

Social norms, gender, and serious and organised crime in Albania and Kosovo

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Question

What evidence is there about social norms, gender, and serious and organised crime in Albania and Kosovo?

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1. Overview

This rapid literature review explores the evidence about social norms, gender, and serious and organised crime (SOC) in Albania and Kosovo. There is limited literature that explores this exact question, as historically, gender has rarely been associated with organised crime (Amerhauser, 2020), therefore beyond a few focussed texts, this query also brings together findings from related literatures on: gender and organised crime (more generally); gender norms in Albania and Kosovo; and organised crime in Albania, Kosovo, and in the broader region of the Western Balkans. This paper is not comprehensive of all of the issues related to this question, but is illustrative of the most commonly discussed issues.

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Key points

Gender and SOC

Taking a gender perspective to understand organised crime includes examining: the gendered drivers of organised crime; the roles of women, men and sexual and gender minorities in organised crime and in activities to tackle organised crime; the gendered impacts of organised crime; and entry points for addressing the gendered drivers, roles and impacts of organised crime.

Gendered inequality and norms of toxic masculinity and the marginalisation of women are increasingly mentioned as general drivers of organised crime. Some impacts on SOC include: making women/girls are more vulnerable to human trafficking; making male victims of human trafficking invisible; and influencing refugee/migration patterns through the Western Balkans. Organised crime is seen to have offered men a new way to assert their masculinity in the Western Balkans' post-conflict context with limited economic development and jobs.

Patriarchal norms, roles and behaviour are prevalent in the Western Balkans' region, with a strong gendered division of labour, and poor gender equality outcomes. Traditional customary norms in Albania (the *Kanun*) are particularly inegalitarian. While much progress has been made in securing legal rights for women and girls, these are poorly enforced. Organised crime provides men with the opportunities to earn money, gain status, feel empowered, and provide for their families. The lifestyle is glamorised through films, music, and social media, while rapid globalisation and social change have led to traditional values losing importance.

Roles of women, men, and sexual and gender minorities in organised crime

As perpetrators - Organised crime members in the Western Balkans are almost exclusively male, with women perhaps constituting between 4% to 7% of members (based on limited data of criminal prosecutions). Of the women convicted of being members of an organised crime group in the Western Balkans, most were engaged in: drug production and trafficking (72% of women convicted); firearms trafficking (16%); trafficking in persons (8%); and migrant smuggling (4%). Women are generally understood to be more accomplices and not the main perpetrators, although there are examples of women in more active and senior positions.

Cultural norms shape the extent to which women and men engage in organised crime underlining the importance of understanding culture and history - for example, there is evidence that Slavic women have held more active and central positions in organised crime networks than Albanian women. The role and perception of women in organised crime may be changing along with improvements in women's empowerment in the region, with some evidence that women may be taking on more active and even leading roles in SOC.

As victims, participants, and perpetrators - Human trafficking involves mostly women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation, and also for forced labour, and begging. Women and children are commonly recruited through personal relationships (sometimes romantic partners who force them into illegal work) and through recruitment for sex work. Gender roles and inequality make women more prone to exploitation, as do economic scarcity, health problems, family difficulties, age, and ethnicity. Male victims of trafficking are likely to come from poverty

and violent homes, with additional risk factors including being gay, bisexual, trans or intersex; age; education level; homeless or resident in a children's home; having a disability; and potentially also "blood feuds". These characteristics highlight the need for an intersectional gender-sensitive approach to human trafficking.

Women who are trafficked often occupy more than one role within the trafficking nexus, e.g. also participating in recruiting girls/women, and in sping on other women. Social stigma and discrimination affect trafficked people and their support workers' relationships with family and the community, and their access to accommodation and health services.

As agents supporting resilience to SOC - Women also play key roles in CSOs in the Western Balkans that address vulnerabilities associated with organised crime e.g. drugs use and distribution, youth development, post-prison reintegration, etc. While the space for CSOs is small, complex, and shrinking, the literature is hopeful of the roles that women could play in supporting the resilience of actors to organised crime (a growing area of interest for policy and practitioner actors).

Social norms around organised crime

Clan, family, and ethnic bonds – Albania's principal sources of social capital and organisation are familial, regional, and clan loyalties, with the Albanian Mafia (*Shqiptare*) originating from clan-organised crime groups. These criminal groups are now increasingly internationally networked and no longer rely solely on family ties. Kosovo's principle source of social capital and organisation is the family, and village and ethnic social organisations. Both populations have more distant relations with the state, with specific historic/cultural characteristics. Organised crime groups are accused of manipulating ethnic identities to consolidate their power over state institutions.

Customary norms and use of violence - Criminal groups in Albania also distort customary norms to their benefit – e.g. the ancient cultural practice of the "blood feud". Criminal groups sometimes disguise criminal violence as a form of blood feud, and blackmail judges who are fearful of being targeted through a blood feud.

Culture of corruption and impunity - The Western Balkans' weak governance and clientelist political settlement are key factors shaping a culture of corruption and impunity. SOC is considered one of Albania's main security and governance challenges that has got worse over the past decade. Conviction levels in Albania are extremely low.

Lack of trust in the state - People in Albania are reticent to report organised crime activities to the authorities due to a lack of trust in institutions and for fear of repercussions.

Literature base

Despite the pervasiveness of organised crime in Albania, Kosovo, and the Western Balkans, and its impacts globally, "research on the topic is scarce. Information is often anecdotal, and data is limited and frequently unreliable" (Global Initiative, 2020b, p.2). Relatively little is known about women's involvement, including what roles they play (Fraser, et al., 2019), and even less is available about sexual and gender minorities (The Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, 2022, forthcoming). The role of gender in organised crime is increasingly

mentioned in the literature, yet it is rarely researched in-depth (UNODC, 2020, p.57). There is some data that disaggregates convictions by sex, which allows some insights into the types of organised crime that women engage in most, and the most commonly explored aspect is human trafficking, especially due to the high proportion of women and girls who are victims (UNODC, 2020; Fraser, Ahlenback & Clugston, 2019). Most of the literature, however, does not explore gender in depth, and where it is mentioned focuses on men as the primary agents of criminal behaviour, and women as victims, with much less analysis of the role of women beyond their roles as auxiliary to men Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, 2022, forthcoming; Selmini, 2020). Similarly, there is limited literature that solely focuses on the relationship between social norms and organised crime, however a lot of literature does include references to cultural aspects such as the role of clan identity, cultures of corruption and impunity, and distrust in the state. By its nature, organised crime is highly secretive, and involving violent and financially powerful people, thus it is difficult and dangerous to research (Zhillia & Lamallari, 2015).

2. Gender and SOC

Taking a gender perspective

The Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (2022, forthcoming, p.6) explains that “taking a ‘gender perspective’ when examining organised crime includes looking at the following aspects:

- “Gendered drivers of organised crime, including women’s marginalisation and norms around masculinity, as well as vulnerabilities of women, men and sexual and gender minorities;
- Role of women, men and sexual and gender minorities, including pathways into organised crime;
- Gendered impact of organised crime, including on victims of organised crime;
- Women, men and sexual and gender minorities’ involvement in civil society, government and media agencies working to tackle organised crime, including the gendered risks they face in their work; and
- Entry points for addressing the gendered drivers, roles and impacts of organised crime, including awareness-raising campaigns, promoting legislative reform and women’s roles in CSOs”.

Gender inequality and gender norms

Gendered norms of toxic masculinity and the marginalisation of women are increasingly mentioned in the literature in regards to the general drivers of organised crime. As the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (2022, forthcoming, p.5) explains, “gender is a key determinant of criminality, sometimes put even above a person’s socioeconomic, educational or employment status. Gender also plays a key role in determining

the victims of organised crime... [and] also plays a key role in strengthening community resilience to organised crime”.

Gender inequality and norms impact on SOC in varied ways. As an example, a literature review examining vulnerability to human trafficking in four countries found that unequal gender roles and relationships have made women more vulnerable to exploitation and violence in Albania (Brodie, et al., 2018, p.24-25). It particularly highlights risk factors including: family authority over women’s marriage prospects thus reducing women’s choices and trapping them in prostitution; women lacking access to education and employment that would enable them to avoid exploitation; and families frequently being involved in recruiting young women for trafficking (Brodie, et al., 2018, p.24-25). Meanwhile, norms around masculinity in Albania make it hard for boys/men, and for society, to recognise when boys/men have been victims of human trafficking as it is not “acknowledged and spoken about, whether that be publicly or internally within family or friendship networks” (IAGCI, 2021, p.90).

Gender norms, family roles, and safety are believed to influence refugee/migration patterns – e.g. in determining whether woman move on their own or as part of a household through the Western Balkans, whether they move at night time, and whether they are left along the way at refugee camps while their male counterparts continue journeying further (Amerhauser, 2021). Women’s potential to migrate is shaped by their access to resources, education and political participation (Amerhauser, 2021). Amerhauser (2021) highlights that in 2021 only 3.2% of all migrants in the Western Balkans were reported to be female, this was down from 17-18% in 2015.

The Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (2022, forthcoming, p.7-8)¹ explains that “organised crime has offered men a new avenue to assert their masculinity” in the Western Balkans’ post-conflict context where there is limited formal work opportunities and slow economic development. Indeed, Krasniqi, Sokolić and Kostovicova (2020) highlights the challenges of building a gender-just peace in Kosovo after the civil war, in a context where the dominant Albanian national discourse gives primacy to men, male values, and masculine norms. Despite Albanian women’s activities in the processes of nation building, the prevailing symbolic role of women is seen as the revered mother/nurturer of the nation, and as family members, at the expense of a larger role in society and politics (Krasniqi et. al., 2020). In Kosovo, while there have been increasing discussions around gender equality and democratisation, more generally, since 1999, these are overshadowed by the legacy of the Serbian–Albanian conflict, the rise of new nationalist discourses, and the dispute over state status following the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Haug, 2015, p.147). As Haug (2015, p.147) explains, “the development of new-rights based legislation was not even remotely on the agenda”.

A rapid gender analysis of six Balkans countries in 2021 found that “patriarchal norms, roles and behaviour are still prevalent in the region, as is a strong division of 'male and female work/tasks” (Batkovic, 2021, p.2) e.g. in Albania there is strong support for the “the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the homemaker” model (Dauti & Zhllima, 2016, p.41). The

¹ Their analysis draws on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, an online questionnaire, and secondary literature in the Western Balkans.

data on gender inequality confirms these divides, for example, women: are more likely to be unemployed than men; experience a greater level of economic dependency; work more in the informal sector; have less land rights (especially under *Kanun* (Albanian traditional customary laws)); and are underrepresented in politics and report not feeling welcome or attracted to participate (UN-Habitat, 2017; Kushi, 2015). Intersecting inequalities include rural/urban and socioeconomic divides. Where men are regarded as the primary agents in society, “women are often portrayed as mere accessories to the strong man, and are sexualised or objectified” (Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, 2022, forthcoming, p.7-8). Indeed, Albania’s ancient moral code - the *Kanun* – determines that women are the property of men after marriage, and that women are, more generally, “defined as animals, good only for work” (Arsovska & Begum, 2014). “Although the Kanun does not have the force of law, it still influences the attitudes of the ethnic Albanians” (Arsovska & Begum, 2014).

Much progress has been made over the previous decades in regards to legal rights, e.g. Kosovo has the most advanced gender equality law in the region (passed in 2004), yet it is poorly enforced. And meanwhile “gender inequality and stereotypes are deeply embedded in general culture and economic relations, and little progress has been made in combating it” (BTI, 2020b, p.25).

Focus group discussions found that organised crime provides men with the opportunities to earn money, gain status, feel empowered, and provide for their families in the Western Balkans, found the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (2022, forthcoming). Organised crime, and sometimes drug culture, is popularised and glamorised through films, music, and social media with a depiction of organised criminals as “fit young men who carry guns, drive fancy cars, have bling lifestyles and get the girls” (The Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, 2022, forthcoming, p.7-8). There is also a popularisation of the football hooligan, masculine culture, where “a certain style of dress and behaviour, including violence, is part of toxic group identities” (The Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, 2022, forthcoming, p.7-8). Meanwhile, interviews with women engaged in organised crime indicate that their main motivating factors to join are also economic. Arsovska (2019) explains how rapid globalisation and social change fostered “sociocultural confusion” in the Balkans: “drifting between tradition and modernity, socialism and capitalism, many – driven by the “American Dream” – fled their homeland. There was a false romanticism about ‘making it’ in ‘the West.’ Traditional values lost importance. Being wealthy became the most cherished cultural goal”.

Roles of women, men, and sexual and gender minorities in organised crime

As perpetrators

Organised criminal group members in the Western Balkans are almost exclusively adults, and primarily male, with key activities including: drug trafficking, illicit trade in counterfeit goods, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking (UNODC (2020, p.26; Reitano & Amerhauser, 2020). Accurate statistics on group membership are not possible in this secretive sector, however UNODC (2020, p.26, 57) highlights two studies where one found women made up 4% of persons prosecuted for participation in organised crime groups (drawing on court verdict data of 323 persons prosecuted from 2003 to 2017), and another found women made up

7% of persons prosecuted for participation in organised crime groups (drawing on UNODC analysis of national criminal justice administrative data between 2012-2018). UNODC (2020) notes that this is “comparable to global trends” (UNODC, 2020, p.26)

Analysis of national criminal justice data in the Western Balkans indicates that among all women convicted, the most common activities were (UNODC, 2020, p.57):

- **Drug production and trafficking** - 72%
- **Firearms trafficking** - 16%
- **Trafficking in persons** - 8%
- **Migrant smuggling** - 4%

Notably, the percentage of women convicted of people trafficking in the Western Balkans is significantly lower than the global average – as in 2016 over 35% of people prosecuted for trafficking in persons globally were women (UNODC, 2018, p.36). UNODC’s (2018, p.35) research does show significant regional variation, which they suggest might be due to different criminal justice approaches; variable justice capacity which sees more junior offenders prosecuted (and therefore more women, as they are less likely to be in senior positions); and the context specificity of different geographies and trafficking processes (UNODC, 2018, p.36). Importantly, UNODC (2020, p.57) highlights that “women’s roles in various aspects of organised crime is a topic that is often discussed, yet rarely researched”.

There is also case study, and anecdotal information, about the roles of women in organised crime in the region. E.g. women have reportedly been involved in cannabis cultivation in Albania since “the beginning of the 1990s, when they planted cannabis in their gardens. Since then, women are believed to have played a key role in the industry, specialising mostly in the process of cleaning cannabis” (Amerhauser, 2020). Amerhauser (2020) notes that, while rare, there have been cases of women having more senior positions in criminal groups in the region. Another paper highlights research on women’s roles in running pyramid schemes linked to organised crime in Albania in the 1990s, and more recently in engaging in counterfeiting roles for organised crime groups, and in managing private companies involved in fraud cases (Fraser, Ahlenback & Clugston, 2019, p.2). Arsovska and Begum (2014) note that falsification/counterfeiting may be a frequent phenomenon of female criminality in Albania, but usually as accomplices and not the main perpetrator.

Cultural norms shape the extent to which women and men engage in organised crime underlining the importance of understanding culture and history (Arsovska & Begum, 2014). Arsovska and Begum (2014) highlight that investigated cases illustrate that Slavic women have held more active and central positions in organised crime networks, unlike Albanian women who have mainly been part of support networks, in more passive roles. For example, UNODC (2009 in Arsovska and Begum (2014)) found that that 79% of Ukrainians prosecuted/convicted for human trafficking in Italy were women. And the examples of Slavic women extend beyond human trafficking to other forms of organised criminal activities. Arsovska and Begum (2014) note that the Slavic women’s male partners and immediate networks have still played significant roles in their decisions to become active figures and partners-in-crime.

The role and perception of women in organised crime may be changing as women’s empowerment in the region progresses and as women’s roles in society evolve find the

Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (2022, forthcoming) who note that “women are starting to take more active and even leading roles in crime, as in other sectors” with examples in the West Balkans region in burglary; cannabis cultivation; recruiters for sex work; facilitating and mediating sex work; running the family’s criminal enterprise; money laundering; and smuggling of illicit goods across borders.

Women’s activities in organised crime appear to be increasing e.g. in drug trafficking, counterfeiting and kidnapping of children for sale or exploitation (Fraser, Ahlenback & Clugston, 2019; Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (2022, forthcoming). Yet the number of women arrested remains small, the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe (2022, forthcoming) speculates that this might be a result of gender perceptions that “shape not only the role played by individuals in organised crime, but also law enforcement responses and interdiction patterns. In other words, traditional perceptions of gender among law enforcement officials may be prejudicing their tendency to discount the potential role of female perpetrators”. They conclude that “Moving forward, it is important to recognise the multifaceted role played by women in both countering and perpetrating organised crime, and to acknowledge that some women are not passive bystanders in organized crime activities but play central roles as agents” (Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, 2022, forthcoming, p.21).

As victims, participants, and perpetrators

Human trafficking is a key SOC area that demonstrates gendered characteristics, and is a significant feature of the Western Balkans’ SOC landscape, being an origin, destination, and transit for trafficked people (UNODC, 2020, p.98). Human trafficking involves mostly women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation, with regional variation (UNODC, 2018, p.36). Traffickers exploit women and children for sex trafficking, forced labour, and begging. The women and children are recruited through different methods. Arsovska and Begum (2014) explain how Albanian human trafficking recruiters (who were predominantly male) used the “lover boy” method of winning the hearts of emotionally vulnerable women, “making them emotionally dependent, before forcing them into illegal work, such as prostitution or the “kidnapping” method to recruit additional victims”. IAGCI (2021, p.13) explains another method that recruits people with some, though not all, knowing that they will be working in the sex industry, but believing that they will earn more money than in the sex trade in Albania or will have more control over what they do. However, on arrival at the destination, victims are often placed under the control of traffickers and deprived of their identification documents, financial resources, and have insufficient knowledge of the local language, and may not be given the terms they had initially agreed to (IAGCI, 2021, p.13). In Kosovo, the human trafficking industry is widely considered to have been bolstered by high profits, lack of social awareness, lenient laws, and the large presence of international peacekeepers and bureaucrats (Anastasijevic, 2006).

Gender roles make women more prone to exploitation, and limit their choices not to engage in trafficking – for example as traditional attitudes towards gender roles prevent women from continuing education and pushes them into the hands of the trafficking agents (Anastasijevic, 2006). Other vulnerability factors that put women and children at greater risk of being targeted include: economic scarcity, health problems, family difficulties (such as violence), age (girls aged 14 to 18 are most likely to be targeted for prostitution), and ethnicity (IAGCI, 2021; UNODC, 2020; Fraser, et al., 2019). E.g. Roma and Egyptian communities are more likely to be targeted for forced labour as they work more in the informal economy (IAGCI), 2021, p.13).

Male victims of trafficking are likely to come from poverty and violent/abusive family homes, with additional risk factors including being gay, bisexual, trans or intersex; age; education level; homeless or resident in a children’s home; and having a disability (IAGCI, 2021). “Blood feuds” may present a further risk factor (see section 3) (IAGCI, 2021). In Albania, male trafficking victims are more likely to have been exploited as minors, many from the age of 13 or 14, and on average have only accumulated 5.5 years of education compared to the national average of 11.9 years (IAGCI, 2021, p.14-15). Most trafficked males are attracted through offers of jobs and income highlighting how poverty and limited economic and future prospects are key drivers of human trafficking (IAGCI, 2021). This particularly affects boys and men in Albania who are expected to provide for their families from their early/mid teens, yet face limited employment opportunities, especially in rural areas (IAGCI, 2021). “In Albania, there is a general lack of awareness and understanding that males can be victims of trafficking, which makes boys/men unwilling to accept that they are being/have been exploited. It also means that others may be slow to recognise boys/young men as trafficking victims and that it may be harder for males to receive the help they need” (IAGCI, 2021, p.14-15). These characteristics highlight the need for an intersectional gender-sensitive approach to human trafficking.

Despite the number of identified victims almost tripling from 2012 to 2017 in the Western Balkans, the number of convictions for trafficking in persons nearly halved over the same period (UNODC, 2020, p.98). UNODC (2020, p.98) suggests that this may indicate a changing culture where more women actively seek income in the commercial sex market, and thus there is less need for coercion or violence to recruit victims of trafficking.

Women who are trafficked often occupy more than one role within the trafficking nexus finds Brodie, et al. (2018). They emphasise the need to problematise the binary made between trafficking victims and offenders (Brodie, et al., 2018). UNODC (2018) identifies qualitative studies that show women traffickers are particularly active in the recruitment phase of human trafficking. They can also move into roles as spies on other women. Fraser, Ahlenback and Clugston (2019) identify two main pathways that women take into SOC:

- As victims of human trafficking who get “promoted” to supportive roles in the criminal network; and
- Through family ties and intimate partners.

At a University of Bedfordshire/IOM learning event in 2017 on human trafficking related to Albania, discussions highlighted that social stigma and discrimination were key issues facing those who has been trafficked, and also the support workers working with trafficked people (IAGCI, 2021). This affects their relationships with family and the community, and access to accommodation and health services (In IAGCI, 2021, p.115). The lack of family and social support more broadly increases the victims’ risks of poverty and of being trafficked again (IAGCI, 2021, p.115). The paper reflects that victims of gender-based violence in Albania are often blamed for what happened to them (IAGCI, 2021, p.115).

As agents supporting resilience to SOC

Women also play key roles in CSOs in the Western Balkans that address vulnerabilities associated with organised crime and corruption and that strengthen local resilience to these challenges e.g. through their work on drugs use and distribution, youth development,

post-prison reintegration, media freedom, environmental issues, and marginalised groups (Amerhauser & Kemp, 2021, p.1; Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, 2022, forthcoming). The role of civil society and non-state actors is critical in the Western Balkans where organised crime groups, the state, and elite patronage networks are closely linked, yet despite this, less than 1% of CSOs registered in the Western Balkans deal directly with organised crime or corruption (Amerhauser & Kemp, 2021). The Western Balkans' context is complex as space for CSOs continues to shrink with CSOs facing smear campaigns, intimidation, and competition from government-organised non-governmental organisations that pursue the interests of the government or close allies (Amerhauser & Kemp, 2021, p.4). While gender norms in the Western Balkans mean that women are not expected to lead social movements or to promote economic development, women are considered as particularly able to build innovative and healthy relationships and trust with institutions and law enforcement, and to promote the role of education, youth empowerment and gender equality – all factors that could reduce vulnerability to organised crime (Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, 2022, forthcoming).

Notably, the role of civil society – and women in particular - in supporting the resilience of actors to organised crime has been growing as a popular issue of policy and practitioner focus (e.g. Tennant, 2017).² While the concept of resilience in organised crime is as yet fairly complex to operationalise, it provides a useful lens that attempts to bridge the divide between development and law-enforcement practice (Bird, 2021), and that draws attention to the broader environment that drives/inhibits organised crime, rather than just the criminal actors themselves. This analysis can support a more holistic understanding of the environment, and identification of policy responses. In their case study of community responses to gangs in Cape Town, Thomas and Pascoe (2018, p.3) identify that “Resilience to organised crime at the community level is essentially characterised by its non-violent, grassroots approach; a resilient community also understands how violent crime has gained power over the community”. The “resilience of communities is to a large extent determined by social capital, formed through the links, shared values and understandings that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and work together”, explains Bird (2021, p.8). “Women’s social capital is often built across different networks from those of men, and in some contexts in separate, often domestic rather than public, spaces. These formal and informal networks tend to become drivers of resilience in times of crisis” (Bird, 2021, p.8). Bird (2021, p.8) outlines ways that resilience can be expressed:

- By creating an alternative vision of what society can be
- Building relationships, so individuals can stand strong together outside criminal structures
- Resisting the revenues, livelihoods and lifestyles offered by organised crime
- Calling out criminal injustices and ending the culture of impunity
- Engaging with criminal actors and believing in their ability to change
- Standing together, so that people’s voices can be heard as a collective

² Global Initiative has published a number of papers examining community-level responses to organised crime by using a resilience framework (e.g. Amerhauser & Kemp, 2021; Tennant, 2017; Bird, 2021). It has also held “resilience dialogues” in the Western Balkans to discuss how to “build coalitions and develop narratives in the fight against organised crime and corruption”, during these dialogues, Amerhauser (2021, p.12) notes that three recurrent themes came up: youth, gender and the social re-use of stolen assets.

- Creating safe spaces, both physically and ideologically
- Supporting victims of violence at the hands of organised crime

3. Social norms around SOC

Clan, family, and ethnic bonds

In Albania, the principal sources of social capital, solidarity, and organisation are familial, regional, and clan loyalties (BTI, 2020a). These traditional forms of patronage networks have been useful for people during Albania's difficult transition phases, yet they have also stymied the development of a democratic civic culture and trust in state institutions (BTI, 2020a). According to survey data, levels of interpersonal trust are also low in Albania (BTI, 2020a).

The Albanian Mafia (Mafia *Shqiptare*) is considered to have originated as clan-organised crime groups with the groups made up of various clans, sub-clans and families (Bak, 2019). For example, Albania's north-eastern city Shkodër (a hotspot for organised crime) has "at least four powerful clans active in the city, mostly formed around kinship ties. These mafia-style families are believed to have strong links to other criminal groups in the country, as well as in Kosovo and Montenegro. They are also believed to be connected to diaspora groups in Western Europe, as well as political actors or parties" (Global Initiative, 2019, p.11). However, Arsovska (2019) highlights that although "kinship and common territory have served as powerful bonding and trust-producing elements for Balkan criminal segments, particularly ethnic Albanian groups", it is "too simplistic to describe them as kinship-based organisations with well-defined boundaries. Each core group, often composed of three to ten members from the same ethnic background, represents a smaller, criminal subunit that is part of a larger multi-ethnic criminal network." Through the past few decades, Albanians criminal groups have become more internationally networked and the "no longer rely solely on family or social ties, but also create ties with other members and foreign citizens" (Zhillia & Lamallari, 2015, p.38).

Meanwhile, in Kosovo, the main source of social engagement and solidarity is the family, and social organisations within villages and ethnic communities (BTI, 2020b). BTI (2020b, p.16) explains this is "due to the historical experience of an all-engulfing and discriminatory socialist welfare system. The repression of the Albanians in the 1990s made them create an underground society to uphold social ties, education and cultural life. Interethnic trust was almost completely destroyed in the years of repression and during the conflict". Meanwhile, "civic engagement is quite limited. On the one hand, the nonviolent resistance movement of the 1990s has formed a tradition of civic solidarity. On the other hand, this legacy of a self-organised Kosovo-Albanian shadow state was associated with a tendency to abstain from public involvement" (BTI, 2020b, p.28).

Zhillia (2011, p.389) explains that "one of the most distinguishing features of organised crime in the Western Balkans is its distortion of the concept of ethnicity" whereby organised crime groups use nationalist and ethnic discourses, and fund political parties along ethnic lines, to consolidate their power over state institutions such as the judiciary and police.

Customary norms and use of violence

Criminal groups in Albania also distort customary norms to their benefit – such as the cultural practice of the “blood feud”, finds Zhilla (2011). The Albanian cultural norm of the blood feud is a practice dating from the 15th century - known as the *Kanun* of Leke Dukagjini – used to govern the use of violence, and to apportion justice and honour, through the sanctioning of family-based revenge killings (Amerhauser, 2021; Zhilla, 2011). It developed “as a way of protecting families in the absence of a strong central state. The fear of reciprocity was designed to be a deterrent against acts of violence: one risked triggering a tit-for-tat spiral of revenge by taking someone’s life” (Amerhauser, 2021, p.9). In the current day, it is mainly practiced in the north of Albania, yet more research is needed on this secretive practice (Zhilla, 2011). Zhilla (2011) explains that organised crime groups sometimes disguise criminal violence as a form of blood feud, therefore making family members of the victims under social pressure to become involved in reciprocal violence. Criminal groups may also use these customary norms to influence judges and law enforcement agencies, with judges fearful of being targeted as a result of involvement in a blood feud. Albanian criminal groups are noted as being extremely violent criminal groups where the disproportionate use of violence is part of their modus operandi (Zhilla & Lamallari, 2015).

Culture of corruption and impunity

The literature universally recognises that the Western Balkans’ weak governance and clientelist political settlement are key factors shaping a culture of corruption and impunity. Research by Zvekić and Vidličkagi (2020), and others has identified an “organised corruption” style of governance in the region. “Political elites provide an umbrella of protection for criminal groups (which may involve their family and friends) and their activities, while the criminal groups help the political elites to enrich themselves, as well as gain and keep power” (Global Initiative, 2019). For example, there is a culture of impunity related to cases of grand corruption in Albania (Herbert, 2021).

This culture has been shaped by the region’s complex modern history of wars, embargoes and economic crises, combined with its geographic position as a route to Europe, which contributed to an environment of high demand and reward for illegal goods, services, and practices (UNODC, 2020, p.13). This reduced the ability of the authorities to control crime, and encouraged the political toleration (and sometimes sponsorship) of illicit behaviours, with the distinction between licit and illicit commodities becoming unclear (UNODC, 2020, p.13). Anti-corruption institutions lack sufficient independent authority and capacity and thus encourage the reality and impression of impunity (Bak, 2019).

SOC is considered to be one of Albania’s main security and governance challenges that has got worse over the past decade (BTI, 2020a), and Bak (2019) identifies the most serious concern with regards to corruption in Albania is the links between the government and organised crime. Bak (2019, p.7) explains that the mafia started shaping national institutions from the 1990s, and has “now evolved into one of the most influential para-institutions in Albanian society”. Corruption is a serious problem in Albania’s police and law enforcement agencies, despite public officials being arrested and prosecuted for accepting bribes, there were no convictions between 2013 to 2017 (UNODC, 2020, p.71). While civil society should play a central role in monitoring and evaluating SOC and corruption in the Western Balkans, the non-

governmental sector remains isolated and increasingly restricted (Amerhauser; 2019; Reitano & Amerhauser, 2020). However, notably, Albania has been undergoing a reform process and establishing a number of new institutions to strengthen the rule of law,

The levels of conviction for participation in an organised criminal group in Albania are extremely low - just 17 people were convicted in 2016 (14 males and three females); 9 people in 2017, and 18 people in 2018 (UNODC, 2020, p.63). UNODC (2020, p.63) notes that “when observing the attrition of cases through the criminal justice process it can be seen that in 2016, only 20 per cent of arrests resulted in a conviction for participation in an organised criminal group. This points to a need to more closely examine at which stage cases are failing to proceed and analyse the reasons for these failures”. Qualitative data identified by UNODC (2020) suggests that group leaders enjoy impunity in the Western Balkans more often than people in the lower ranks of criminal organisations.

Lack of trust in the state

People in Albania are reticent to report organised crime activities to the authorities due to a lack of trust in institutions and for fear of repercussions, find Zhilla and Lamallari (2015) based on interviews, focus groups, and literature review. The lack of trust in public institutions is related to “high perceptions of corruption, ‘sale of secrets’ and lack of effective witness protection” (Zhilla & Lamallari, 2015, p.20). While the fears of retaliation by criminal groups reflects the reality that in a small territory like Albania, it may be easy to identify who is reporting and collaborating with the authorities (Zhilla & Lamallari, 2015). Other factors include the lack of a culture of reporting wrongdoing due to historic reliance on family, social, and regional ties, while reporting to state bodies was considered ‘spying’ and shameful (Zhilla & Lamallari, 2015). “The least mentioned reason by interviewees in this regard has to do with the indirect ties with persons involved in organised crime (i.e. family, kin, or social ties)” (Zhilla & Lamallari, 2015, p.20). In the Western Balkans region in general, people have become increasingly disenfranchised as election-related corruption has removed the key mechanism for citizens to push for change finds Bak (2019) in a literature review. Notably, in Kosovo, while “political corruption in Kosovo is rampant... [the] ruling parties have been less capable of rigging elections in their favour than in some of the other countries” in the region (Bak, 2019, p.11).

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