" (Andreas, 2004, p. 48), and that there has been little examination of the reasons why organized crime found such a fertile ground for its activities exactly in this region, this paper aims at identifying the root causes which contributed to its significant expansion during the last decades. While the studies conducted so far focused only on one type of factors, the main hypothesis of this research is that different factors, including geographical, historical, economic, political and sociological factors, have to be taken into consideration to properly understand how and why organized crime today pervades the entire region.

The geographic position of the region, located in the middle between big empires and powers, Asia and Europe, drug producers and drug consumers fostered the creation of illegal channels of smuggling (UNODC, 2008). The socialist period provided other opportunities to organized crime: strong links were established between the security sectors and criminals in all the countries (Brady, 2012), while the consumers' needs that the official economy could not satisfy started to be met through the flourishing of smuggling channels and black markets, with the tacit or explicit approval of politicians (Glenny, 2008). Fought by paramilitaries, criminals and released prisoners engaged in looting and smuggling (Andreas, 2004), the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s have been addressed as another major cause of the growth of Balkan-based organized crime. The shady political and economic process of transition which followed, led to the enrichment and social advancement of criminal segments of the society (Minchev, 2002), while the disappointment of the civilian population who had high hopes in the process, acted as another incentive to criminality (UNODC, 2008). Past and more recent international actions, from the lifting of sanctions in the 1990s (Hajdinjak, 2002), to the same presence of soldiers in poor, war-torn countries (Mendelson, 2005), to military interventions (Pascali, 2001), contributed to the growth of the phenomenon as well. Out of these, this paper considers two determining factors in the creation and expansion of Balkan-based organized crime: the Yugoslav wars and the economic and political transition that ensued. I argue that the chaos, economic uncertainty and political vacuum which characterized both these events, provided particularly fertile opportunities to an embryonic form of organized crime which was already affecting the region. Fed by a "culture of impunity" (Mendelson, 2005, p. 70), corruption and economic hardship, organized crime in this region grew almost undisturbed, today reaching a dimension and power impossible to ignore.

2 Conceptual Framework

This section charts the conceptual ground for the paper by first presenting the region focus of the research through a brief analysis of the origins and usage of the term "Balkans", as it is also known. Secondly, the concept of organized crime is defined and analyzed.

2.1. The Balkans

In the middle between Asia and Europe, inhabited by a largely heterogeneous mixture of people in linguistic, cultural and religious terms, the Balkans have often been associated with negative connotations, in particular in the Western imagery. Initially attributed by geographers to the mountain range which was wrongly considered to run across the region, the term started, since the very beginning of its usage, to refer to more than a simple geographical space.

In 1918 'The New York Times' defined the fragmentation of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empire as "Balkanization of Europe" (The New York Times, 1918), not "East Europeanization" nor "Balticization of Europe," but it was only with the fall of the Ottoman Empire that the term became of common use, and a real synonym for partition, ethnic conflicts and backwardness. After the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in the very heart of the peninsula they became even a "toxin threatening the health of Europe" (Glenny, 2000, p. xxiv). The Balkans have received such an "inglorious coverage" (Todorova, 1997, p. 38), that, to Cvijetic (1999), "there has hardly been a notion this century as burdened by negative connotation as 'the Balkans' or 'Balkanization.'"

With no mountain ranges separating the Balkans from the rest of Europe, undefined geographical borders intersect with mental borders in creating a fragile space. If, to most Europeans, the region begins with Slovenia, to some Slovenians their country represents the "official geographical limit between Balkans and Mitteleuropa," or even "the last threshold and barrier of the truly west-European civilization against the Balkan madness"; for Serbs, it begins with Kosovo or Bosnia, their country being the last shield of Christianity; for Croats, advocates of the Western democratic civilization, it begins with Serbia and its Byzantine tradition (Žižek, 1999). While Greece considers itself as the heart of Western civilization, thus nothing further from "Balkanness," Hungary claims its belonging to the Austro-Hungarian Empire to declare itself a truly Central European country. The Balkans are, thus, always "the other," something lying further East or further South, far from civilization and development; this "other" becomes, though, a "nowhere" when the Balkan states themselves do not want to be inscribed in the region.

In this paper, the Balkans are considered as composed of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo. Once part of large Empires, from the Austro-Hungarian to the Ottoman Empire, united in the former Yugoslavia or part of the socialist experiment, the Balkan countries share common geographical, historical, political and cultural features which unquestionably contribute to making them a single region.

2.2. Organized Crime

Given the multi-dimensionality of organized crime as well as the variety of disciplines dealing with the phenomenon from different points of view, most of the literature acknowledges the difficulty of giving a clear and unique definition. A certain consensus seems to have arisen around the broad definition given by the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime: “‘Organized criminal group’ shall mean a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences¹ established in accordance with this Convention, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit” (UNODC, 2004, art. 2). The Working Group entitled to provide such a definition focused on the broadly accepted elements of the phenomenon, namely a certain organization, characterized by continuity, using intimidation or violence, pursuing profits and exercising influence on the public, on the media and on the political structure (Vlassis, 2002). Some defining common characteristics can, in fact, easily be highlighted, leading to two main ways of understanding it: as a set of actors or as a set of activities. The general public more often understands it as a set of actors, referring to the most famous criminal organizations such as the Italian or Russian mafia. In this paper, organized crime will be considered as a set of actors engaged in different activities depending on the opportunities provided by external situations, continuously adapting them to changes in demands and supplies in illicit markets and in political and economic situations, with the only aim of maximizing their profits. For this reason, the activities taken into consideration here are the trafficking in drugs, one of the most lucrative illicit activities, for which the region became famous, and the smuggling of migrants, a more recently established business, which could, in the future, bring the biggest profits.

Within the literature, two main models explaining the structure of criminal organizations emerged. The corporate model considers them as highly centralized and hierarchical corporate structures (Cohen, 1977), while according to the network model, criminal organizations are composed of isolated networks of individuals or small groups collaborating with each other (Bruinsma and Bernasco, 2004). The latter has recently gained ground both within the literature and among police forces (e.g. OCTA, 2007), to the point that the term “serious crime” is often preferred to the sometimes ambiguous “organized crime.” Modern and dynamic networks acting in a globalized world are, indeed, replacing the old image of hierarchical, rigidly structured organized groups. Reuters (1985), questioned the very essence of organized crime to the extent of introducing the notion of a “disorganized crime” made of a huge number of extremely small criminal enterprises, marginal and ephemeral. Organized criminal networks today operate through “fluid network structures” (Williams, 2001, p. 62), which do not follow rigid and permanent patterns, but rather adapt themselves to the ever-changing political and economic environment. Acting in more and more interconnected societies, the nature of modern organized crime networks profoundly changed as well, becoming more complex and flexible (Europol, 2015).

Given their high capacity to adapt to changing external situations and activities and the large scale of their criminal links, Balkan-based organized criminal groups will be considered here as perfectly fitting the network model. The organized side of crime, therefore, no longer describes the reality of the phenomenon, attracting the criticism of

¹ “Serious crime” shall mean conduct constituting an offence punishable by a maximum deprivation of liberty of at least four years or a more serious penalty.

several disciplines, from criminology to sociology. Yet, it continues to be extensively used in policy, among the police and by the media.

If past theories considered criminal organizations as enterprises, ready to use violence to reach their ultimate scope of creating monopolies (Schelling, 1967), today, the view according to which criminal organizations are no longer fighting each other for power, but are, instead, increasingly cooperating to reach a common objective, is gaining more ground (Williams, 2002). Such cooperation shapes international connections which will create in the future a new "pax mafiosa" (Sterling, 1994), in which scattered units of criminals work together to peacefully build a global criminal market.

Globalization has, without any doubt, modified the ways in which organized criminal groups flourish and work together, involuntarily facilitating their cooperation. Criminal organizations that often gather to deal with local realities, satisfying specific needs, were suddenly enabled, thanks to globalization processes, to operate beyond national borders, taking advantage of improved transport capabilities and enjoying higher profits. Thanks to increased economic interconnectedness, easy and rapid communications and the development of new technologies, smuggling definitely encounters fewer obstacles and, thanks to growing economic inequalities and to different systems of taxation, its profitability grew as well. The reduced capacity of states to properly regulate transnational activities and control their borders, led to an augmented, unchecked flow of smuggled goods, but also of human beings. Such increased possibilities for transnational crime thus represent "the dark side of globalization" (Williams, 2001, p. 66).

The difficulty in giving an exhaustive definition of organized crime, the continuous changing nature of its patterns and of the smuggling routes it runs, and the impossibility of collecting enough objective data, make this activity extremely hard to be firmly grasped and contained. However, by readapting the above-mentioned definition of organized crime given by the United Nations, this paper considers Balkan-based organized crime as fluid networks of people, existing for a period of time, with the aim of committing crimes of a nature which changes following exogenous opportunities, or responding to concrete necessities, in order to obtain a financial or other material benefit.

2.3. The Balkan Criminal Axis

Despite the well-known violent and bloody past of the region, and a bad reputation that is hard to change, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) surprisingly defined the Balkan region as "one of the safest in Europe," which reports relatively low rates of "conventional crime," such as murder, rape, assault or robbery (UNODC, 2008, p. 9). Although incomes are lower than in Western Europe, and a certain income inequality persists, alongside high rates of unemployment, the Balkans are today relatively well-developed, their populations do not face grinding poverty and education levels are high. The region is, thus, not affected by many of the factors traditionally associated with rising crime. Its demographic situation, characterized by a relatively old population, and by low fertility rates in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ralph, 2013), reduces the risk of street crimes and violence, ordinarily committed by young people. As urban areas host by nature higher crime rates than rural areas, the lesser level of urbanization in the region, compared to Western Europe, is an advantage in terms of criminality rates. Moreover, the criminal justice system appears to be well-equipped, to a certain extent thanks to the communist heritage which left behind

considerable security coverage, and a relatively efficient police system. Yet, Europol identified the "South East hub" as the European area in which organized crime activities have most remarkably increased in recent years (Europol, 2011). Whilst not famous worldwide in comparison to the Russian or Italian Mafia, this "Balkan axis" (Europol, 2011, p. 9) silently became "one of the most important epicentres of organized crime" (Storajova, 2007, p. 91) and one of the main trafficking routes into the European Union (EU), to the point that it is simply "impossible for one interested in 'organised crime' and illegal markets to ignore the area of the Balkans" (Antonopoulos, 2008, p. 315).

Due to increased trafficking through the Black Sea, a never-ending demand for illegal commodities in the EU and the increase in the number of illegal migrants coming from Greece, the region has recently seen a significant expansion in several criminal activities. To the old and never outdated trafficking in weapons, women, and heroin, for which the region holds a sad record, trafficking in cocaine and migrants have been added more recently. As the Balkans are the main geo-economic hub linking the EU, the Middle East, Turkey and Russia, the expansion of organized criminal activities should pose a serious concern to the whole of Europe.

The discrepancy between a seemingly well-developed and safe region, the Western image of turbulent Balkans and the growth of the Balkan criminal axis appears substantial, allowing the assumption that "organized crime in South East Europe must be 'organised crime of a very special type'" (UNODC, 2008). After having briefly presented the current situation of crime in the Balkans, the following sections, by analyzing the root causes of organized crime, illustrate the "specialties" of the type of organized crime which affects the Balkans, providing an explanation for the reasons why exactly this region today became a "hotbed of criminal activities" (Riegler, 2005, p. 28).

3. The Root Causes of Organized Crime in the Balkans

Invasions, centuries of foreign rule, the demise of empires, conflicts, migrations, the birth and breakup of Yugoslavia, surrounded by communist dictatorships, contributed to the creation of a complex ethnographic mosaic in the region, which offered a fertile ground to the explosion of violence and to transnational organized crime.

To some authors, the root causes of organized crime in the Balkans go back to the remote past of the region: to Hozic, "since the days of the Ottoman rulers, informal and illicit trade networks have paralleled legitimate commerce" (Hozic, 2004, p. 36), while Hupchick (2004) considers banditry as endemic in the region, already undermining the stability of the Ottoman Empire. Other authors identify the socialist period as the era during which the regional organized crime emerged. To Brady (2012), the links established between security sectors and criminal groups at the times of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1992) mark the beginning of the unstoppable growth of organized crime. The geostrategic position of the non-aligned Yugoslavia, in the middle between NATO and Warsaw Pact countries, acted as an incentive to smuggling activities and to the creation of black markets (Glenny, 2008). Black markets started to flourish throughout the entire region, often with the tacit approval, if not the direct involvement, of party officials, while smuggling became the only way to meet the needs of consumers which the official economy could not satisfy.

If foreign dominations, years of communist rule, dictatorships, economic backwardness and even a favourable geographic position created good conditions for organized crime to flourish, this paper argues that two major historical events have been crucial for its growth and expansion throughout the entire region: the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and the shady political and economic transition which followed. Focusing on these two events, the next sections show how they gave the fundamental boost to the contemporary expansion of organized crime in the Balkans.

3.1. The Yugoslav Wars

The Yugoslav wars have, only recently, started to be looked in relation to organized crime. The wars which opposed Slovenes, Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks during the 1990s, the same ethnic groups who had been peacefully living together for more than fifty years, marked, to Storajova (2007), the very same origin of Balkan organized crime. The breakup of Yugoslavia, the economic blockades, the legal vacuum and the difficult post-war reconstruction, indeed, created favourable conditions for organized crime to bloom throughout the Balkans.

The simple fact that these wars were intrastate wars, as most contemporary conflicts, entailed a criminalized component: without the possibility of counting on trained armies, and with limited financial resources, intrastate fighters rely on looting, smuggling or on making profits on humanitarian aid (Andreas, 2004). Generally considered as the quintessential example of ethnic wars, instead, these conflicts could be better defined as a "criminal rampage of no more than 66.000 thugs" (Hajdinjak, 2004, p. 6). The idea that Yugoslav citizens go to war pushed by an implacable hatred fostered the misconception that they were also ready to fight. Yet, half of the Serbian side, the most organized and better equipped one, refused to do so, obliging politicians to resort to thugs and paramilitaries (Mueller, 2000). All competing sides ended up relying on irregular soldiers, whose participation entailed an escalation of violence including indiscriminate killings, rapes, looting and destruction. In the end, the wars were concretely fought not by devoted nationalists, nor by normal citizens filled with hatred, but by criminals or released prisoners who were hired to undertake this task.

Even international actions aiming at halting the violent course of the events resulted in the opposite effect, and also contributed to fostering the expansion of organized crime. The arms embargo imposed on Yugoslavia in September 1991, for instance, led to the sudden creation of parallel illegal smuggling channels and black markets. Weapons flocked from the former countries of the Warsaw Pact, South-Africa and Argentina, from which, between 1993 and 1995, Croatia imported weapons for 308 million dollars (Hajdinjak, 2002, p. 10). The strict embargo imposed in May 1992 on Serbia and Montenegro was easily violated by illicitly importing large quantities of oil from Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Romania. Although not involved in the wars, stimulated by its closeness and by the huge profits at stake, these countries performed the role of mediators in the transnational system of smuggling, later becoming epicentres of organized crime of their own.

The type of organized crime which emerged during, and partly thanks to, the conflicts was not characterized by a strict ethnic affiliation, as one would expect. Criminal groups of different ethnicities closely cooperated, questioning again the ethnic hatred theory (Andreas, 2004). The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), which saw the opposition between Bosnian-Serbs, on the one side, and Bosnian-Croats and Bosnian-

Muslims, occasionally allied, on the other, provides a striking example of such inter-ethnic collaboration. Criminal leaders from the same ethnic groups who were so bloodily opposing each other during the day, peacefully met in "business areas" at night to exchange oil, weapons and various commodities (Andreas, 2004). Paradoxical as it may seem, Bosnian Serbs sold to the army of Bosnia many of the weapons which were later employed to kill them.

Under the longest siege in modern history (6 April 1992 - 29 February 1996), and reached by far too little humanitarian aid to sustain an entire city, the civilian population of Sarajevo survived mostly thanks to the creation of smuggling channels. The tunnel built under the city in 1993 shows the magnitude of such illicit businesses: every day an average of 4.000 people and 20 tons of material passed through it (Sorey, 2012). The civilian population turned out to be heavily dependent on a class of criminals, which made the line between war criminals and national heroes, and thus between legality and illegality, blurred, which would later have dangerous consequences for the creation of new, democratic states, while fostering tolerance for illicit activities.

In synthesis, apart from death and destruction, from forced migration and massive economic losses, the wars in former Yugoslavia left behind them other, often ignored, long-term consequences. The decisions of local, nationalist politicians, international actions, economic difficulties, and a generalised chaos ended up fostering a parallel, dramatic expansion of organized criminal activities which, not having been stopped either during the conflicts or after their end, kept growing undisturbed. In the end, the wars concretely contributed to the creation of a "multi-ethnic, cross-border and well-integrated" form of organized crime (Anastasijevic, 2006, p. 3). While the Yugoslav system was collapsing and Tito's ideas were failing, "the idea of Yugoslavian unity and cooperation embodied in the motto *Bratstvo i jedinstvo* (Brotherhood and unity), was paradoxically only maintained in organized crime activities, "the real and enduring legacy of the socialist experiment" (Storajova, 2007, p. 112).

3.2. The Post-War Transition

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the Yugoslav wars, marked the failure of the economic and political system of the East, and the triumph of the Western liberal values and capitalist system. The Balkans, as the other former socialist countries, embarked, then, on a complex economic and political transition toward liberalization and democracy. If, as stated by Williams (2011), the threat posed by criminal organizations to a state is directly proportional to its vulnerability, states in transition are weak and easily permeable by definition. While experiencing high inflation, a significant fall in GDP, financial uncertainty and massive unemployment, common to all the countries in transition, the Balkans had also to recover from years of conflicts and to deal with the expansion of an already strong parallel criminal system.

With no experts in the field, and with a limited expertise on private property, the process of privatization resulted in a deeply corrupt and clientelist process since its very beginning. The liberalization of trade across borders, which happened almost overnight, was not accompanied by a simultaneous implementation of proper regulations, leaving room for illegal transactions, which led "not only to a complete criminalization of the states' economies but also of the region as a whole" (Minchev, 2002, p. 108). While the weapons stockpiled during years of wars started to be redirected to satisfy other demands, reaching, for instance, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), excise goods,

cigarettes, laundered money, drugs and even human beings started to transit through the already established smuggling channels (Hajdinjak, 2002).

Since a real political turnover never happened, the same nationalist leaders who sustained the wars remained in power in most of the former Yugoslav countries. Strongly tied to the political sphere, not only did war profiteers and local criminals not encounter any legal prosecution, but they often experienced an upward mobility. In the end, the war acted as "a highly effective mechanism for criminalized social advancement" (Andreas, 2004, p. 49).

While a few individuals were illicitly accumulating enormous capital with impunity, the civilian population, simultaneously facing a sudden deterioration of life conditions and disruptive social changes, was losing confidence not only in the newly established institutions, but in the entire process. The transition appeared, to a large part of them, as a real "robbery," which "did more damage to the economy and post-war social structure than the war itself had done" (Dolezal, 2010, p. 62). To the UNODC (2008), all this acted as another incentive to criminality.

In conclusion, the main beneficiaries of the economic and social transformations following the collapse of communism have been precisely the criminal groups, to the point that, to Shelley (1999), instead of a functioning democracy, the authoritarianism of the communist rule was replaced by the authoritarianism of organized crime.

3.3. Today's Balkan Route

The geographic position of the Balkans and a rugged internal environment opposed to an easy external accessibility did not provide many stimuli to their internal economic development, contributing to transforming the area into an ideal transit zone, whose profits have always come more from its borders rather than from its own territory. In the past dividing the Ottoman from the Habsburg Empire, the NATO members from those of the Warsaw Pact, the Balkans happen to link, today, the world's main supplier of heroin, Afghanistan, with one of its most lucrative markets, Western Europe. Approximately following the historical Silk Road, a long and ramified Balkan Route survived the conflicts, changing laws and governments, serving as a giant illegal bridge between East and West. The geographical direction and ramification of the route changed following the political and historical events that took place in the region: when the transiting through Croatia and Bosnia had to be suspended because of the wars, new channels linking Macedonia to Albania and Italy were immediately opened (Storajova, 2007). Soon after the end of the wars, however, the pre-war Balkan Route was restored, certainly much before the rule of law. The political stabilization that ensued and the enforcement of the police, more successful in countries such as Croatia and Serbia, resulted in the relocation of the centres of illegal trade in countries where such processes have been rather less successful, like Kosovo and Montenegro (Albertini, 2011). Today, Kosovo is the "new Colombia of Europe" (Pascali, 2001, p. 29), which supplies heroin not only to the continent but even to the USA. If this situation is preventing the country from obtaining a free visa regime, paradoxically, the entry of Bulgaria and Romania into the EU, resulting in more lenient controls at their borders, was followed by a redirection of the heroin flow destined to Western Europe, to these countries (UNODC, 2011a).

Over time, the region became not only a transit zone, but also a huge consumer on its own: while the consumption market reached proportions similar to the four major heroin consumers of Western Europe, the percentage of people aged between 15-64 injecting heroin is 4.6 times higher in the region than the global average (UNODC, 2014). In addition to the obvious negative consequences that the smuggling of drugs inflicts on the economic and social development of a region, the health of its citizens and their health care systems are unquestionably negatively affected by such circumstances.

Following the continuous changes in the market of narcotics, and in particular the decrease in consumption of heroin, paralleled by an increase in the demand for cocaine, UNODC (2007) expressed its concerns about the expansion of the cocaine routes toward Eastern Europe and the formation of alarming inter-oceanic drug alliances. South-Eastern Europe, indeed, has been identified as new entry points for cocaine coming from South America through the ports of the Adriatic and Black Sea (Europol, 2011). Among others, the Sinaloa cartel, one of the most dangerous Mexican drug cartels, found in the Western Balkans the entry point it was looking for to expand its trade towards Europe, while Colombian and Peruvian criminal groups are also allegedly showing their interests in new business in the region (Nicolaj, 2012). The Austrian government also identified a Balkan Route, which in this case does not originate from Afghanistan, but still crosses all the Balkan countries, as one of the ways in which cocaine reached the country (UNODC, 2008). It is, thus, clear how this route started, with the passing of time, to serve a twofold purpose, satisfying the demand of both the opiates and cocaine addicted of Western Europe. Although the quantity of cocaine smuggled through the Balkans remains minimal (around 1%), this situation shows how broadly Balkan-based groups are expanding, reaching a more and more global extension (UNODC, 2007).

The same Balkan Route which passed largely unnoticed in the past years, suddenly came into the limelight when it was frequented by an unprecedented flow of refugees and migrants. While immigration is becoming a real business, "worth more than drugs" (Sironi, 2014), and the smuggling of migrants a highly profitable activity, which generated a revenue of 5 to 6 billion USD in 2015 (Europol and Interpol, 2016, p. 2), while fences and walls are being erected by an increasing number of countries, and EU members seem far from agreeing on common policies of management of such flows, Balkan criminal groups are, once again, taking advantage from gaps in legislation, from the passiveness of European institutions and from the restrictive immigration policies of local governments. Since studies reveal that it is very likely that trafficking in persons is managed by criminals already involved in other forms of illicit activities (Study prepared by the Secretariat of the Budapest Group, 1999), and to Europol (2016), criminals involved in migrant smuggling networks were typically previously involved in drug trafficking, the engagement of Balkan-based criminal groups in the smuggling of migrants was, at least, foreseeable. Although it is not easy to gather reliable data on such a contemporary, constantly evolving phenomenon, "it is now beyond doubt that some of the region's most unscrupulous and established criminal syndicates have moved into migrant smuggling" (Townsend, 2015). While the Macedonian legislation was prohibiting the use of public transportation to illegal migrants, the border with Greece was immediately transformed into an open-air market of bikes, sold at least at three times their market value (Westcott, 2015), and when Orban was announcing the building of a 175km fence along Hungary's border, a Bulgarian-Hungarian mafia gang was deemed responsible for the death of 71 people trying to cross the border in an overcrowded lorry (Harding, 2015). While Palic, in the north of Serbia, became a meeting

point for traffickers and trafficked Kosovars who paid 200€ for their pursuit of freedom (Xharra, 2015), Lojane, in Macedonia, became a renowned smuggling centre where politicians and top-ranking police officers collaborated with criminals in the smuggling of migrants (Rujevic, 2016).

The existence and continued survival of a route for the smuggling of different types of drugs and vulnerable human beings, which involves, to different extents, all the countries of the Balkans, provide, thus, a concrete example of the consequences that smuggling channels which have never been dismantled, unpunished criminals and unstopped criminal activities had on the entire region. Fostered by the wars and the exploitation of unpatrolled borders, used to finance the fighting factions, partly covered by the police or the political elites, illegal smuggling remains a significant problem in the region, still among the main transit zones for heroin and suddenly also an important consumption market.

4. Organized crime, “probably better organised than all the efforts to deal with it”²

The analysis has demonstrated how deep the roots of organized crime run, embedded in the historical past, but also in the cultural mindset of South-Eastern Europe. Once the Yugoslav wars had come to an end, new borders had been drawn, and a democratic political system and a liberal economy had been established, at least on paper, governments had to face the increased power and influence of criminal groups all over the region. By the end of the 2000s, when governments had changed at least once all over the region (with the exception of Montenegro), all the countries had engaged in the fight against organized crime and corruption. To various extents and more or less successfully, most of them have recently also made improvements in the field of security, in their legislative frameworks and law enforcement. More importantly, they have also acknowledged that national responses are far from sufficient to combat the type of organized crime well-rooted in the region. Therefore, at the threshold of the 2000s, regional and international initiatives started to flourish, while cooperation among the Balkan countries considerably increased. The next sections present and briefly analyze, highlighting strengths and weaknesses, the most important regional and international initiatives implemented in recent years with the aim of fighting organized crime in the Balkan region.

4.1. Regional Initiatives

Given the transnational nature of organized crime in this region, regional initiatives to fight organized crime assume critical importance. As previously stated, in the last decades several initiatives of regional cooperation, often initiated and supported by external actors, have been implemented. If, on the one hand, regional cooperation led to improvements in economic and social development, infrastructure and energy, justice and home affairs, security cooperation and building human capital, on the other hand, considerable efforts have still to be made to properly implement effective regional strategies. This section presents some of the most important initiatives launched by the countries of the region or by external actors, primarily the European Union.

² Sandole, 2003, p. 1.

4.1.1. SECI, SELEC and SEECP

Among regional cooperation initiatives, the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI) has been one of the most active in the field. Initiated in 1996 by the USA as a support to the implementation of the Dayton Accords, its main objective was the development of a sustainable economic strategy in the region. Cooperation in the field of combating trans-border crime was an essential part of its activities aiming at regulating the normal functioning of cross-border cooperation and in 2000, a Regional Center for Combating Trans-Border Criminality was established in Bucharest (Matei, 2009). Recognized as the main actor in the region in the fight of trans-border crime, the center closely collaborated with the most important international organizations devoted to the same cause (INTERPOL, EUROPOL, OSCE, etc.). After ten years of activity, the SECI had substantially contributed to increase the awareness of practitioners and policy-makers on the challenges to face in trans-border investigations and to strengthen the regional identity of South-Eastern Europe (Southeast European Cooperative Initiative, 2008).

After having provided the region with a certain stabilization and having obtained the support of international organizations and actors, in 2011, the SECI has been transformed into the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC), whose primary objective is exactly to support the coordination among South-Eastern European countries in preventing and combating all forms of crime, including transnational, serious and organized crime. To facilitate and better organize the investigations, exchange of information and research activities, six task forces have also been created, among which there are the Countering Trafficking in Human Beings and Illegal Migration, and the Anti-Drug Trafficking Task Force (Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre, 2016).

The SELEC is "one of the most cost-effective investment and the best governmental response in exchanging criminal intelligence" (Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre, 2015, p. 11), which has been successful in speeding up investigation processes and the exchange of information among participant countries.

Launched on Bulgaria's initiatives, and not on the initiative of international organizations or non-Balkan countries, as the SECI and as it is often the case in the region, the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) is, according to its founder, the most successful initiative in the region (Southeast Europe Directorate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria). With the aim of bringing a lasting stability in the region, while improving regional cooperation, this initiative, which brings the Balkan countries together with Moldova, Greece and Turkey, has been engaged in the battle against illegal activities since 1996. While not having achieved considerable progress in major bilateral political issues in the region, the regular meetings involving heads of state and government and foreign ministers from all the participant countries are substantially contributing to improve the political atmosphere and to ease persisting tensions among countries (Kronja and Lopandic, 2012); an outcome which, given the troubled historical past of the region and its heterogeneity, has not to be underestimated.

Regional cooperation has, in any case, reached important results, illustrated, for instance, by the latest seizing of 62kg of heroin thanks to the cooperation between SELEC, Bulgarian and Turkish police (SELEC, 2016), but several problems, exacerbated by the historical developments of the region, persist. Efforts of a coordinated regional action, indeed, fail when reaching Kosovo (excluded, for instance, from the SELEC, and which joined the SEECP only in 2014) or Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the two entities, Republika Srpska and the Muslim-Croat Federation, maintain their own police forces

operating under different laws (Anastasijevic, 2006). Despite increased commitments, thus, substantial gaps in regional cooperation persist, concerning in particular limited capacities of law enforcement agencies, lack of cooperation between agencies and prosecutors, and lack of information exchange without prior request (Greavu, 2016). Shortages of human resources, infrastructure, technical advice, equipment and training are addressed as major, long-standing problems, together with a lack of a comprehensive, long term strategy (Balfour and Stratulat, 2011).

Since organized crime and corruption are listed among the non-military threats with the highest potential of threatening regional security (Grahovac, 2012), the Balkan states should cooperate much more closely at a regional level to successfully eradicate the problem. Given the past turbulent history, including continuing changes in borders, significant external influences and different (more or less oppressing) political regimes, the creation of a united, peaceful society, willing to cooperate with each other becomes, without any doubt, much harder.

4.1.2. The European Union

Despite numerous difficulties, the European Union has always actively fostered regional cooperation. The EU Stabilization and Association Agreement, which has been extended since 2008 to cover the entire region (with the notable exception of Kosovo), served as a fundamental step in bringing closer, and in few cases, admitting the Balkan states to the EU.

The Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, aiming at strengthening peace, democracy, human rights and economy in the wake of the Yugoslav wars, was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in 2008. According to the RCC, this initiative established itself as “the central cooperation framework in SEE” (Greavu, 2016, p. 7), and strongly contributed to improving regional cooperation also in the fields of justice and home affairs (including fighting serious and organized crime, activities in the area of migration, asylum and refugees), security cooperation and inclusive growth (including anti-corruption strategies). However, in many cases, agreements on regional cooperation remain purely declaratory, and they are very rarely followed by an exhaustive follow-up. Recent annual reports of the RCC show that while regional initiatives proliferate, together with the documents and websites listing their importance and specialties, an exhaustive overview of their concrete impacts is still missing (Dehnert and Taleski, 2013). This situation, together with the fact that much research is now outdated, leads to a major difficulty in understanding and assessing progress made through regional cooperation.

However, the willingness of joining the European Union acts as one of the strongest incentives for the countries of South-Eastern Europe to engage in more serious programs and reforms in the field: its “magnet effect” is still widely regarded as having the capacity to change wayward nations into states that follow liberal European norms” (Riley, 2013). To join the EU, indeed, candidate countries must have a functioning market economy and stable institutions able to guarantee democracy. In the Pre-Accession Pact these countries commit themselves also to instituting central judicial and police bodies which have the task of elaborating the national policy against organized crime, to creating national contact points dedicated to information exchange on organized crime issues, and to structuring a network of the magistrates entrusted with the fight against organized crime (Longo, 2003, p. 164). Despite more or less satisfactory performances, the fact that Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia are today part of the Union, and that Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and

Serbia are candidate countries, shows that, since the end of the 1990s, undeniable progress has been made all over the region in these areas.

The Western Balkans, however, and in particular Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, proved to be the slowest countries in their recovering, remaining stuck in a limbo in which they are neither truly in, nor truly outside of Europe (De Borja Lasheras and Tcherneva, 2015). The stabilization of these countries, which after the enlargement became even closer neighbours, remains, thus, a priority for the EU, which can be achieved only if these countries and the EU itself work closely together to “address the criminal threats to the stabilization and development of the region, as to the very security of the EU” (European Commission, 2005, p. 8). If the willingness of joining the European Union, thus, unquestionably pushes the countries of the region toward stabilization and a more effective fight against organized crime and corruption, it can, at the same time, open new opportunities for a further expansion of organized crime. If widened markets and lessened controls on the movements of goods and people bring benefits to national economies, indeed, they similarly benefit both transnational and local organized crime (Davis, Hirst and Mariani, 2001). The accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, for instance, was supposed to be followed by remarkable improvements in the tackling of organized crime and corruption. The reality was that, while the governments were raising excise duties to the EU level, as requisite for the accession to the single common market, and alcohol, tobacco and petrol were becoming incredibly expensive, organized crime groups had already turned to the smuggling of these goods (Chakarova, 2015). Seven years after their accession, still “few tiny steps forward [and] some big steps back have been made” (G. K., 2014), while “systemic corruption, government instability, and mass protests are the defining features of politics in both countries and have been for years” (Mujanović, 2016). Although Romania proved to be more effective than Bulgaria in tackling organized crime and corruption, this situation has been delaying the entry of both countries into the Schengen area since 2010. Even though the situation of organized crime has always been less severe in Croatia than in other countries of the region, it was only with the death of President Tudjman, who led the country between 1990 and 1999, that more effective reforms started to be adopted (Cockcroft, 2012). Despite the disappointing experience of Romania and Bulgaria, and despite the conviction of the former Prime Minister Ivo Sanader for taking multi-million dollars’ bribes from foreign companies, Croatia succeeded in joining the EU in 2013. Not much seemed to have changed right after the accession, since EU-initiated reforms to the rule of law, judiciary, and prosecution of political corruption remained below expectation, and the “three branches of government are held by the same types of crooks” (Ali, 2013). Between 2001 and 2012, illicit financial flows cost Croatia over \$17.5 billion (Kar and Spanjers, 2014), which led some to argue that the large funds the country was receiving by the EU during the same period should have been suspended until it would engage in a real fight against illicit activities (Srdoc and Samy, 2013), or that, if this considerable amount could be recovered, today “Croatia would not need a foreign loan” (Ali, 2013). Moreover, according to the latest study commissioned by the European Parliament, corruption throughout Europe is costing €990 billion in GDP terms a year, and, not surprisingly, Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania have been elected as the most corrupt countries in the European Union (RAND Europe, 2016).

Like EU accession, the Schengen membership can be a double-edged sword: if, on the one hand, it can increase the national capabilities of the countries in terms of law enforcement and intelligence, on the other hand, it raises again new possibilities for

smugglers. The accession of the countries to the free-passport zone of the EU as well as the EU visa exemptions for the Western Balkan states could be, for instance, exploited by Albanian, Turkish and Russian criminals who are looking for more direct access to the European illicit markets (Rettman, 2011).

Moreover, since the flow of refugees and migrants coming from the Middle East and North Africa via Turkey into Europe does not seem to have significantly decreased, the abolition of custom controls at maritime borders could transform the Black Sea into a new entry channel, and, as a consequence, become a new opportunity for human smugglers (Chakarova, 2015). In any case, apart from increased opportunities for criminal gangs, and the doubtful success of the fight against organized crime and corruption of some of the countries of the region, the willingness of becoming an EU member remains one of the biggest catalysts for change. The EU remains one of the most active external actors in South-Eastern Europe, which today seems to be fully aware of the importance of cooperation in the region, and of the risks organized crime can pose to socio-economic development and stability in its neighbourhood countries (Wennmann, 2011). Its increased engagement, together with the fact that the domain of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) has experienced one of the fastest growth in recent years, while traditionally domestic policy ambits such as organized crime, terrorism and immigration are progressively acquiring an external dimension, demonstrate such an awareness (Strazzari and Coticchia, 2012). Nevertheless, the same complexity and fragmentation of the European institutional framework obstructs the creation of a coherent, long-term EU strategy in the field.

Fighting a multi-dimensional phenomenon such as organized crime should involve a long-term political commitment, resources to be employed and multi-dimensional strategies. Given the actual results, the EU has still to fill the gap between ambitions and reality (Strazzari and Coticchia, 2012).

4.2. International Initiatives

International initiatives, efforts and actors played and are still playing an equally important role in fighting organized crime in the region. These efforts, which resulted in a series of initiatives, mostly of Western origin, such as the Paris Pact Initiative or UNODC's Regional Programme for South Eastern Europe, seem to have been more promising than the regional and national ones (Delevic, 2007). The huge number of initiatives and programmes dealing with the fighting against organized crime and corruption in this region shows, once again, the complexity of the problem, the links between the security of this region and the rest of Europe, underestimated in the past, and the impossibility of solving it with unilateral solutions (Bebler, 2013).

The main international instrument in the fight against transnational organized crime is the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime adopted in 2000. When ratifying this convention, States commit themselves to adopting a series of measures against transnational organized crime. The fact that all the countries of the region (with the exception, once again, of Kosovo) have ratified this instrument between 2001 and 2005, demonstrates their recognition of the seriousness of the problem and of the necessity to deal with it on an international and cooperative level. Nevertheless, the absence of Kosovo's signature of the Convention, and its exclusion from international police organizations related to security issues such as INTERPOL, EUROPOL, SECI,

FRONTEX remain major obstacles in the tackling of the problem at both regional and international levels.

In 2009, UNODC established a Regional Programme for South Eastern Europe. Closely aligned with the EU, this programme aims at providing the countries of the region with expertise, technical tools and services to counter organized crime, drugs and terrorism, while contributing to the implementation of the EU acquis. Positive results have been achieved, going from improved skills and infrastructures for border police, which resulted in an increased quantity of drug seized in the region, to an augmented cooperation between judicial authorities, or to some of the countries joining the European Union (UNODC, 2015). Nevertheless, changes in the region, inadequate funding from donors and limited resources from UNODC, made the actions too fragmented, and the results remaining below target (UNODC, 2012a).

A special focus on fighting organized crime along the Balkan Route was, then included in the Paris Pact Initiative (PPI), officially launched in 2003. With the ambitious aim of countering the trafficking in opiates originating from Afghanistan, this initiative involves today more than 70 countries and international organizations. Bringing together partners who would not engage with each other elsewhere, the PPI is one of the most important partnerships in the fight against illicit trafficking in opiates (UNODC, 2012b). By creating tools which facilitate the exchange of information among partner countries and by establishing platforms for cooperation and intelligence sharing, and an international forum for discussion, this initiative has already reached important objectives, also illustrated by the fact that the total area under poppy cultivation in Afghanistan decreased by 19% in 2015, and that opium cultivation decreased in most Afghan provinces (UNODC and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Counter Narcotics, 2015). Despite the increased commitment and awareness of the partner countries, and despite the decrease in cultivation reached last year, the problem of trafficking in opiates from Afghanistan has however been worsening since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, showing that military initiatives do not always lead to the expected results (UNODC, 2011b). As opium was one of the biggest sources of income for warlords and insurgent groups, eradicating its production was a key aspect of NATO's plan for defeating the Taliban regime, and a key argument in the decision of joining the invasion of the country taken by the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, determined to destroy the production of the same heroin which was killing so many young British people (Tomlinson, 2013). Yet, opium cultivation kept increasing, reaching the highest levels in 2007, 2013 and hitting a new record in 2014 (UN News Centre, 2014). The fact that the opium cultivation was all but eradicated, that terrorist groups are still earning huge profits through it, while young Europeans are still dying from heroin, reveals that the destruction brought by military interventions can foster rather than stop organized crime, leading exactly to the opposite of the desired effect.

A similar situation was experienced by Kosovo, "the black hole of Europe" (Tisdall, 2005). In 1999, while organizing the air campaign which would later be conducted against Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo, NATO trained the KLA gangs of Kosovo (listed as a terrorist organization by the US) to manage the bombing from the ground. This action hugely increased their military and financial power, transforming the KLA into the "absolute master of Kosovo" and the Kosovo mafia into "one of the leading criminal organizations in the world" (Pascali, 2001, p. 28). An analysis of the situation of the country one year after the NATO bombing and the deployment of the NATO mission KFOR in Kosovo highlights how the objective of restoring peace was far from achieved

(STRATFOR, 2000). On the contrary, the alliance seemed to have further lost control of the power the KLA was seizing: supposed to be disarmed and disbanded after the cease-fire, it became, instead, "better organized and certainly better armed than ever before" (CNN, 1999).

Not only military interventions, but the mere presence of international actors can lead to, often unintended, side effects which can foster organized crime activities rather than contribute to the stabilization of the countries. After the end of the war, the flocking of rich international actors into Bosnia and Herzegovina, from trainers, to legal advisers and private contractors, and of soldiers from the NATO Stabilization Force (SFOR), was accompanied by a considerable increase of women trafficked into the country, while brothels started to flourish (Mendelson, 2005). The situation started to seriously affect the reconstruction of the war-torn country to the point that "peacekeepers have come to be seen as part of the problem in trafficking, rather than part of the solution" (UN, 2004, p. 5).

Despite concerns and international embarrassment, the same situation repeated itself in Iraq and Afghanistan in the following decades, when the increase in the presence of international soldiers was followed by a sharp increase in the demand for prostitution (U.S. Department of State, 2013).

Altogether, the analysis shows that although interventions and aid coming from international organizations are often considered as the best way to help countries in need, and have indeed often succeeded in doing so, they can also lead to unwanted and unexpected side-effects. On the one hand, actions of external, neutral, actors can help in creating forums for mediation, help opposite factions to reach solutions, foster stabilization and democracy; on the other hand, the presence of rich, international actors, or their military actions, can, and in most of the cases did, provide new opportunities for organized crime, an outcome which should not be underestimated. When intervening in a complex context, with a turbulent history, with high rates of corruption, international actors are well-advised to better analyse the local history and possible implications, especially of a military intervention, while regularly monitoring the effects of their actions.

4.3. Future Prospects

In the last decades, the simultaneous, active involvement of the European Commission, of regional actors and international organizations, together with the increased commitment of the countries of the region, has been successful in helping the South-Eastern European countries (to various extents) to reach the demanded standards in terms of fighting organized crime and to establish (more or less) functioning and stable institutions. Nevertheless, organized criminal groups still cooperate at regional and international levels much more efficiently than the governments and international organizations which are trying to suppress them (Anastasijevic, 2006). Despite reports, concerns of governments and international organizations, an increased awareness and a more recently gained global attention the Balkan Route remains a fundamental channel in the global system of supply and demand of illegal goods, while the Balkan criminal organizations are expanding their activities. Organized crime being a long-standing problem, the inability of national governments and international bodies to find an effective solution appears even more striking.

Having acknowledged the complexity of the causes and the depth of the roots which led to the current expansion of organized crime in the region, it seems clear that the responses to confront the problem have to be multiple, strong, and to involve different actors. Given the increased interconnection among organized crime groups, which now reach global levels, the response of law enforcement officials and policy-makers should become more and more globalized as well (Europol, 2015). If local and regional efforts are fundamental, indeed, "the need for a coordinated approach at European level and even internationally is indispensable" (Balfour and Stratulat, 2011). Since organized crime thrives on corruption which is still endemic in the region, the European Union should start to rely not only on the political elites of the region, but also on a Balkan civil society which seems to have awoken in recent years.

In conclusion, to effectively tackle the threat of organized crime, a combined national, regional, and international strategy involving policy-makers, international organizations and civil society should be adopted. As suggested by one of the organizers of a workshop of Western-European and Balkan activists aiming at coordinating their anti-trafficking efforts, then, "we must become as coordinated, flexible, and effective as the traffickers" (Lindstrom, 2004, p. 46).

5. Conclusion

Having survived the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, communist dictators, the changing of political and economic systems and the global economic crisis, organized crime seems to be the most enduring "institution" in the Balkans. The Balkan Route and the criminal groups operating throughout it proved to be highly flexible and promptly adaptable to changing conditions, to the point that today organized criminals are able to exploit not only the roads crossing the region in all directions, but they are also increasingly controlling ports and sea routes, performing a proper global role.

Due to the liberalization of the 1990s, but also to the increased economic interconnectedness, and improvements in communications, transport and technologies brought about by globalization, criminal organizations created to satisfy local demands were suddenly transformed into transnational criminal corporations. If, to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the last decade has been a lost one for the entire region, which has not been able to implement structural reforms and not even to return to the GDP level it had attained prior to the fall of socialism, the same cannot be said of its criminalized side, which, during the same period, "has assumed a central role for organized criminal activities in the rest of Europe" (UNDP, 2008, p. 14).

While theories of a crime-terror continuum are gaining ground, a future hypothetical convergence between transnational organized crime, corruption and terrorism appears as a possible, frightening scenario in the Balkans, where at least two of the phenomena are already deeply-rooted (Shelley and Picarelli, 2005). Since alleged contacts between Al-Qaeda members, Bosnian criminals and KLA members in the smuggling of heroin seem to have already been established, the risk that the same Balkan Route crossed by drugs and people could become a corridor for the access of terrorists to the heart of Europe becomes a realistic possibility (Makarenko, 2004).

Given the current strength of organized crime in this region, and the possible negative prospects for the future, the necessity of finding effective solutions appears not only fundamental but also urgent. In light of this analysis, the envisaged strategies should cautiously take into consideration the different, interlinked, factors laying behind the growth of organized crime.

Due to its geographic position, the region found itself in the middle of huge powers and markets, which, combined with an internal geographic environment which did not provide many stimuli to economic development, contributed to the creation of smuggling channels and black markets generating much higher profits than legal exchanges. Historical developments offered, then, ideal conditions for organized crime to bloom, to the point that "the existence of organised crime in the Balkans is generally understood as a rational response to a very specific set of challenging historic circumstances" (Balfour and Stratulat, 2011, p. 27). Corruption and harsh economic conditions inherited by the socialist period fostered the creation of trans-national smuggling channels, in many cases necessary to the survival of the population, in which political leaders and security sectors were, often, directly involved.

While intrastate armed conflicts are often intertwined with criminality, the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s were completely intertwined with crime. Released prisoners, criminals and paramilitaries enormously enriched themselves through smuggling and looting, while fighting a war which was losing its ideological foundations. International interventions also played a part in the growth of Balkan-based organized crime: the sanctions and arms embargo lifted during the conflicts were immediately and easily violated by a proliferation of smuggling channels; the reassuring presence of soldiers in post-conflict countries was paralleled by a worrying increase in the number of women trafficked into the same countries and military interventions ended up increasing the power of local mafia gangs.

After the Balkan wars, the politicians who kept governing the countries at the end of the 1990s had strong links with criminals, who often gained prominent positions. Having fought national wars, unpunished criminals became national heroes, which would have dangerous effects on the rule of law and democratic governance of states in the years to come. A poorly regulated economic transition left room for illegal transactions, black markets and illicit profits.

While the current, massive improvements in technology, communications, and transport facilitated the expansion of the activities and connections of local criminal groups, the global economic crisis and the turmoil in Middle East and North Africa provided new opportunities. Facing the arrivals of huge migration flows to the Balkan states, and a parallel implementation of increasingly restrictive migration policies by both Balkan and European States, organized criminal groups found, again, ways of escaping the laws, while providing migrants and refugees with goods and services they were desperately looking for. Only by taking into consideration all these factors simultaneously, the embeddedness, depth and multi-dimensional origins of organized crime in the region will be understood, together with the difficulty of eradicating such a phenomenon today.

The analysis has, thus, provided a linear explanation for the causes which led to the current expansion of organized crime in this region, demonstrating how the two main factors - the Yugoslav wars and the political and economic transition - produced not only conventional problems, but also an enduring legacy of organized crime becoming more

and more transnational and pervasive. Although national, regional, European and international initiatives are multiplying, and progress has been made in all the Balkan countries, organized criminal groups still appear more flexible, adaptable and organized than efforts to counteract them. This implies that the Balkans remain today, to different degrees, "still of immense insecurity and instability" (Riegler, 2005 p. 23).

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