

TACKLING CRIME IN THE BALKANS: A NEW STEP TO FURTHER COOPERATION

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The countries of the former Yugoslavia have faced many challenges ever since the end of the war which plagued the region in the early 1990.

These challenges never seemed to go away on the road to eventual membership in the European Union (EU). EU membership was made the firm objective and extreme importance was assigned to the Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA) that are issued by the EU and that each candidate country must complete successfully before it eventually joins this organization.

Inter-ethnic hatreds served as a manipulation tool by the politicians in the 1990 and were put to use so that at the end of the day those same politicians would stay in power whereas the majority of the population would be their manipulation experiment.

Across the region and during the wars, there was only one safe assumption as to who were the beneficiaries of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. These beneficiaries were the criminal groups within the region who were very closely linked to the government structures. This link became explicit after the United Nations (UN) put an embargo on weapons to all Yugoslav republics three months after the start of an armed conflict in June 1991. The 'brotherhood and unity' motto employed during Yugoslavia to keep people together remains alive to this day in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Unfortunately, it is related only to organized crime that knows no boundaries or religious and ethnic divisions and remains a major obstacle for the region's desire to join the EU.

In a situation of war and sanctions, morality and ethics were set aside and crime was justified by the higher interests of the State. Previous Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian governments all used criminal networks as a means of evading international sanctions and acquiring material necessary for the war effort. The result was a collusion between governments and local criminal gangs which cemented the bond between each state security apparatus and the criminal underworld.

These criminal groups benefited because they, along with the support of their criminal counterparts, who were their enemies on the battlefield, managed to hold monopolies over the smuggle of petrol, cigarettes and weapons for the war effort. This Balkan transnational crime connection was extremely strong during the war, and it was one of the many challenges that the region as a whole faced in succumbing when the war had finished. With the war coming to an end these criminal structures reaped the benefits from the politicians in power and what resulted was a tightly connected network between the mafia

and the political establishment. While the underground economy is conventionally viewed as operating outside of state controls, in the case of sanctions in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), it was to a substantial extent state directed and promoted as "patriotic smuggling". In short, sanctions enhanced the criminalization of politics and the politicization of criminality. Examples of this "patriotic smuggling" and inter-ethnic cooperation include instances when Serbia allowed weapons from Romania and Bulgaria to reach its enemies in Croatia and Bosnia over Serbian territory. In return, the Bosnians, Croatians and Albanians were selling oil to their enemy, the Serbs. This was because profit from oil at the time of sanctions was huge. The profit from these activities from all sides went in two directions. It either went to the state which used the money to buy even more weapons or into the pockets of the powerful Balkan mafia.

Through these kind of embargo-busting commercial deals, the ties between organized crime and the state deepened and expanded. Such an atmosphere built on low morality and where dishonesty was a virtue led to a hasty criminalization of society and the springing up of a new elite. This new elite, however, were the criminals. No other sphere of society was impacted so strongly by the sanctions. Beginning with the war and sanctions, a new period in social development commenced. This new period was that the state apparatus and organized crime grew together. It is a known fact that criminal groups were the largest beneficiaries from the UN sanctions that were imposed on Serbia-Montenegro during the wars in the early 1990 (Montenegro became independent in 2006). In fact the grey economy was the major coping strategy of a considerable part of the population. It was a phenomenon that was tolerated by the government and that developed into a deep-rooted philosophy of behavior for a considerable number of the population. An estimate in 2002 stated that about one million people in Serbia were involved in the grey economy, constituting nearly one-third (30.6%) of active participants in the labor market. In 2003, employment in the grey economy accounted for some 35% of total employment in Serbia. The effects of this period still plague the countries of the former Yugoslavia. No more is this evident than in Serbia where the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic in March 2003 was a stark reminder of how organized crime became part of the state apparatus and the extent to which extent its influence managed to span in all layers of the society.

Solving the problems of crime and corruption and opening up a Pandora's box as to the issues which have affected Serbian society are not just issues which affect Serbia, but they affect the region and the countries of the former Yugoslavia as a whole since there are worrying levels of corruption and crime in Bosnia, Montenegro and Croatia as well. Issues such as police cooperation and intelligence sharing have taken on a role of extreme importance. Over the past few years there have been results on the field not just with the arrest of fugitives but also with cross-border cooperation on succumbing human trafficking and drug smuggling. Through these efforts we have witnessed the announcement of the formation of a regional centre for the fight against organized crime. This was announced by both the Serbian Interior Minister,

Ivica Dacic, and his Croatian counterpart Tomislav Karamarko. As part of a regional campaign to battle organized crime, Serbia and Croatia also signed an extradition agreement whereby individuals charged with the highest criminal offences would no longer be allowed to use either of the two countries as sanctuary. According to the agreement, an individual could be extradited to the country where an act was committed regardless of nationality. The latest development is the agreement signed between Serbia and Montenegro on October 29, 2010, over the extradition of criminals, which is based on the same principle as the one with Croatia. Following this agreement, a series of arrests followed. Serbia has since taken into custody 12 men charged by Montenegro with war crimes and Montenegro has detained 6 organized crime suspects wanted by Serbia.

However, one must realize that these latest arrests are only the beginning of uncovering the issues which have plagued the Balkans for all these years. This is not only the case with Serbia but it is present in all the former republics that still find it very difficult to deal with their past.

The need for improved border controls, reinforced fight against illegal immigration and trans-border organized crime are some of the requirements that these countries face if they want to accede to the EU. With the promise of EU accession, reforms in these sectors are expected to provide a sense of urgency and a popular incentive that local governments can use to build political consensus and ensure effective implementation on the road to eventual EU membership.

The best sort of initiative is a regional one because it has the most chance of success. This also applies to the countries of the former Yugoslavia. The cooperation that the police and intelligence departments have across the region is one of the first steps to reaching a compromise on issues of even greater importance. The fact that diplomatic relations between Serbia and Croatia have taken on new highs is among other things also due to improved relations of their interior and justice ministries. Nevertheless, the issues of Kosovo and Bosnia remain open. But it is quite clear where the possible answer and solution lie: they lie in domestic initiatives, there on the 'field' and in standing by one's promises.