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THE IMPACT OF CRIME ON THE REGIONAL STABILISATION IN SOUTHERN SERBIA AND KOSOVO

With the end of wars in the former Yugoslavia and the fall from power of Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000, the Balkans have finally got a chance to rid themselves of the ‘powder-keg’ stigma. However, the peace did not settle down without hiccups. Aftermaths of major earthquakes are always marked by aftershocks. Similarly, the peace was disturbed by low-intensity conflict that started first in predominantly Albanian municipalities in Southern Serbia along the borders with Kosovo; more serious fighting ensued in the north-west parts of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)⁹¹ between ethnic-Albanian insurgents (National Liberation Army) and state security forces. Reportedly, Albanian insurgencies both in Southern Serbia and in FYROM were supported by networks involving former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) activists. The subsequent fighting prompted many observers to temper their optimism about the possibility of durable stability in the region. Yet, both conflicts have been successfully contained and proved that it would be wrong to herald a return to enduring gloom in the region. However, the absence of armed conflict does not equal durable stability. The presence of international troops in the region in question on the one hand, and strong commitment of the governments in the regional capitals to the goal of full integration in European and Euro-Atlantic structures on the other, unquestionably serve as effective safeguards against the revival of bloodshed. In fact, conditions for solving the issue of instability on a regional level are more favourable than ever.

Nevertheless, efforts on all sides are needed if the current truce is to be translated into sustainable peace. Therefore, the paper proposes to

⁹¹ Turkey recognises Macedonia under its constitutional name.

examine the link between crime and stability in the region from an inverted perspective. It attempts to look at the impact of regional stabilisation on the organised crime, or rather, how a lack of a comprehensive strategy for development has contributed to the fact that the region became an outlet for the perverted entrepreneurship.

Brief outline of the conflict dynamics

The three municipalities of Presevo (Preshevë), Bujanovac (Bujanovc) and Medvedja (Medvegjë), situated in southern Serbia along with the border of Kosovo (south-west), and FYROM (south), comprise a compact region of around 1200 square kilometres. This is the only region in Serbia with a mixed Albanian, Serb and Roma population. The population of the three municipalities is over 100 000, of whom around 60 000 ethnic Albanians. Given the demographic composition, location and underdevelopment of the municipalities, the region has been strongly and specifically influenced by events, security situation and other developments in Serbia and Kosovo, but also the wider region. Therefore, the armed conflict that started in January 2000, just months after the war in Kosovo ended, and intensified over the next 17 months, did not happen in isolation.

While Serb and Albanian communities in the region rarely experienced a truly high level of cordial coexistence, interethnic relations were severely damaged in Milosevic's Serbia. Moreover, the walls of mistrust between the two communities were further reinforced by the armed conflict in Kosovo, as it coincided with grave human rights violations and open repression by paramilitary formations, the army and police. During the NATO air campaign in spring 1999, eleven Albanians were killed in the municipality of Presevo alone, while thousands were expelled. Albanians were subjected to human rights violations (murder, harassment, expulsion and looting) of the Albanian population in all

three municipalities in great deal followed the pattern of those taking place in Kosovo.⁹²

Conditions for armed conflict and the rise of the self-styled Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja⁹³ were facilitated by the establishment of the Ground Security Zone (GSZ) under the Military-Technical Agreement. The so-called “Kumanovo agreement” was signed by Serbian and Yugoslav security forces and NATO representatives on June 9, 1999. The GSZ was a five-kilometre wide demilitarised strip along the administrative border with Kosovo, and was established as a buffer-zone between the Yugoslav Army (VJ) and NATO-led international security forces in Kosovo (KFOR). Access to and movement of the VJ forces were prohibited in the strip, while only lightly-armed (“calibre below 12 mm”) members of the police force were allowed to patrol.

Soon after it was established, the strip became the haven for KLA-style attacks on Serbian targets, as the insurgents utilised the power vacuum to launch attacks.⁹⁴ So, for almost two years, the GSZ, or *the demilitarised zone* was that in name only. According to a report, large amounts of small arms and light weapons (SALW) were widely available in Kosovo, despite the efforts of KFOR and UNMIK police to collect them and uncover secret caches. Portions of that arsenal poured freely into

⁹² For a detailed description of human rights abuses of ethnic Albanians in the region see the report by “Albanians in Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja”, Humanitarian Law Center, Belgrade, 2002.

⁹³ The Albanian acronym is UCPBM – *Ushtria Clirimtare e Presheve, Medvegje dhe Bujanovcit*). The number of fighters was a contested issue, but it is reasonable to assert that the UCPBM had around 2000 members.

⁹⁴ The KLA was formally disbanded and demilitarised on September 20, 1999, under the “Undertaking of Demilitarization and Transformation’ Agreement. The subsequent creation of the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), led by former KLA commander Aim Ceku, absorbed around 5000 former fighters. Although the members of the KPC are not allowed to carry guns, as the Corps is designed to provide disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, an international analyst described its structure “curiously similar to the KLA’s wartime organisation.” Other ex-KLA members were incorporated in the Kosovo Police Service, after finishing the OSCE-supervised training course. Another faction followed their charismatic leaders Hashim Thaqi, president of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) and Ramush Haradinaj, leader of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK). However, some elements of KLA network, that even during war-time could not boast of a firm structure and hierarchy, decided to operate on their own, and moved into organised crime, forming loose networks.

southern Serbia - the border was practically open for all kinds of illicit trafficking, especially arms.⁹⁵ When the fighting intensified, KFOR tightened the border control and intercepted shipments for the insurgency, and evidence suggested that the UCPBM had support by splinter groups of the disbanded KLA.⁹⁶ Their proclaimed goal was the eventual unification with Kosovo.

But, the problem was further intensified by the fact that in the aftermath of the Kosovo war a large number of Serb police troops who were forced to withdraw from Kosovo, were located in the Presevo valley, as the region is also known. Many of those were members of the notorious Unit of Special Operations, or Red Berets, that cut a murderous swath through the Bosnian and Kosovo wars.⁹⁷ Their presence alone was enough to terrify the local Albanian population. The behaviour of Kosovo Serb policemen, also with a record of numerous grave human rights abuses while serving in Kosovo, created additional security problems. Harassment, extortion, expulsion and other abuses of the rights of ethnic Albanians in the area was the norm, and many Albanians fled to Kosovo. Moreover, their presence served as an effective deterrent for thousands of Albanians who fled the area during the Kosovo war to return to their homes. This was the situation that new authorities in Belgrade inherited after they came to power in late 2000.

⁹⁵ For a comprehensive discussion on legal and illicit arsenal of SALW in the region see report by Ian Davis, "Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: the Nature of the Problem", Saferworld, London, May 2002.

⁹⁶ For example, in March 2000, the US troops of KFOR raided Albanian hideouts along the southern Serbian border, and seized more than 200 uniforms, 22 crates of rifle and machineguns ammunition, 2 mortars, 28 hand-grenades, six landmines and other military supplies belonging to the UCPBM. Gjeraldina Tuhina, "Raid in Kosovo", AP, 16 March 2000.

⁹⁷ One of the founders and the first commander of the Unit was arrested in Belgrade after the assassination of the Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic. In late May he was transferred to the Hague Tribunal, after being indicted for war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia. Another commander of the Unit, Milorad Lukovic a.k.a Legija is suspect no.1 in relation to the murder of Mr. Djindjic. Together with Dusan Spasojevic, he formed a powerful network of criminals, organised mainly around drug trafficking, the so-called Zemun clan. They are believed to be the main organisers behind the assassination of the Serbian PM. Spasojevic, incidentally from Bujanovac, was killed during a police attempt to arrest him related to the above-mentioned charges. The unit was disbanded.

After months of fighting, an internationally-brokered deal was reached between the two sides on May 31 2001, under which the UCPBM disarmed and gave up plans for secession in return for guarantees of greater human rights and representation in local government and police structures. The Yugoslav forces were allowed to reoccupy the GSZ, and the process was supervised by NATO. Agreement was also reached on the implementation of a multi-ethnic police force under the auspices of OSCE, as a part of a broader effort in confidence-building measures. KFOR and UNMIK introduced tighter control of the border with Kosovo in order to prevent infiltration of armed men. Resettlement of around 10,000 displaced Albanians began, while the Serbian government, with the assistance of international donors, provided aid for the repair of damaged property and infrastructure. In the fall of 2002, local elections were held in the three municipalities with a monitoring mission of the OSCE. For the first time the Albanians got their legitimate political representatives in local government.

This success notwithstanding, the regional dimension of the conflict was soon revealed. As efforts to contain the conflict in the Presevo valley intensified in 2001, a new armed conflict erupted in neighbouring FYROM between National Liberation Army (NLA) and government forces.⁹⁸ The fighting took place in northern parts of FYROM and the declared goals of the NLA was to protect the rights of ethnic Albanians in the country that comprise around one third of the population. Similarly to the rise of the KLA, the NLA regarded Albanian political representatives in the country impotent and too weak to advance the cause of improvement of political and economic rights of the Albanians in Macedonia, who had for long been disenfranchised from economic and political life of the country. Again, some KLA veterans came to aid their kin in the neighbourhood. This restricted KFOR capacities as it was forced to combat illicit trafficking of arms and fighters on two sides. Nevertheless, KFOR arrested over 1000 people in 2001, related to the armed conflict both in Presevo Valley and in northern FYROM.

⁹⁸ Curiously, the Albanian acronym of the formation is UCK (Ushtria Clirimtare e Kombetar), the same as for the Kosovo Liberation Army.

The response of the government forces was often unprofessional and indiscriminate, targeting civilians as well, which only propelled the spiral of violence. All major international actors were alarmed by the conflict in FYROM, for its potential to destabilise a much wider region. The High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, the head of the European Commission Chris Patten and NATO Secretary General Lord George Robertson were dispatched to contain the conflict. The diplomatic efforts culminated in the General Framework Agreement in August 2001 (so-called Ohrid Agreement), which provided for substantial representation of minorities in public administration, language rights and the strengthening of the local government. The NLA was disarmed and disbanded, while the leader of the guerrilla Ali Ahmeti formed a political party that won seats in the September 2002 elections. NATO's Task Force Operation Harvest, that ran from August 27 to September 26 2001 resulted in the collection of nearly 4000 weapons within the 30-day mandate.⁹⁹

The role of organised crime in the conflict

Milosevic's regime left behind organised criminal networks that used to be key supporting pillars of his power. For more than a decade, the state not only tolerated those networks, but even organised and directed them through the powerful state security apparatus (secret service) SDB. Individuals with criminal record were directly linked with military and paramilitary structures, and were used as shock-troops in all wars that led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The most notorious of them were promoted as 'national heroes' and 'devoted patriots'. In exchange for their loyalty in the war-effort, they were allowed to operate in impunity and were protected from prosecution, as they moved into the lucrative underworld business. The main business was trafficking of drugs, cigarettes, and to some extent human beings. Many of them were official members of the SDB. Elements of these groups were moved to Southern Serbia in the aftermath of the war in Kosovo, on a pretext to 'fight terrorism'. But their targets were not so much members of insurgence as

⁹⁹ All the weapons were handed over voluntarily by NLA members. The Saferworld report warns that the SALW was still in abundance in FYROM. Op.cit.

the civilian Albanian population in the area. At the same time, they forged partnership in illegal business with criminal elements among the Albanian fighters, both from Kosovo and Presevo Valley.¹⁰⁰

With the change of power in Serbia in October 2000, the new authorities in Belgrade inherited highly criminalised security structures. The new government in Belgrade, overwhelmed with many problems, did not commit fully to the restructuring of the judiciary, the police and the army. As a result, remnants of these groups continued to operate in Southern Serbia beyond the peace deal between Belgrade and local Albanian leadership.

The assassination of the Serbian Prime Minister came as a wake-up call for leaders in Serbia who attempted to eradicate organised crime elements in society. It was this tragic event that truly exposed the connection between criminals, hard-liners and militants, as these gangs often used ‘patriotism’ as a shield in their dealings.

Although the UCPBM demilitarised after May 2001, splinter groups continued to operate in the region.¹⁰¹ Car-bombs, random explosions, and skirmish fire continued well beyond the May peace deal, although on a smaller scale. This time the targets of assaults, abductions even, were Albanian moderates and members of the multi-ethnic police force. Radical elements of the splinter group used these assaults to deter normalisation of relations in the region.

In fact, evidence suggests the strong links between ethnic Albanian and Serbian gangs who saw the stabilisation of the region as against their interest. Namely, their true motive was the protection of lucrative smuggling routes, especially for drugs. They joined forces after the peace deal to keep the region in the state of ongoing tension, as they had a strong incentive to resist the normalisation, in attempt to prevent contraband routes to be disrupted. Curiously, the incidents faded away after the assassination of the Serbian Prime minister and after KFOR

¹⁰⁰ Some intelligence suggests that the notorious leaders of the JSO offered their ‘good offices’ to special police units of the FYROM Ministry of Interior (“Lions”).

¹⁰¹ Estimates say the number of fighters does not exceed a few hundreds.

arrested Shefket Musliu, alleged leader of the splinter group, in the neighbouring area of Gnjilane in Kosovo.¹⁰²

In a similar vein, the appearance of the Albanian National Army (ANA), that claimed responsibility for various incidents in Kosovo, FYROM and Southern Serbia, is seen as yet another feeble reincarnation of the KLA.

The last thing these elements want is tightening of the borders and heightening security arrangements, and regional co-operation that may enhance legal trade among neighbouring societies. As one member of international community in Kosovo observed, “the organised criminal fraternity contains some of the most ‘ethnically tolerant’ members of each community.”

Some good news

Although it may seem that these groups are too pervasive and that organised crime will continue to reign in the region, several positive examples suggest that conditions for creating a durable stability on a regional level are far more favourable than meets the eye. As mentioned above, all conflicts have been successfully contained, with a strong engagement of interantional actors, such as the EU, the OSCE, NATO and the US government. Other regional initiatives, such as Stability Pact and SECI continue to support various efforts in this direction.

The ongoing struggle against organised crime in Serbia that was at the very core of Milosevic’s criminal heritage seriously damaged criminal networks that had partners in neighbouring regions. Besides, the event prompted the government in Belgrade to commence a profound reform of the judiciary and security apparatus. That one strong branch of organised crime was hacked off in the region, undermining the entire

¹⁰² In late May 2003, the US President George W. Bush lifted "national emergency" on orders dating back 11 years that enabled sanctions against the former Yugoslavia. In a letter to Congress Bush stressed that sanctions against Milosevic and his associates would continue, as would those targeted against individuals threatening to obstruct peace deals involving FYROM, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Both Lukovic, suspect in the murder of Serbian Prime Minister, and Musliu are on the black list.

network has greatly helped. As peaceful general elections in FYROM in September 2002 demonstrated, proponents of nationalist ideologies on both side were defeated, and cleared the way for future political change to take place within constitutional order.

As was the case during all the clashes in the aftermath of the Kosovo war, splinter groups, or various incarnations of the former KLA, had little support among Kosovan political leadership, leaving the groups without serious political sponsorship. In fact, the most prominent political leaders condemned the violence both in southern Serbia and in FYROM. Thus, the splinter groups pretend to operate as some sort of “Real IRA”. Moreover, KFOR and UNMIK police in Kosovo over the last year became more efficient in combatting organised crime groups in the province. The arrest of individuals indicted by The Hague Tribunal, former commanders of the KLA Daut Haradinaj, brother of the leader of AAK and Rrustem Mustafa, a.k.a. Commander Remi last year, were also serious blows for criminal entrepreneurship.

On a larger scale, other positive preconditions also create a favourable climate for enhancing stability in the entire region. First of all, governments in all regional capitals are determined more than ever to catch up with the EU and Euro-Atlantic security structures. Five Western Balkan countries, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, FYROM and Serbia and Montenegro are increasingly joining ranks and improving intra-regional cooperation in anticipation of full-fledged EU membership.¹⁰³ They have made great strides in overcoming the legacy of half a century of command economy and 10 years of violent instability.

In addition, the Border Security and Management conference, hosted in late May by the FYROM government and supported by NATO, the EU, the OSCE, and the Stability Pact clearly demonstrated the readiness of the governments in the region to join forces in combatting organised crime and be integrated into the European mainstream. Stability Pact

¹⁰³ Joint op-ed by President of Croatia Stjepan Mesic, President of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Boris Trajkovski, Prime Minister of Serbia Zoran Zivkovic and Prime Minister of Albania Fatos Nano: “The EU and the Southeastern Europe need each other”, International Herald Tribune, May 22, 2003.

coordinator Erhard Busek commended the effort by saying: “Given the sensitivity of border issues, the conference must be seen as a major achievement that the western Balkans are joining forces to deal with the topic.” The event also revealed that the regional leaders are taking seriously the warning of NATO’s Secretary General Lord George Robertson: “Either this region takes control of its borders – or the criminals will take control.” This is an impressive achievement, but certain structural obstacles still have the potential to impede the process of stabilisation, and by the same token revive organised and less organised criminal elements.

Southern Serbia, parts of Kosovo (around the town of Gnjilane/Gjilan) and FYROM (Kumanovo) remain the most underdeveloped areas in the entire region. The area was a compact region that disintegrated after the state collapsed. Borders that were imposed disrupted the economic and social fabric of the whole region, something which criminal elements were quick to take advantage of. Economies of the states in the region are still too weak to propel development. Moreover, extensive ESI research in the area suggests that ethnic conflicts do have a political-economic dimension that is so often neglected.¹⁰⁴ What all these parts have in common is that their societies are shaped by the crisis of industrial societies created by Yugoslav socialism. In the case of FYROM, local industry has collapsed, while public administration is under huge pressure not only to downsize, but also to make more space for minority representation. At the same time, the private sector is emerging too slowly to be able to generate more jobs. Large portions of Albanian population remain trapped in the cycle of underdevelopment. The Slavic population feels threatened by Albanian demands to be integrated in the shrinking public sector. Consequently, both sides remain trapped in some sort of zero-sum game. As another report noted: “There are a great deal of unemployed ‘young warriors’ with no occupation other than further violence.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ See for example “Ahmeti’s Village: The Political Economy of Interethnic relations in Macedonia”, Skopje and Berlin, October 2002.

¹⁰⁵ Saferworld, op.cit., p.25.

Similarly, in northern Kosovo the majority of the Serb population remains there largely because of budgetary transfers from the Serbian state. This ability to remain in the public sector although industry collapsed creates a strong incentive for large sections of the Serb population to resist integration with other parts of Kosovo. The fact that the town of Mitrovica is still divided on north 'Serb' and southern 'Albanian' part is a case in point.

Similar examples abound in the region. Gnjilane/Gjilan, the closest town in Kosovo to formerly troubled southern Serbian municipalities has high unemployment, while at the same time is one of the youngest regions in Europe. The average age is 27, while more than 50 % of the population is under age of 24. The biggest industry in the region, textile, that used to employ nearly 3000 people 15 years ago, employs only 200 today. If nothing changes in terms of economic development, what these regions are most likely to export in the coming decades will be organised crime and migration.

However, the international community, most notably the European Union, has large stakes in keeping the region affluent. The peace process that ended fighting in FYROM, for example, has a big EU flag on it. Now that the interests of the governments in the region truly converge with those of European Union – and these are stability and prosperity – all actors must seize the opportunity and work together towards the common goal. Governments in the region need to continue their efforts in combatting organised crime, but a harder task is to devise effective ways of reducing the unacceptably high levels of unemployment. This cannot be done without greater engagement and assistance from the EU. In fact, the nascent European common foreign and security policy the region can indeed become a model for creating durable stability after crises. In other words, the EU must take a bolder step and move beyond conflict-containment policies and post-conflict reconstruction, and commit its resources in a way that will pull the region out of the development trap.

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