

Organized crime in Eastern Europe and Russia: the new challenges at the beginning of the 21st century

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1. Organized crime in Eastern Europe and Balkans

Eastern Europe and Balkans are situated at a major intersection between East and West, Europe and Asia, and Europe and the Mediterranean. The matter of organized crime in the Balkans has only become concerning in the last few decades of the 20th century, despite similar activities occurring for centuries¹. The region is a major hub for criminal activities like human trafficking, drug trafficking, money laundering and the smuggling of illegal commodities. Political unrest, economic hardship, and lax law enforcement are just a few of the elements that have allowed these criminal networks to flourish in the area².

Europe serves as both a source and a destination for illegal goods that are transported between continents³, but most often, Europe is considered a significant consumer market. This is especially true of illegal narcotics, such as heroin from Central Asia and cocaine from South America. Other than illegal drugs, Europe is a major market for protected cultural objects, protected wildlife, and knockoffs of name-brand commodities, including software, cigarettes, and pharmaceuticals⁴. Most of the time, transnational organized crime in Europe is seen as a representation of the socio-economic divide between Western Europe and the former Soviet Union and Balkan nations⁵. Some international crimes are, in fact, somewhat characterized by an East-West axis. For example, like cross-border serial burglary are carried out by Eastern European gangs in Western Europe, stolen vehicles are often trafficked from Western to Eastern Europe⁶.

There are several reasons for the high rate of organized crime in the Balkans. A major reason is the geographic location. Shortcuts that go via the peninsula connect Europe with the Middle East and Asia because of its geographic location⁷. More than any other historical, cultural, or national element, the so-called «Balkan Route» has been utilized to smuggle

people and other items from Asia and the Middle East to Europe and vice versa. The «Balkan route» is one of the primary routes used for drug trafficking from Turkey and other Asian nations to Europe and became more and more popular throughout the 1970s⁸. After 10 years, this route has developed into one of the most significant places for smuggling drugs and human beings into Europe, due to the geopolitical advantages of the Balkans⁹. The triangle border region between Kosovo, northern Macedonia, and southern Serbia is unsurprising, some of the most popular routes are those used for other types of trafficking, like drugs and firearms¹⁰. The demand for «facilitators» (smugglers) who provide fraudulent paperwork, serve as guides and scouts, offer transportation, lodging, and tickets, and bribe border guards has increased along the Balkan route¹¹. It is important to note that many of these facilitators are involved in multiple types of criminal activity, including drug trafficking (15%), human trafficking (20%), and property crime¹². The Western Balkan route continues to be the busiest migration route into Europe, with an increase in arrivals at the continent's external borders. In the final ten months of 2024, 22,300 irregular entries through the Western Balkan route were discovered. The amount is quadruple what it was in 2021 and is the largest since 2015. According to European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), «A large number of irregular border crossings can be linked to both those abusing visa-free access to the Western Balkans as well as migrants making repeated efforts to enter the border». Some immigrants travel to the EUs external borders using visa-free routes through Belgrade Airport¹³.

Weak border controls make the Balkans susceptible to organized crime¹⁴. A combination of the terrain and insufficient or dishonest border and customs officials are to blame for this. Most Balkan nations do not require visas for travel¹⁵. Although borders were not yet physically closed in 2019, police continued to exert intense control over them and deploy violence as a deterrent¹⁶. The opportunity of easily exploiting of border crossings to carry out illegal activities highlights the inefficiency of infrastructure and tools aimed at contrasting the crime in those areas¹⁷. Even if they wished to stop the new cross-border trafficking, law enforcement agencies were chronically lacking in cutting-edge tools and equipment, such as sniffer dogs, x-ray machines, and, in Albania as recently as 2001, flashlights and handcuffs. This gave the criminal elements an advantage¹⁸.

Another reason is a collaboration between organized crime. These organizations are distinguished by their capacity to cooperate and successfully adjust to any new social situation to carry out their criminal goals. Despite their forceful but formal nationalistic rhetoric, these crim-

inal organizations have always collaborated on drug trafficking, human trafficking, the smuggling of stolen automobiles, cigarettes, guns, fuel, and money laundering¹⁹.

The Balkan countries involved in this conflict face numerous challenges, including reluctance from state authorities in most nations. Some criminals had a history of violence or had participated in the resistance movement against the communist government²⁰. In their countries, these individuals were hero-worshipped for defending the state, freedom, and democracy²¹. It is the case, for instance, of former leaders of UCK²² units in Kosovo who, after the end of the war against Serbia, became political leaders and went on in their illegal traffics from a stronger position. Whether they were charged with a crime or caught in the act, these individuals often got only symbolic punishment, even though several of them were actively participating in illegal conduct. In other cases, official institutions have frequently refrained from taking on organized crime due to a variety of risks, a lack of motivation brought on by societal unrest or low wages, an unpredictable work environment, or a combination of these factors²³. Political or familial ties, rather than their real professional principles, have elevated some of the authorities who have acted in this way. The corruption-related official involvement in criminal activity and political or official structures' involvement in criminal activity are further challenges. More than any other element, this phenomenon has been impacting the growth of organized scientific crime, organized economic crime, and ware piracy in most of the Balkan states²⁴. Corruption is either becoming worse or remaining stagnant in Eastern European nations. The effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts varies significantly across the European Union (EU), with considerable disparities in some EU Member States²⁵.

Lastly, institutions at home and abroad don't cooperate and aren't transparent enough. In some instances, the lack of collaboration between national and international institutions, particularly the issue of inadequate transparency in the work of the international institutions in Kosovo and Bosnia, has also shown to be an obstacle to the successful completion of their primary mission. The primary mission is to combat organized crime²⁶. These events have helped to foster a culture of suspicion and a setting where local and international agencies in Kosovo and Bosnia accuse one another of making errors or failing to effectively combat organized crime and corruption²⁷.

These developments have stimulated cooperation and coordination among the countries in Eastern Europe to strengthen freedom, democracy,

and security in the region. Fighting the region's security threats – terrorism and organized crime in particular – has strengthened diplomatic, political, and military relations between Eastern Europe countries, improved intelligence sharing, and intensive cross-border police, and judicial cooperation²⁸. Cooperation includes gatherings of regional political and military leaders, joint education and training programs aimed at preventing and combating terrorism and organized crime, and coordinated efforts by public prosecutors, intelligence, and law enforcement officials in the region to secure borders, apprehend suspects in terrorism and/or organized crime, dismantle organizations connected to these crimes, and freeze or seize assets²⁹.

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Along with their allies and partners, Eastern Europe nations have cooperated in the battle against terrorism³⁰. The likelihood of joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) – status coveted by most former communist nations in Europe has sped up Eastern Europe's regional cooperation. Members of the EU and NATO have evidently shown democratic maturity and advanced security capabilities, they also have requirements and benefits of membership in the two organizations that have sped up regional cooperation efforts³¹. After 1989, NATO and the EU concentrated on enlarging the area of peace and stability in Europe by welcoming new members. They helped candidate and non-candidate nations strengthen their democracies and boost their security capacities through a variety of programs, partnerships, and/or membership requirements. These programs aimed at post-conflict development and reconstruction, reform of security and defence institutions, and bringing Eastern Europe countries closer to the West. Using these initiatives, the two organizations have compelled candidate nations to fortify their bilateral and trilateral ties, solidify their ties with their neighbours, and take part in several regional and subregional cooperative security groups³². Some Balkan nations continue to deny that organized crime has infiltrated their borders. Slovenia, for instance, claims to be a member of a regional organization that fights crime, but the nation has not yet admitted that organized crime exists there³³. In other words, integration between the two institutions has always required regional and subregional cooperation³⁴.

2. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the new frontiers of illegality

Now, let's examine how the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has impacted criminal activities in these countries. Russia's invasion of

Ukraine has significantly affected regional illicit economies and criminal networks, but the basic power balance between the Russian state and organized criminal groups has not changed. Due to its direct involvement in illicit economies, the Russian state has remained in a dominant position vis-à-vis criminal groups even as Western sanctions have prompted the emergence of new trafficking routes to supply the industrial and consumer goods that are subject to Western sanctions. In contrast, in Ukraine, Russia's aggression significantly severed long-established cooperation between Russian and Ukrainian criminal networks. Yet to be seen in 2025 is whether Ukrainian criminal groups' split from their former Russian organized crime partners will persist despite the strong possibility that Ukrainian forces will face increasing attrition in the second half of the year, especially if Western aid falters and dries up.

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Over the past three decades, Ukrainian organized crime, intensely intermingled with Ukrainian politics and business, was also closely connected to Russian criminal networks³⁵. Ukrainian criminal groups were not as tight with their Russian counterparts as the Belarusian crime networks are³⁶, but the collaboration was robust enough for Russian intelligence and special forces to use Ukrainian organized crime³⁷ in support of Russia's annexation of Crimea and in the separatist region of Donetsk. Thus, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, it was uncertain whether Ukrainian criminal networks would sustain their Russian connections or side with Ukraine. Although some Ukrainian criminal groups, such as in Odesa, still provided services to Russian agents, most have severed those ties³⁸. The Ukrainian organized groups' calculations went beyond patriotism³⁹: according to experts on Ukrainian organized crime, and Western law enforcement officials, various Ukrainian criminal groups judged that if Russia succeeded in annexing Ukraine, Russian organized crime would eventually subsume or eliminate them. Siding with Ukraine meant preserving some illicit profits and power. Ukrainian authorities' early actions reinforced this calculus. First, Ukrainian counterintelligence networks, bolstered⁴⁰ by a decade of Western assistance, have systematically and aggressively⁴¹ sought to identify and punish collaborators⁴², including in the criminal underworld. Second, various Ukrainian politicians and businessmen with criminal entanglements were at least temporarily forgiven if they supported anti-invasion efforts, such as by supplying weapons⁴³ and ammunition to Ukrainian forces, profiteering along the way. This and broader corruption in Ukrainian procurement⁴⁴, resulting in weapons supply gaps, have created legitimacy problems internally within Ukraine. Ominously, perceptions of corruption could further jeopardize the already-precarious Western military support. There are also fears that the weapons meant for and being used

within Ukraine could leak into European crime markets, but the extent⁴⁵ so far has been limited.

A decline in Western materiel and training support would bring Ukraine to a dangerous military attrition⁴⁶ within several months, a trend potentially intensifying in 2025 should right-wing political parties gain momentum. Some Ukrainian organized criminal groups may start determining that defecting and collaborating with Russian actors now may position them better in the long term as battlefield dynamics shift. Monitoring the criminal landscape and dismantling and arresting any elements of Ukrainian criminal networks developing relations with Russia will be important for maintaining deterrence.

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Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a second key question was whether Western sanctions would trigger the Russian state to become so dependent on criminal networks for liquidity and crucial goods that Moscow would lose its dominance over organized crime. While a complete meltdown of the Russian state à la the 1990s, when Russian mafia businessmen often dictated terms to Russian officials, was unlikely, a substantial weakening of the Russian state vis-à-vis organized crime was possible. That did not happen because the Russian state itself handled the sanctions evasion and smuggling of critical goods. The Russian corporate sector managed hydrocarbon sales, since many governments, such as India⁴⁷ and Brazil⁴⁸, embraced Russian energy discounts despite Western sanctions and helped Russia to circumvent them⁴⁹. Linking up with North Korea, Iran, and China, Russian special operations and intelligence services established weapons, microchips, and other critical goods pipelines. North Korea's government, which operates the country's illicit economies, has been an important smuggler of weapons into Russia⁵⁰, including artillery shells and missiles⁵¹. North Korea's Rason port⁵² and Russia-linked rail saw a dramatic surge in container activity⁵³ after Russia invaded Ukraine. Beyond diplomatic succour, Russia pays North Korea back⁵⁴ with military technology blueprints, agricultural commodities, and oil⁵⁵. Last, but not least, Pyongyang provided Moscow with more than 10,000 soldiers to support its war against Ukraine⁵⁶. Through the Caspian Sea⁵⁷, Iranian smuggling networks have similarly delivered anti-tank missiles⁵⁸, RPGs⁵⁹, attack drones⁶⁰, and artillery shells⁶¹ to Moscow, while the Iran-linked Houthis have avoided⁶² targeting Russian ships.

China too has played an essential role in undermining Western sanctions on Russia, particularly in vital industrial components like microchips. Russian electronics smuggling rings, such as the Serniya Network, have also helped Russia overcome⁶³ Western export bans. Es-

establishing front companies in Western countries⁶⁴ as well as developing hubs in China, the United Arab Emirates, and Serbia⁶⁵, these channels have supplied both the Russian military⁶⁶ and other Russian companies⁶⁷. China also receives most of Russian oil tankers⁶⁸.

With the Greek port of Kalamata⁶⁹ and the Spanish city Ceuta⁷⁰ also implicated in evading the European Union's ban on Russian oil, Hong Kong⁷¹ and Dubai⁷² have become Russian oil companies' primary trading capitals. Dubai is also where sanctioned Russian oligarchs and criminals have parked⁷³ their physical assets and money. Indian smuggling networks operating in Dubai have helped launder Russia-bound money and gold, such as that extracted by the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group⁷⁴. Speaking of Wagner Group, it is important to highlight that While former Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin pioneered the recruitment of hardened criminals, including murderers and drug smugglers, from Russian prisons for Wagner's Ukraine operations, the Russian military has picked up the practice⁷⁵. Those who do not become the war's cannon fodder will eventually return to Russia, significantly augmenting Russian criminal groups' coercive power and perhaps their proclivity toward violence. The Kremlin will have a challenge keeping them subservient.

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Kremlin-linked Russian criminal networks are expanding a «dark fleet» of vessels that obfuscate cargo origin and frequently operate without a flag state, registration number, automatic identification system, and insurance. Alternatively, they use flags of convenience such as Panama, Malta, Liberia, and Cameroon. Various Greek companies⁷⁶, such as Navios Maritime Partners and Eastern Mediterranean Maritime, are being scrutinized for Russia-linked transactions⁷⁷. Greek ships now constitute nearly 50% of tanker capacity⁷⁸ departing from Russian ports, a 33% surge since the invasion. A Bombay-based company, Gatik Ship, facilitates disguising⁷⁹ ship ownership and illicit business. After Saint Kitts and Nevis annulled the registration of 36 Gatik ships⁸⁰ for transporting sanctioned Russian oil, at least four were reflagged in Mongolia⁸¹.

New land smuggling routes⁸² through Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey have also emerged. Many of these networks are highly fragmented, decentralized, non-Russian, and independent of the Kremlin. But since they mostly carry consumer goods for the Russian economy, instead of sensitive military and industrial contraband, they do not threaten the Russian state's power. Long used to collecting «taxes» from Russian crime networks, Russian intelligence services began extensively facilitating and directing⁸³ the Russian organized criminal groups' smuggling of counterfeit and untaxed tobacco, other counterfeit

goods, and even drugs to generate hard cash for the state and their own covert operations.

42 Russian smuggling networks⁸⁴ have also proliferated in surprising places, such as the U.S.-Mexico border where since mid-2022, U.S. Customs and Border Protection has reported a noticeable increase⁸⁵ in Russians attempting to cross into the United States. Many of the smuggled individuals are likely escaping the Kremlin's authoritarianism, but amid the intense Russian intelligence presence in Latin America⁸⁶ and especially in Mexico⁸⁷, some could endanger U.S. interests. Russian intelligence services could also encourage the establishment of greater cooperation between Russian and Mexican criminal groups or attempt to develop direct ties to Mexicans by offering them safe haven in Russia away from the reach of U.S. law enforcement. Should any such ties materialize, the United States should prioritize dismantling any Mexican groups collaborating with Russia.

Finally, as far as drug trafficking is concerned, although the war in Ukraine redirected some drug routes, cocaine smuggling into Russia did not collapse. In fact, the cocaine supply, intended for distribution into Western Europe⁸⁸, appears to have increased⁸⁹, as Russian criminal networks, assisted by counterparts in Lithuania, Belarus, Serbia⁹⁰, and Turkey⁹¹, continue to supply cocaine from Ecuador⁹², Costa Rica, and Venezuela. And despite the Taliban's ban on opium cultivation, the Russian criminal networks' decades-old smuggling of Afghan heroin into Russia and Europe, some of which is linked to groups in Chechnya and its strongman Ramzan Kadyrov⁹³, has not shown any weakening either. But consistent with the synthetic drugs revolution sweeping the world, amphetamine use is also rising in Russia. Synthetic drug laboratories, many owned by Russian organized crime and relocated to Kazakhstan⁹⁴ since 2022, supply members of the Russian military⁹⁵.

Overall, in 2025, the prospects are high that the Russian state will maintain its upper hand vis-à-vis Russian organized crime, while Ukrainian organized crime may start posing a multifaceted challenge to Ukraine.

Note

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