European Parliament

Cooperation in the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans

Unequivocal support for the European perspective of Western Balkan countries was reiterated by participants at the EU-Western Balkans summit in Brdo on 6 October 2021, as well as in the European Commission's October 2021 enlargement package reports. Nevertheless, the Commission insists that all countries in the region need to continue to accelerate and deepen reforms on independence of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, and the fight against transnational organised crime. Progress on the rule of law is part of the 'fundamentals', that remain open throughout accession negotiations, as it is considered essential and will determine the overall pace of the negotiations. International cooperation, such as agreements and joint actions with Europol, Eurojust, and Frontex are crucial as well. The European Parliament is set to vote during the December 2021 plenary session on an own-initiative report on cooperation in the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans.

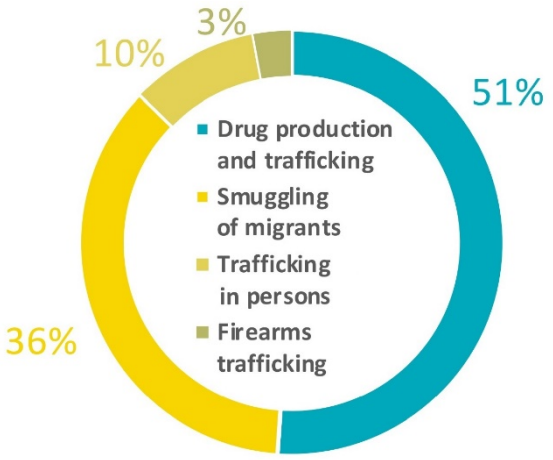
Organised crime in the Western Balkans

Transnational organised crime groups in the Western Balkans cause significant financial harm, not only in their countries of origin, but also to the EU, its Member States, and its allies and partners. A 2020 World Bank report notes that weak institutions and weaknesses in the implementation of the rule of law, as well as organised crime, are key structural constraints to job creation and economic transformation of the region's six countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo*.

Unlike traditional organised crime groups, Balkan groups do not appear to operate under a typical hierarchy, but rather around ethnic associations and friendship ties. They also appear to be more agile, organic, and project-based. Balkan criminal groups are adept at adopting new technologies, thus increasing their ability to expand their criminal market base through cyber-enabled fraud.

Academia defines the triple structure of organised crime in the Balkans as trafficking in drugs, in weapons, and in human beings. Recently, a fourth element, cyber-related crime, has become an important target for domestic reforms and an area for strengthening international cooperation. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that crime-related economic activity in the six countries represents an important part of their gross domestic product (GDP), and more than half of those convicted for participation in an organised criminal group are linked to drugs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – The distribution of persons convicted of drug production and trafficking, trafficking in persons, smuggling of migrants, and firearms-related crimes in six Western Balkans countries, by links to organised crime, 2012-2018.



Source: UNODC, 2020.

On 10 July 2018, at a summit in London under the Berlin Process, the six Western Balkan countries made anti-corruption pledges, committed to following the provisions of the EU *acquis*, and promised to increase international cooperation on security, including in the fight against terrorism, radicalisation, cyber-attacks, organised crime, and firearms trafficking. The Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime provides an analysis of progress in the implementation of these pledges up to 2021. The initiative estimates that annual revenue from illegal migration and related trafficking in human beings amounts to some €50 million. According to UNODC, smuggling of migrants was second highest in the list of convictions linked to organised crime, after drug production and trafficking.

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International cooperation

The agreements on operational cooperation between Europol and four Western Balkan countries (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) established the network of liaison officers that communicates using Europol's secure information exchange network application (SIENA). This network enables swift and user-friendly communication and exchanges of operational and strategic crime-related information and intelligence between Europol, Member States, and third parties. Europol also has a working arrangement with the law enforcement authorities of Kosovo*. Furthermore, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia have signed cooperation agreements with Eurojust, and Bosnia and Herzegovina has opened negotiations on one. Kosovo* is less advanced on such an agreement. Nonetheless, judicial cooperation on criminal matters with all Western Balkan countries is crucial to fighting organised crime.

The 2019 joint action day – a joint exercise of EU and Western Balkan law enforcement agencies – involved 6 758 officers (6 708 officers on the ground and 50 officers in the operational centre at Europol's headquarters). Law enforcement officers from 30 countries, as well as eight agencies and international organisations, teamed up to tackle the four priorities of the European Multidisciplinary Platform against Criminal Threats (EMPACT): firearms trafficking, illegal immigration, document fraud, and drug trafficking. The operation was part of the EU policy cycle, a four-year plan for the fight against serious and organised crime. This joint action of Europol, Frontex, Interpol, and the IPA/2017 Countering Serious Crime in the Western Balkans project intensified checks in areas identified as high-risk. On 8 March 2021, EMPACT became a permanent EU policy cycle for organised and serious international crime. EMPACT 2022+ covers the period from 2022 to 2025; priorities for those four years were adopted on 26 May 2021.

Western Balkan countries have also developed a cooperation with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) which has expanded its operational activities beyond the EU's borders with the launch of a new operation in Serbia in June 2021. Serbia is the third country in the Western Balkans to host a full-fledged Frontex operation, with 44 standing corps officers from 14 countries helping to detect criminal activities, such as people smuggling, trafficking in human beings, document fraud, and smuggling of stolen vehicles, illegal drugs, weapons, and excise goods, as well as potential terrorist threats. In the coming months, the number of officers is expected to rise to up to 87 officers, upon Serbia's request. Frontex already has nearly 150 standing corps officers and staff taking part in operations in Albania and Montenegro, along with patrol cars, helicopters, and other equipment.

European Parliament position

The EP's 2020 recommendation on the Western Balkans recalled the need for enlargement as a positive EU agenda that must be accompanied by strong and tangible incentives. Parliament stressed that the EU has to continue working with the Western Balkan countries on countering terrorism and organised crime, and to ensure a targeted focus on state capacity-building and judicial reforms. Resolutions adopted in 2021 on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia recall that all six countries must increase their efforts in fighting corruption and organised crime, and must build strong, coherent, and independent institutions.

The EP also supports financial instruments that would enhance the Western Balkan countries' fight against organised crime and reforms. On 15 September 2021, the EP approved the legislative resolution on the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III), which entered into force retroactively on 1 January 2021. The instrument, with a budget of €14.2 billion in current prices, falls under the Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027) budget heading 'Neighbourhood and the World'. IPA III has the second largest allocation of this heading, with almost 13 %, after NDICI-Global Europe (72 %), but ahead of humanitarian aid (10%). Finally, the EP also supported the investment plan for the Western Balkans, adopted on 6 October 2020, which will mobilise some €9 billion in investment in the region.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Own-initiative report (Rule 54): 2021/2002(INI); Committee responsible: AFET; Rapporteur: Lukas Mandl (EPP, Austria).

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