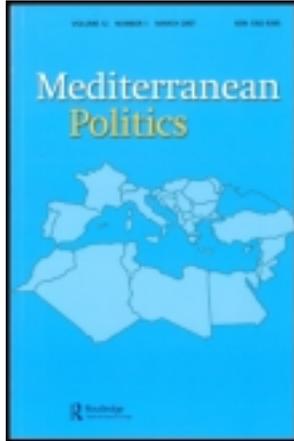


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### The Decade Horribilis: Organized Violence and Organized Crime along the Balkan Peripheries, 1991-2001

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# The *Decade Horribilis*: Organized Violence and Organized Crime along the Balkan Peripheries, 1991–2001

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**ABSTRACT** *The 10-year-long cycle of war that swept the Balkan peripheries saw the soldering of nationalist agendas, local clientelistic interests, and transnational illicit activities. This investigation seeks to shed light on the nexus that exists between this collusive admixture and the process of violent geopolitical rearticulation. Using mainly investigative journalism and specialized research, the author explores underground political economies, mapping out illicit flows, reading the modifications in routes and distribution modalities in connection with power shifts and war. The analysis moves from the Croatian secession to the explosion of the ‘Albanian question’, from the underpinnings of Milošević’s regime to the independence of Montenegro. The author identifies distinctive regularities that underlie the symbiotic relationship between political power and organized crime structures: a possible discontinuity is discerned in the longue durée trajectory of state making, war making and illicit trades. While the political holds primacy, the global neo-liberal economy de-structures traditional organizational models, empowers intermediation, and gives organized crime a formidable opportunity to emancipate itself from the traditional role of provider, often allowing direct intervention in the management of political violence and in the moulding of state structures.*

## War Lights and Criminal Shadows

The *decade horribilis* that marked the end of the twentieth century saw the return of war in Europe. The gloomy Balkan battlefields stood in dark contrast with the exhilaration that many felt as the cold war structures collapsed, and a new world order based on indivisibility of peace was proclaimed. A heterodox creature between East and West, the Yugoslav federation imploded in a violent, ten-year-long agony, during which nationalist projects collided with each other. Through the fog of war, deep elements of elite collusion soon became discernible. Many of the fortunes of the protagonists of this story had not to do with the epic of patriotic defence of the

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fatherland, but with obscure politico-military deals, black market transactions, and mafia investments.

The ‘dark side’ of this war cannot, as one might be tempted to conclude too hastily, be dismissed as the inevitable side effect of all wars. The following analysis is an attempt to delve into these opaque processes, shedding some light on facts, events, and connections that often have been relegated away from the main picture, or used for hasty, caricatural representations.

The intertwining of newly emerged, ethnically defined institutions, mafia-style war economies and elite connivance patterns is quite tangible. Seen from the ground, war in Bosnia can be hardly reconciled *sic et simpliciter* with the long dominant idea of a ‘Greater Serb’, genocidal aggression that was resisted (at least from 1994 onward) by a Muslim–Croatian alliance receiving belated external support. A scrutiny of local dynamics reveals the existence of a collection of local wars along which state-dismantling and state-making projects have been articulated. Thus, around the project of creating the Croatian state of Herzeg-Bosna, the very same elites that were conducting terror campaigns in the daylight were making deals at night. Most top-down diplomatic representations do not fully capture the nature of war making and state making in Bosnia and, inasmuch as Bosnian events illuminate wider regional dynamics, of the other wars in the region (Bjelaković and Strazzari, 1998).

Accounting for eclipsed processes at a wide, regional level is not an easy task, given the difficulty in collecting and verifying data. Nonetheless, there exist many journalistic and academic sources tackling the nexus between political and criminal agendas in the Balkans. While we still do not know much, our knowledge about how events occurred is certainly beyond a first exploratory phase, and a theoretically informed interpretation of empirical patterns can therefore be attempted.

A *proviso* is in order. This analysis of the dynamics of underground and criminal economies is not intended to formulate truth claims on the ‘real causes’ of a war that was prepared in the shadows. The question of root and proximate causes of peace and war in the Balkans is too complex to be reduced to monocausal explanations. The following analysis, for example, is not premised on economic greed as the key causal mechanism behind armed conflict in the Yugoslav wars. Research on civil war centred on the ‘greed *versus* grievance’ dichotomy (Collier and Sambanis, 2005) seems to be unable to properly account for deeper structural factors that shape the forms that politics takes along world peripheries.

### **Now You Are On Your Own: Baby Steps**

A critical aspect for understanding the nexus between war and the economy in a (former) Yugoslav context is the role played by the pre-existing, ‘self-management’-based economy. Different from the centralized Soviet model, the Yugoslav system encouraged the consolidation of local economic elites and a clientelistic system that usually followed ethnic demarcations. This had clear implications for conflict patterns: by ignoring the legacy of this system one could hardly understand the case of Fikret Abdić, the Muslim leader of the ‘Bihać pocket’ in north-western Bosnia.

Abdić was an influential businessman with good relations with the Krajina Serbs. He ended up living in Croatia after mobilizing an army that stood against Sarajevo's more uncompromising line toward international diplomatic plans. Interestingly, Abdić's self-styled 'minister of foreign affairs' was for some time an Italian truck driver from Lucca, Tuscany.

Such a grotesque outcome was not part of an immutable script. The last attempt to adopt badly needed reforms and mobilize young political *cadres* at the time of the government of Ante Marković was boycotted by a *de facto* alliance between conservative party clienteles and new nationalist actors. When key international players withdrew their political and financial support for the reform plan on grounds of instability, the road to violent provocations was opened (Woodward, 1995). While nationalism derailed the path of democratization, the introduction of a market economy coincided with the onset of plundering: the conquest of the levers of political power in a system based on social property became synonymous with the opportunity to control the process of allocation of property rights. Armed factions provided their services in the process. In the years to come, big and small self-styled republics with self-styled ministries systematically enacted predatory measures to ensure control over family savings and productive resources, as well as through covert and illegal channels to consolidate their grip on the territory.

The way in which one may speak of 'war economy' in the context of the Balkan wars differs radically from the traditional notion of 'mobilization of all productive resources for the war effort': as soon as the nationalists rose to power questions such as the slump in GDP disappeared from the public debate. The outbreak of war meant the annihilation of the economy, mass unemployment and high local instability. The new regimes abolished all intermediate political bodies, banned trade unions, and used the black market to plunder and reallocate wealth. The disappearance of fiscal extraction meant that in order to sustain the cost of war, the economy moved from production to predation.

Along with Tilly's (1985) thesis on state formation as organized crime, Thomas Gallant (1999) has examined the way in which in modern times bandits facilitated the process of state making before being co-opted within state structures. The mushrooming of different types of militias in ex-Yugoslavia (Bougarel, 1996a: 103) can be interpreted as part of the process of decomposition and recomposition of the state's monopoly on force, and as a bridge toward new armies and new forms of political legitimacy. This process can also be seen as 'the rise of the parastate' (Liotta, 2000: 26–7) – i.e., a force acting *against* the state, *within* the state or *in place of* the state by laying claims of succession to an expiring order by seeking to transform itself into a state or to align with larger states. If one focuses on the historical trajectory of modern state sovereignty, the role played by international piracy, chartered companies with licence to wage war, and privateering practices, then the Balkan wars assume a familiar colouration. It comes as no surprise that across the sieges implicit and explicit economic and military deals were quite frequent. The defence of Sarajevo was first organized by street gangs, which were physically eliminated as the monopoly of force was reconstructed around the Bosnian state *Armija*. As Thompson (1989) convincingly illustrates, after being used

by state powers to reinforce their sovereignty prerogatives, such agents were eventually liquidated or neutralized as the state's monopoly became complete and the international order changed.

The result of war activities is the drawing of new social and ethno-territorial borders, and the establishment of an all-encompassing mafia system based on the docility of a population that is both intimidated and assisted through clientelistic channels. Illicit practices are a fundamental pillar of this system. In order to understand how all this came about, and appreciate possible mutations in the process, one has to set out from an historical contextualization of the role that the Balkan region has vis-à-vis the international illicit sector.

### **Well-Trodden Old Paths**

In the late nineteenth century opium was extensively cultivated in Central Anatolia and in the Macedonian region, and it constituted a major share of Ottoman exports. In the Balkans, the growth of the opium derivative market accompanied the dissolution of empires, and the parallel emergence of new state borders.

International efforts to regulate the drug trade hark back to the treaties of 1925 and 1931, whose main, immediate impact was to transfer the flow of drugs into illicit channels. When the big western chemical industries gave birth to an international cartel, traditional producers for European markets such as Turkey and (first) Yugoslavia found themselves cut out: Ankara and Belgrade then cooperated, trying to strengthen their position in a contracting economic sector and developing illegal channels that intercepted a demand coming from smaller European plants. The manufacturing companies that were closed down in Europe would invariably be moved to Turkey, while any blow to Turkish production would be followed by the appearance of Bulgarian manufactures and refineries. The drug trade was already endowed with quite flexible structures (Chassagne, 2004).

In the wake of World War II, a myriad of formal and informal channels constituted what became known as the 'Balkan Route'. After the war, the Yugoslav federation extracted significant advantages from its location as a geopolitical buffer between the two blocs. This had implications for profits coming from illicit trades, too. By the early 1970s the 'French connection', which smuggled Turkish heroin to the big North American cities via laboratories located in Marseille, was dismantled. As a consequence the Turkish organizations pointed their attention to Western Europe: the Italian mafia, so far an intermediary, adapted part of the logistical structures used in tobacco *contrabbando* to the new heroin market, thereby becoming a partner of the Turkish criminal groups. As a consequence, securing control over the Balkan land routes became crucial. At the very moment in which the 'French connection' became history, 70 per cent of the morphine travelling from Turkey to Europe went by land through Bulgaria and Yugoslavia (Lamour and Lamberti, 1972).

The historical 'Balkan route' runs between Istanbul and Sofia (with Skopje as a variant), then reaches Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana. In this context Bosnia and Herzegovina – the bedrock of Yugoslav defence strategies – becomes an important

*point de passage* for drugs transiting towards Austria, Italy and Hungary (Pietrostefani, 2003: 236). The amelioration of the road networks, the growth of tourism and the signing of the convention on international road transport (TIR) facilitated the exchange between Turkey, Yugoslavia and Western Europe.

Secret services and affiliated paramilitary groups typically provided the junction between the criminal and the political. In Turkey the concept code-named 'deep state' illustrates the connivance that exists between the security apparatus, militant nationalists, and the network of protection and services that involves heroin barons.<sup>1</sup> While even the collapsing Albanian regime sponsored some activities such as cigarette smuggling, the most blatant illustration probably comes from Bulgaria. Here already during the 1960s the secret services established import–export societies<sup>2</sup> as a cover for clandestine transactions (in arms, drugs, and money) that would end up attracting all sorts of international traffickers, thus extorting profits and eventually exerting control over local drug smuggling routes (Chassagne, 2004: 151). After the transition, former elements of the security apparatus became key figures in an underground dominated by insurance companies and ex-wrestlers. A long trail of blood was left in Sofia during the 'gangster war' of 2002–03. Among those who started their lucrative activities with deposits siphoned from party channels and who ended up assassinated is the tycoon Ilya Pavlov, owner of the giant Multigroup Corporation.<sup>3</sup> Other biographies took a radically different course. In the case of the karate champion Boiko Borisov, who served the Ministry of Interior during the 1980s, after setting up a security firm that guarded Czar Simeon II among others, Borisov was appointed General of the Internal Police Force. His immense popularity helped him win election as mayor of Sofia in 2005.<sup>4</sup>

The imposition of the arms embargo<sup>5</sup> on the Yugoslav republics in 1991 is the act that marks the *grand entrée* of transnational organized crime onto the Yugoslav stage (Gambino and Grimaldi, 1995). An embargo meant demand for logistics and know-how, while political fluidity meant that the time had come to take risks. A memorandum handed in 1994 to the Slovenian President Drnovsek estimated arm trafficking to and through Slovenia to almost equal the Republic's budget. A protagonist of this business, according to the Slovenian press, was Aleksander Oman, a Slovenian expatriate to Australia who had become honorary consul of Liberia in Ljubljana. At the beginning of 1991 the number two of Yugoslav customs, Peter Rajić, drew a clear conclusion from the observation of the weapons that drug trafficking organizations were exporting to Yugoslavia thanks to colossal deals that were made in Western Europe, Hungary and the then Czechoslovakia: 'all this makes one suppose that war will be of unprecedented violence' (Auchlin, 1993).

### **Croatia Shows the Flag: The 'Balkan Route' during the 1990s**

An Interpol report on the year 1990, issued in 1991, praised the Croatian police for being the most efficient in Europe in carrying out activities to suppress drug trafficking. One year later the report from this source signalled a slump in heroin seizures on Croatian territory (Rastello, 2000: 172).

One way of making sense of this data is to consider the way in which, as war was being decided, illegal activities appeared to become vital for sustaining the secessionist effort (James, 1992). In particular, Croatian Herzegovinan circles – which soon turned out to be the main stakeholders in Tudjman's ruling party in Zagreb – began to demand a policy of non-interference in their illicit activities, which often had to do with the procurement of weapons through the mobilization of diaspora lobbying (see *infra*). Until 1990, Belgrade's establishment had been presenting itself as an efficient guarantor vis-à-vis the international drug trade networks; in doing so, it had been able to extract a significant profit from trafficking activities that were accompanied by corruption and big money-laundering investments. Evidence stemming from Italian and Austrian police sources confirms that Yugoslav federal authorities were involved, and that they would in fact extract profits by granting the safety of the loads (Rumiz, 1993).

The strategy adopted by the new Croatian elite had been one of upsetting the existing equilibrium by hampering and disrupting the flow of heroin that traditionally transited along the 'Balkan route'. The stakes were large: according to Interpol, during the 1980s approximately 70 per cent of the heroin consumed in Western Europe was channelled along this axis (Provvisionato, 2000: 92). Until the secession, therefore, challenging the faltering federative structures was part of Zagreb's strategy of opposing Belgrade's reforms, which implied a re-centralization of the country. In this phase, the seizures of drugs on Croatian territory marked the emergence of an increasingly self-confident political power. Eventually, the independence of Croatia meant that the influx of money that could be extracted from the river of narcotics originating in Turkey aroused the appetites of the new political elite.<sup>6</sup> For Zagreb it was no longer the time for interdiction strategies, or for challenging the criminal underground. It was now time to play a new game in the role of protagonist. Austrian officers registered the strengthening of Croatian criminal clans, whose logistical bases were located mainly in Herzegovina, in direct contact with the Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane (HVO, Croatia Defence Council) militias (AEGD, 2002). A new, unprecedented route was opened then between South America and the Dalmatian coast. Diaspora groups that were mobilized for this purpose (Santoro, 2004) later became the main beneficiaries of the process of privatization of public companies that the Tudjman regime promoted.

In open violation of the embargo, weapons entered Croatia from many quarters, each time with the involvement of Western secret services and each time with public denial on the part of western governments. In August 1991, while the media spread Tudjman's *cri de douleur* for Croatia being left unarmed at the mercy of 'Serbian communist repression', arsenals in Zagreb were already in good shape: 100,000 rifles had been bought from East Germany a few weeks before its regime collapsed, while hundreds of Stingers and anti-tank missiles were reported to have arrived from Austria and Italy, either illegally or through the classical method of triangulation.<sup>7</sup> According to *Jane's Defence Weekly*, the previous year Austria had imported from Spain five times the number of Astra pistols actually needed. As of 1991, the Croatian police were supplied with Astra pistols. A large proportion of the ex-Soviet arms that Croatia obtained (Mig21, tanks T72 and helicopters Mi24) were in fact

coming from Germany. In Novi Čakovci, a strategic military base near Vukovar (seized by the Croat National Guard), was supplied with missiles – and therefore able to launch against Serbia. On 28 July 1991, Yugoslav Mig29 attacked the base where, according to media reports, a team of 19 German instructors had recently arrived. Germany denied the fact, but a subsequent cancellation of an air transit request left many doubts (Gambino and Grimaldi, 1995: 100). All sorts of mercenaries and obscure characters contributed to the Croat cause. When the famous Colonel MacKenzie died in Sierra Leone (February 1995), *Soldier of Fortune* magazine published a picture showing him active in Bosnia in 1994 alongside US trainers (Gambino and Grimaldi, 1995: 90). Eventually, *Operation Storm*, through which the Croats re-conquered the Krajina region, demonstrated how a country under embargo had managed to arm itself with the most sophisticated weaponry, and how it had received military know-how through US private security companies such as MPRI. Between 1991 and 1995 Zagreb was able to devote 40 per cent of its budget to military expenditures.<sup>8</sup>

Tellingly, one can find evidence of how emissaries of the Sicilian *Cosa Nostra* felt increasingly at home along the Croatian coast. Giambattista Licata – a major exponent of the Sicilian *clan Fidanzati* and of the *mafia del Brenta* rooted in northern Italy – was headquartered near Rijeka. He was in possession of a Croatian passport and operated in connection with known extreme right militants. By intercepting Licata, the Venetian investigators dismantled an illegal channel of arms procurement worth an estimated \$50 million. The weapons were being shipped from Israel to Croatian ports (Gambino and Grimaldi, 1995: 26–9). In these years, Italian mafias were losing protection because of the *mani pulite* anti-corruption campaign in Italy, which decapitated the entire political system. The response was an unprecedented mafia offensive launched by the *cupola* of *Cosa Nostra*: when the judge Giovanni Falcone, the symbol of the anti-mafia campaign, was killed with his wife and escort on the highway at Capaci (Palermo), the Semtex that was employed for the explosion was of Croatian provenance.<sup>9</sup>

At this point the star of the ‘Balkan route’ was no longer shining. Far too many predatory, opposing interests were now demanding royalties in an unpredictable and increasingly fragmented geopolitical configuration. The mushrooming of territorial militias and roadblocks, the outbreak of war, and the imposition of stricter sanctions on rump-Yugoslavia were all elements that made the ‘Balkan route’ look increasingly unpredictable, and a better investment for drugs entrepreneurs.

### **Just Across the River: The ‘Albanian Economic Miracle’**

In Albania, these years were marked by the rise to power of the Democratic Party led by Sali Berisha, formerly the doctor of Enver Hoxha, and the interest of the northern *fares*.<sup>10</sup> This change occurred in a dramatically evolving institutional and social context where the concept of ‘illegal’ – to put it euphemistically – was highly amorphous. Once again, this political change had deep consequences on the local criminal landscape. After decades of hegemony of southern *fis*, the previously marginalized northern clans were now in control of the capital and of the state.

During the cold war, the border with Kosovo and Montenegro had been kept under strict control, if not sealed. The fall of the Yugoslav and Albanian regimes, the vagaries of the transition, the existence of inter-Albanian family bonds, and the wide asymmetry in economic standards made this border quite permeable. At the same time, geographical remoteness and an impervious morphology explain the relevance of this quiet area in a moment in which the Serbo-Montenegrin federation was struck by an international embargo sanctioning its role in a war that was being fought elsewhere.

Contrary to the expectation that sanctions and political tension in Kosovo would make the border hermetically sealed, exchanges soared all along it. For example, it is estimated that in the period 1993 to 1994, when approximately 200 boats per day were crossing the waters of the lake of Shkodër towards the Montenegrin town of Plavnica, oil-smuggling activities accounted for a daily influx of approximately \$1 million (CSD, 2002: 14). An average of nearly 500,000 litres of fuel were smuggled into Montenegro each day across the river Buna, thanks to the complicity of the local customs and police forces (Ameye, 2006: 68). On their way back, the boats carried other licit goods such as tons of flour from Vojvodina.<sup>11</sup> Quite tellingly, the only media that spoke of Albanian–Yugoslav illegal trade were Croatian newspapers. Likewise, the press close to the Albanian opposition denounced the way the breach of the UN embargo had been agreed upon directly by Albanian President Berisha with his Montenegrin counterpart Momir Bulatović in September 1993.<sup>12</sup> If one considers that ten years later gasoline smuggling would remain a pillar of Kosovo's economy, then the lasting salience of these mechanisms becomes apparent. The economic chaos linked to the difficulty of transitions and privatization, the existence of embargoes, and the widely differing prices of petrol products in the Balkan region represented the most favourable conditions for a number of actors to emerge and operate at different levels of legality (CSD, 2003).

One pillar of the Serbian–Albanian *pax mafiosa* was undoubtedly the axis that came into being between Željko Ražnatović, alias Arkan, and Enver Hajin. While the former was a well-known Serbian criminal boss and a paramilitary chief who in Pristina had won the seat to the Yugoslav Parliament, Hajin was an ex-officer of Enver Hoxha's secret police who had become a prominent figure among the Albanian criminal bosses operating around the Shkodër lake. Along with licit goods that avoided taxation or international sanctions, the southern borders saw the arrival of arms and Turkish heroin. In particular, narcotics began to beat the old routes of tobacco smuggling, reaching the Adriatic ports of Bar (Montenegro) and Durrës (Albania).

At the same time, Kosovar businessmen were increasingly seen in Tirana, where an explosive admixture of politics, private interests, and illicit transactions was under preparation. As revealed by a number of intelligence and police sources, *Vefa*, the most important Albanian holding until the implosion of 1997, was heavily involved in both funding the national political system and in the exchange of drugs for weapons. Thanks to contacts with the Italian mafia from Puglia – the *Sacra Corona Unita* – its profits grew exponentially throughout the 1990s and its managers even developed an investment strategy in southern Italy (Gumbel, 1997).<sup>13</sup>

In and around Slobodan Milosevic's sanctions-stricken regime, national interests were militating in favour of much more indulgence than overtly admitted vis-à-vis Albanian networks and neighbours. Criminal organizations provided all the necessary services, and Albanian organizations too benefited from high-level protection. The existence of a situation of mutual gain and connivance must be fully appreciated if one wants to reach a sound understanding of the doldrums in Kosovo until the escalation of 1998. On the one hand, one can observe repression, as well as the self-organization and self-ghettoization dynamics that characterized the existence of the underground Republic of Kosova. On the other hand, however, in a situation in which parallel political structures and shadow economies dominated the scene, the province had grown into a crossroad for profitable illicit trades. Contrary to widespread perceptions, indigence was never a major problem in Kosovo, thanks to the existence of a dense network of private business and assistance activities. By late 1998, the average income among Albanian Kosovars had become two or three times higher than the average (public) salary of a Serbian citizen of Priština (Morozzo della Rocca, 1999: 64).

Evidence of Albanian Kosovars involved in drug smuggling can be traced back to investigations conducted by the Swiss police in 1991. Yet the criminal profile assumed by Kosovo's organizations is best illustrated by a number of operations conducted throughout Europe between 1992 and 1997. A joint operation with the Italian police led to the arrest of Kosovar heroin dealers in Skopje in 1994 (Milivojevic, 1995). *Operation Macedonia*, a joint effort of Italian, Swiss and German police, shed light on financial links in Zurich, pointing to the collaboration that emerged between 1995 and 1998 between Kosovar mafia clans and the Italian '*ndrangheta*'. European law enforcement agencies began to issue reports that documented how ethnic Albanians had become the second biggest community after Turks detained for narco-trafficking. The close link between heroin trafficking and the financing of the Kosovo liberation movement has been documented in different countries, at different levels, and by many intelligence reports and journalistic sources (Klebnikov, 2000).

Albanian-speaking mafias were the first foreign criminal organizations in Italy that endowed themselves with 'fire squads' to settle accounts whenever a transaction went bad. In January 1999 alone they killed nine times in two weeks in Milan. Year after year the city of Milan, already an important hub for drug distribution, rose to the role of main referent for what has been tellingly labelled the 'golden triangle' of Priština–Tirana–Podgorica, an area where 5 tons of heroin would transit per year, according to investigative sources (Colaprico, 2005). In 1998 the Italian police dismantled eight organizations and arrested 100 Kosovars, charging them with trafficking in heroin and arms.<sup>14</sup> In 2004, one-third of the heroin seized in Italy came from operations conducted in this city. The arrest of Albanian politicians tied to Berisha's *milieu*, of important Kosovo bosses (Agim Gashi in Milan) and leading figures of the '*ndrangheta*' (Giuseppe Morabito and Domenico Branca) revealed the organizational capabilities and the modalities of territorial control of a criminal network that was based along the Po Valley but extended throughout the continent.

Branca was arrested in Bratislava in 1995, as he was working with Albanian-speaking clans.

Branca's arrest took place along the so-called 'oriental' or 'northern Balkan route', which offered alternative and safe bases through Bulgaria, well north of the Danube. *Operation Africa*, carried out by the Italian police in June 1998, unmasked a number of tracks converging in Bratislava, documenting how, by the second half of the 1990s, heroin was no longer running on big Turkish TIRs across Yugoslavia (Omicron, 2001). A more sophisticated net of small couriers had come into being under the control of the Kosovo groups in alliance with the '*ndrangheta*' along the Turkey–Budapest–Bratislava axis. Capital would arrive in Vienna already clean, accompanied by bosses that had changed their clothes and were now wearing elegant Italian fashions (Barbacetto, 1999).

A ramification of this 'northern Balkan route' goes through Bulgaria, and then into Serbia. In December 1996, at the border post of Dimitrovgrad-Gradina, the Yugoslav police intercepted 365 kilograms of heroin on board a truck carrying green peppers from Plovdiv. To fully appreciate this figure, one can compare it with the 20 kilograms that the Yugoslav police declared they had seized during 1998, or with the 14 kilograms intercepted by the Macedonian police in 1999. The Plovdiv-based society turned out to be owned by Nazim Delegu, an Albanian from Kosovo who was known as a godfather of a wide mafia net extending to the former Yugoslav territories, Albania and Italy (Miletitch, 1998: 124).

Kosovar Albanian organizations won the underground war over the drug market against Albanian challengers from Albania. A note from the US Drug Enforcement Agency dated 1997 estimated that the Kosovo Albanian mafia controlled business worth three times the GDP of the state of Albania (Provvisionato, 2000: 96). Kosovo Albanian investors even penetrated the southern Mediterranean route, i.e. via Greece and Cyprus, according to the Italian *Direzione Investigativa Antimafia*. As growth dynamics unfolded, and the need for more sophisticated and flexible network structures became apparent, clan origin and territorial reference became less and less relevant, and organizations became increasingly mixed.

The organizational model of Albanian criminal clans is similar to those of close-knit '*ndrine*', the criminal families of the Calabrian '*ndrangheta*', a world protagonist in intermediation, particularly rooted in Colombia and South America in general. Affiliates come from the same family or village, and the structure is made up of horizontal relations among several interchangeable bosses who refer to a supreme boss. Once they eliminated rival gangs in Europe, the Kosovars positioned themselves in higher levels of trafficking. Thus Albanian-speaking organizations emancipated themselves from the role of being a mere connection ring between the Turkish mafia and western markets. The strategic alliance with the Italians (and even with Russian and Ukrainian mafias) made these organizations autonomous actors able to diversify investment, beginning for example to deal in cocaine.

By the end of the 'black decade' Albanian mafias were protagonists on the global scene. *Operazione Pristina* was carried out by the Italian police (with the support of Europol analysts) in several countries of Europe, South America and Central Asia. In early 2001, a Colombian–Albanian axis was dismantled. It was geared to ship

some 40 tons of cocaine a year thanks to the protection offered by some high-level police officers in Tirana.<sup>15</sup>

### **Kosovo Flares Up**

An early signal of the direction that events in Kosovo were about to take was the murder in 1996 of the aforementioned Enver Hajin at the hand of Darko Asanin, who shared with Arkan the reputation of boss and war hero. New equilibria were forming and the wind was changing. In Albania, Berisha turned his attention toward Europe, most notably Germany, thus irritating some of its early US sponsors. Perhaps this step was taken in an excess of self-confidence resting on a 'financial miracle' fuelled by speculative capital. These speculations were pioneered by figures such as Hajdin Sejdia, a Switzerland-based Kosovar businessman who administered and spent some \$40 million, mainly stolen from peasants and workers' saving. An IMF inspection team visited the country and announced the storm to come: the bankruptcy of financial societies meant the disappearance of the savings of the majority of Albanians who had trusted in the 'capitalist miracle' whereby 'money breeds money'. The wave of panic that followed in March and April 1997 is remembered as a quasi-civil war during which hundreds were killed. Berisha's party left its fingerprints on the financial pyramids; Fatos Nano – the Socialist leader who was then under arrest – fled from prison, while the south of the country was burning. Unlike Berisha, Nano had solid connections with the southern *fis*, and his return to power seemed to imply that Albania would be less involved in the Kosovar and Macedonian imbroglio.

The implosion of Albania, and the evaporation of its police and military officers, had obvious implications for illicit activities and transborder trafficking. The border between Albania and Macedonia became entirely permeable, following the trail of the ancient Via Egnatia, the road connecting the two capitals of the Roman Empire, Rome and Byzantium. The lake of Ohrid offered a way out for the Turkish heroin that was now being diverted away from Kosovo. Not unlike what had happened with the traditional 'Balkan route' at the time of the war in Croatia and Bosnia, the whole system of Kosovo connivance and collusion had become too costly and unpredictable compared to possible new splinter routes.

At Dayton, international diplomacy had carefully avoided addressing the Kosovo issue, and in the United States the republican candidate Bob Dole, a strong advocate of Kosovo's independence, had lost the elections. Therefore the Kosovar Albanian elite's gradualist project of constructing a parallel state, a parallel economy and a parallel society was now at a dead end. The 3 per cent income tax that each Kosovar *emigré* was contributing to the 'Republic of Kosova' via its government in exile led by Bujar Bukoshi ceased to be poured into the coffers of the Pristina-based, non-violent presidency of Ibrahim Rugova, who therefore found himself cornered. The weapons that had just disappeared from Albanian garrisons and depots were cheap and easy to obtain through the porous borders of the mountains separating Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo. The trafficking route through Kosovo was becoming obsolete: the Albanian ports of Saranda, Vlora and Durrës were now offering a more

convenient outlet. The new routes connected Bulgaria with Macedonia and Albania. The Macedonian city of Tetovo, close to Kosovo, stood in the middle.

The single most visible phenomenon linked to organized criminality in Albania is probably the blossoming of sea smuggling, in a continuum between Italian and Albanian organized groups. The phenomenon hinged on the rise of a new social profile, the *skafisti* – i.e. young drivers of speedboats across the Adriatic–Ionian Sea.<sup>16</sup> Up to 1996, dozens of boats would leave each night from the city of Vlora, thus reaching the scale of a social phenomenon propelled by the adoption of laws against migration to the EU. Kosovars were charged almost double the price of local Albanians. Then Kurds began to arrive, along with others from the Middle East, and eventually even Chinese, with prices that skyrocketed. Human smuggling to the EU was providing the organizations that dealt with it some \$3 to \$4 billion per year (Kojdheli, 2006).

In 1998 guns began to fire in the mountains of Kosovo. The Albanian leader Fatos Nano, who had so far been harshly criticized by Albano-Macedonians and Kosovars, turned into a fervent sponsor of the Ushtria Çlirimtare Kosovës (UÇK). Parallel to this, in an attempt to gain some direct relevance, Berisha made an attempt to create a professional army (FARK) in alliance with Bukoshi, and a brief underground battle was fought between Kosovo Albanian factions, also on Albanian territory. After some murderous episodes, the UÇK formations of Hashim Thaçi and Ramush Haradinaj remained almost unrivalled and claimed territorial control throughout the province as soon as open hostilities ceased thanks to an extended net of self-appointed mayors and ex-combatants.

In spite of a certain reticence on the part of the US anti-drug agencies in admitting it, it is a fact that in the aftermath of war in Kosovo drug traffickers consolidated their influence and increased heroin trafficking, forging links with other drug cartels. The existence of connections between political militants and illicit activities is not difficult to prove. An investigation conducted in 2006 on an organization providing ‘all inclusive’ packages for illegal migration ran into intercepted phone conversations in which the protagonists of the business were narrating the way in which they actively contributed to staging the violent incidents that swept the province in March 2004 (Castaldo, 2006).

### **In the Underground of Belgrade**

As the contours of the Balkan landscapes were being remoulded also by the flowing of underground criminal rivers, the states became increasingly family affairs, in which virtually any actor with a role to play was personally entangled with all other actors. The distinction between legal and illegal, as well as between institutional and informal, became increasingly irrelevant. After years of sanctions and regional turmoil, the borders between white, grey and black economies looked extremely fuzzy. The war mood and the survival imperatives that shaped public and private perceptions by 1999, in coincidence with NATO’s bombing campaign, marked the overcoming of formal institutional dialectics and the sliding of political life into pure power politics and repression of dissent. The shrinking of political and economic

spaces meant a dramatic rise in the killings of prominent politicians and businessmen (Strazzari and Dognini, 2000).

Descending into Belgrade's mafia underground, one can note that the structures of Serbian organized crime throughout the Yugoslav wars rest in a significant way upon pre-existing networks. These were connected to the counter-espionage apparatus, the police and the army, circles that often had been employed in the past in the not-so-invisible war against a host of enemies abroad. Beginning in the late 1960s common criminal elements were recruited and granted benefits if they contributed to the underground war with anti-Yugoslav émigrés (Kusovac, 2002). The latter were to be found among those nationalist circles that managed to place their men in leading positions during the secessionist wars.

A good example is Gojko Šušak, Croatian minister of defence. Susak used to be a businessman in Ottawa, Canada, a position from which he had been particularly active in organizing anti-Yugoslav provocations, the funding of nationalist militant factions, arms procurement operations through Latin America, and eventually violent incidents in the early days of war. Among other activities, militant Croats from Herzegovina had been strategically manipulating the remarkable flows of pilgrims visiting the Catholic sanctuary of Medjugorje (Rastello, 1998: 63–77). In February 1991, when he was still minister of immigration, Susak invited the entire Croatian diaspora to contribute to the defence of Croatia's independence by sending contributions to a Geneva-based UBS bank account. The account soon contained up to DM150 million, and it remained in use until Susak's death in 1998.<sup>17</sup> A year before the ruling nationalist party had won the elections thanks to massive funds hidden in a remote bank of Zupanja, where firms doing business with the Ministry of Defence were asked to deposit bribes (Hedl, 2003).<sup>18</sup>

With the spiralling of wars and sanctions, the Yugoslav state began to collaborate with local mafia organizations that had nothing to do with the security apparatus. Meanwhile, Milošević's government was quite efficiently raking up family savings and foreign currency, resources that were needed to sustain wars and withstand international isolation. This was made possible through the systematic manipulation of monetary policy, through speculation, and through the strict control of street money-changers. Milošević was originally a banker, and banking societies revealed themselves to be Trojan horses for securing a firmer grip on the productive apparatus. In 1990 a campaign named 'Loans to Serbia' was launched to collect hard currency by promising fabulous returns. The newly launched private bank *Karicbank* was the heart of the operation. Predictably, *KaricBank* was sunk, while the money (an estimated \$500 million) ended up in Cypriot banks, opening new channels that would attract money coming from drug trafficking in the whole Mediterranean region. The entire mechanism would fund the wars to come.

Parallel to this, in Serbia, *Dafiment* controlled money-changers and provided them with freshly printed currency, speculating on hyperinflation, and forcing Serb industries to be first indebted, then controlled by the *Dafiment's* own financial *cupola*. Similar is the action of *Jugoskandik*, whose director was in control of black markets and weapons deals with Israel. The sinking of *Jugoskandik* meant the loss of savings for thousands of citizens in a climate of total impunity, while its director fled

to Israel (Rastello, 1998). Significantly the economic crimes of the regime would remain virtually ignored even in the post-Milošević era.

Looking at Belgrade's financial situation, the close relationship with Cyprus banks, which had played a crucial role in the survival of the country,<sup>19</sup> was progressively interrupted as a result of closer international inspections conducted at US prodding. Nicosia, which had already offered shelter to capital escaping the Lebanese war, and easy financial access for *mafiosi* capital from Bulgaria and other Balkan countries, was now paving its accession to the European Union. Survival for the Yugoslav treasury came thanks to the privatization deal that was concluded not quite transparently with the Italian and Greek companies *Telecom* and *Ote*.

With the economic indicators plummeting, no access to international finance, and Yugoslav forces increasingly under fire by UÇK snipers, the costs of maintaining the massive security apparatus in Kosovo had become intolerably high. Milošević must have been well aware of the fact that the implicit pact with Rugova, whose party controlled parallel Albanian institutions, was not fixed, and keeping control over two million Albanians who had embarked upon an intransigent political project was not a realistic goal. Seen in this light, the widespread idea that Milošević intended to keep a direct grip on the whole region is probably misleading. What is sure is that by 1999 everybody was ready, so the war could begin.

As Cypriot accounts were disclosed, Belgrade turned its attention toward China, in particular to Hong Kong and Shanghai, where Yugoslav consulates were opened.<sup>20</sup> By the time NATO attacked Serbia, the Chinese presence in Belgrade was quite visible. While the influx of Chinese emigrants of rural background was no novelty, Yugoslavia became a destination for Chinese businessmen engaged in key sectors of post-war reconstruction. In this light, NATO's 'accidental bombing' of the Chinese embassy to Yugoslavia raised several questions. In the end, payment problems Belgrade had with *Sinochem* – a provider of Libyan, Iranian and Russian oil – were overcome (Rozen, 2000), and despite the devastating attacks on oil refineries and chemical plants, fuel tanks and bottles for sale disappeared relatively soon from Belgrade's streets. At the same time, the influx of Chinese commodities (shoes, clothing, low-tech items, food) can be situated in the wide grey area between market and underground economy. Along with the production and import of counterfeit goods (heavily concentrated in the region of Sandjak), the expansion of this sector performed a double function. First, it allowed relatively high profits by virtue of low costs. Second, and most important, it ensured a modicum of social stability, meeting the need for consumer goods.

Going back to the question of international sanctions, the abovementioned case of the warlord Arkan remains emblematic of how the embargo was turned into an asset for criminal gangs. At the moment of his assassination in Belgrade, the criminal profile of Arkan – whose Tigers are accused of the worst crimes in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo – stood in striking contrast to that of a blood-thirsty fanatic, and was more in line with that of a skilled service provider. Aligned with the regime, he managed a good share of the pie of oil and derivatives. Increasingly active in the importation to Serbia of German and Swedish-made fertilizers through Hungary, his Montenegrin acquaintances finally allowed his involvement in the cigarette-smuggling business

(Staletović, 2000). The binomial sanctions borders in a context of shrinking state budget became a crucial factor for the Milosevic family, including not only the presidential couple, but also the son Marko, who was heavily involved in transborder activities. In short, by manipulating the embargo, the Milošević family gained control of all the financial and commercial arteries that connect the country with the outside world. While the relationship between sanctions and the crumbling of the regime on 5 October 2000 remains open to debate, the fact that the strategy pursued vis-à-vis the ‘Serbian question’ has contributed heavily to reinforcing the dynamics of criminalization of the public sphere can hardly be denied (Zucconi, 2001).

The fall of Milosevic was accompanied by rumours of deals that the democratic leaders had cut with Belgrade’s underground to secure a smooth path to regime change. The existing continuities between organized crime and institutions in Serbia entered the spotlight when President Djindjic was assassinated on 13 March 2002.

According to many analysts the smoke-screen that had protected the nexus between war crimes, criminality and political power that led to the end of Yugoslavia was eventually being cleared away. Others, by contrast, cast doubts on the way in which the anti-crime campaign was conducted, showing how its protagonists were the very same high officials whose ‘inactivity’, to use a euphemism, had been part of the problem. At the end of Operation Sabljia strong ambiguities were still present in the entire sphere of the security apparatus (Rotta, 2003). By taking aim at the reform impulse, Djindjic’s killers demonstrated that the vestiges of the politico-criminal system were still alive and able to destabilize the country. The crisis of representation and the institutional stalemate that followed lasted until 2006, when a new constitution was adopted as Montenegro made its final step toward secession, and the negotiations over the status of Kosovo were in full swing.

### **Montenegro: Smuggling Independence**

The efficient management of illegal traffic entails a number of activities that can engender frictions if local counter-powers stand up and claim border-control prerogatives. In this respect, the dispute that emerged in 2000 between Belgrade’s federal authorities and the Montenegrin government over the patrolling of the borders (including Podgorica airport) and the Serbian economic blockade on Montenegro, can also be read as friction over ‘who is in control of what’ in a state-making perspective.

After the end of the NATO bombing campaign, which quite tellingly spared the coastal area, Montenegro was *de facto* exempted from international sanctions, and adopted a pro-Western economic course heavily supported by US financial transfers. Up to this moment, the secessionist milieus gravitating around the premier Milo Djukanovic have been trying to distance themselves from Belgrade. Yet also given the size of the country, in parting company with Milošević Djukanović ended up in the hands of the criminal organizations based along the Adriatic coast.

Thanks to the entrepreneurial initiative of societies such as *Zetatrans* or *Monti*,<sup>21</sup> the Montenegrin Republic became the most important staging area for illicit loads

heading for western markets through a number of passages from American, Swiss, Dutch and above all Belgian depots via Ukraine, Poland, Romania, Macedonia (Ruotolo, 1999) and later on via Greece, Cyprus and Croatia (Ruotolo, 2000). According to a report issued by the Italian parliamentary Anti-mafia Commission, Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds operated from Basel, Switzerland, through two organizations. One of them, Export Two, was tasked with the sending of cigarettes to Montenegro along channels that proved to be rather permeable to drug and weapons smuggling as well (Abate and Crimi, 2000). While the treasury of Montenegro was being put safely away in Switzerland along with private capital, a state tax of \$10 per case, euphemistically defined 'on export–import', was being levied on cigarette smuggling.

Montenegro's transformation into a safe haven, or perhaps a pirate colony for Italian *mafiosi* of diverse affiliations, harks back to 1993. Between 1994 and 1995 some 450 protagonists of Italian organized crime found shelter around Podgorica, a small republic that at the time had no contacts with Interpol. The tobacco business toward Italy was then estimated to engender yearly profits of approximately \$1 billion (not to mention the damage to the fiscal revenue system) and to give work to some 26,000 people. An alarm bell rang when the head of police of Podgorica, Vaso Bausic, was apprehended in Bari during his initiation rite into the local *Sacra Corona Unita*. In 1999, the Tribunal of Napoli documented the close relationship between the Montenegrin government and the clan headed by Ciro Mazzarella, a *camorrista* who settled in Lugano, Switzerland. At the end of 1999 the investigation brought the indictment of the then minister of foreign affairs of Montenegro, Branko Perovic, who was charged with collusion with the Napolitan *Camorra*. One year later, upon a mandate of the Italian police, the legendary Swiss referent for the huge cigarette smuggling and money laundering business of a number of mafias, Gerardo Cuomo, was eventually arrested in Zurich.<sup>22</sup> Active through a host of financial societies based in Aruba (Dutch Antilles) and Cyprus, Cuomo was the holder of an import–export licence in the Republic of Montenegro and was able to deal directly with tobacco multinationals. Subsequently, the police, carrying out an investigation into illegal international trade and money laundering, brought to prison among others a Swiss judge who was officially appointed to watch over international smuggling and money laundering. Eventually, in November 2000 the EU Commission announced legal moves against Philip Morris and Reynolds for their involvement in tobacco smuggling and tax evasion.<sup>23</sup> In 2003 the Napolitan persecutors presented a 364-page report that documented in detail the links between Djukanovic's milieu and the mafia organization run by Paolo Savino. The request for arrest was turned down given the immunity that Djukanovic enjoys as a head of state (Bošković, 2003a).

While helping polish up the reputation of Montenegro as a 'Mediterranean Tortuga', western economic, political and security support to Podgorica has been quite ambivalent and little evidence can be found of its effectiveness in reducing criminal activities, whose grotesque aspects kept periodically surfacing in the media. Being crossed by the various Balkan routes, at the end of the 1990s Montenegro had become a land of competition between different sovereignties,

mafias and security apparatuses. The entire people trafficking infrastructure had a solid basis in Podgorica, and scandals concerning women trafficking and prostitution touched high officers and Djukanovic himself. Speaking to the media in 2003, the president declared that cigarettes were lawfully present on Montenegrin soil, and that the government should not be held responsible for the destination of that tobacco (Bošković, 2003b).

The political trajectory of the country is not difficult to decipher: the debate on abolishing corporate taxes and the incentives given to external investment speak for themselves. The idea of an offshore Adriatic basis seem to be particularly appealing for Russian mafias and businessmen who have shown warm support for Djukanović's bid for independence, taking a high profile role in the privatization process (Caracciolo, 2006).

### **Shaky Tiles in the Macedonian Mosaic**

During the brief period that separates the end of hostilities in Kosovo and the outbreak of war in Macedonia, it became evident that the making and unmaking of states in the region was far from concluded, and that this fluid geopolitics was heavily nurtured by illicit activities. The very volatile situation in Montenegro lent plenty of oxygen to criminal activities in and around Kosovo. On the other hand, in Serbia, a hotbed of tensions was the mainly Albanian-inhabited Preševo valley, an area that runs next to the border with Macedonia and that was demilitarized by the technical agreement signed between NATO and the Yugoslav army. Here a number of roads connect the quasi-protectorate of Kosovo with Albanian-inhabited border cities, western Macedonia, central Serbia and Bulgaria. The illicit flows of which this region had long been a centre (e.g., the small town of Veliki Trnovac) soon began to suffer from Kosovo's pacification. This consideration accompanied the decision to blow on the fire of Albanian irredentism, so as to strengthen profitable forms of control. For months, the Presevo demilitarized strip became a area of dangerous instability, in which Albanian snipers were targeting Yugoslav soldiers to claim the liberation of 'Eastern Kosovo'. Here too, the typical profile is that of the businessman with solid connections with the UÇK, such as Shaban Shala (Caprile, 2000). In spite of the American presence in the territorially adjacent sector, militias of the 'Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac' were even able to launch a new guerrilla offensive in December 2000, stipulating an alliance with Macedonian clandestine factions such as the 'Albanian National Army' (AKSH).

In the mainly Albanian inhabited western districts of Macedonia illegal activities have always thrived, and incidents along the border with Albania were a problem throughout the 1990s. During the decade, Macedonian territory acted as a ring of intermediation, a springboard which hosted stocks and depots, thus animating all sorts of trafficking. As the country became independent, even the pharmaceutical industry of the Republic of Macedonia was reported to be involved in the production of heroin (OGD, 1998).

Related to the growth of the West's economic and military presence in the region was the increase in criminal organizations devoted to the trafficking of women from

Eastern Europe. In anonymous rural areas by the border young women were deprived of their documents and sold from gang to gang, ending up temporarily 'stocked' before being channelled into the streets of the West. Dilaver Bojku, an Albanian boss from the village of Veleshta, was reported to be in control of 3,000 women. Arrested, he managed to escape and find shelter in Montenegro, where he was eventually arrested after the international community put pressure on the government of Skopje.

Illicit transactions had a direct impact on the conflict dynamics of the Macedonian region. In the spring of 2001, following the mutual recognition of borders between Skopje and Belgrade and minor incidents in the mountain village of Tanusevci (right on the Kosovo–Macedonian border), an armed offensive was launched in west Macedonia by a newly born Macedonian branch of the UÇK. Tellingly, Tanusevci was home to Xhavit Hasani, an Albanian–Macedonian boss who had become a war hero during the Kosovo war, transforming this area into a logistical base for the Kosovar combatants. After four months of violence, the strategy pursued by the local UÇK was eventually rewarded: a number of concessions were made at the prodding of international mediators, and the former combatants went through a successful election, which placed them directly in the newly formed government.

Power struggles in the districts of Western Macedonia have often taken the shape of the settling of accounts between different families who back different political parties. In the 'Macedonian capital of Albanian politics' – i.e., the city of Tetovo – local elites have long been intent on power struggles involving an impressive series of violent episodes that have often been hastily dismissed by authorities, media and international observers as simple 'criminality'.

### **Conclusions: Paramilitaries and Peripheral Parastates**

Drawing the line between legal authority and illegal challengers, and conceptualizing their relationship during the last cycle of Balkan wars is quite a complex task. Nonetheless, some distinctive background, structural factors can be identified. Looking at long-term continuities, for example, a distinctive pattern of collaboration between political authorities and bands of irregulars can be traced back in time to the period when the Balkans were under Ottoman rule. The practice of co-opting bandits and tribesmen not only as auxiliaries during war campaigns, but also for extracting taxation, protecting trade routes, surveilling borders, or even for not making troubles, was quite systematic (Barkey, 1994).

Arms trafficking and external intervention have deep roots too. In the Ottoman Empire the Christian population was not allowed to carry weapons: thus the armed prophets of national revolutions were backed externally: quite inevitably, the channels for introducing weapons were those of contraband. Rifles were hidden among tobacco loads carried through donkeys and mule trains (Perry, 1988). Thus bandits, clans, and similar armed formations 'often headed social movements that led to the formation of the modern state in the region' (Xenakis, 2001: 12).

In these historic dynamics licit goods often paved the way for the illicit. As reconstructed above, during the 1990s the routes that were opened for cigarettes and

petrol smuggling soon afterwards saw the flow of drugs and weapons, and then the expansion to all sorts of other goods, from stolen vehicles to human beings. States often sponsored illicit trade in the attempt to extract profits and strengthen their influence; the fingerprints left by agents under cover in operations conducted in the black market during the 1990s exist independently of one's taste for the dark literary intrigues that Eric Ambler narrated in 1939 in his *The Mask of Dimitrios*.

A second background factor that creates permissive conditions for illegal trade has to do with the regional politico-economic conjuncture: the end of the socialist system brought about social destructureation all across the Balkans. Sure, socio-economic structures vary enormously, ranging from Yugoslav self-management, to the Bulgarian soviet-style centralized economy, as well as the harshness of Romanian and Albanian regimes; nevertheless, in each case the crumbling of the political system (and the normative standards that it embodied) as well as the transition to a market economy were turbulent processes, in which the not-so-invisible hand of mafias came to give a hand of protection, assistance and regulation. The reason why transborder crime became so important lies in the fact that in this chaotic period of evanescent institutions and economic collapse, national borders became (and for a long time would continue to be) the largest redistributing mechanism of national wealth. If at some point nobody would collect taxes among Kosovo Albanians, soon nobody would collect taxes, stop. Albania in this sense is an example: here the state would not reach efficiency standards for electricity provision and road maintenance, but dynamic entrepreneurs would soon travel in armoured SUVs and own electric generators for each of their restaurants. The value of goods transiting across Balkan countries reached in some cases 85 per cent of GDP (CSD, 2003). In 2001 the IMF estimated that merchandise imports were at about 80 per cent of Kosovo's GDP: heavy reliance on custom duties, excise and sales tax collected only at the border made the entire system extremely vulnerable (IMF, 2001).

Third, while political and territorial fragmentation meant little or no cooperation between neighbouring law enforcement agencies, the opposite can be said for informal actors. The Balkans is a peninsula where communication and transport are particularly difficult: however, this situation changed quite rapidly with the spread of new means of private transportation. Illicit actors know the terrain quite well, and besides having long experience of collaboration along informal, adaptive networks, they have a stronger stake in the process: nothing would convince a conscript or a badly paid local policeman to risk his life by going out at night trying to stand in the way of organized smugglers. The proliferation of borders means an increased need for skilled entrepreneurs, a rise in prices of smuggled commodities, the dynamization of the sector, and the generalized empowerment of groups that in some way take part in the criminal chain.

In more detail, a few trends emerge from the analysis of heroin smuggling through the 'Balkan route'. When the profitability of the traditional 'Balkan route' diminished because of the unpredictability of war-related events, the traditional main trafficking itinerary was bifurcated, thus involving also Central European countries. Worldwide the supply of opium from Afghanistan was steadily growing,

and loads of heroin transported by TIR now began to be stocked in depots in the southern Balkans (Chassagne, 2004: 154). This development meant that places that traditionally offered a safe haven to bandits and smugglers now integrated a net of intermediate stocking areas where the smuggled goods could stay until the next logistical contact would be established and a mobile phone would ring. Splinter roads multiplied: smuggling networks were diversifying their supplies and itineraries. From here onward the distribution would be carried out in smaller loads (5–20 kg) in private cars or bags. At the same time, a new development occurred in response to the need for growing flexibility: all the main actors of illicit transactions widened and diversified their activities. Arkan investing in the smuggling of fertilizers is a case that is not dissimilar from those of the world's major arms intermediaries, who become active in diamonds, frozen fish, flowers, and transport in Iraq on behalf of the US (Naim, 2005: 253).

Illuminated by Tilly's (1985) comparative historical sociology, the modern history of 'state making as organized crime' lends itself to decode the role that the criminal sector has played in the Balkans, and still does not say all about contemporary wars. The symbiotic nexus between war making and state making (and the role played therein by illegal and criminal enterprises) is in permanent mutation, as a response to the transformation of state sovereignty, intervention practices, as well as global economic dynamics. When interviewed about the type of economic future they would envision for the entity they were employing violence for, the local leaders of the Bosnian Republika Srpska mentioned off-shoring, fiscal safe havens and casinos.

Having this in mind, some tentative findings emerge from the dissection of a decade of crime and war in the Balkans. Contrary to widespread perception, not unlike other mafias, Balkan mafias do not come into being where the market and the state are absent, but they rather accompany (or guide) the unfolding of market and state structures. Far from being a 'new challenge' to state stability, the history of illegal (i.e., criminal) armed groups is deeply intertwined with the emergence and consolidation of state forms in the Balkan region: in this context the emergence and the persistence of armed groups is not perceived as a threat to the (nation-)state, but on the contrary it can be perceived as working in its defence. Smuggling typically concerns commodities that are either subject to high customs fees (petrol products, cigarettes, alcohol, cars) or banned/restricted (i.e., the exchange of weapons for drugs; but also migrants, strategic raw materials, exotic animals, goods violating intellectual property rights). Systematic fraud is also committed with regard to certificates of origin to elude EU external border customs and medical controls (CSD, 2003: 17–19). Seizures of drugs clearly show how illicit activities develop a parasitic relationship with licit trade.

This leads to a second consideration: intermediaries win. The rise of Albanian organized crime is probably the most visible example. The Italian '*ndranghetisti* set the example: from the impervious Calabrian mountains the '*ndrine* carve out an intermediation in wider international markets controlled by *Cosa Nostra*, acting as couriers first, then intermediaries in cocaine dealings, eventually losing the territorial reference and ending up determining international price ratios.

The cohesive, family-based nature of Albanian criminal networks helps explain the success of Albanian groups. Intermediaries provide long-distance services and articulate flexible, decentralized networks that absorb risks and respond to opportunity variations, thus minimizing vulnerability. The overcoming of the traditional triangular structure and the end of the model command-control have important implications (Naim, 2005; UN INCB 2001): aggressive contrast strategies (e.g., Plan Colombia) may bring about local tactical successes, but have virtually no long-term general impact on the overall market and its profitability.

The third consideration is closely linked to the second: organized crime can take hostage the development of state structures. Criminal groups have always acted as providers of war-related services, thus developing a vested interest in protracted, intractable conflicts. What is new is the magnitude of profits and the opportunities that external powers, international markets and 'new mobilities' can disclose vis-à-vis states that are increasingly small and withdrawn in terms of regulation, budget and welfare. International efforts to regulate or prohibit goods during the 1920s made profitability increase. A massive growth of drug markets takes place during the 1980s and the 1990s, and drug abuse becomes a problem also for country of origin and of transit. The huge differential in profits that becomes possible whenever a good is illicit (hence, not subject to taxation) and borders are shuffling and permeable, makes criminal enterprises emerge. The current prohibitionist and sanctioning structure of international relations, the extraordinary development of mobility, communication and financial infrastructures, and the constraints on nationalist elites in terms of resources (i.e., no longer cold war-type external support, poor and small territories) offers to mafia structures the opportunity to promote types of business that are extremely lucrative and enabling. Drugs, fuel, migrants, tobacco, arms and other smuggling activities across several borders become typical tools by which mafias emancipate themselves from the role of mere provider and become able to intervene directly in the management of political violence (Armao, 2000).

A final insight can be drawn with regard to the relationship between politics and criminal economy: the production and the trafficking of drugs do not develop unless they benefit from favourable political conditions (Chouvy, 2001). Transnational crime needs countries where finance and banking are easily accessible. To fully comprehend the perverse way in which illicit profits are linked with the perception of stability one can look at the construction sector, which by the end of the 'black decade' became the pulling economic sector across the entire region.<sup>24</sup> In 2006 the governor of the Central Bank of Albania warned about possible recession in the real estate market. The upward trend in this sector was maintained by migrant remittances, and profits from illegal activities. Paradoxically, then, given the dwindling of remittances and the predominance of the construction sector, stability for Albania would entail that illegal activities are not disrupted (Lubonja, 2006).

This reconstruction documents the symbiosis between politics and illicit trade and business, it on the one hand unmasks much of the argument predicated on ethnic hatreds and grievances, on the other it cannot be reduced to apolitical analytical

categories such as the greed of elites. By transforming the nature of the criminal reality and activities, political factors that have to do with state formation and positioning vis-à-vis European and global events, dominate the evolution of drug trafficking in the Balkans throughout the 1990s. The emergence of small, stifled states keen on dismantling welfare safety nets, devoid of institutional autonomy and margins of manoeuvre in the international arena, seems to provide an ideal soil for mafia structures to prosper.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The concept of ‘‘deep state’’ is illuminated by episodes such as the Susurluk car accident of 1996. On 3 November 1996 a Mercedes collided with a lorry. The car was carrying a top police official, a member of parliament, a wanted gang leader, and a former beauty queen. The crash pointed to shady links between politicians, police, the military and criminal gangs.
- <sup>2</sup> Notorious is the state company Kintex, which covered the activities of the Syrian Ismet Fatik Turkmen Shaban.
- <sup>3</sup> ‘Un proiettile al cuore del piú ricco di Bulgaria’, *Osservatorio Balcani*, 11 March 2003. A *vittima eccellente* was Filip Pavel Naidenov (alias ‘Fatik Junior’, son of the mentioned Ismet Fatik), a major dealer in weapons and drugs (‘Sofia come Chicago anni ’20’, *Osservatorio Balcani*, 20 August 2003). Another protagonist of smuggling in and through Bulgaria was Konstantin Dimitrov, alias *Samokovetsa*; he was in charge of dozens of transport and security companies when he ended his days face down in a hotel of Amsterdam in December 2003 (Mangalakova, 2003).
- <sup>4</sup> ‘Crimine e politica in Bulgaria: i musi’, *Osservatorio Balcani*, 19 March 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> UN Security Council resolutions 713 and 724, 1991.
- <sup>6</sup> *Turkish Daily News* (Ankara, 5 March 1997) reports that the American Drug Enforcement Agency estimated that every month, four to six tons of heroin left Turkey to be introduced in Europe.
- <sup>7</sup> T. Sansa in *La Stampa*, 5 August 1991 (cited in Gambino and Grimaldi, 1995).
- <sup>8</sup> Assessments by Paul Beaver for *Jane’s Defence Weekly* (quoted in Bellamy, 1995).
- <sup>9</sup> Before opting for employing explosives, the Corleonesi of *Cosa Nostra* had been testing some bazookas and anti-tank weapons that had been ordered in ex-Yugoslav territories.
- <sup>10</sup> Family-based enlarged clans along which Albanian mafia organizations tend to be structured.
- <sup>11</sup> ‘Montenegrin-Albanian flour smuggling’, *OMRI Daily Digest*, 18 October 1995.
- <sup>12</sup> *Globus*, 8 July 1994 – quoting the Albanian newspaper *Gazeta Alleanca* (cited in Ameye, 2006).
- <sup>13</sup> See also Commissione Parlamentare di Inchiesta sul Fenomeno della Mafia, ‘Audition of the Ministry of Interior’, Rome, 18 April 1997.
- <sup>14</sup> *Agence France-Presse*, 9 June 1998.
- <sup>15</sup> G. Barbacetto, in *La Repubblica*, 10 February 2001.
- <sup>16</sup> Figures provided by the Albanian Ministry of Interior give a rough estimate of 600 zodiac speedboats active during the decade 1992–2002.
- <sup>17</sup> ‘Novom HDZ-u moze se povjerovati tek kada vrati opljackani golemi novac iz domovine i inozemstva!’, *Novi List*, 30 March 2004.
- <sup>18</sup> See also *Nacional*, 9 November 2001.
- <sup>19</sup> In 1992 the *Jadran Express*, a ship carrying the Maltese flag was intercepted in the Adriatic Sea with a load of 20 tons of artillery ammunition heading to Montenegro and Serbia. The societies that cover the load refer to Italian organized crime and are based in Cyprus, Gibraltar and Croatia.
- <sup>20</sup> The transfer of some \$300 million to Belgrade, which was announced in December 1999 after a visit to China by the Yugoslav Minister of Foreign Affairs (*Jane’s Intelligence Review*, February 2000), could in large part be regarded as Yugoslav capital on its way back.
- <sup>21</sup> Monti was controlled by the powerful Italian *mafia* boss Francesco Prudentino, eventually arrested in Thessaloniki, Greece in December 2000.

- <sup>22</sup> On Operation Crna Gora, see the report 'Tobacco Companies Linked to Criminal Organizations in Cigarette Smuggling', Center for Public Integrity – International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 3 March 2001.
- <sup>23</sup> 5,690 tons of illegally traded cigarettes were seized in 1999 inside the EU borders. EU experts are convinced that this figure represents approximately 10 per cent of the cigarettes actually smuggled (Sensini, 2001).
- <sup>24</sup> The Balkan construction sector gained world-wide reach. Kosovar Albanian Behgjet Paçolli is in control of a veritable empire (Mabetex) headquartered in Switzerland, with interests in South America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union (construction of the new Kazakhi capital) and above all Russia (reconstruction of the parliament building, bombed in 1993). In Russia, the detonation of the 'affaire Mabetex' touched President Yeltsin, involving the then Swiss prosecutor Carla del Ponte and the Security Services then led by Vladimir Putin.

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