

# LITTLE BLACK BOOK OF ORGANIZED CRIME GROUPS IN WESTERN BALKANS

DUŠAN STANKOVIĆ



WESTERN BALKANS  
ORGANIZED CRIME  
**RADAR**



**BCSP**  
Belgrade Centre  
for Security Policy

September 2022  
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## Executive Summary

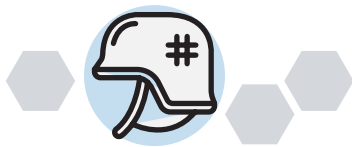
This research focuses on the six European Union (EU) accession candidates from the Western Balkans (WB6): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Its objectives are to map the phenomenon and main characteristics of organized crime groups (OCGs) in the region. The analysis is based on the research of both primary and secondary data, using expert interviews, police announcements, official statistics, national SOCTA documents, etc.

The study finds that OCGs from some countries such as Albania, Montenegro and Serbia developed largely international networks with 30 and more members. These OCGs represent the main actors and leaders of organized crime (OC) in the region. Other OCGs which have fewer members (from 3-4 to around 15), perform mainly on a national level or as facilitators of bigger OCGs. Male gender is the most common (in about 90% of the cases). Women are engaged in logistic activities, although there are individual cases where they are higher in the criminal group hierarchy. The age of the members can vary between 20 and 50 years old, depending on the activity and territory. The estimated average is around 35, but there are cases of members aged 65 and over. The nationalities and ethnicities of the OCGs follow the patterns of their regions, having solid bonds with their families and traditions. However, differences in background do not stop OCGs to cooperate and make criminal networks.

The main criminal activities performed by the OCGs in WB6 are the illicit drug trafficking and migrant smuggling. At the same time, illegal firearms and explosives trafficking and money laundering serve as facilitators of the major activities. Less frequent crime types are organized property crimes, where smuggling of goods is the most prominent activity. Trafficking in human beings has recently been much-evoked in public, mainly by large migration going through the Balkans and creating opportunities for illegal migration and human trafficking. Still, it seems like the authorities currently do not identify big OCGs in the trafficking of human beings. In addition, cybercrime represents an incremental trend, but there also seem to be no prominent OCGs which perform it as a core activity.

# MAIN FINDINGS

on the OCGs



The biggest OCGs with 30+ members from Albania, Montenegro and Serbia are leaders on an international scale



Smaller OCGs (3-4 to 15 members) perform on national levels (or as facilitators of bigger)



Males are the most prevalent on all levels of hierarchy (90+%)



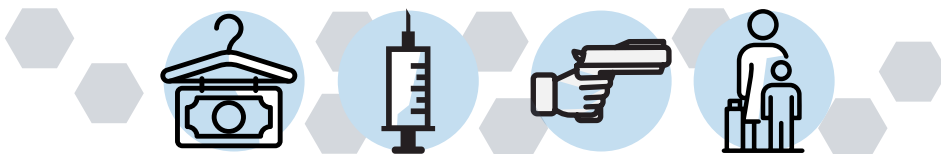
Women mostly involved in logistical activities



Age of the members varies between 20-50, average around 35, with individual cases 65+



Families and ethnic bonding, socio-cultural relationships, but no problem in cooperation



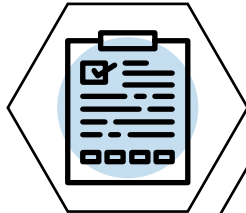
Major activities Illegal drug trade and migrant smuggling, firearms and explosives trade and money laundry facilitators

Following the police websites in all the WB6 for January - July 2022, there were 125 announcements on the group arrests and seizures. They disclosed arrests of 998 persons, making 6.8 arrestees per announcement. Age was available for about 522 persons, and it makes an average of 33.8. Male sex is prevalent in the announcements and takes over 90%. The most common criminal activities are the illegal drug trade and migrant smuggling, while most seizure are drugs, firearms and cash. Geographically, capitals and border crossings in the WB6 are the places where these arrests and seizures most often take place.

# POLICE ANNOUNCEMENTS

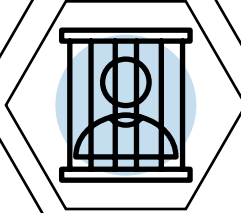
in WB6 January-July 2022

**125**  
announcements



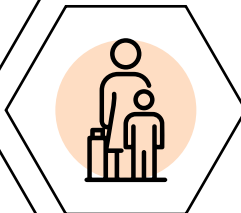
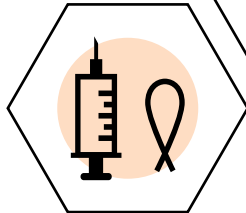
**6,8**  
persons per  
group arrest

**90%**  
males arrested



**998**  
arrested persons

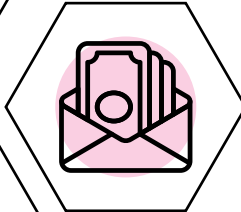
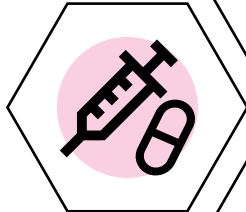
Most  
common  
crime types:



**Migrant Smuggling**

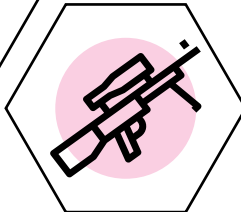
**Illegal drug trade**

Most  
common  
seizures



**Cash**

**Drugs**



**Firearms**

Places:



**Capitals**



**Border crossings**

# Introduction

Organized crime is receiving attention on many levels; from the public, researchers and academics, authorities and civil societies. It has consequences on several levels such as crime rates, economics, and social relationships and cultures. It threatens the legal system, social security and political stability and violates human rights in many ways.<sup>1</sup> Organized crime has been studied in the WB6, but not so many studies have been focused on mapping the phenomenon of Organized Criminal Groups. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the OCGs in WB6, their characteristics and trends.

The WB6 are exposed to organized crime threats, especially due to their vulnerability. Contrary to the democratic transformation in many Eastern European countries during the 1980s, events in the WB6 such as ethnic wars, poverty, political transition and state collapse provided many opportunities for organized crime.<sup>2</sup> After the Yugoslav civil war and the Kosovo war in the 1990s, which involved most of the WB6, a period of reforms toward democracy, freedom, and open market economies was followed by the growing trends in crime. In addition, the black markets in the WB6 made the region attractive for many EU-based OCGs to launder their proceeds.

Several factors contributed to the appearance and development of organized crime in the Balkans. Firstly, in the early 1980s, Eastern European countries were undergoing an economic crisis followed by sanctions and various political conflicts that created the grounds for the emergence of OCGs.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, social factors and legal and institutional vacuum, during the transition period, contributed to the development of organized crime. After a short period, the Balkans became one of the most important epicentres of international organized crime.<sup>4</sup> These patterns of organized crime and corruption have been devastating in the territories of the WB6. In the time of European integration, the threats of OC and the consequences it leaves on communities and institutions deserve greater attention and treatment to suppress it by all actors.

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Some of the main factors that contributed to the development of organized crime in the Balkans are geographical position (the Balkan route), economic crisis, corruption, sanctions against former Yugoslavia, weapons embargo, transition, involvement of officials in illegal activities, lack of transparency and cooperation between local and international institutions and states.<sup>5</sup>

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It is important to define what exactly organized crime is, for a number of reasons such as: to delimitate the jurisdiction of the institutions fighting organized crime; to emphasize the objectives of governments in defence of human rights and freedom; enable the distinction and observation of different acts of organized crime groups members; to assess and follow the state, patterns, and structures of organized crime and to fulfil the cooperation and change of information on an international level.<sup>6</sup> Studies of organized crime tend to agree that it is a “continuing criminal enterprise that rationally works to profit from illicit activities that are often in great public demand. Its continuing existence is maintained through the use of force, threats, monopoly control, and/or the corruption of public officials”.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the characteristics of OCGs, a studies have found that the strongest predictors of being a member of OCGs are being male, having prior criminal activity, and having prior violent behaviour. Additionally, prior sanctions, social relations with organized crime-involved subjects, and a troubled family environment were also associated with greater odds of future organized crime recruitment.<sup>8</sup> Many of these traits are similar to the OCGs in WB6 and some of them have been addressed in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UN ODC) report on measuring OC in Western Balkans from 2020.<sup>9</sup> The knowledge of these traits and factors of OCGs in the WB6 should help the authorities and societies to prevent and investigate organized crime in the region.



# Methodology

The methodology and objectives were established through developed Terms of Reference. Data and information used in this report are gathered from primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources include two types of data gathered in the research process. Firstly, qualitative data were collected through interviews conducted with experts in organized crime: law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, investigative journalists, and representatives of civil society. Secondly, researchers followed police announcements from all the WB6 regarding arrests and seizures that could be connected to organized criminal groups. Data were collected from the beginning of January to the end of June 2022. This research adopts the definition of OCGs from the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime (UN CTOC). Data from the announcements serve to observe recent trends and phenomena of group criminal activities.

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The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime defines an organized criminal group as 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 offences established in accordance with this Convention, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, financial or other material benefit". According to this Convention, serious crime means "conduct constituting an offence punishable by a maximum deprivation of liberty of at least four years or a more serious penalty".<sup>10</sup>

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Secondary sources include many reports and official documents addressing organized crime, official statistics, studies and research on organized crime. We used national Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA) reports (when available), reports by national statistical offices, annual reports by the police, annual reports by prosecutors and courts, as well as research studies and investigative articles.

To identify current trends and patterns of OCGs in the region, researchers interviewed 19 experts in the field of organized crime from the WB6. Furthermore, 125 police announcements were identified that have characteristics of arrest connected to the organized crime, according to the UN CTOC definition of an organized criminal group. This primary data was compared and analysed along with the secondary sources.

This analysis is not without limitations. Data availability and scarce information limited the capacity of the study. Qualitative data may appear subjective in some cases; therefore, it is interpreted properly and double-checked with the other resources.

Quantitative data from the official resources were already processed by the other subjects and therefore presented here as a final product. In contrast, data collected following the police announcements is our primary data. It has several limitations considered through the report and accounting for them in the analysis. Firstly, announcements refer to the arrest and seizures involving three or more persons, for the crimes defined by the UN CTOC. Still, they may not necessarily be prosecuted as organized criminal groups. Secondly, police websites may not report on some of the arrests that took place but were followed by the media and public.<sup>11</sup> The previous research in Serbia finds that some crimes are overreported while others are underreported by the police.<sup>12</sup> However, this kind of data indicates the most recent trends regarding criminal groups, and it is not official information on the number of processed organized crimes. It helped to provide an insight into the possible indicators and characteristics of OCGs. Therefore, it is presented concerning its limitations.

# Mapping Organized Criminal Groups in Western Balkans: How is the business done?

## National or international level: How far do the WB6 OCGs reach?



### **Bigger OCGs from Albania, Montenegro and Serbia drivers on an international level**

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40-60% of activities performed on the international level

Main activity - Trade in illegal drugs

Organized crime in the WB6 operates on both national and international levels. This study finds that in some of the WB6, OCGs serve mainly as facilitators of bigger OCGs, while in some, they are the main leaders of OC in the region and wider. For example, OCGs from Albania cooperate with criminals from bordering countries and countries in Western Europe and Latin America. It is estimated that about 60% of their criminal activities are transnational, related primarily to drug trafficking and the cross-border transfer of cash.<sup>13</sup> Other 40% of OCGs' activities are conducted within state borders, typically associated with robberies, cybercrime, distribution of drugs and, to less extent, prostitution.

Similarly, Montenegrin OCGs that operate internationally are primarily involved in drug trafficking from Latin America to Europe. In the distribution of cocaine, they make the Balkan criminal network, together with OCGs from Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the Montenegrin Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA), OCGs formed a network of associates for drug distribution in several countries of Western Europe from 2017 to 2021. In addition, they are active participants in the greater production of cannabis in Germany and Spain and in further distribution.<sup>14</sup>

Serbian SOCTA also estimates that 40% of OCGs operate in two or more countries while others perform their activities only inside the country. On the international level, OCGs are present in the illicit drugs and firearms markets, although there have not been OCGs focusing only on illegal firearms and explosive trafficking.<sup>15</sup>

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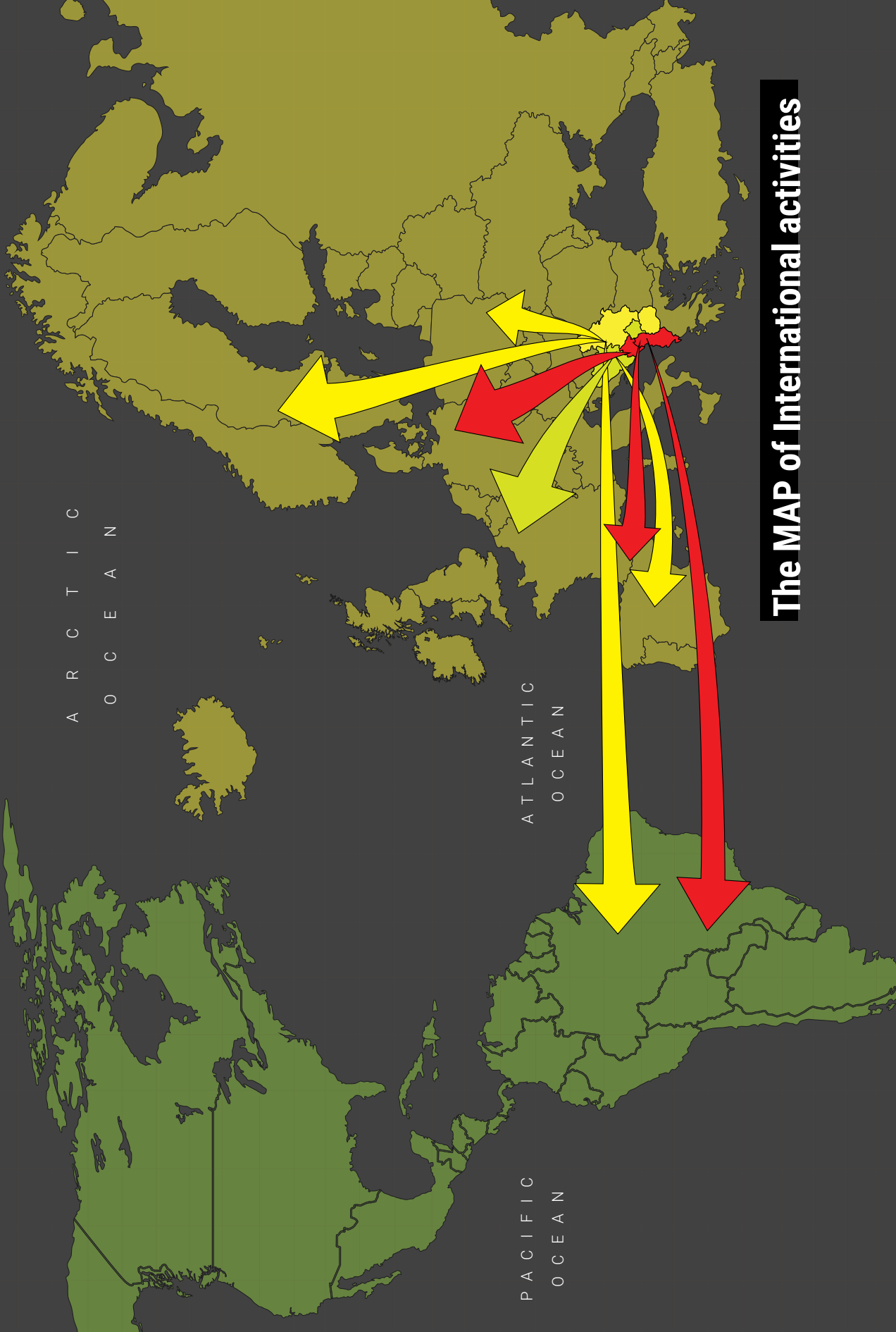
The Europol recently communicated the “dismantling of Balkan cartel trafficking cocaine from South America to Europe”, in a cross-border operation involving law enforcement authorities from Croatia, Italy, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia and Spain. During the investigation, which lasted from 2019, 41 suspects were arrested and prosecuted in Croatia, Italy, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Serbia, Slovenia and Portugal.<sup>16</sup>

Although Balkan cartel as a term is mentioned by law enforcement as Europol and media in the cocaine traffic, the existence of such a cartel is not yet found theoretically. There were identified big criminal organizations which included smuggling cocaine from Latino America to Europe, such as Šarić’s clan (developed in Montenegro and Serbia) or Tito and Dino (origins from Bosnia and Herzegovina). However, there is no Balkan cartel by definition since no criminal organization in the WB has comprised its elements to produce cocaine and complete the drug business chain.<sup>17</sup>

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On the other hand, there is no evidence that OCGs from Bosnia, Kosovo or North Macedonia act as the main perpetrators and drivers of organized crime internationally. Although OCGs from North Macedonia operate internationally on a few levels, there is no evidence any of those is the prominent leader in the process. According to their Ministry of Interior report from 2021, of 10 OCGs involved in the illicit drug trafficking, 7 (70%) operated internationally.<sup>18</sup> This is confirmed in the interviews<sup>19</sup>, indicating that the geographical position of North Macedonia enables international operation and collaboration amongst the OCGs. On the other hand, groups that tend to operate on a national level usually abuse their powers from an official position they hold in the system.

The information also implies that Bosnian citizens are mostly perpetrators but rarely leaders of organized criminal activities that would operate outside of the country. At the same time, some of the OCGs operate only inside the country. Similarly, no OC figures in Kosovo are reaching the international level of operation independently. Most of them serve as facilitators to the big OCGs from the region. For example, there is a growing trend of organized crime in the trafficking of heroin from Turkey, managed by Turkish groups.<sup>20</sup>



ARCTIC  
OCEAN

ATLANTIC  
OCEAN

PACIFIC  
OCEAN

**The MAP of International activities**

## Specialization of the WB OCGs: How much do they diversify illegal activities?

About 50% poly-criminal  
(performing more than one type of crime)



Bigger groups specialized, smaller  
act opportunistically

Drugs trafficking specialized separately  
in cocaine, heroin, marijuana



Similar to the tendency of bigger OCGs to act on their own on an international level, they tend to specialize in criminal activities as well. On the other hand, smaller groups may act opportunistically and switch from one activity to another. Most of the groups in the WB6 are poly-criminal (involved in more than one criminal activity). However, recent trends in European Union show that poly-criminality of the groups is slightly declining, from 45% in the Europol's SOCTA 2017<sup>21</sup> report to 40% in 2021<sup>22</sup>.

A similar prevalence is found in the WB6. For example, in North Macedonian SOCTA from 2015, 43% of the OCGs were specialized in one type of crime, 26% of the OCGs were poly-criminally oriented and acted in several areas, while 20% were mostly engaged in one criminal business but performed some other crimes occasionally. In Serbia, most of the OCGs are poly-criminal, but the biggest ones specialize in drug trafficking. OCGs in Albania also tend to specialize in drug trafficking, regardless of the type of drugs.

Montenegrin OCGs mostly specialize in smuggling and distributing drugs, followed by cigarette smuggling. This is primarily on the international level, where cocaine is the prevalent type of drug, but there are also OCGs specialized in the distribution of heroin or marijuana. Recently, groups involved in the distribution of heroin and marijuana tended to establish networks with the ones involved in cocaine trafficking and use their routes for the distribution. Montenegrin OCGs have also been recognized as "agencies for the recruitment of sailors and crew of overseas ships", specializing in the transport of cocaine. This is characteristic of criminal groups from the south of Montenegro, which recruit people who were supposed to begin a career as sailors due to their geographical position.<sup>23</sup> It has also been noticed that criminal structures engaged in cocaine smuggling started with marijuana cultivation and smuggling activities in European countries, primarily Spain and parts of Germany.

On the other hand, smaller OCGs may switch from one criminal activity to another, depending on the situation and opportunities to commit a crime. In BiH, there are examples of OCGs that commit thefts of vehicles and smuggled drugs or become involved in migrant smuggling and human trafficking. For example, OCGs that were formed to commit thefts switched to drug trafficking of about 25kg per week.<sup>24</sup>

# The sophistication of organized crime methods: Violent or not?



The declining trend of violence in general



The bigger OCGs produced more violence recently

The purpose of violent methods is to protect smuggled goods, discipline own members and fight for the market



Both primary and secondary resources pointed to a downward trend of violence performed by OCGs. However, bigger OCGs are producing more violence when fighting for the market and when maintaining discipline inside the organizations. This resulted in many mafia-like murders, mostly in Serbia and Montenegro but even wider in Europe. Therefore, violence principally facilitates other activities, while it is primarily practised in cases of extortion and robberies to gain profit. For example, violence is typical of Albanian OCGs operating in drug trafficking and extortion when controlling territory, supplying lines and resources. It is applied mainly by paid assassins. Still, it also has a declining trend among the powerful OCGs since they look toward more sophisticated methods, transition to licit activities and support at higher state and political levels.

On the other hand, Serbia and Montenegro were under the strike of OCGs fighting violently for the markets. This accounts for two clans dealing with cocaine whose war in the period between 2017 and 2021 resulted in over 60 mafia murders, which is also identified in Montenegrin SOCTA. Moreover, although there were no clashes between the two clans in 2021, murders related to the war between these two clans continued in the middle of June 2022.<sup>25</sup>

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The first wave of violence between the two most known Montenegrin clans (Škaljari and Kavač) occurred in 2015. This set off a series of violent tit-for-tat incidents involving criminal groups from Serbia and Montenegro, which are aligning to one side or the other, and led to a spill-over of violence abroad Montenegro, the region and some European countries as well (murders happened in Malaga, Berlin, Amsterdam, Athens, Kyiv).<sup>26</sup> Violence happens for different reasons, and its frequency, visibility and duration are the results of specific factors. These include a high degree of competition between the two groups (and others) – a stake in cocaine trafficking that is worth fighting for. This is followed by a sufficient pool of young men who are willing to die for it, and a degree of criminal governance enabling the conflict to continue.<sup>27</sup>

The war between these Škaljari and Kavač clans has involved assassinations and the use of explosives, bombs and snipers. Family members have been killed, as well as some collateral victims. OCGs hired professionals and amateurs for the murders - depending on whose liquidation was planned. They have also hired foreigners; some of them were trained soldiers known as “mercenaries”.<sup>28</sup> These brutality is also reflected in the manner of committing serious crimes with the increasing use of explosive devices. Most recently, one of the allegedly highly ranked members of one of the clans was murdered with at least eight hits while sitting in the restaurant that is positioned on the promenade near the Old Town of Budva.<sup>29</sup>

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As it can be seen, much of the violence driven by these OCGs has been spread through Montenegro and Serbia and even wider to Europe. According to Serbian SOCTA from 2019, 5 OCGs (18%) practice violent methods. In Belgrade and Novi Sad, criminal networks are widespread and have good connections that enable control of the market and members. Similar to the pattern found in Albania, they use intimidation to control local communities, extortion, criminal markets and political connections.<sup>30</sup>

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Investigative media KRIK and Radio Free Europe found that 110 homicides in Serbia, from January 2012 to the end of 2020, were connected to mafia-organized crime. Of those 110, 11 are solved, 15 trial is in process, and 16 cases have suspects while 68 do not.<sup>31</sup> Besides, OCGs practice violence to discipline their members and fight with opposite groups for the criminal markets. Most cases are from the fight between the Škaljari and Kavač clans. In Serbian tabloids, there is also a story of Veljko Belivuk, arrested leader of one of the OCGs who cooperated with the Kavač clan. This case is connected to 7 murders.<sup>32</sup>

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Information from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia indicates that violence, in general, is declining among the OCGs due to the more sophisticated methods. Violence is mainly used in isolated cases within the group or between them. Due to hierarchical structure, violence is practiced to maintain discipline within the groups and obtain power and respect in their surroundings. For example, in North Macedonia, it is mainly done by OCGs involved in drug trafficking and extortion, using personal or online and telephone intimidations, weapons and property damage.<sup>33</sup>

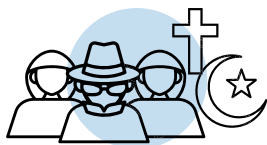


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Violence and murder are rare among OCGs in Kosovo for two main reasons. Firstly, sporadic violent confrontations are driven by the blood feuds deriving from Kanun (common law of Albanians that was used for governing in the absence of state laws). Revenge for killings, which is foreseen by the above-mentioned common law, is a common phenomenon in Kosovo. Therefore, the usage of violence would potentially lead to a never-ending loop of murders/usage of violence, which can translate into a loss of both financial and human resources. Secondly, groups are not so large, so every potential confrontation would further weaken the group in terms of loss of members and exposure to the authorities.

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## Origins and structure of the OCGs in WB6: How much nationality, ethnicity, and family relations matter?



Members share origins and ethnicities

OCGs often called by place of origin or geographical location



Organized crime is profit-driven, background is not an obstacle for cooperation between different OCGs

It has been noticed that many OCGs were created by members that share origin and history. Some OCGs are strongly bonded through family and relative ties, sharing ethnic and national origins simultaneously. If the environment is multi-ethnic and diversified, OCGs would also have members from different groups. For example, the ethnic structure of Bosnian OCGs is diversified and consists of all nations, including Roma and Montenegrins.

However, stronger and larger OCGs tend to share the same origin. And this is the pattern found in most of the WB6. For example, in Kosovo, members of the OCGs are mostly Serbs or Albanians, depending on the geographical location of the groups. Still, other ethnicities such as Turkish or Roma communities may be included. In Albania, firmly established OCGs have deep family bonds and trust among the members. It is also found that some of the members can have the same birthplaces and lifepaths. For example, Skaljari and Kavac, places in Montenegro, by which are named two well-known clans, Skaljari clan and Kavac clan, and their members were recruited from these places in the beginning. In North Macedonia, three main criminal groups operate from the villages of Aračinovo, Kondovo and Grčec.<sup>34</sup>

These kinds of social and cultural connections between leaders and members of OCGs helped them to develop trusted criminal networks. They also recruit new members from their parental places of origin, bringing persons of trust to their OCGs. Furthermore, in the latest Montenegrin SOCTA, authorities found patterns regarding the origins of OCGs trading illicit drugs. For example, heroin traffickers usually come from the same place (north of Montenegro), and their members are, besides Montenegro, citizens of Kosovo, Albania and Turkey. Marijuana traffickers are structured similarly to heroin groups, located in the central part of the country and connected by family and ethnic ties with Albania.

Ethnicity, nationality, and religion are not important in drug trafficking since it is profit-driven only. In general, it is found that at the same time, OCGs are strongly motivated by generating illegal profit. This means that past national and ethnic conflicts like the Yugoslav civil war do not make an obstacle for the OCGs with different origins to cooperate on an international level and participate in the so-called Balkan criminal network.<sup>35</sup> In addition, another important trait of OCGs in the Western Balkans is hooliganism. Since the 1990s, leaders and members of football hooligan groups were found to be connected to organized criminal activities.<sup>36</sup>

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Organized crime is profit-driven activity. Therefore, differences in nationalities and ethnicities do not stop OCGs from cooperating and establishing criminal networks inside the WB6 and abroad. OCGs of Albanian ethnicity from Kosovo and North Macedonia were found to cooperate and make networks with ones from Northern Kosovo and South Serbia when smuggling goods and immigrants toward Europe. Also, Montenegrin OCGs smuggle drugs and cigarettes through parts of Montenegro and Kosovo inhabited with Albanian communities. Furthermore, the authorities found that Turkish, Afghan and Pakistani group have their cooperates in Kosovo and North Macedonia.<sup>37</sup>

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# Mapping recent trends and estimations of OCGs: numbers, age, gender, structure

## ALBANIA

### 15-30 OCGs estimated

from 3-4 up to 60 members

about 80% men

20-50 years old (depending on role/crim. act.)



Drug traffic



Migrant smuggling



Prostitution  
human traffic



Cybercrime



Money  
laundering

### Police announcements:

43 group arrests

11.8 persons per group

90% men

34.5 average age

There are no official estimates of OCGs in Albania, but there are moves toward the development of SOCTA methodology, which is expected to be adopted soon.<sup>38</sup> According to the information from the most recent report of the Special Prosecution Office<sup>39</sup>, as well as information collected in the interviews, major crime types performed by the OCGs in Albania are, respectively, drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, prostitution (human trafficking), cybercrime, along with the money laundering. It has also been noticed that Albanian strongly organized OCGs, tend to expand their activities in diversified areas of businesses such as construction or hospitality industries.

Based on the qualitative information gathered in the research process, it is estimated that there are between 15 and 30 established OCGs in Albania - mainly in Tirana, Durrës, Elbasan, Shkoder, Vlore, Kruje.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the highest number of group arrests is recorded from the police announcements in Albania – 43. This may also suggest that many OCGs are not registered or identified by the security sector, but it should be noted that not every group arrest presents an organized criminal group neither is there a guarantee that it will be prosecuted as organized crime.

OCGs may be more or less big, from 3-4 to 10-15 or 20 members. The largest groups which operate on an international level can have 50 to 60 members, like the ones in Italy<sup>41</sup>. It is suggestible that OCGs have been rapidly growing recently since past research recognized groups of up to 17 members (the Gang of Durrës).<sup>42</sup> In the police announcements, group arrests have the largest average of arrestees compared to others in the WB6 – 11.8; but individual cases of high-number group arrests may drive this. For example, there were two announcements of 101 and 71 suspects in illegal drug trafficking and fraud in a call centre, respectively.<sup>43</sup> However, it is noticeable that OCGs from Albania, along with OCGs from Montenegro and Serbia, have more members and form bigger groups than in the rest of the WB6.

Regarding the gender structure of the OCGs in Albania, most of the members are men, around 80%, while women do not play critical roles.<sup>44</sup> In the police announcements, men are even more prevalent, making up 89.5% of the suspects. The age of the members depends upon illegal activity. Drug couriers are typically in their teens, while others are between 30 and 40 years old. It has been noticed that individuals involved in the smuggling of weapons are older, aged from 40 to 50. Typically, leaders are well into their 50's, while members 25 to 30 years old low in the hierarchy. This is also confirmed in the police announcements, where the mean age is 34.5. The members of OCGs are Albanian and generally do not represent any particular minorities. An important trait of strong OCGs is trust and family ties. Family ties are not necessary to build trust between OCGs; however, the longevity of OCGs is largely based on the trust built on family ties.<sup>45</sup>

# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

## 5-10 OCGs estimated

10-15 members, 35 average age



Drug traffic



Migrant smuggling



Prostitution  
human traffic



Goods  
smuggling

## Police announcements:

24 group arrests

7.1 persons per group

34.5 average age

As in Albania, there are no official estimations of organized crime groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. SOCTA is also in the process of development.<sup>46</sup> Scarce data regarding organized crime suggests that the most common crime types performed by the OCGs are, respectively, illegal drug trafficking, migrant smuggling and human trafficking, smuggling of goods, cybercrime and vehicle theft, supported by the illegal trade in firearms and explosives and money laundering.<sup>47</sup> Based on the information gathered in the research process, it is estimated that around 5 to 10 OCGs operate in BiH, with about 10-15 members.

It is suggestible that there are no big OCGs identified in the public and media currently. In the 24 police announcements on criminal group arrests in the first half of 2022, the average number of suspects is 7.1, which places these groups just behind those recorded in Albania and North Macedonia.

Regarding the structure of the criminal groups, qualitative information says that members are usually around 35 years old, similar to our result of the police announcements (34.5 average of the 12 members whose age is reported). In those announcements, gender information was unavailable, nor was there another source on it. Usually, the role of the women is in the facilitative and logistical activities. For example, they have a role in controlling other women in the process of human trafficking and prostitution. In rare cases, women became leaders and members with influence in Bosnian OCGs.

It is also found that the ethnical structure of Bosnian OCGs is diversified and consists of all the nations, including Roma and Montenegrins. Interviewees also pointed to the civilians involved in organized crime operations, such as mechanical engineers who helped create devices to unlock the lockers, physicians who intervened in the cases of injuries of OCG members, or economic and financial experts who assisted in money laundering.

# KOSOVO

Police neutralized OCGs:

**37**      **28**      **49**  
 2019      2020      2021

Estimated age 20-65 depending on crime type



Drug traffic



Goods smuggling

Police announcements:

8 group arrests

4.25 persons per group

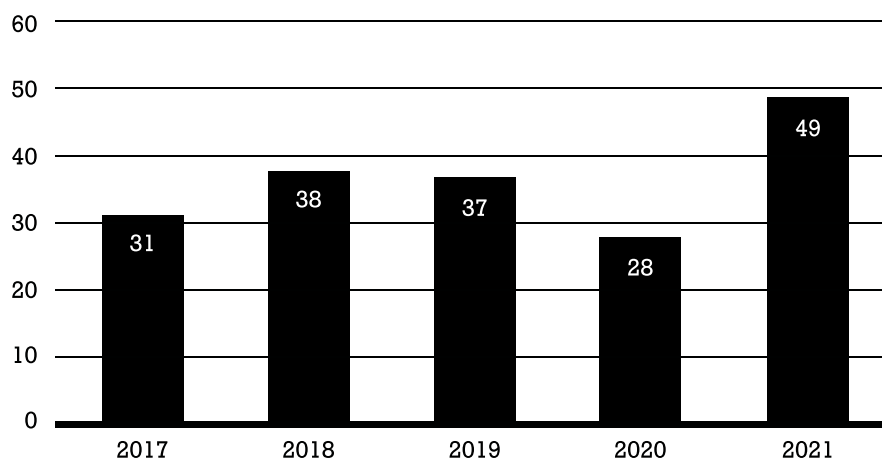
males 80%

31.8 average age

Kosovo 2021	Reported	Convicted
OC	148	15
Money laundering	19	0
Corruption	282	1
Migrants smuggling	11	0

*Table 1. Structure of Organized and serious crime cases in Kosovo. Source: Annual Report (2021) of Inter-Institutional tracking mechanism on characteristic criminal offences by Kosovo Prosecutorial Council.*

## Neutralized OCGs in Kosovo



*Figure 1. Neutralized OCGs in Kosovo. Source: Kosovo police Annual Work Reports.*

Illegal drug trafficking is also the primary criminal activity committed by organized criminal groups in Kosovo.<sup>48</sup> It is estimated that 60-70% of criminal investigations are related to drug trafficking.<sup>49</sup> This is followed by smuggling of goods, particularly cigarettes, involving OCGs from Montenegro, although this activity is mainly facilitated in Kosovo, not performed by the OCGs from Kosovo.<sup>50</sup> There are no official estimations of the OCGs in Kosovo. The last SOCTA report was for 2014-2015<sup>51</sup> and the new one is in the pipeline<sup>52</sup>. However, police publish annual work reports (Figure 1) with information on neutralized OCGs.<sup>53</sup> These reports say that 49 OCGs were neutralized in 2021<sup>54</sup>, continuing the growing trend from 2019 (37)<sup>55</sup> and 2020 (28)<sup>56</sup> (Table 1). We recorded eight announcements on group arrests by the police with 4.25 persons per group, so it would be interesting to compare this information to the new report for 2022.

The information regarding their structure suggests that OCG members engaged in the trafficking of drugs, goods and humans are usually between 20 and 40 years old, while those engaged in loan-sharking are usually older members, going up and over 65 years of age. In the police announcements, the calculated average age was 31.8. The role of women usually seems to be in support of the male leaders of the OCGs or their partners and acquaintances. Women are more present in human trafficking for prostitution purposes. In these cases, they usually play the role of approaching and recruiting other women, with the idea of easier access to victims through a peer approach.<sup>57</sup> Women are also used by family members that engage in criminal activities as a form of protection when crossing borders or sensitive areas in general.<sup>58</sup> In the recorded police announcements, females took about 20% of the arrestees.

In general, OCGs in Kosovo are made of Albanians and Serbs, depending on the geographical location of the groups. Other ethnicities may be included in the OCGs, such as Turkish, Roma community etc. OCGs are not necessarily limited by ethnicity, geography, and administration; however, they are structured by family, place of origin (town, village), and ethnicity.<sup>59</sup> The northern part of Kosovo has been identified as the “grey zone” and hotspot of organized crime by GI TOC.<sup>60</sup> Significant funds are “pumped” into Northern Kosovo by Serbia and Kosovo after the conflict periods. The population there is dispersed between Albanian and Serbian ethnicity, and the lack of administration and governance created a specific environment where organized crime flourishes. Most of the criminal activities are smuggling goods like fuel, construction materials, medicines, cars, cigarettes, food, beverages etc.



# MONTENEGRO

## SOCTA estimates



10 high ranked OCGs,  
of which mostly over 30 members



Drug traffic



Cigarette  
smuggling

## Police announcements:

8 group arrests

4.75 persons per group

males 100%

34.8 average age

The most common recorded crime types performed by the OCGs in Montenegro are illegal drug trade and cigarette smuggling. According to the 2021 Global Organized Crime Index, Montenegro is ranked first in cocaine trafficking among the European countries and 14<sup>th</sup> in the world, alongside Italy, which shares the same position in both categories.<sup>61</sup> Montenegrin SOCTA from 2021<sup>62</sup> estimates 10 active high-ranked OCGs, while in the previous one, from 2017, there were 11 (35 in SOCTA for 2011, 20 in 2013<sup>63</sup>). According to law enforcement agencies, most groups have over 30 members, but there have been some reports of OCGs with more than 200 members.<sup>64</sup> In the latest SOCTA, it is indicated that those two largest OCGs have cells abroad. In the eight recorded police announcements in the first half of 2022, groups did not have such a high number of members (4.75 per group). However, it may be that these cases will not be criminally charged as organized crime.

Information gathered through the study implies that the age of members can vary between 18 and 55, but that recently younger commit more serious crimes (18-29 years old). OCGs also tend to recruit young and unknown to the police.<sup>65</sup> In the police announcements, the average age was 34.8, and no females were recorded, but the information was not clear regarding gender. Interviewees estimated that only 1% of women and that their role is logistical, conveying messages between bosses and members, financial expertise and money laundering.

According to SOCTA, ethnicity, nationality, and religion are not important in cocaine trafficking, since it is profit-driven only. Groups trafficking heroin usually come from the same place (north Montenegro), mixed with citizens of Kosovo, Albania and Turkey. Marijuana traffickers are structured similarly to heroin groups, located in the central part of the country, connected with Albania and having strong family and ethnic ties.

In the annual work report for 2020 of Montenegrin police, it is reported that police filed 76 criminal charges in organized crime, high corruption, money laundering, terrorism and war crimes, 95% higher than in 2019.<sup>66</sup> These charges included 320 persons and 105 legal entities, which is 82% higher than in the previous year. In 2021, there were 52 filed criminal charges against 212 persons and three legal entities. Of those 52, 13 were OC cases and 80 as members of OCGs.<sup>67</sup> This makes around 6.15 members per group, somehow a higher average than the one found in the police announcements (4.25). This may indicate that bigger OCGs have not been charged or that they are processed abroad<sup>68</sup>.

# NORTH MACEDONIA

Police neutralized OCGs:

<b>21</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>
2019	2020	2021



Drug traffic



Migrant smuggling

2021:

38 OCGs were detected,  
380 members were prosecuted,  
42 is the average age,  
2/3 are Albanians 1/3 Macedonians,  
some of the groups are led by Pakistani  
and Afghan citizens,  
95% male and 5% females  
(usually not in the daily operations).<sup>69</sup>

Police announcements:

13 group arrests  
7.5 persons per group  
males 100%  
25.3 average age

	Neutralized OCGs	Members	Drugs (members)	Migrant smuggling (members)	Corruption (members)	OC Economic crime and money laundering (members)
2016	12	103	5 (24)	1 (7)	1 (15)	2 (37)
2017	12	116	7 (35)	1 (23)	0 (0)	3 (54)
2018	16	102	9 (49)	3 (15)	0 (0)	1 (12)
2019	21	136	6 (19)	4 (43)	8 (57)	1 (3)
2020	13	71	6 (24)	3 (22)	3 (14)	0 (0)
2021	14	99	10 (61)	2 (19)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Table 2. Neutralized OCGs in North Macedonia. Source: Annual Work Reports by North Macedonian Police

The most common crime types performed by OCGs in North Macedonia are the illegal drug trade and migrant smuggling. In 2020, police detected and suppressed a total of 13 OCGs, of which 6 were in the field of illegal drug trafficking and 3 were in the illegal trafficking of migrants, 3 in corruption and one terrorist group (Table 2).<sup>70</sup> In 2021, it is reported that 14 OCGs were suppressed (99 persons reported) – 10 in the field of the illegal drug trade and 2 in the trafficking of migrants (Table 2). In addition, one OCG was active in the illegal trade of cultural heritage, and one in the abuse of power and authority.<sup>71</sup>

In the interview with the representative from the police, we collected information that 38 OCGs were detected in 2021, while 380 members were prosecuted for OC. Their average age is 42, and 2/3 are of Albanian ethnicity, while 1/3 are Macedonian. It has also been noticed that some of the groups are led by Pakistani and Afghan citizens. Gender prevalence was that 95% of members are male, while females take 5%. Besides, women are not usually involved in daily operations.<sup>72</sup>

As we can see, the authorities can identify a great number of OCGs, but not all of them get neutralized (from 12 to 21 per year). From 2013 to 2015, 46 OCGs were identified, of which 31 had a high level of organization and 15 had a low level.<sup>73</sup> It was estimated that 63% of the OCGs are composed of 5 to 14 members, 22% have 15 and more, and 15% have 3-4 members.<sup>74</sup>

In the 13 identified police announcements on criminal group arrests from January to July 2022, the average number of members was 7.5, but it is worth noting that this number is higher due to one big arrest of a terrorist group with 35 members<sup>75</sup>. If we take that there were 99 offenders in 14 suppressed OCGs in 2021, this makes an average of 7.1 perpetrators per group, similar to the one found in the police announcement. The medium age of offenders in the announcements is 25.3 but information gathered through this study says that the age of OCG members varies between 22-55 years old.

Depending on their structure, members come from mixed backgrounds and ethnicities. In 2021, 2/3 of detected OCG members were of Albanian background, while 1/3 were Macedonian. This has changed since the last SOCTA (2015), which shows that Macedonian nationality dominates in 52% of the OC cases, Albanian in 43%, and 5% are the others.<sup>76</sup> They usually recruit members from borderland areas, local people that have strong connections with local police and authorities. In 2021, it was noticeable that some of the groups were joined by Pakistani and Afghan people.<sup>77</sup> The connections within the structure of the OCGs in North Macedonia are mostly characterized by family ties and criminal interests among friends, which is especially expressed at the top of the OCGs structure that acts for a longer period.<sup>78</sup> There has also been high variability of civil professions included in OC activity, such as bookkeepers, IT technicians, lawyers etc.<sup>79</sup>

# SERBIA

Police neutralized OCGs:

<b>23</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>19</b>
2018	2019	2020

SOCTA 2019



27 OCGs (2015-58)  
 males 94.6%, average age 38  
 female 5.4%, average age 33



Drug traffic



Migrant smuggling

Police announcements:

29 group arrests  
 4.5 persons per group  
 males 98.5%  
 41.8 average age

	Neutralized OCGs	OC drug seizures	Drugs	Human trafficking and migrant smuggling	Economic crime	Cybercrime	General crime
2018	23	31					
2019	22	39	7	6	4	1	4
2020	19 (137 arrested)	45	6	8	4		1

Table 3. Neutralized OCGs in Serbia. Source: Strategic Assessment of National Security 2022-2025

The main criminal activities of the OCGs in Serbia are the illegal drug trade and migrant smuggling. This can also be seen from the table of cases run by the Prosecutor for Organized Crime. It seems that authorities have targeted their objectives on investigating marijuana and synthetic drug production. Strategic Assessment of Public Security states that 13 OCGs currently operate in the production, smuggling and illegal trade of narcotic drugs.<sup>80</sup> In 2018-2020, police discovered 209 laboratories for marijuana and 1 laboratory for producing synthetic drugs.<sup>81</sup> Serbian SOCTA from 2019 also estimates that 77% of criminal activities driven by OCGs are in the illegal drug trade.<sup>82</sup> In the other types of crime, there have been some ad hoc groups in firearms trafficking, and property-related crimes (robberies, burglaries, thefts of vehicles).

In the first SOCTA from 2015, there were 58 identified OCGs.<sup>83</sup> In the next SOCTA (2019), there were 27 OCGs, 5 of which were at the low level of organization, 15 were medium level, and 7 were high level of organization.<sup>84</sup> After this report, there was no other official assessment of organized crime until 2022, when the Strategic Assessment of National Security reported that 23 OCGs were neutralized in 2018, 22 in 2019, and 19 in 2020.<sup>85</sup> There is no official report on neutralized groups in 2021. Still, the Minister of the Interior announced on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2022 that police have suppressed and charged more than 30 OCGs from January 2021 to that date and 12 OCGs from the beginning of 2022 (79 persons arrested on suspicion that they are OCG members).<sup>86</sup> That makes at least 18 OCGs in 2021. Therefore, a downward trend of reported OCGs is noticeable.

Regarding their structure, SOCTA in 2019 reported that the male gender is the most prevalent (94.6%), with the average age of 38, while females make up around 5.4%, with an average of 33 years old. Women's role is mostly non-violent in financial and money laundering operations.<sup>87</sup> In the 29 identified police announcements regarding group arrests, the average number of members was 5,3, and the age was 41.8, which is noticeable older than in the other territories but similar to the information from SOCTA (38). Male sex is almost certain (98.5%).

There was no information on ethnicity in Serbian SOCTA from 2019, except that 12% were foreign citizens, and their middle age is 43. However, it is noted that leaders and members of OCGs are sharing the same history, ethnical origins, friendships and relatives' connections. Furthermore, it is noted that family members and partners are included in the criminal businesses, and that low-ranked members are usually younger and do not have a criminal history.<sup>88</sup> In a previous SOCTA report (2015), one of the conclusions was that OCGs are formed regardless of ethnical origins and that they are only profit-driven.<sup>89</sup> And this is again confirmed in 2019's SOCTA, which notes that past conflicts between different nationalities and ethnicities do not stand between OCGs when they have to cooperate and gain illegal profit on an international level.<sup>90</sup>

# Mapping the main criminal activities of OCGs in the WB6

This study finds that the main and most common crime types performed by the OCGs in WB6 are, respectively, trade in illegal drugs, migrant smuggling and smuggling of goods. Besides these, illicit firearms and explosives trade, property or financial crime, and trafficking in persons are appearing sporadically. All of these are followed and facilitated by money laundering and illegal distribution of weapons. Secondary information gathered in the research aligns with the most common crime types in police announcements regarding group arrests and seizures (Table). Therefore, in this chapter, only the main activities are presented, together with the most common and important patterns found in the research process.

Police announcements	Most common crime
Albania	Illegal trade in drugs, Counterfeit
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Illicit drug trafficking, Migrant smuggling, Illegal trade of firearms, Money Laundering
Kosovo	Illicit drug trafficking, Migrant smuggling
Montenegro	Illicit trafficking of tobacco and cigarettes
North Macedonia	Migrant smuggling, Corruption
Serbia	Illicit drug trafficking
Most common	Illicit drug trafficking, Migrant smuggling

Table 4. Most common crime types in the police announcements

## Trade in illegal drugs

As expected, the illegal drug trade is the most prevalent criminal activity performed by the OCGs in WB6. Previously, the UNODC macro report on WB found that most persons (51%) convicted for participating in an organized criminal group were linked to drug production and trafficking.<sup>91</sup> This is remarkable for territories where bigger OCGs operate. For example, according to the Serbian SOCTA<sup>92</sup>, drug-related organized crime accounts for 77% of all organized crime in Serbia. And interviewees from Albania estimated that drug trafficking takes 60% to 80% of criminal activity, mostly focused on cocaine. This is also confirmed in police announcements in which the trade in illegal drugs is the most common crime type, followed by migrant smuggling (Table).

# Cocaine

Cocaine is present in most WB6, smuggled in or even produced in some laboratories established in the central part of Albania. However, great quantities of cocaine enter the WB6 in Albania through the port of Durres and in Montenegro through the port of Bar. Afterwards, it is transported by road, hidden in hard-to-reach places inside the vehicle (ventilation openings, spare groups, various types of partitions) or specially designed places (sticks or bunkers in the car). Most of it goes from Albania to Kosovo, and it is distributed to Serbia (through Peja) and North Macedonia, towards Bulgaria and Western Europe. Cocaine in Serbia also comes from Montenegro. This route leads from Bar, through Podgorica and Rozaje to Novi Pazar and central Serbia. Additionally, it comes from Preševo, which is very close to the Serbian borders with Kosovo and North Macedonia.<sup>93</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina, cocaine from the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland has been noticed, and it may be used or smuggled again.<sup>94</sup> In these cases, the SKY application is used for communication among smugglers.<sup>95</sup> In addition, some extreme biker groups have been involved in the distribution of cocaine.<sup>96</sup>

<b>Cocaine (gr)</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
Albania					
Bosnia					
Kosovo			1.581,68	2.678,85	414.958,18
Montenegro	1.634,34	34.897,92	93.242	1.082,59	1.244.180,61
North Macedonia	260,0	587,0	852,0	1.003,3	604,0
Serbia	12.799,58	12.990,05			

*Table 5. Cocaine seizures in the WB6. Sources: Police annual work reports (where available).*

# Heroin

When it comes to heroin, it is also present in all the WB6. It mainly comes from Afghanistan and Turkey, through Bulgaria and Romania, entering North Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia as part of the Balkan route. Some of the heroin stays inside the WB6, while a significant amount is mainly distributed by the Albanian, Montenegrin and Serbian groups in Western Europe. This is done through Italy (by the Adriatic Sea), Croatia or Slovenia.



<b>Heroin (gr)</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
Albania					
Bosnia					
Kosovo			7.718,0	9.803,65	3.642,31
Montenegro	17.926,58	1.782,42	23.319,66	13.157,07	2.059,05
North Macedonia	1.400,0	1.971,0	736,0	4.951,7	6.053,0
Serbia	16.972,76	36.470,88			

Table 6. Heroin seizures in the WB6. Sources: Police annual work reports (where available).

## Cannabis

Greater OCGs from Albania and Serbia have focused on the production and distribution of cannabis inside the WB6 and, further, towards Western Europe, Greece, and Turkey. Cannabis – marijuana is the drug most commonly produced in Serbia and Albania (cultivated in Shkodra, Kruja and Vlora). It is mainly exported to Italy and less to Greece. Besides big plantations of cannabis, indoor cultivation in these countries is becoming widespread.

Cannabis from Albania goes to Montenegro and BiH, through the Shkodra Lake and Bojana River, by water and nearby land. Another route is to Kosovo, through North Macedonia, the border crossing of Bogorodica, to Greece and Turkey<sup>97</sup>, or to Bulgaria through Serbia and North Macedonia, if not consumed inside Kosovo. On the other hand, cannabis produced in Serbia is going to Hungary through Subotica, in Bulgaria through Pirot and the border crossing of Gradina, while in Romania via the crossings of Vatin and Stara Moravica.<sup>98</sup>

<b>Marijuana (gr)</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
Albania					
Bosnia					
			824.230,0 +		
			25.447,0 hashish +	256.717,9 +	449.549,0 +
Kosovo			6810 cann plants	5622 plants	2.380 plants
Montenegro	3.336.411,52	3.203.420,06	2.290.600,9	3.103.998,31	3.465.094,03
North Macedonia	510.100,0	1.532.432,0	977.210,0	61.800,0 + 900 ml hashish oil	1.869.000.000,0
Serbia	3.858.408,88	3.624.985,50			

Table 7. Cannabis and marijuana seizures in the WB6. Sources: Police annual work reports (where available).

In 2019 and 2020, members of the OCG led by Predrag Koluvića, which cultivated cannabis in the space of a former “Jovanjica” company, municipality of Stara Pazova, were arrested. During this, “650 kilograms of marijuana and 67.077 plants (almost 4 tons of raw marijuana)” were seized.<sup>99</sup> This case got wide attention by the public and investigative media, since number of authorities and state actors became involved. The first indictment accused the members of this OCG of being directly involved in producing and distributing marijuana. The second involved members of police, state security agency and military intelligence agency. It is expected that the third indictment should capture some of the government stakeholders and political figures, but it is not pursued yet. This case became even more complicated when a former highly ranked employee in the police and political figure, Dijana Hrkalović, who is under investigation in another criminal case of Veljko Belivuk’s OCG, accused the inspector for drugs who discovered “Jovanjica” of being involved in drug trafficking himself, and the High Public Prosecutor in Belgrade started investigating this claim.<sup>100</sup>

## Synthetic drugs

Synthetic drugs are mostly imported from Western Europe, but some laboratories have been found in the WB6, mostly in Serbia. Products are smuggled to Kosovo and North Macedonia with the tendency to appear in Greece or Turkey. The biggest seizures of synthetic drugs were in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, Bor, and border crossing Horgos. Another route of smuggling is to the Republic of Srpska.<sup>101</sup>

<b>Synthetic drugs (tablets + gr)</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>
Albania					
Bosnia					
Kosovo				225.42	
Montenegro	420 + 54,6	1770 + 236,6	6832 + 271,4	378	3.059,45
North Macedonia	1.116.606	537	409		2025
Serbia	103.374	31.911			

*Table8. Synthetic drugs seizures in the WB6. Sources:  
Police annual work reports (where available).*

## Migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons

Since the 1970s, the Balkan route has been established for drug smuggling from East to West. In 2015, it became one of the major routes of illegal migration, with an estimated 1.5 million asylum seekers and migrants from Syria and Iraq going toward Western Europe through Turkey, Greece and Western Balkans.<sup>102</sup> These created opportunities for the development of the OCGs in both migrant smuggling and human trafficking. However, the current position from the authorities in the WB6 is that there are no identified OCGs in human trafficking in the WB6.

Based on the other information as interviews, human trafficking in the WB6 is mainly connected to prostitution and illegal migration. For example, from Kosovo towards Montenegro (and then BiH), Serbia (to Hungary) and North Macedonia (to Greece). UNODC's MACRO report identified that trafficking in persons in WB6 is the crime that participates in the highest share of convicted persons linked to some OCGs (29%) but has a downward trend.<sup>103</sup> This only suggests that trafficking in persons is most often an organized criminal activity, not performed outside of organized crime. For example, the same report finds that illegal drug trafficking connected to OCGs takes about 5% of all drug convictions.<sup>104</sup>

It is noted that human trafficking in the WB6 has changed in the previous period and that victims of trafficking may be recruited in the WB6. For example, the trafficking of persons for the purposes of prostitution was common in Serbia during the civil war, but there is no crime on such an organized level nowadays.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, BiH was the place of transit and destination for victims, but nowadays, victims are mostly citizens of BiH primarily for mendicancy, but also in labour and sex markets. There are a few cases of victims from Afghanistan, Cuba, Gambia, Libya and Sri Lanka. Most youths from the Gipsy's communities are victims of exploitation for mendicancy and perpetration of some property crimes.<sup>106</sup>

On the contrary, there were registered OCGs in migrant smuggling in the previous period, and it appears as the second most common criminal activity in the WB6, after the trade in illegal drugs. When it comes to migrant smuggling, UNODC's MACRO report finds that official data on persons convicted for migrant smuggling in the Western Balkans show that 17% are linked to organized criminal groups, but their interviews suggest that it is rarely individual activity.<sup>107</sup> The report indicates that small OCGs with members of different structures and nationalities organize smuggling from the country of origin to the European Union.

Due to the Balkan route, migrant smuggling is widespread in most WB6 daily. It is estimated that one OCG in BiH smuggles about 10 to 15 migrants daily. They are entering the WB6 territories in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. Smuggling routes in Albania begin at the border with Greece, towards the port of Durrës or the Albanian-Montenegrin border. Migrants from the Middle East and North Africa mainly

follow these routes. Although there are no registered and recognized OCGs in human trafficking in Montenegro, local groups participated in migrant smuggling at the borders with the neighbouring countries and provided logistics to the international smuggling networks, similarly to the patterns seen in Serbia.

The Balkan route navigates migrants from Albania towards the Montenegrin border (Bozaj, Sukobin) to enter and Niksic-Pljevlja to leave for Bosnia and Herzegovina, sometimes to Serbia. It's being conducted by the local OCGs that provide the assistance of international networks. Another route comes through North Macedonia, where police reports indicate that migrants are smuggled into Serbia by Corridor 10 from the south to the north. From 2020 to 2022, there is an increase in migrant smuggling in Kosovo, especially among Syrian migrants. The most used routes for the trafficking of migrants are through the Merdare border crossing near Podujevae, and Jarinje in the North of Kosovo.<sup>108</sup> After entering Serbia, they try to reach European Union across the borders of Croatia and Hungary.

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Recently, the Balkan Investigative Report Network (BIRN) reported a discovery of the migrant smuggling case which involved a Serbian-Syrian translator who became a migrant smuggler with strong connections in the police and whose gang dominates the city of Sombor and the northwest border with the EU.<sup>109</sup> After the publication of the investigative article, there was certain violence near the migrant camp in northwest Serbia, allegedly by the ones involved in the smuggling towards the ones who helped discover the case.<sup>110</sup>

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## Trafficking in illegal firearms and explosives

Most of the involvement of illegal firearms and explosives possession and distribution among OCGs serves to facilitate the main activities by protecting smuggled goods and producing violence among OCGs and their members. This is also a view of the law enforcement authorities in the WB6<sup>111</sup>. For example, according to Montenegrin SOCTA 2021, there are no OCGs in the illegal firearm trade, but mostly individual cases in which weapons trafficking serves the members of OCGs themselves. UNDOC report also suggests that firearms trafficking is a supplemental activity to other OCGs criminal activities and that “anecdotal evidence shows linkages between arms and drug markets, theft and petty crime”.<sup>112</sup> Only Kosovo Police representatives have pointed out that they have increased their focus on the trafficking of weapons in 2022, as an increase in these activities has been observed recently.<sup>113</sup>

Most illegal weapons in the WB6 come as legacy from the Yugoslav civil wars when weapons were widely spread among the population. It has been noticed that firearms and military equipment are smuggled from BiH to Western European countries, where prices are much higher than in the countries of origin. Although the civil war ended 30 odd years ago, citizens still possess a high number of illegal weapons. Since Yugoslavia was a manufacturer of military industry, all the ex-Yugoslav republics have the same characteristics regarding firearms. The weapons found in France, Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark originate from BiH.<sup>114</sup> Firearms enter Albania through the region of Shkodra, via Montenegro. In the Serbian SOCTA (2019, 64) it is stated that part of the firearms is smuggled from Bosnia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, and another part from Kosovo. A recent common type of OCG activity in Kosovo is the smuggling of “Prop Guns” that are mostly produced in Turkey and reach Kosovo through Albania and North Macedonia mostly.<sup>115</sup> Several laboratories that convert such prop guns to real firearms have been discovered in recent years, which indicates the presence of a new form of trafficking and sale of weapons in the country.<sup>116</sup>

## Smuggling of goods and other financial and property crimes

There has been noticed that some large OCGs have been involved in the smuggling of goods, most often cigarettes. A great part of it is driven from Montenegro, where tobacco comes from the port of Bar, by abusing the part of the port with a free zone status (banned for storing cigarettes in 2021). Some of the smuggled cigarettes that come from Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Kosovo tend to go to the EU countries through the port of Bar. Trafficking of cigarettes is also common in Kosovo, where some of OCGs from Montenegro are mainly engaged, and consequently, they may not necessarily be considered a typical criminal group, but rather they may be seen as facilitators of the OCGs working in Montenegro.<sup>117</sup> In this regard, (Peja), a town located in the western part of Kosovo, is considered one of the hotspots of organized crime in the country due to its geographical proximity to Montenegro (for cigarettes, but also drugs and firearms).

Besides cigarettes, many products are smuggled from the North of Kosovo to the South of Kosovo (fuel, construction materials, cars, drinks, food, medicine).<sup>118</sup> In addition, organized groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina are also committing financial crimes through the illegal trade of textiles and other goods from the Republic of Turkey, Hungary and PR China.<sup>119</sup> Those groups have many legal entities with infrastructure and warehouses in Istanbul and Budapest, after which it gets smuggled into Bosnia. The goods are not reported, they are sold through the retails with minimal tax, while merchants sell them in the black market, by which tax evasion and money laundering are committed.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

The WB6 governments recognize organized crime as a major threat and focus their activities against it. However, it is not possible to identify and suppress every organized criminal group due to many factors. It is suggestible that a high level of corruption in societies is enabling organized criminal activities.

This research finds that OCGs in the WB6 operate on both, international and national levels. Larger OCGs, recognized by law enforcement authorities, media and the public are drivers and leaders on the international level. They tend to specialize in particular crime types, most often trade in illegal drugs, and spread their activities from South America to Europe. These groups were drivers of violence, resulting in many murders in the WB6 and throughout Europe in the fight for illegal markets. On the other hand, smaller OCGs which operate on national levels, tend to use less and less violence, mostly in self-disciplinary cases. They are not highly specialized in the activities and may switch from one activity to another.

The structure of OCGs is diversified, depending on the region and criminal activities. Males are highly prevalent among the members, in about 90% of the cases at all hierarchical levels. Females have less significant roles, primarily in logistical activities. The age of the members usually varies from 20 to 50 years old, making an average for the whole region at 35. Still, there are cases of members of 65 and more years old. Important traits found throughout the WB6 are family ties, shared past, and ethnic and cultural origin of the group members. However, this is not obstructing cooperation among groups from different backgrounds since OCGs are profit-driven.

## Recommendations

### **Publication of reports on organized crime:**

- **Further development of SOCTA methodology and publication of SOCTA** reports in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina;
- **Publication of new SOCTA** reports in Kosovo (latest 2014-2015), North Macedonia (latest 2015) and Serbia (latest 2019);
- **Publication of annual police working reports in each of the WB6;**
- **More complete publications of public prosecutors' cases on organized crime.**

These publications would inform the public on current organized crime issues and enable regional comparative data.

Furthermore, the information on organized crime and OCGs may serve more effective social and criminal policies against organized crime. These help identify and protect the most vulnerable groups at risk of becoming either victims of organized crime or getting involved in it.

## Change of focus

- **From offenders to victims:** SOCTA reports should include estimations of the groups most at risk to be involved in the OC, becoming members of OCGs or victims of OC, especially regarding gender, age, and background (education, ethnicity, geographies). This would change the focus from repressive activities, so far the only ones observed, to preventive strategies that would help keep youth and marginalized groups away from becoming either members or victims of OCGs;
- **Identifying main OCGs** in migrant smuggling, illegal trade in firearms and explosives and trafficking in humans, since these criminal offences have been reported but often not as organized crime;
- **Recognizing environmental crimes** and focusing investigations on OCGs that are committing some of the environmental crimes while performing main or additional/logistical criminal activities. This crime type was given an important part in Europol's 2021 SOCTA<sup>120</sup>;
- **Focusing investigations on corruption and money laundering.** This would lead to the main actors and leaders of OCGs, as well as to the facilitators of organized crime from the institutions.



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