

Fatal attraction

Foreign criminal networks in Albania

Albania remains a transit country for trafficking drugs and there is evidence that organised criminal groups, such as the Italian mafia, are increasing their activity in the country. **Fabian Zhilla** examines Albania's capacity to confront organised crime.

▶ KEY POINTS

- Albania remains an attractive location for external organised crime groups, in part because of its geographical location and indigenous criminal networks.
- Groups from as far afield as Colombia are thought to be present in Albania, although by far the largest presence is that of the various Italian mafia groups.
- While Albania has made significant progress in combating organised crime, its progress remains limited by widespread institutional corruption.

Albania is an attractive location for foreign organised crime groups, partly due to geography but also because of the turbulent recent history of the country and the continued resilience of its indigenous organised crime groups. Albania is on the Balkans trafficking route for illegal drugs, particularly heroin, and it has poorly policed borders with Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia, and to a lesser extent Greece. There is also a powerful indigenous nexus of organised crime groups that is embedded in cultural values and social norms, which has made it extremely difficult for successive governments to uproot. The non-governmental organisation Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perception Index placed Albania in 95th place out of 183 countries – one of the worst in Europe – indicating that corruption in the state sector may be widespread.

Moreover, in recent years Albanian organised crime groups have strengthened their connections with crime groups elsewhere, in particular with the Italian mafia groups. According to the UN Office on Drugs and

Crime's (UNDOC) World Drug Report 2010, Albanians made up the single largest group, nearly one third, of all arrestees for heroin trafficking in Italy between 2000 and 2008.

The 2010 UNDOC report also indicated that the links between Albanian organised crime and traditional mafias operating in the EU were solid and ongoing. In addition, this implied that Albanian territory remained a frequently transited territory for trafficking drugs. Several Italian mafia groups are present in Albania: the Camorra, the Sacra Corona Unita and the 'Ndrangheta. There are also a number of indigenous Balkans groups operating in Albania, including Serbian, Greek and Turkish groups. Finally, the presence of Colombian cartels has also increased since 2001.

Italian connection

With the fall of the Communist system in Albania in 1989, state structures were dismantled. This paved the way for the Italian mafia groups to exploit Albanian territory – not only relatively lawless at that time, but just 72 km across the Strait of Otranto – by carrying out a wide range of criminal activities, such as arms trafficking, human trafficking, smuggling cigarettes and stolen cars, money laundering and drug trafficking during the transition period, which is generally considered to have lasted until around 1997.

In 1997, a series of pyramid schemes mushroomed in Albania's main cities, including the capital Tirana, as well as regional towns such as Vlorë and Lushnjë. Millions of Albanians lost money after these funds, which had been endorsed by government officials, could no longer make payments. There were major demonstrations and public unrest and the ability of the government to maintain order began to collapse. Albanian organised crime and especially Italian mafia groups took the

advantage of this financial collapse to launder their proceeds of crime in these schemes.

By 2001, Italian mafia groups, such as the Sacra Corona Unita and the Cosa Nostra, had begun to establish links with local Albanian organised crime groups and were co-operating in establishing networks for human trafficking and smuggling cigarettes. However, the re-establishment of government control over most of Albanian territory during the past few years has not eradicated the indigenous or external organised crime groups.

The Albanian State Intelligence Service (Sherbimi Informativ Shtetëror: SHISH), in a report presented before the parliamentary commission on national security in June 2010 that was leaked to the press, warned that the activities of the Italian mafia in Albania were being extended. It noted that Italian mafia groups had targeted gambling, betting and casinos for investment. SHISH noted that while other powerful organised crime groups such as Russian, Israeli, and Colombian groups were increasing their activity in Albania, Italian mafia organisations remained the most active. According to SHISH, the sectors most endangered by the persistence and growth of Italian organised crime in Albania were tourism, real estate, construction materials and alternative energy technologies.

The Camorra

Camorra groups, traditionally from Naples and the surrounding area of southern Italy, were among the first Italian mafia organisations to allow foreigners to join them. Albanian criminals who emigrated to Italy during the 1990s soon began to join Camorra groups. The process was made easy by similar social and cultural habits between the Camorra families and the Albanian incomers. According to Roberto Saviano, an author who has written extensively on



Albanian police have improved control over borders, and the technological capacities of the border crossing points have been upgraded. PA: 1453576

the Camorra, the Casalesi family from the province of Caserta was one of the clans that most enthusiastically embraced the Albanian incomers.

During the turmoil of the late 1990s in Albania, arms smuggling, particularly small-arms, proliferated, and Albanian organised crime groups began trafficking arms to countries such as Italy, Macedonia, and Greece. According to James Pettifer and Miranda Vickers in their 2007 book *The Albanian Question*, the price of an a Kalashnikov-type assault rifle at that time was around USD5. By 1998, there were around 2 million small-arms in Albania. The Camorra was at the heart of much of the small-arms trafficking and was heavily involved in smuggling Kalashnikov rifles that had been 'liberated' from Eastern European ammunition depots. According to Saviano, these weapons were often delivered to organised crime and militant groups operating within the EU.

The Camorra also had close ties with other Balkan mafia groups during this period, especially with Serbian criminal rings. During the Kosovo war in 1999, in which the Serbian military and paramilitary groups were involved in the 'cleansing' of ethnic Albanians from what was then a Serbian province, arms were smuggled to the Serbian army

and paramilitary groups. In exchange, Italian mafia groups were provided with preferential conditions for investments in Serbia. Saviano claimed that Camorra families such as the Casalesi had even negotiated with Albanian organised crime groups to facilitate arms trafficking to Serbian paramilitary groups through Albanian territory.

The Camorra has continued to expand its criminal activities in Albania, gradually shifting to more consolidated businesses. Major sectors in which the Camorra is believed to have invested in Albania include steel processing and cement production. In addition, the Camorra is also trying to exploit Albanian territory to dump toxic and household waste exported from EU countries. The estimated profit made by Italian mafia groups on the export of toxic waste is estimated at around EUR20 billion a year, according to Italian environmental organisation Legambiente. Owing to its strategic position, widespread corruption and strong indigenous organised crime networks, Albania is an attractive destination for the disposal of such waste.

Albania may also have been targeted because of the lack of proper infrastructure and expertise in the supervision of such waste disposal. According to the 2010 report of the

Albanian Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Water Management, there were about 60 private companies dealing with the waste recycling, and several of them were not even licensed.

The Sacra Corona Unita

In September 2010, Albino Prudentino was arrested by Albanian police, with the help of the International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol), near his business in the coastal city of Vlorë, and later extradited to Italy. Prudentino was one of the key leaders of the Sacra Corona Unita, which was involved in the business of smuggling cigarettes to the EU. In January 2011, a transnational network of criminals smuggling cigarettes from Eastern Europe to the UK was broken up by UK police. The Prudentino clan, along with a UK wine merchant, Peter Vyse, smuggled cigarettes into the UK hidden in consignments of pickled vegetables, dog food and orange juice, avoiding an estimated GBP10 million (USD16 million) tax duty, according to prosecutors, who named Prudentino and two other members of his clan as being among those involved. Vyse was convicted and sentenced to seven years imprisonment; no one in the the Prudentino clan was apprehended.



From left: Albanian President Bamir Topi, Kosovan President Atifete Jahjaga, Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov and Montenegrin President Filip Vujanović.

PA: 1453574

Italian authorities issued an arrest warrant for Prudentino in 2010, after a two-year investigation called ‘Calypso’. Prudentino and 11 other members of the group stand accused by Italian authorities of cigarette smuggling, extortion and drug trafficking. According to the Albanian Serious Crimes Prosecutor, Prudentino had started to invest in Albania since 2007, and by 2010 he was involved in several

also noted that there were indicators that the ‘Ndrangheta had been investing in the construction industry in the main Albanian coastal cities.

Other Balkan groups

Serbian criminal rings are mainly active in counterfeiting banknotes and producing fictitious instruments destined for the Albanian

‘The Camorra has continued to expand its criminal activities in Albania, gradually shifting to more consolidated businesses’

businesses, including betting companies and casinos, in Tirana and Vlorë worth around EUR3 million (USD4 million).

The ‘Ndrangheta

The ‘Ndrangheta is also becoming a concern for Albanian authorities. A high-profile criminal member of the ‘Ndrangheta, Giuseppe Simonelli (alias ‘El Paco’) was arrested in the coastal city of Vlorë in August 2010 and extradited to Italy in December 2011 where he is facing charges. According to the Albanian press, Simonelli was one of 15 people arrested in an operation codenamed ‘Due Torre’ that was organised by the Italian police against the Manusco clan. Nine other members were arrested in Italy, four in Spain, one in Austria and one in Bangladesh. SHISH’s 2010 report

market, according to the 2010 SHISH report. Security officials believe that counterfeited banknotes and fake Albanian treasury bonds are being illegally produced in Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia.

There has been considerable concern among security officials that Serbian and other Balkan mafia groups have been operating in Albania. This fear has been exacerbated by the ongoing problem of corruption and its inhibiting effect on reform of the judicial system. In October 2007, investigators from the Ministry of Justice tried to seize the case files of a Bosnian Serb businessman, Damir Fazlić, whom they suspected of being involved in money laundering. Fazlić denied any wrongdoing. The Ministry of the Interior then announced it would sue two of

the prosecutors who had tried to summon Fazlić for questioning. According to the US Department of State’s 2008 Human Rights Report, legal experts called this threat a “blatant attempt to intimidate the Office of the Prosecutor-General into dropping the case against Fazlić, who was alleged to have links to high-ranking government officials”. The charges of money laundering were dropped in 2009 for lack of evidence. However, the Department of State’s 2010 report reiterated that government corruption in Albania remained a “serious and unresolved problem”.

Greek organised crime groups

Albanian organised crime groups also have strong links with groups in Greece. Their activity has mainly been based around human trafficking and smuggling cannabis. In December 2011, Albanian law enforcement agencies seized around EUR2.6 million from Albanian banks, which was thought to belong to an Albanian organised criminal group involved in prostitution in Greece. Along with local Greek and Albanian organised crime groups, it was trafficking and exploiting women largely from Eastern Europe. The group owned five yachts, which it used to offer services to important Greek figures. The estimated daily profit of this group was estimated by law enforcement officials at around EUR12,000.

Albanian security officials also admit that Albania is a country of origin for the production of cannabis. According to the 2008 UNODC report, *Crime and its impact on the Balkans and affected countries*, cannabis is grown and collected in rural areas in southern Albania and from there organised crime groups, made up both of Albanians and Greeks, smuggle it across the border for distribution in Greece. These networks utilise both land and sea routes to traffic the cannabis across the border. With the co-operation with Greek mafia and other Albanian organised crime groups active in Greece, cannabis is distributed for local consumption in Greece or supplied to other EU countries, and there are also occasional seizures of cocaine and synthetic drugs such as ecstasy.

Albanian organised crime groups traditionally used animals to transport cannabis by land across the southern and southeastern borders between Albania and Greece, although this has since largely given way to road transport and other methods of getting across borders. In November 2011, a joint operation between Albanian and Greece



Turkish President Abdullah Gul (left) and his Albanian counterpart Bamir Topi inspect a guard of honour in Ankara, Turkey in 2011. PA: 1453575

police broke up a network that was trafficking cannabis using small passenger vehicles. In the same month, Greek police dismantled another group transporting cannabis through Corfu.

There was another example of the co-operation between Greek and Albanian organised crime groups in cannabis smuggling in November 2011, when Greek police seized around 241 kg of cannabis. The drugs were brought across the border between Albania and Greece and then divided in two shipments in different vans. The vans went off in different directions and were stopped by Greek police in different cities. The one apprehended in the city of Arta was driven by an Irish citizen and the other one, stopped in Athens, was driven by a Greek-Italian national. Cannabis that had been grown in the villages of southern Albania was being packed in Greece, and from there, shipped to Ireland hidden in cargos of oranges.

Links between Albanian organised criminal groups and Greek groups also extend to the trafficking of other drugs. Albania was the second most common origin country for cocaine seized by Greek authorities in the period between 2001 and 2006. However, for

the most commonly trafficked drug, heroin, it is largely Turkish groups that are in control of distribution.

Turkish organised crime groups

According to the European Police Office's (Europol) 2009 EU Organised Crime Threat Assessment, Albania is increasingly becoming a transit route for heroin into the EU. Albanian organised crime groups, along with Turkish groups, are also changing the patterns of the supply of cocaine and increasingly exploiting the Balkan route. The extent of the networks were exposed in 2005, when one of the more powerful heroin trafficking networks, involving Albanian and Turkish organised crime groups, was broken up. The heroin was brought into Albania by Turkish criminal groups and from there was transported to Italy using couriers of various nationalities, although mainly Albanians, ethnic Albanian Kosovars, Croats, Italians and Germans. Heroin was first smuggled into Turkey, from where it was trafficked into Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania and then on to Italy.

A special investigator of the state police on drug trafficking was a member of the

gang. His role was to inform the group in advance about any threat or possible police operation against them. The leader of one of the two sub-groups involved in the trafficking, Emiliano Shullazi, also known as Anton Nikolli, was arrested and imprisoned for eight years. Immediately after his release in 2010, Shullazi was believed by police to have revived his criminal networks. In May 2011, Shullazi was arrested together with 11 other individuals travelling in a bulletproof car and wearing a bulletproof vest. During the arrest, police found three guns, three police radios, three knives and a considerable amount of cannabis. He remains in custody with the case in progress.

Colombian mafia

Small quantities of cocaine are regularly trafficked into the EU through Albanian territory. The most serious attempt by the Colombian cartels to establish themselves in Albania came during the years of upheaval between 1998 and 2001, in the wake of the collapse of the pyramid schemes. The cartel was already largely established in Italy, and two Colombian cousins were sent to Albania with a view to making the country a hub for

the supply of cocaine to the EU. The group started to prepare the infrastructure to facilitate the operation – including the purchase of a luxury speed boat in Montenegro at an estimated cost of USD1 million. Several ‘ghost’ firms were set up to launder the proceeds of the drugs smuggling. In 2001, the group was broken up and all its members were sent to prison.

Saviano claimed that the Italian Camorra had also tried to build links between with South American cartels and Albanian organised crime groups. According to Italian prosecutors, other groups, including the Cosa Nostra, are also exploring the possibility of using Albania as a route to bring cocaine into the EU. This increase in cocaine-related activity has had some unintended consequences. An Albanian couple were poisoned after drinking a bottle of wine in a restaurant

from Colombia to Belgium through Antwerp, while hashish was brought from Morocco to Spain and later distributed in Italy and Holland. The role of the Albanian criminal branch was to recover the cocaine melted in the palm oil and to store it in Albania. The drugs were then packed and trafficked into other EU countries.

Beyond these moves to use Albania as a transit country for repackaging and smuggling drugs on to the EU, more complex linkages are being built between Albania and South American crime organisations. The SHISH 2010 report warns: “Some Albanian drug lords, residents in Latin American countries, are trying to engage in important areas of investment in Albania, activities that create opportunities for disguising the traffic of cocaine, and the laundering of the proceeds of crime”.

‘There is evidence that criminal groups, particularly from Italy, are taking advantage of the attractive facets of Albania’

located in a coastal area called Golem. Around 150 g of cocaine were found inside the bottle. It is believed that this bottle was part of a larger consignment used to smuggle the drug that was diverted to the restaurant by mistake.

Albanian organised crime groups are also thought to play a role in smuggling drugs originally from Latin America through the port of Antwerp in Belgium, according to the UNODC. In March 2011, Albanian police seized a consignment of palm oil in which 200 kg of cocaine had been mixed, the largest such seizure in several years. The cargo was spotted by police in Belgium, although the cargo had passed through Spanish ports with the cocaine apparently undetected. The truck had a Macedonian licence plate and the trailers carrying the containers had been loaded in Latin America. Albanian authorities were notified by Belgian police and seized the shipment after it had crossed the Albanian border.

The following May, Spanish police in co-ordination with Europol, in an international operation called ‘Salonica’, dismantled the whole network, which comprised Spanish, Moroccan and Albanian citizens. Around 22 people were arrested and one tonne of cocaine and 160 kg of hashish were seized. The operation involved shipping cocaine

Threat assessment

Albania remains a transit country for trafficking drugs such as heroin, cocaine and cannabis, and there is increasing evidence that organised criminal groups, particularly from Italy, but also from Turkey, elsewhere in the Balkans and from Latin America, are taking advantage of the attractive facets of Albania, such as the existence of established criminal networks and high levels of corruption to establish themselves in the country.

Control over the border has improved, and the technological capacities of the border crossing points have been upgraded, allowing officers to access a central database. However, Albanian law enforcement still struggles with poor infrastructure as well as a lack of capacity regarding forensic laboratories, covert policing and witness protection services. There is also a lack of funds both for salaries – which leaves police officers vulnerable to corruption – and to pay covert informants.

However, there have been significant improvements in recent years in Albania’s capacity to confront organised crime. According to the UNODC 2008 report, Albania investigated more organised crime suspects per capita than Italy in 2003 – well ahead of any of its neighbours, particularly Greece, which investigated only one suspect per 100,000

citizens. Moreover, Albanian security services have increasingly demonstrated their capacity to work with other agencies, particularly in international operations against organised criminal groups. A key example of this was the conviction and imprisonment of organised crime leader Aldo Bare, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in March 2011 following co-operation with security forces in Italy and Turkey.

Moreover, the relative normalisation of Albanian civic life – notwithstanding recent political stalemates and parliamentary boycotts – has allowed the introduction of limited judicial reform, the establishment of a new Serious Crime Court, and the drafting and ratification of a raft of laws dealing with serious and transnational crime.

Nonetheless, Albania still suffers from serious structural and operational problems that inhibit the prosecution of organised crime and mean that the country is still a relatively lax and attractive destination for foreign organised crime groups. Its high level of institutional corruption is a key part in this, and successive governments have been unable to make significant progress against this. Albania also suffers from mountainous, hard-to-police borders, and a geographical situation that places it near the centre of Balkan smuggling routes, as well as entrenched domestic organised crime groups often based on fiercely strong clan and family connections. Until a serious effort to confront corruption can be undertaken, Albania will remain an attractive destination for crime groups from across Europe and beyond. ■

This article was first published online at jir.janes.com on 16 February 2012.

▶ ON THE WEB

- Bare trap – Albanian police step up co-operation
- Albanian judge killed in car bomb attack
- Albania/Security

Author

Fabian Zhilla is a PhD Candidate at King’s College London, researching the causes of judicial corruption and its interplay with organised crime in the Western Balkans.

jir.janes.com