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ANALYSING ORGANISED CRIME IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WESTERN BALKANS REGION, WITH A RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE ON THE TERRITORY OF ALBANIA

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Analysing Organised Crime in the Context of the Western Balkans Region, with a Research Perspective on the Territory of Albania

Juliana ZAHARIA¹

Abstract

Organized crime creates a particularly negative social situation in the Western Balkans, which has a direct impact on the relationships that citizens have with their society. The analysis of several characteristics of organized crime and their consequences on young people, based on a review of the literature, constitutes the main research approach on which the conceptualization of the variables is based. The research follows the methodology of a cross-sectional descriptive study, which explores through scientific means how respondents (n=1,059) perceive organized crime in Albanian society. The collection of data through the structured questionnaire, analysed statistically, highlights the factors conducive to crime and the groups most exposed, as well as the dynamics linked to opposition to criminal acts, which support scientific conclusions to focus on the request for specific intervention.

Keywords: organized crime; illicit traffics; young people; Western Balkans; Albania.

Introduction

Despite efforts to recognize and combat the effects of large-scale organized crime on the processes of strengthening democracies, a prerequisite for the European Union's enlargement policy, this phenomenon persists in most of the region of the Western Balkans. It is widespread and appears in multi-criminal forms.

According to Tony Sagggers (2019), "the Western Balkan countries are an important hub for organised crime specialising in (among other things) facilitating the trafficking of drugs to EU Member States" (Sagggers, 2019). For the author,

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“Albania and the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) play a strategic staging post for ‘east meets west’. They also provide a direct link to the EU via Greece (over land) and Italy (via the Adriatic Sea)” (Saggers, 2019). In a recent analysis, the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South-East Europe (2024) highlights that “In addition to the cocaine trade, Western Balkan criminal groups are also involved in importing heroin and weapons, human trafficking, indoor cannabis cultivation and exporting synthetic drugs” (The Observatory of Illicit Economies in South-East Europe, 2024).

The aim of the research is to study how organized crime affects Western Balkans today, its forms and characteristics, according to a point of view of scientific analysis oriented by the study of reports, papers and contemporary literature. With particular emphasis on the case of Albania, the analysis of the conditions of delinquency, and in particular of illegal trafficking networks, where serious crimes are linked to illicit flows and criminal affairs, shows distinct negative consequences on the reality of young people. In analysing the characteristics of organised crime, research themes focus on the conditions and circumstances surrounding the life prospects and development of young people. Furthermore, knowledge of the specifics of criminal acts in Albania from the perspective and opinions of young people, as participants in the study, allows scientific conclusions to be drawn to better understand the risks, dangers and circumstances imposed on this specific group, as well as the fragmentation of institutional responses.

Literature review

The analyse of research, reports and documents provided by international organizations, aims to understand the forms in which organised crime is perceived, including the characteristics of its negative impact on human values, social interactions and public security. The difference in these characteristics according to the dimensions of the literature, and the difference in their forms of reflection from the point of view of the study participants, has been a theme of the research and a primary direction of the scientific approach. The literature review focuses on knowledge of the analysis of criminal acts and organized crime in in the context of the Western Balkans region, with a research perspective on the territory of Albania.

Illicit trafficking and criminal affairs – Highlights from the region of Western Balkans

The Western Balkan countries are considered sites where many criminal trafficking routes pass. In the 2019 Drug Markets Report, published by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, the Western Balkans region is considered “a key transit region for drugs and precursors flowing from and to the

EU” (EMCDDA, 2019). According to this report “This is reflected in Europol’s overall policy and operational framework with regard to the Western Balkans, more specifically Albania, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina” (EMCDDA, 2019). While in an earlier analysis by Kole Krasniqi (2016) on organised crime in Balkans, the author emphasis that “Organized crime in the Balkans could not have developed to this point without establishing networking and cooperation between regional groups belonging to organized crime” (Krasniqi, 2016). Continuing his analysis, Krasniqi states that “These groups, becoming more and more criminally sophisticated all over the Balkans, are characterized by their ability to work together and to adapt to any new social circumstances well enough in order to achieve their criminal goals” (Krasniqi, 2016).

In World Drug Report 2023, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime highlights that “The harms caused by drug trafficking and illicit drug economies are contributing to and compounding many of these threats, from instability and violence to environmental devastation (UNODC, 2023), following the 2008 analysis, which considers that “the organised crime situation in the Balkans is rooted in the instability generated by the simultaneous impacts of political transition and conflict” (UNDOC, 2008). It emphasises also that “organised crime in the Balkans has been very organised, and lubricated with corruption” (UNDOC, 2008).

The reports reflect a reality where the interweaving of illicit trafficking and their harmful forms affects the development of the region and keeps the risk of instability on alert. This particular situation, as well as the requirement for peace, stability and prosperity, is the subject of the “Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act” (2023) drafted on May 17, 2023 by the Senate of United States of America. The document highlights that “The Western Balkans countries (the Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Kosovo, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, and the Republic of Serbia) form a pluralistic, multi-ethnic region in the heart of Europe that is critical to the peace, stability, and prosperity of Europe” (The Senate of United States, 2023). The act underlines the need for “Continued peace, stability, and prosperity in the Western Balkans” (The United States Senate, 2023), which according to this document “is directly tied to opportunities for democratic and economic advancement available to the citizens and residents of those 6 countries” (The Senate of United States, 2023).

From this perspective, alongside the policy of enlargement of the European Union to the countries of the Western Balkans, the fight against organized crime is central. The Council of the European Union (2023) stresses to the need for the counties in this specific region “to progress on comprehensive justice reform, the fight against corruption, including de-oligarchisation, and the fight against organised crime” (CEU, 2023), recalling for “a solid track record on final convictions and seizure and confiscation of criminal assets” (CEU, 2023), as a continued demand “in the fight against organised crime” (CEU, 2023).

The particularity of organised crime features related to Albanian territory

Organised crime in Albania is a phenomenon characterized by dramatic forms of illegal trafficking, criminal affairs and widespread serious crimes. The alarming expansion in all cities of the country, and especially in the capital, Tirana, creates a permanent social condition of inclusion of young people. While the analysis of criminality in Albania is often considered within the framework of the analysis of organised crime in the Western Balkans region, distinction between definitions and characteristics, analysed on the basis of a structured scientific methodology, is fragmentary.

Considering this, in his analysis, demanding: "Is the Albanian-Kosovan-western Macedonian agglomeration a 'mafia' in the strict sense of the word?" Xavier Raufer (2003) states that "Several visible signs show that Albanian crime has attained a high degree of organisation and sophistication" (Raufer, 2003), estimating that "If this stage in itself is not enough for one to speak of a mafia, discussion is none the less eminently necessary" (Raufer, 2003). The author considers that "The signs are in the multi-criminal activity" (Raufer, 2003).

A 2017 report from the Organized Crime Observatory of the University of Milan, with a team under the direction of Professor Fernando Dalla Chiesa, entitled "Fourth Report on the Northern Areas, for the Presidency of the Commission Parliamentary of Investigation on the Mafia", indicates important data. Referring to the annual report on the activities carried out by the National Prosecutor of Anti-mafia as well as on the dynamics and strategies of mafia-type organized crime, in period 1 July 2011-30 June 2012 by National Anti-Mafia Directorate, the Organized Crime Observatory of the University of Milan highlights the structural organization of Albanian mafia which "stands out for its ability to evolve, for its aggressiveness and for its robustness of the criminal system" (Organized Crime Observatory of the University of Milan, 2017). Whereas, defining Albanian crime from a transnational perspective, Organized Crime Observatory of the University of Milan considers it "as a set of cells that form a criminal network with a command centre in Albania" (Organized Crime Observatory of the University of Milan, 2017), whose 'main cell' according to this analyse "constitutes the head of the organization, carrying out managerial and strategic roles" (Organized Crime Observatory of the University of Milan, 2017).

According to Zhilla and Lamallari (2015), "The most developed areas, such as Tirana, Durrës and Fier have a higher rate of criminal activity and a higher concentration of perpetrators due to the concentration of capital and demographic movements (drugs, light weapons and explosives, prostitution running rings, internal trafficking, extortion, etc.)" (Zhilla and Lamallari, 2015). The authors' points out that "The regional distribution of each activity: arms trafficking in Shkodër, Kukës and Burrel (Fushë Kruja for explosives) due to their proximity to Montenegro and Kosovo. Drug trafficking in Tirana, Durrës, Elbasan, Vlorë, Korçë, and Fier (fiscal evasion, organized stealing of oil). Smuggling of migrants

in Gjirokastrë and southern areas close to Greece, such as Korçë, Pogradec and Konispol” (Zhilla and Lamallari, 2015).

Methodology

The research design

The research design is organized through the application of quantitative methods, with the structured questionnaire being the main data collection instrument. The conceptualization of the variables is based on the study of the literature with emphasis on reports and documents developed by international organizations that have at the centre of their research work on organized crime in the Western Balkan region, in also focusing on the territory of Albania.

From the process of conceptualizing the variables, it was carried out in the operationalization of the variables (Mathews and Ross, 2010), distinguishing “Type of criminal acts” and “Factors conducive to crime” as independent variables and “Opposition to crime” as the dependent variable.

Setting of the study

The Western Balkans are considered a fundamental research location for the study process, since most of the analyses contained in reports, papers or documents focused on organized crime consider this region as the focal point through which pass the arteries of crime in Europe, and Albania as the country with the highest concentration of these arteries.

The research sites are located on the territory of Albania. The study is national and covers the Northern region (cities of Shkodra, Malësia e Madhe and Lezha), the Central region (cities of Tirana, Durrës, Elbasan and Krujë), the Southern region (cities of Berat, Vlora and Korça). What determined the research sites was the level of concentration of organized crime arteries according to national and international statistics, as well as previous research on vulnerability of the region related to criminality with the analysis of paths against (Zaharia, 2018).

Research sample and inquiring instrument

The research sample consists of 1,059 respondents, selected by the quota sampling method from groups of young people (with an age range of 16 to 29 years), stratified into two groups of study participants: 1) respondents living in urban areas; 2) Respondents living in suburban areas. Table 1 presents the sampling data divided into four educational levels (Table 1).

Table 1. Cross analyse of respondents' education and residence

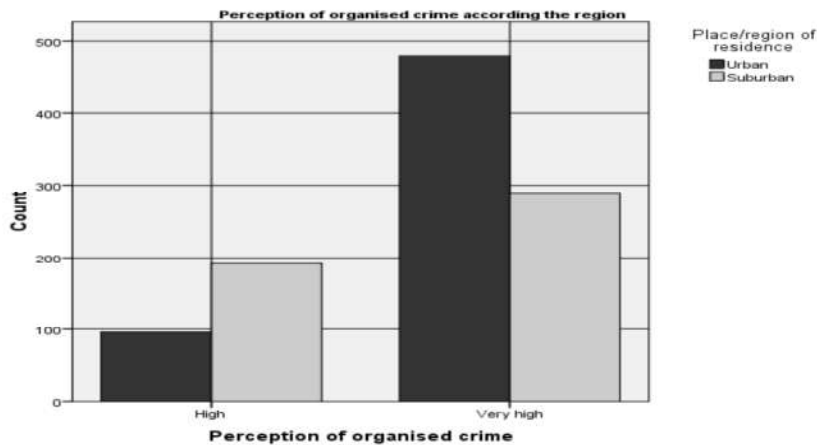
Education * Residence				
Count				
		Residence		Total
		Urban areas	Sub-urban areas	
Education	Undergraduate	338	21	359
	Elementary school	118	82	200
	High school	75	132	207
	Universities	214	79	293
Total		745	314	1059

Source: *Questionnaires Analysis, 2024*

The structure of the questionnaire following quantitative approach to social research (Neuman, 2007), which is also the main research instrument for collecting primary data, is built on the basis of the difference in the scientific dimensions of the characteristics and forms of organized crime today, in the territory of Albania. Each of the three sections of the questionnaire guided the construction of exploratory questions and scales according to the dimensions of the literature. After the questions on general data, the questionnaire continues with the section of questions aimed at distinguishing the main characteristics of crime in the region from which the group of respondents was selected. The following section includes questions and scales that measure the characteristics that shape crime and the direct and indirect influence they exert on respondents. and concludes with an acknowledgment relating to the opposition efforts required and necessary against the dynamics that crime creates, according to the respondents' point of view.

Results

The of organized crime is analysed in correlation with the independent variable "Place/region of residence". The data presented in Figure 1 shows that 64.4% of participants who think the level of crime is high (27.2%) and very high (72.8%) come from cities, with the majority coming from the from the regions of North (27.6%) and the Centre Albania (36.8%). This statistic shows a shift in the spread of criminal acts towards regions that include the cities of Shkodra, Kruja, Durres, Tirana and Elbasan.



Source: Questionnaires Analysis, 2024

Figure 1. Cross analyse of organized crime impact in the regions of Albania

Association with criminal acts in terms of participation, first incrimination or indirect submission is one of the main subjects of study and statistical analysis. For 23% of respondents, this association is that of direct involvement in criminality, while for 77% it is of indirect involvement. The data in Table 2 shows that the groups of respondents mostly involved in criminal acts are undergraduates (35.2%) or those with primary education (27.3%). Other complementary analyses show that subjects directly involved in criminal acts come from urban (68.1%) areas of Albania.

Table 2. Cross analyse of respondents' education and association with criminal acts

Education * Association with criminal acts				
Count		Association with criminal acts		Total
		Direct association	Indirect association	
Education	Undergraduate	72	301	373
	Elementary school	91	199	290
	High school	58	256	314
	Universities	23	59	82
Total		244	815	1059

Source: Questionnaires Analysis, 2024

The variable “Type of criminal acts” is operationalized into six values: 1. Drug trafficking, 2. Drug cultivation, 3. Human trafficking, 4. Injuries; 5. Crimes involving property damage and theft. 6. Illegal trade. The descriptive data in Table 3 shows that respondents consider “Drug trafficking” (34.6%), “Human trafficking” (19.6%) and “Drug cultivation” (19.5%) as the most widespread criminal acts in the areas where they live (Table 3).

Table 3. Criminal acts or activities in the regions

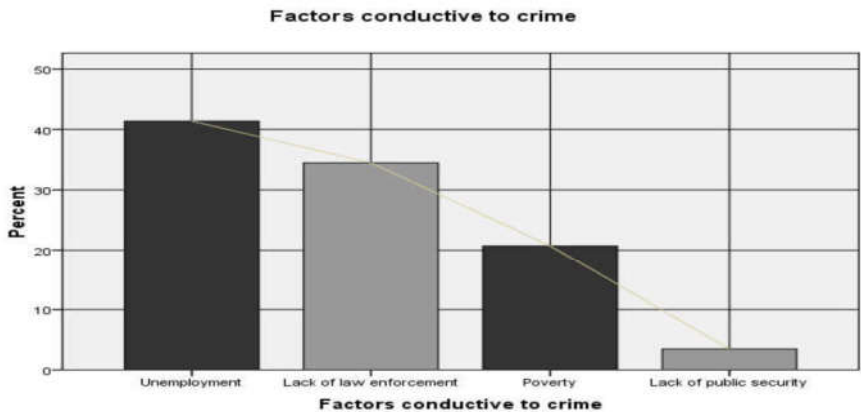
Type of criminal acts					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Drug trafficking	366	34.6	34.6	34.6
	Human trafficking	208	19.6	19.6	54.2
	Property damage and theft	182	17.1	17.1	71.3
	Injury	72	6.8	6.8	78.1
	Drug cultivation	206	19.5	19.5	97.6
	Illegal trade	25	2.4	2.4	100.0
	Total	1059	100.0	100.0	

Source: *Questionnaires Analysis, 2024*

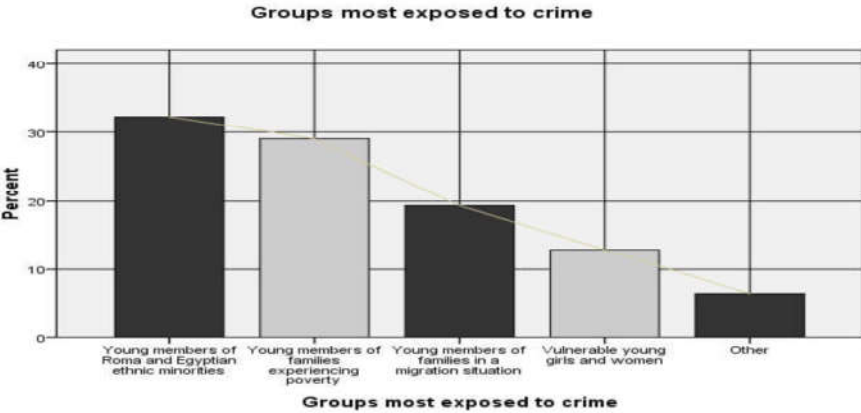
The statistics presented in Figure 2 follow the analysis of data collected from responses to the question on specific social factors that influence the involvement of groups of young people in criminal activities.

As observed, the data indicates “Unemployment” (41.4%) and “Lack of law enforcement” (34.5%) as the two main factors conducive to crime in the region. The other factors are considered “Poverty” (20.7%) and “Lack of public security” (3.4%) (Figure 2).

The descriptive statistics for the variable “Groups most exposed to crime” is presented in Figure 3, which according to respondents are “Young members of Roma and Egyptian ethnic minorities” (32.3%), “Young members of families experiencing poverty” (29%), “Young members of families in a migration situation” (19.4%), and “Vulnerable young girls and women” (12.9%) (Figure 3).



Source: *Questionnaires Analysis, 2024*
Figure 2. Descriptive statistics of the variable “Factors conducive to crime”

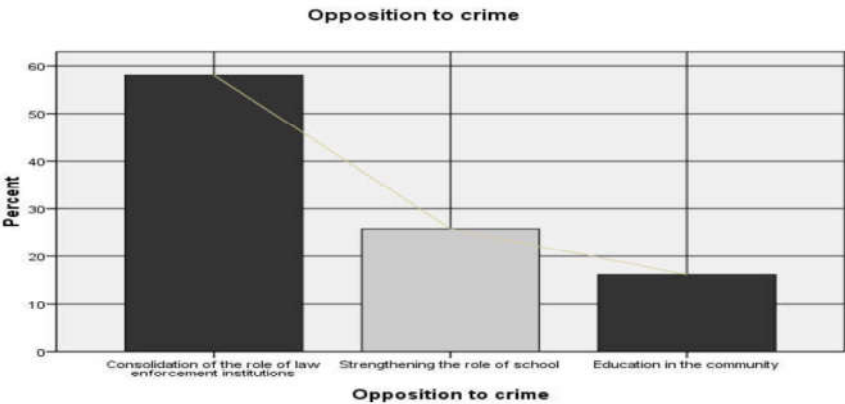


Source: *Questionnaires Analysis, 2024*
Figure 3. Descriptive statistics of the variable: “Groups most exposed to crime”

One of the guiding objectives of the study was to understand the most significant form of barrier to crime in the regions. The descriptive statistics in Figure 4 show “Consolidation the role of law enforcement institutions” (58.1%) as the most important form of favouring circumstances against the spread of criminal acts in the regions of Albania. According to respondents, other efforts can be focused on “Strengthening the role of the school” (25.8%) and “Education in the community” (16.1%) (Figure 4).

More specifically, in the analysis of interventions of a more social than legal nature, effective legal and social assistance for young offenders and their reintegration through education, work and safe access to the community were

presented by respondents as important points of view in the fight against criminal acts and their impact on youth groups.



Source: *Questionnaires Analysis, 2024*

Figure 4. Descriptive statistics of the variable: “Opposition to crime”

Conclusion

The Western Balkans region has stood out since the early 1990s as the region with the highest level of crime in Europe, characterized by human trafficking, drug and arms trafficking as criminal acts leading to serious crimes. The current reality of the high level of crime in the region is reflected in the reports of international organizations. This reality has continued to sensitize the European Union and the Euro-Atlantic offices to consider that the fight against crime is a condition for progress in the process of enlargement towards the countries of the Western Balkans and for the strengthening of stability and peace in the region.

A review of the reports shows that the term most used to distinguish, highlight or discuss criminal acts in the Western Balkans is ‘organized crime’. Because the choice of areas and crossroads through which criminal routes pass and their use to create illicit assets and profits through money laundering chains in all Western Balkan countries, where Albania often stands out, the main characteristic is that of a criminal organization.

The analysis of crime and criminal acts at the regional level, and in particular in the territory of Albania, shows that definitions based on scientific research are not comprehensive, and often realized in the absence of analysis of the characteristics on respondents’ grounds, through citizen groups participation. The terms “Albanian mafia” or “multi-criminal activity” (Raufer, 2003) are terms that also characterize the reality of a widespread level of criminality in Albania, which often constitutes

the only constant and unchanged basis of relations, which many groups have with their society.

According to research data, the factors most conducive to crime are high unemployment rates, lack of law enforcement, poverty and lack of public security. These factors mainly expose young members of Roma and Egyptian ethnic minorities, young members of families experiencing poverty and migration, as well as vulnerable young girls and women, to the risk of being involved in crime. Data analysis shows the consolidation of the role of law enforcement institutions as the most important form of opposition to any form of organized crime.

Recommendations

One of the most obvious consequences of weak law enforcement institutions is high levels of crime. The development perspective of the Western Balkans region should be focused on the priority path of strengthening the law with a direct impact on the protection of citizens and in particular of groups in difficulty.

Stopping the spread of criminal acts in Albania requires a strong response from all levels of law enforcement, to create multiple forms of legal interventions.

The relationships that citizens establish with their society should be at the centre of interventions against crime and criminal acts. Promoting secure employment, tackling poverty and vulnerability should be at the centre of the fight against crime at all levels of government.

Interventions against crime should be focused on responses characterized by the specific characteristics of crime in Albania, which are specifically located in urban and suburban areas of the Albanian territory

In addition, exploratory and analytical scientific research must be reoriented within the framework of studies through university platforms, based on policies that provide valuable scientific research.

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