Causes of organized crime in the Balkans

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Abstract

Legal systems are put in jeopardy and social stability wherever there are organized criminal activities. In the Balkans, organized crime is the main obstacle to the European integration of the region. The permanent influence of organized crime in the state structures, the cooperation between different criminal organizations and especially their collaboration with some extremist group's impacts political stability in an extremely negative way. The states in the Balkans have recognized the dangers for their peoples constituted by organized crime and have already taken a number of required legal, institutional and political measures in order to be able to successfully combat organized crime. However, organized crime still constitutes the main risk in the new democratic states in the Balkans in spite of these measures. For that reason, combating organized crime may not be treated just as the task or responsibility of one single state but it needs to be understood as an obligation and responsibility of all the states in the entire region as well as of the European Union. Therefore, cooperation and coordination of joint activities for combating organized crime have to be based on modern international standards. Besides, a continual perspective is required according to the interest of the people of the region to live together in peace and mutual harmony and to establish a society where human rights are not threatened by criminal violence but protected just like in the European Union.

Keywords: Organized Crime, Balkans, Corruption, causes of organized crime.

Introduction

The Balkans is a geopolitical region of Southeast Europe that includes an area of 550,000 km where about 55 million people with different identities, who sometimes are in adversarial ethnic, cultural and political positions, live together (Hobsbawm, 2005).

Such confrontations led to the discourse of the Balkan Peninsula where the word "Balkanism" was increasingly used during the nineteenth century to refer to a disintegrating geographic area in which small states and the states which had been recently liberated from the Ottoman Empire developed expansionist policies towards each other, committed cruel acts of violence against members of other peoples and instigated various ethnic conflicts in the Balkans. So over the last two centuries, the Balkans has been adequately treated as a problematic area of Europe by the Western World (Hobsbawm, 2005).

After the end of the ethnic conflicts of the twentieth century, the Balkan countries, supported by the European Union and the U.S., started opposing the past practices of confrontation among each other by engaging in active policies of mutual friendship and cooperation as fundamental European values. Since that time, the Balkan countries have begun more openly to reject their being labeled as “Balkan countries”, on the grounds that their countries no longer undergo ethnic or political
crises and that there they have passed their own bills of rights into laws and have built functional institutions according to European models (Hobsbawm, 2005). In reality, despite many successes that have been achieved in some regions of the Balkans, there are still obstacles, such as: the functioning of the rule of law and the development of a democratic life.

These countries, which have been characterized by a relatively low degree of economic development and by significant deficits in their democratic education, are faced with two new enemies, called "organized crime" and "corruption", after they have left the bloody mutual conflicts of the past behind and established democratic governments. There can be no doubt that these criminal phenomena which are present in different forms and sometimes accompanied by various national or religious sorts of extremism are tantamount to a major disruptive force for any attempt to achieve social development and the cultivation of democratic values in this part of Europe (Krasniqi, 2009). Therefore, the successful fight against these criminal phenomena amounts currently to the main challenge for the new democratic governments in the Balkans and South Eastern Europe (Department of Crime Problems, 2005).

The emergence and development of organized crime in the Balkans

Historically the Balkans served as a bridge between Europe and Asia. In this way, the Balkan Peninsula was also used by various criminal groups as a transit country for trafficking and smuggling various goods to Europe. Despite these activities having taken place for centuries, the phenomenon of organized crime in the Balkans has only become so alarming during the last decades of the twentieth century (Stojarova, 2011).

Specifically, the great economic crisis of the early 80-ies of the XX century that gripped the former Yugoslavia and other countries of Eastern Europe, followed by economic sanctions and various political conflicts, provided optimal conditions for the emergence of organized crime in the Balkans. Meanwhile, social factors as well as legal and institutional vacuums, which developed during the transition period most of the countries in the region underwent, contributed to the rapid development of organized crime in the Balkans so that after a short time, the whole Balkan region had become one of the most important epicenters of the international organized crime (Stojarova, 2012).

The main factors that have contributed to the emergence and development of organized crime in the Balkans are:

The Geographical Position

Short-cuts crossing through the Peninsula link Europe with the Middle East and Asia. This geographical position has caused the “Balkan Route” to be used for smuggling people and various goods from Asia and the Middle East to Europe and vice versa more than any other historical, cultural or national factor.

The Balkan Route

After heroin had been discovered on 21. 08. 1897 by the German scientist Felix
Hoffmann, it was at the time considered “an effective drug against cough and pain” and called heroin because it was thought to be a heroic discovery back then. It soon started to be consumed on a large scale in some European countries (Briesen, 2005). Several international conferences were organized in Shanghai (1909), Den Haag (1912, 1913, 1914) Geneva (1925, 1931, 1936) etc. (Schmidtbauer & v. Scheidt, 1999), because of the alarming dimensions of drug addiction. Due to some different political and social influences, some European countries passed their first laws against the consumption and trafficking of narcotics. These restrictions obviously had a considerable impact on the beginning of secret and illegal drug trafficking towards Europe (UNODC, 2012). This is also evidenced by the data published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), according to which about 400,000 women are being trafficked to Europe through various routes over the Balkan each year, while the number of trafficked women in the Balkan countries is estimated to be around 170,000 (Lindstrom, 2004). However, after two years, the extent of drug trafficking through the “Balkan Route” had increased significantly. According to Europol, about 100 tons of heroin came to the Balkan in 2011, of which 85 tons were smuggled into the direction of the European Union (Europol, 2011), mainly through:

According to some analysts, the criminal groups operating along the "Balkan Route" gain about 2 billion € per year merely by selling the drugs that were produced in Afghanistan (Kosta, 2008).

**The Liberalism Of Yugoslavia**

During the late ‘70s of the XX century, the Yugoslav regulations for the movement of persons and goods were rather liberal. Meanwhile, in all other dictatorial countries of the region, such movements were much more limited and strictly controlled. Undoubtedly, this sort of economic liberalism (compared to other countries in the region) and geopolitical advantages offered by the Yugoslav state had a lot of influence on the Balkan Route being used for trafficking and smuggling various goods to Europe and vice versa.

**The Economic Crisis**

During the last decades of the 20th century, former Yugoslavia and other socialist countries were facing a major economic crisis, which had caused a drastic economic downfall and a radical increase of inflation and unemployment. The economic crisis resulted in severe political tensions mainly among different Yugoslav republics as well as in Moldova.

Under such circumstances characterized by seriously weakened institutions, organized groups of individuals involved in criminal activities, such as human trafficking, smuggling of drugs, counterfeits of diplomas and other official documents, financial fraud, etc. came into existence in the region.

**Corruption**

The economic crisis, political tensions and the weakened state institutions enabled the development of corruption all over Eastern Europe. Officials of these countries, disappointed by the communist ideology and demoralized by their low salary, were not showing any interest in public welfare, but were merely concentrating on their own rapid and illegal financial advancement. Thus, through corruption, illegal contacts and networks were created between government officials, mainly from
The consequences of the restrictions on the import, export and transit of sanctioned goods within the territory of the former Yugoslavia during the 90s led to the appearance of criminal groups that cooperated with each other and particularly so with Milosevic's regime in order to access channels for the import or export of prohibited goods or to act as mediators in supplying the Serbian market with scanty goods, such as fuel, rare sorts of medicine, tobacco etc. Under these circumstances any form of smuggling was legalized and all those who broke the UN blockade were treated by the Serbian propaganda as "heroes" (Instituti Demokratik i Kosovës, 2011). Thus, all the towns and cities along the Serbian border became an area of trafficking and smuggling. The difference between state-organized crime, on the one hand, and corruption and mafia, on the other hand, became invisible under these circumstances. Serbian criminal groups from all the territories of former Yugoslavia, tolerated and supported by the state, had gained so much power as to exert a strong political influence.

The Sanctions of 1992 against Former Yugoslavia

The Weapons Embargo

The transition period. This time implied the start of significant structural changes and the transition of a state-controlled society to a democratic one. During this period of great economic, legal and political transformations, legal and institutional loopholes were created which enabled the development of various organized criminal activities in many countries in the Balkans.

The extent of the development of organized crime has recently caused the Balkan region to be treated not only as a transit region but increasingly considered a place of destination and storage for drug trafficking, human trafficking, weapons smuggling and money laundering as well as a place where various forms of organized economic and financial crime are committed (US Department of State, 2013).

The alarming fact that the number of users of different sorts of drugs at the same time has increased in the Balkans during the recent years should also be mentioned (Carpo, 2006).
According to some analyses, the Balkan countries have been found to be places where drugs are cultivated (mainly cannabis sativa), where marijuana and hashish oil is produced, and where all kinds of drugs have been abused and traded during the recent years (Qaja, 2011). Therefore, Europol explained that the dominant region for the production of the hashish that supplies the EU market is Albania, followed by Serbia, Bulgaria and Kosovo (Mapo, 2013).

Conclusions

Organized crime is a widespread phenomenon all over the world. Wherever organized crime is present, it affects the political stability, puts the legal system at risk, threatens social security and violates human rights. As such, organized crime amounts to a threat to the society in the Balkan countries. These countries are aware of the risks organized crime represents and therefore, they have taken a range of necessary measures by building a solid legal foundation, by reorganizing and reforming state institutions and by continuously improving the cooperation between national and international institutions in order to facilitate the development of a more successful war against organized crime. Although these measures have been taken and the fight against the organized crime has been advanced to a top priority, its forms and dimensions still represent one of the main obstacles for the EU integration-process in some of these countries.

What is most surprising is the fact that in the Balkans, neither the blood-shedding during the political conflicts of the last century nor strict visa requirements, tough border controls and high customs barriers have prevented the regional cooperation between organized criminal groups - even those belonging to "opposed" nationalities. This means that political conflicts and state borders in the Balkans have served as obstacles for establishing effective cooperation between countries of the region in the fight against organized crime and other forms of criminal activities rather than as facilitators in preventing and fighting organized crime.

Current practices in the fight against organized crime have shown that this war cannot be fought with the desired success just by approving laws according to European standards and reforming institutions of law enforcement. The introduction of new forms of organized crime necessitates the need for specialized joint institutions consisting of the police, the prosecution and the courts, based on European practices, as well as continuous education of their personnel on the issues of criminology, law, economics, banking, finance, financial auditing, etc.

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