

# *Implications ff Organized Crime in the National Security of the Western Balkans After the 1990. Case Study: Albania* \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Abstract**

*National and transnational organized crime today constitutes one of the most serious threats and challenges to the national security of Albania, of the countries in the region and beyond. The geographical position of the Balkan region, along with the region's own problematics, such as its criminality and weak government structures, have turned the region not only in a shortcut to the criminal activity originating from Asia and the Middle East that heads for Western Europe, but also in an attractive and lucrative path in terms of the low risk it poses to criminal groups. This paper aims at providing a conceptual framework for the phenomenon of organized crime, by focusing on the issues that I have identified and considered as of serious importance to the Albania and region's democratic values, political stability, social and economic development, as well as their security environment. In this context, I have argued that organized crime has political implications, largely due to its transnational nature, as it does not recognize state borders and thus ignores and challenges the state sovereignty. It also has economic implications, mainly associated with the criminal activity of money laundering, the informal economy it stimulates and the financial and economic destabilization it provokes. The study seeks to answer to the raised research questions through the analysis of the causes, factors, legal framework as well as of the strategies and measures taken by the respective countries and relevant*

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*institutions in the context of the fight against this phenomenon. On the other hand, in addition to the main theoretical approaches used to describe the phenomenon, the study analyses Albania's security and crime policies and strategies by comparing them with those of the regional countries in order to highlight the similarities and differences.*

**Key words:** *organized crime, transnational crime, illegal trafficking, money laundering, corruption.*

## **I. Introduction**

This paper aims to analyze the phenomenon of Organized Crime (OC) for a complete understanding of the causes and factors that promote its emergence, evolution and sophistication as well as the strategies and policies for the fight against this phenomenon, with the aim of reaching some conclusions regarding the implications, danger, threats and challenges it poses to Albania and other Western Balkan (WB) countries, as well as to their society, economy and democratic order.

The objectives of the study to achieve the intended goal are: Analysis of the implications that OC brings to the national security of the WB after the '90s; identification of the factors and causes that have influenced the emergence, evolution and consolidation of the OC in Albania after the '90s; identification of the features and characteristics of the OC in Albania after the '90s; and presentation of the national policies and strategies as well as the joint policies to get an understanding of this phenomenon in Albania and WB. In this framework, the research question that the study is: Which are the basic implications of the OC after the '90s in the security environment of WB in general and Albania in particular? And the hypothesis: The basic implications of the OC after the '90s in the security environment of WB and Albania are linked with the political instability, erosion of the sovereignty (democratic institutions) and weak economies, which are destabilizing factors for the state and society as a whole.

The methodology of this paper is based on the descriptive method to identify different concepts such as the OC phenomenon, as well as the analytical method where the main goal has been to get an understanding of the implications of this phenomenon in the national security of the countries of the region as well as Albania after the '90s.

## II. Literature review

*The Balkans*, otherwise known as the *Balkan Peninsula*, is a geographical area located in the southeast of the European continent. Many definitions and meanings are associated with it, including geopolitical and historical ones. For Wiberg, the Balkans was the border between the Habsburg and Turkish empires (Wiberg, 1994:8). Whereas the Cambridge dictionary defines the Balkans as a region that lies in southeastern Europe between the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea (Cambridge dictionary, 2019). In view of a more detailed description of the geographical position of the Balkan Peninsula, it can be affirmed that Balkan Peninsula term means the area bounded by the Adriatic Sea to the west, the Ionian Sea to the southwest, the Aegean Sea to the south and southeast, the Marmara Sea to the east and the Black Sea in the east and northeast.

As the natural western, southern and eastern border of the peninsula has been easily defined due to the maritime borders, the northern border has been difficult to be defined geographically in a universally accepted way due to the lack of a natural border. However, one supposed northern border is the Danube-Sava-Koper line and the other is the line connecting the northern ends of the Adriatic Sea (Koper, Slovenia) and the Black Sea (Odessa, Ukraine).

The Balkans has an area of about 550,000 km<sup>2</sup>, a population of about 55 million inhabitants with different identity, ethnic, cultural and political composition (Okey, 2007). This population lives in 12 countries to include Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and European part of Turkey.

The historian Robert de Vaugondy was the first to use the concept of the Balkans or Balkan Peninsula in 1775 in the “Grand Atlas” (Carter, 1977:7). For the first time in political literature, these concepts were used by the German geographer August Zeune in 1808 (Zöpel, 2018:2).

Various researchers argue that the most accepted definition of the concept of the Balkans originates from the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in 1914, which sparked the start of the First World War. However, at that time, the Balkans, rather than a geographical area, was referred to as an area where chaos, quarrels and primitive conflicts prevailed, along with the equally archaic ways of solving them. It was due to this opinion, that the invention of term ‘balkanization’ after the First World War was also encouraged, which according to the Bulgarian academic Maria Todorova “referred mainly to a process of nationalist fragmentation of the former geographical and political units into new, problematic and stable states” (Todorova, 1997:32). “Balkanization not



only had come to denote the parcelization of large and viable political units but also had become a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian” (Todorova, 1997:3).

As a conclusion, it can be affirmed that among researchers outside the region, the Balkans has been referred to a region close to Europe in the geographical sense but far and different from it in the sense of culture, mindset, development and civilization. On the other hand, there are efforts from the region’s countries and researchers to point out the indisputable European identity and perspective of the Balkans.

The term *geopolitics* comes from Greek roots (Γη - land and Πολιτική - politics) and in its general sense describes the interaction between politics on the one hand, and the territory of space - the geographical position of a country - on the other. Geopolitics is concerned with the analysis of geographic influences on the relationships and nature of interactions between states, their foreign policy strategies, and the global balance of power.

As a theoretical concept, geopolitics located between geography and political science is divided into *classical* and *critical geopolitics*. What is usually called “classical geopolitics” has to do with the role of geography in the international political relations and mainly focuses on the strategic goals of states. As such, classical geopolitics focuses on the state-centric and balance-of-power concept of world politics that dominated much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Dodds, 2000; Agnew, 2003). While “critical geopolitics” focuses on the analysis of geographic assumptions and definitions that play a role in the design of world politics (Agnew, 2003:2). For this reason, according to field researchers, critical geopolitics does not give a neutral consideration of “geographical facts” but is a deeply ideological and politicized form of analysis.

## *II.1. The concept of security and its evolution*

Security is the basic concept in Security Studies, and also stands at the heart of International Relations. The concept of security, like the concept of peace and identity, is a very complex and constantly evolving concept, therefore it has been and is impossible to give a clear and unique definition for it. Such a concept for centuries, almost until the end of the Cold War, was seen and understood in a narrow perspective - that of protection from a foreign or external aggression and was synonymous with military power.

A broader and contemporary understanding of the concept of security, which connects it with the protection of a society values, is coined by the researcher Arnold Wolfers, according to which: “Security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the

absence of fear that such values will be attacked” (Wolfers, 1962:150). Of the the same opinion are other later researchers of the field, among whom there is a consensus that security means freedom from threats to essential values (Baylis, 2001&Buzan, 1983).

Following this argumentation and meaning, it can be affirmed that nowadays the concept of national security has expanded compared to its classic concept. At present, such concept is not limited simply and only to the protection of the territory and the population from an external aggression, it also has the meaning of the need to manage and cope with direct or indirect risks and threats which can potentially threaten the security of a country.

## *II.2. Theoretical framework*

In terms of the theoretical approach, the issues related to the security of the state are better analyzed from the perspective of the realist approach, while the violation of values, rules and norms is better analyzed from the perspective of the constructivist approach. The reason for using these two theories of International Relations in this study is related to the expansion of the concept of security.

### *II.2.1. Realism*

Realism is the oldest theory of International Relations and has the state at its center. This theory is based on two assumptions: 1. states are the main actors in the political scene and they work in an anarchic system, which means in the absence of a government or high authority that is recognized and accepted at the global level; and 2. politics is governed by the ‘law of human nature’, which is characterized by the drive for power, the desire for dominance, and selfishness or the predominance of self-interest and ambition. According to this approach, the priorities of states are security and power, which do not leave much room for morality. In the realist perspective, war is inevitable and a constant element of our nature, while ideas, ideologies and morals are irrelevant.

In the case of the interpretation of the OC phenomenon from the perspective of realism, it can be affirmed that according to this approach each member of human society has the obligation to obey the basic values of the community. For this reason, according to it, the state has the obligation to intervene (including the use of violent means) in order to maintain its social order, and that the state institutions have the obligation to maintain the operation of the legal system in force, in order for the whole society to benefit from it. As a shortcoming of the realist view, is the ignoring of the fact that in every society there are ‘social problems’ and special means are needed to treat them.



### *1.1.2 Constructivism*

State security can find a broader explanation by using the lens of Constructivism, which presents a much more complex approach and affirms the importance of ideas, values, norms and human consciousness, and the impact they have on the interests of states and their safety.

According to the constructivist approach, political action is characterized by actors who try to identify relevant rules or norms in relation to a given situation. This logic of action is often called the “logic of appropriateness”, which according to researchers March and Olsen is a perspective that sees human action driven by rules of appropriate or exemplary behaviour, that are organized in institutions (March & Olsen, 2009). The biggest difference between realism and constructivism specifically lies in the approach to ideas - constructivism requires that the role of ideas in world politics be taken seriously, while realism completely ignores them. It is my assessment therefore that the aspect of the state’s struggle against the phenomenon of national and transnational OC can find a more comprehensive explanation through the constructivist approach, because it emphasizes social factors and the importance of the context. At its core, the constructivist approach aims to understand and explain the construction of social reality and social phenomena such as OC.

### *1.1.3. Definitions on organized crime*

Criminality has been part and concern of the human society for a long time as a very complex, diverse and heterogeneous phenomenon. Despite the efforts for a clear definition of the term “organized crime” have never stopped, different countries and authors have had different conceptions of this notion, depending on the nature, forms, causes, types and features of the criminality appearing in these countries as well as the analysis and methodology used for this purpose. Another reason is the constant changing nature of the crime itself, which aims to adapt to the political, social and economic changes of society as well as to national and international criminal policies. In this context, the influence of geographical space, the political and economic interests of the states themselves, as well as geographical, political, social-cultural and legal differences, which increase the degree of difficulty for coining a single and clear term “organized crime”, should not be neglected. At this regard, it can be affirmed that the notion of “organized crime” is an “ambiguous and unclear concept” (Paoli, 2002).

Based on the above explanations and arguments, it can be affirmed that there is no unique model or typology of OC, but there are several of such that are based on the culture, history, tradition and criminal circumstances of the country where it operates.

In his analysis of the OC, researcher von Lampe conceptualizes the OC based on three dimensions of its nature, namely: criminal activity, criminal organization and illegal governance (von Lampe, 2015:27). According to him, the first, has to do with the existence of a number of criminal activities that are organized, due to a certain level of sophistication, continuity and rationality or a certain level of damage that it causes. The second, has to do with the existence of a form of criminal organization unlike criminals who act individually or independently. While the third, has to do with the concentration of illegal power in the hands of criminal organizations, which on the one hand create an underworld government, with the aim of controlling, regulating and taxing criminal activities and on the other hand gain influence in legal society by replacing the legitimate government or building alliances with corrupt representatives of the political and economic elites in order to manipulate the constitutional order in their favour (Ibid.).

As to the Albanian researchers of the field, Zhilla and Lamallari, when they talk about the OC, they mean two elements in defining its notion: 1. its connections with the crime world and 2. its connections with public and private institutions. According to this viewpoint, they divide the Albanian OC into two profiles: 1) OC with a low criminal profile - which includes the CGs that deal only with genuine criminal activities and 2) OC with a high profile - which include the CGs that have succeeded in creating connections not only with other CGs, but also with the political and economic elite of the country (Zhilla&Lamallari, 2015:17).

### **III. Security environment in Western Balkans and Albania after the '90s**

#### *III.1. Security environment in Western Balkans after the '90s*

'The geographical position of the Balkan Peninsula at the crossroads between East and West, specifically between Europe and Asia, as well as Europe and the Mediterranean, has had a great impact either on the stability or instability of the region. Meanwhile, the democratic transition process that followed the fall of communism turned into a challenge for the states of the region. But this phase also coincided with the disintegration of the ex-Yugoslavia and the creation of five new states, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and the Union of Serbia & Montenegro, which were later joined by Kosovo. This disintegration process was associated with the revival of nationalist and ethnic sentiments and divisions due to populations of heterogeneous nationalities, ethnicities and religious beliefs, which led to violence and bloody civil and military conflicts during 1992-1995. A few years after the end of the war between the Serbs, Croats and Bosnians, during

the years 1997-1999, the conflict broke out in Kosovo and in 2001 in Macedonia, a situation which was exploited by the CGs to increase their illegal activities.

In addition to military conflicts, crises and political instability after the fall of communism, in economic terms, the countries of the region were in a transitional phase from a centralized economy to a free market one. Privatizations and dubious investments in the economy led to the strengthening of ties between crime and part of the political and economic elite. Researchers Buzan and Wæver have identified the weakness of state structures, as well as OC and corruption as one of the fundamental security problems of the region. According to them, “the weakness of the state structures in the Balkans region underpins a number of the security problems such as OC and corruption, which increasingly become the main obstacle to economic development and the implementation of democratic values as military conflict diminishes” (Buzan&Wæver, 2003:384).

### *III.2. Security environment in Albania after the '90s*

Since the end of 1944 until 1990, Albania was part of the socialist camp and throughout this period it experienced severe isolation from the rest of the world, including its neighbouring countries. The fall of isolation and the opening up of Albania to the West was associated with crimes that were previously unknown to the society but also to the state officials themselves, such as trafficking in clandestine migrants and trafficking in women for prostitution and later also the trafficking in narcotics.

As a conclusion, it can be affirmed that, the communist order and the severe isolation of Albania throughout its period, the long transition, the turmoil of 1997, the lack of state authority, economic problems, unemployment and poverty, corruption and non-enforcement of the law as well as the continuous emigration not only left traces but also shaped Albania's security environment after the '90s and influenced the emerging, strengthening and sophistication of the Albanian OC inside and outside the country as well as its connection with politics and its penetration in economics.

## **IV. Organized crime in Western Balkans after the '90s.**

### *IV.1. The implications of organized crime in the national security of the countries of the Western Balkans*

It can be affirmed that the most important *political implications* of the OC in WB, have to do with sovereignty, i.e., the lack of recognition of state borders, which



serve as a dividing line between territories, political, social and legal systems, but also different economies and cultures. Because of its transnational nature, the OC challenges and disrespects the sovereignty and authority of the state, its political order and legal framework. By avoiding territorial control, which is one of the most important features of the state, it erodes the national sovereignty of the state. In addition to the challenge to the state, the OC aims to corrupt politics - the executive and legislative power - the judiciary and the media, with the aim of obtaining political, legal and media protection.

While the *economic implications* of the OC in WB countries are related to the stimulation of instability and economic and financial crises, distortions in the market as well as structural problems in the economy, which have a negative effect on citizens and on the stability of the country's economic and political system.

There are also implications of the OC in the *social-cultural* aspect of the WB countries through the intervention and infringement of the decent values, norms and attitudes of the citizens towards the good and legal on the one hand and the bad and illegal on the other, influencing and provoking in this way the public opinion with negative impacts on the functioning of the democratic system.

It can be affirmed that the implications of OC in the national security of WB countries have been reflected in political instability, widespread corruption and erosion of the legal economy. The membership in regional and international security organizations, bilateral and/or multilateral cooperation between and among the countries of the region themselves as well as their cooperation with the EU and the USA for the enhancement of their law enforcement capabilities and capacities as well as for building up the rule of law institutions, along with the economic progress and good governance in the Balkans, are seen as a way out for the eradication of the environment that nurtures the transnational OC operating in the region.

#### *IV.2. The factors/causes that have influenced the emergence, development and consolidation of organized crime in the Western Balkans*

The changes of political systems in the region, the disintegration and bloody conflicts with an ethnic background in the ex-Yugoslavia, specifically in Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia, the 1997 turmoil in Albania, the transition from a totalitarian system to a fragile democratic system with weak institutions, the legal vacuum during the transition period, the corrupt public administration, the rapid social and economic changes associated with political uncertainty, the fraudulent and dubious privatizations of the public economy, the favorable

geographical position between the East with opiate-producing and supplying countries, such as Afghanistan and Turkey, and the large and profitable markets for their sale in Western and Central Europe, the international feature of OC and the effects of globalization and the weak economy, are the main reasons that gave impetus to the development and consolidation of OC in the WB region.

UNODC arguments that the OC situation in the Balkans is rooted in the instability generated by the simultaneous impacts of political transition and conflict. War profiteering and unregulated privatisation led to the rapid rise of criminals with high-level political and commercial linkages (UNODC, 2008:12). Meanwhile, the Network of the Global Initiative against Transnational KO identifies and summarizes as factors of the vulnerability of OC in the Balkan region, the geographical position, the legacy of conflict, the criminalization of war, weak border control, authoritarian leadership, corruption, ethnic diversity, and disillusion among the population, especially among young people (Global Initiative, 2017: 2-5).

## **V. Characteristics of the organized crime in the Western Balkans**

The Balkan criminal groups and networks operating in the region and beyond are believed to be often organized on basis of ethnicity and nationality. However, ethnicity and nationality are no longer the basic criteria for the creation and operation of CGs in the region. They are not necessarily the main factors that determine the strings that keep the members of a criminal organization bound together in cooperation. With the internationalization of the OC phenomenon, nationality and ethnicity, as traditional restrictions for participation in criminal organizations, are losing their importance as the basic criteria for membership in criminal organizations of today's times. It can be affirmed that in today's criminal organizations, criteria of ethnicity and nationality have been set aside, and profit maximization has come to the fore. This means that criminal cooperation often involves actors of different nationalities, ethnicities and backgrounds who come together for one purpose: to make money.

It can be affirmed that among the characteristics of WB OGCs from operating in the region and outside it are the hierarchical structure, loyalty, cooperation with other criminal groups from the region and outside it, diversity of criminal activity, violence and aggressiveness, exploitation of the fragile economical, political and security situation in the region, corruption of officials, etc.

## V.1. Main types of illegal activities of the organized crime in Western Balkans

Some of the main criminal activities in which the OCGs in WB are involved in are the production, sale and trafficking in narcotics, trafficking in weapons and human beings, smuggling in migrants, money laundering, etc.

The *narcotics trafficking* is the main and most profitable activity of the regional CGs. In this context, it is worth noting that one of the main routes for the trafficking of opiates, mainly heroin, from Afghanistan to Europe is the so-called “Balkan route”. The UNODC report published on 26.11.2015 defines the “Balkan route” as their main conduit for the Afghan opiates to Europe, through the Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey, the countries of South-Eastern Europe, which are mainly transit countries, and the countries of Central and Western Europe, which are the destination countries (UNODC, 2015:19-20). This report lists 32 countries and territories that transport and supply heroin via the Balkan route (Ibid.). The fact of the importance of the Balkan route in opiate trafficking is also evidenced by the Europol “SOCTA 2017” report, which underlines that “the Balkan route remains the main entry route for heroin trafficking in the EU” (Europol, 2017:38). Regarding the cocaine trafficking along the Balkan route to the markets of Western and Central Europe, the amount is much lower compared to heroin. Another type of drug that is trafficked from the region is cannabis (*cannabis sativa*), which is grown in the region, mainly in Albania, and partially in Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia.

Part of the portfolio of the criminal activities of the region CGs is the *firearms trafficking*, which mainly come from the stockpiles of weapons created in these countries after the end of the Cold War, from conflicts in the ex-Yugoslavia or from lootings of military warehouses, like in happened Albania in ‘97. This type of criminal activity is mainly a supplementary but not primary source of income for the CGs. According to Europol, the OCGs involved in firearms trafficking in the EU and the firearms smuggled mainly come from WB and the former Soviet Union (Europol 2013:31).

Another remit of criminal activity of OCGs in WB is the *migrant smuggling*, an activity that marked a sharp increase during the refugee crisis in 2014-2015. The activity of the CGs in the Balkan region “contributes to the illegal activity of human trafficking in the EU that has flourished together with the migration crisis towards the continent. Such business, according to to a report from Interpol, generated 5 to 6 billion euros in revenue last year [2015]” (Financial Times, 2016).

*Money laundering* is another important activity of the region’s CGs, which also marks the final stage of a criminal activity. The existence of the informal economy based mainly on the circulation of physical money (cash), along with the high level

of corruption, weak law enforcement as well as the corrupt judiciary are some of the motivating factors for individuals and CGs in the Balkan region to invest the proceeds of crime in a legal economy. According to the Europol report, “money laundering also takes place in this region through investments in real estate and commercial companies” (Europol, 2013:12).

## **VI. The organized crime in Albania after the '90s**

### *VI.1. Implications of the organized crime in Albania's national security*

Being part of WB, the implications of OC in our country are very similar to those in other countries of the region. Considering that OC aims to be involved in the political, economic and social-cultural environments of the country, it also has its implications in the political, economic and social-cultural fields in Albania. Regarding its political implications, it can be asserted that the OC in Albania is involved in illegal national and transnational activities, and consequently it does not recognize the authority (violates the laws) and sovereignty (borders) of the state [Albania] and tries to challenge or use the state for its own mere illegal interests. Furthermore, the OC in Albania aims to penetrate the political power, both the executive and legislative, with the aim of facilitating the fulfillment of its objectives that are related to financial gain, the expansion of criminal activity and the avoidance of legal punishment.

But the Albanian OC does not only aim at politics, but also aim at capturing the country's judiciary, prosecution and security institutions, by using corruption and threats as means to achieve this goal. The process of re-evaluation of judges and prosecutors alone, or otherwise known as the “vetting process”, has revealed the high degree of corruption that exists among the representatives of justice, their ties to crime and the favours made to crime in return for the latter's bribes or protection. Most of the dismissals of judges and prosecutors were made for unjustified wealth, but there is also a part of them dismissed for suspicious ties and contacts to crime.

As far as the implications of OC in the Albanian economy are concerned, they are related to the criminal activities that are directed against the national economic system and its normal and legal functioning. In parallel with their illegal activity, the Albanian CGs aim to be involved in the legal economy with the aim of not only laundering the profits generated by their illegal activities and injecting those profits into the legal economy, but also increasing their income.

With regard to the social-cultural aspects in Albania, such implications are reflected in the connection between cultural, social environment and crime, their impact on criminal behavior but also the impact and serious consequences that

crime has in the society and the way society reacts to the crime. When talking about these implications, it means the influence and distortion of the decent values, norms and attitudes of the citizens towards the good and legal on the one hand and the bad and illegal on the other.

In case of an assessment of the risks and threats that Albania faces, OC and corruption can be identified as serious risks and threats to its security. It can be affirmed that a major and strategic objective of Albania should be the membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures, i.e. an objective that is partially met at present with NATO membership but still remains unaccomplished in terms of EU membership.

### *VI.2. The factors/causes that have influenced the emergence, development and consolidation of organized crime in Albania*

Like the implications of OC, the factors that promote OC are mainly of a political, social and economic nature. These factors and various circumstances, either alone or combined with each other, have served as incentives for the emergence of early forms of organized criminal activities, as well as later in the evolution and sophistication of criminal organizations. The two field researchers, Zhilla and Lamallari, single out a number of factors that have influenced the emergence, development and consolidation of the OC in Albania, such as: the transition from a totalitarian regime with stringent criminal policy to a fragile democratic system with weak institutions; the chaotic situation caused in 1997 by the collapse of pyramid firms and the looting of weapons from the army and police depots; endemic corruption in law enforcement agencies; favourable geographical position with drug-producing and supplier countries such as Afghanistan and Turkey in the East, and high-consumption countries in the West; the international nature of OC and the impact of globalization; weak economy; the dismantling of social structures, adversely affecting the family as the society's nucleus; the high rate of migration and the import of criminal experiences and connections obtained abroad, etc. (Zhilla&Lamallari, 2015:7).

### *VI.3. The characteristics of the organized crime in Albania*

The change of the political system, from the communist and isolated to the democratic one with the market economy, was associated with the emergence of a number of problematics and phenomena that had not been encountered before. The economic collapse, the high level of unemployment and poverty, as well as the quick thirst for enrichment, even illegally, led to an increase in the intensity of criminal activity and the creation of OCGs. During 1990-1997, hierarchical

criminal structures appeared in Albania in the form of armed gangs, criminal organizations and structured criminal groups (Zhill&Lamallari, 2015). Their main activities were related to human trafficking, trafficking in women for prostitution, kidnapping and extortion. Armed gangs were strengthened and spread almost throughout the country during the crisis of 1997, where murders, thefts, robberies and extortions flourished, comprised the main part of their criminal activity. According to a report of the European Committee on Criminal Problems, during 1999, some 25 to 100 criminal groups were active in Albania with a total of 500 to 2,500 members (CDPC, 2000).

It was the time when the Albanian CGs gained a bad reputation for the danger they posed not only inside the Albanian territory but also abroad. According to the researcher of the field Arsovska, "By 1999, as a result of the activities of some Albanian criminal groups and the great deal of international attention these groups received, Albanian criminals were considered to be a dangerous breed, posing a significant threat to Western society (Arsovska, 2015:78). In these years, not only we talk about the strengthening and consolidation of the Albanian OC, but the term "Albanian mafia" began to be used, especially for the Albanian crime operating in Italy, but not alone. Some researchers started considering the "Albanian mafia" as the most powerful among other mafias of foreign origin operating in Italy (Jamieson&Silj, 1998).

According to the researchers Zhill and Lamallari, by 2005 and onwards, the criminal network appears as the most widespread and suitable form to undertake various criminal activities. This includes the trafficking in various types of drugs, weapons and ammunition, migrant smuggling and organized cybercrime (Zhill&Lamallari, 2015). The same researchers argue that Albanian CGs are mostly involved in the narcotics trafficking, mainly of cannabis, but also hard drugs such as heroin and cocaine, towards neighboring countries, with EU countries as final destination. Regarding the most concerning activities of this time within Albania, the same researchers single out fines against businesses, use of explosives, murders committed by contracted killers or by "unidentified perpetrators", with the aim of eliminating the rivals for "rebalancing the market", or for terror purposes (Ibid.).

Furthermore, it can be affirmed that today's Albanian CGs try to adapt themselves to the new reality, and adopt their activities in accordance with the new market requirements, tending more and more towards a entrepreneurial model. This finding is also supported by the researcher Arsovska, according to whom "in various parts of Western Europe, the traditional homogeneous, hierarchical, violent, and impenetrable Albanian CGs seem to be giving way to a more conventional business model" (Arsovska, 2015:101).

#### VI.4. Types of illegal activities of the Albanian organized crime

The illegal activities undertaken by the Albanian CGs are very similar to those of other CGs in the region, with the cultivation of narcotic plants, the production, narcotics sale and trafficking, trafficking in weapons and human beings, organized burglaries, money laundering, smuggling of Albanian citizens and migrants, etc, as their leading activities.

The main activity of the Albanian OCG is the *cultivation of narcotic plants* and *narcotics sale and trafficking*. Cultivation of narcotic plants, mainly cannabis (*cannabis sativa*), dates back to the change of political order, the fall of isolation and the opening of Albania to the world, which were associated with new and unknown criminal phenomena, including the cultivation of narcotic plants. This type of criminal activity gained alarming proportions, especially by 1997 and onwards. The tolerance to the open cultivation of cannabis in the village of Lazarat, Gjirokastra district, led to favourable conditions for the CGs, who, for more than a decade, managed to consolidate finances, networks, markets and political connections. According to the Italian finance police, the Guardia-di-Finanza, the annual income from cannabis grown in Lazarat alone was about 6 billion USD, or about half of Albania's overall GDP (Likmeta, 2013).

Another activity of the Albanian CGs is the trafficking in narcotics, specifically cannabis, heroin and cocaine. Located in the Balkan region, Albania is naturally part of the "Balkan route" of heroin trafficking from Asia and the Middle East towards Western Europe. As a result, the Albanian CGs are involved in this profitable activity where "in cooperation with the Turkish CGs, they transport the heroin to Albania through Macedonia, continue to Italy by sea and by land to Greece, as well as in the Northern Balkans. The final destination of heroin shipments remains Western, Central Europe and the Nordic countries" (Zhill&Lamallari, 2015:32-33).

The cocaine trafficking is also one of the most profitable activities of Albanian CGs, who use the territory of our country to transit loads of cocaine (UNODC, 2013:44). The analysis carried out by the police of several EU countries, shows that starting from 2010, the Albanian and/or Albanian-speaking OC, in addition to controlling the distribution of hard drugs, was increasingly involved in the international shipments of cocaine from Latin America to Western European countries.

Among the criminal activities that originated with the opening of Albania to the West is also the *trafficking in human beings*, mainly of women for sexual exploitation and minors for forced labor (begging, etc.) to Italy, Greece and other European countries. Trafficking and exploitation of women for prostitution was

one of the main activities of the Albanian CGs in the 90s, not only because of the significant income this activity generated, but also “because it did not require large investments or capital” (Arsovska , 2015:94).

*Trafficking in firearms and ammunition* is another activity of the Albanian CGs parallel to trafficking in narcotics, human beings and the smuggling of migrants and various goods (Zhillla and Lamallari, 2015:64). Such activity flourished especially during 1997, when the collapse of pyramid schemes was associated with the collapse of the state itself, with the CGs taking control of the country's territory. During this period, police stations and military depots were attacked and looted, among others. According to a UNDP report, more than 550,000 small arms and light weapons, 839 million rounds of ammunition and 16 million explosive devices were stolen from military depots (Khakee&Florquin, 2003). A part of the stolen weaponry and ammunition was smuggled to neighboring countries by the CGs not only in 1997 alone but also during the following years. According to researchers Zhillla and Lamallari, nowadays this kind of trafficking exists in the form of the import from Montenegro and Kosovo of different types of handguns (Zhillla&Lamallari, 2015:69).

*The organized burglaries* of private homes in EU countries by CGs comprised of Albanian citizens is a crime that has existed for a long time, but in recent years it has become a real concern, especially with regard to the negative impact, panic and uncertainty it causes to the local communities in these countries. This criminal activity is carried out by more than one individual, often in by an OCG, and deal with the theft of properties, even with use of violence/weapons, smuggling and recycling of stolen items, and their conversion into financial assets. As a result, in order to intensify the cooperation with the counterpart police organizations of the affected countries, as well as with the aim of combating this criminal activity, the Task Force Anti-Skifter was established in October 2017 at the Albanian State Police.

Part of the range of criminal activities of the Albanian CGs is definitely *the money laundering*, which marks the end of the cycle of a criminal activity that has to do with the recycling of proceeds of crime with the purpose of injecting them in the legal economy. Such money is circulated and reinvested especially in the construction and real estate sector, but also in new businesses or the purchase of existing businesses. This kind of criminal activity finds a fertile ground in Albania as “the large size of the informal economy, combined with the still widespread use of cash, constitutes a significant money laundering vulnerability” (Moneyval, 2018:6).

Another activity of the Albanian CGs, that has taken place over the years, is the *smuggling of Albanian citizens and foreign migrants*. This activity saw a significant growth during the 1990-2000 decade, which coincided with the fall of isolation and



the opening of Albania to the West, as well as the crisis of 1997. But such activity marked a drastic decline after 2010, due to the lifting of the visa regime with the EU. But by 2015 and onwards, an increase in the cases of migrant smuggling from Asia, the Middle East and North Africa towards the countries of Western Europe is seen. To prevent and combat such a phenomenon, Frontex teams (around 50 officers) have been deployed in Albania, and cooperate with the Albanian Border and Migration Police (Frontex, 2019).

## **VII. National policies and strategies on the fight against the organized crime in Western Balkans and Albania**

### *VII.1. Policies and strategies of the Western Balkan countries on the fight against the organized crime*

About three decades after the end of the Cold War, the fall of the communist system and more than 20 years after the end of the Kosovo war, which was the last in the ordeal of wars in the ex-Yugoslavia that led to its dissolution, the assessment is that the security in the region is more consolidated in the sense of the absence of the possibility of a major immediate threat from a widespread and armed conflict (Anastasijevic, 2006). Although the security vacuum caused by the dissolution of the ex-Yugoslavia has been filled, the reminiscence of previous conflicts foster distrust in the relations and cooperation between some of the states in the region, especially between Serbia and Croatia as well as Serbia and Kosovo.

The literature review shows that all WB countries have adopted national security strategies or defense strategies as well as sectoral strategies in terms of the fight against risks and threats to their national security, including OC. All these strategic documents of the WB countries have identified OC as a serious threat to their national security, public safety, democratic institutions, financial and economic stability. Some of these countries have NSSs in force, approved since the last decade, while some others have more updated ones approved this decade.

### *VII.2. Policies and strategies of Albania on the fight against the organized crime*

Like the other WB countries, Albania has adopted national security strategies as well as sectoral strategies in terms of the fight against risks and threats to its national security, including OC. In both of these strategic documents, OC is identified as a serious threat to the country's national security, public safety, democratic institutions, financial and economic stability. More specifically, the updated NSS,

as the “fundamental planning document for the national security of the Republic of Albania”, was approved in 2014. This document points out the interconnected and interdependent nature of national security risks and threats, highlighting that “security of Republic of Albania is affected by a combination of traditional and non-traditional risks, originating from internal and external factors” (Albania’s NSS, 2014:3). In the non-traditional internal risks, the document includes OC, corruption, terrorism and WMD risks to the economic, political order and good governance, while in the external ones it includes the risks caused as a result of the activities of international criminal organizations, terrorist groups, the strengthening of non-state actors, as well as global climate and demographic changes.

The Albania’s NSS makes an assessment of the external (global and regional) and internal security environment. In the global security environment, it notes the largely asymmetric and hybrid nature of future risks, and identifies state, non-state actors or failed states as their generators.

Assessing the internal security environment, among other risks, corruption and OC, expressed in the forms of drug, firearm, ammunition and human trafficking, are identified by the NSS as serious national security risks (Ibid.: 20).

In today’s globalisation period where the borders have ‘melted’, in order for Albania to be successful in the fight against national and transnational OC, the strategies and efforts for their implementation must be coordinated with those of neighboring countries, regional or international security organizations. This is because the success of a single country relatively depends on the success of others, given that regional and international cooperation is the only effective means of fighting transnational OC.

## VIII. Conclusions

As pointed out in the paper, national and transnational OC today constitutes one of the most serious risks and challenges to the national security of Albania and WB countries. This is primarily due to the geographical position of the region, which is located in the transiting corridor of the narcotics, migrant trafficking and smuggling, refugees and victims of trafficking, mainly originating from Asia and the Middle East heading for the Western Europe, as well as the proximity to risks stemming from the destabilizing situation in the Middle East and North Africa. Secondly, due to the problems of the region itself, which are reflected in the existence of criminal groups in the region and the cooperation between them, as well as the existence of weak governing structures, corruption of state officials and porous borders.

With regard to the overall current security situation in WB, it can be asserted that it has improved in terms of the low probability of an armed conflict in the region. This paradigm is reinforced by the deployment of NATO peacekeeping forces in the region, such as SFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina and KFOR in Kosovo, as well as the UN forces, such as UNMIK in Kosovo, but also by the membership of most of the region's states in the international and regional security organizations and institutions such as NATO, Adriatic Charter 5, SEDM, SEPCA, SELEC, but also the political ones such as the Berlin Process, the Regional Cooperation Council, etc. A little wider in the region, we have Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Romania, and Slovenia, as member of EU countries, which together with Albania and Montenegro are also members of NATO. In addition, we have Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania as aspiring countries that are at different stages in the EU accession and membership process.

Following this reasoning, it can be asserted that Albania is not threatened by any conventional threat, such as armed aggression, but the main threats to its security are the non-conventional ones, specifically OC, corruption and terrorism.

Based on the review and analysis made in this paper, it can be concluded that the implications of OC in the national security of Albania and other WB countries are reflected in political instability, widespread corruption and the erosion of the legal economy. To remedy the problems caused by OC, suggestions and recommendations include the reformation of the political and judicial systems, the strengthening of the rule of law, the drafting and courageous implementation of concrete and cross-sectoral strategies on the fight against OC and corruption, money laundering, informal economy, illegal trafficking, smuggling and other criminal activities in the economic remit, the drafting of serious and friendly policies for the attraction of serious foreign and domestic investments in the economy, membership in regional and international security initiatives and organizations, strengthening and intensification of cooperation bilateral and/or multilateral political, economic and security with the regional countries as well as with the EU and the USA for better training, better equipment and enhancement of capabilities and capacities of their law enforcement agencies as well as to help build the institutions of the rule of law, economic progress and good governance in Albania and WB.

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