

# The Western Balkan Organised Crime at European Union: The Albanian Mafia - does it pose a real threat?

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## **Abstract**

This article deals with the research question of whether Albanian-speaking organised crime poses a real threat to the security of the European Union (EU). We analyse the danger of Albanian-speaking criminal organisations in the Balkans, Europe and elsewhere. Based on a wide range of criminal investigations, this innovative report looks forward to providing up-to-date data on police operations carried out by Europol and making the fight against these criminal groups' relevant scenes visible.

The methodology is based on two aspects. On the one hand, the study of the essential characteristics of these criminal groups is based on the latest studies made public in the academic sector. This will help us to understand criminal networks in detail, overlapping the core criminal activities and markets. On the other hand, the key police operations and international actions carried out during this period were studied based on Europol's open access reports involving *Europol News Press Release*. The current situation was established on the evidence released from 2018 to 2021.

*Analysis of these data has revealed the volume and scale of operations. Also, the geographical scope of the main criminal activities of the Balkan Organisations, especially the Albanian Mafia. All this shows that we are dealing with unique criminal organisations. This is so not only because of their sui generis characteristics but also because of their criminal activity, which makes them extremely difficult to combat by law enforcement agencies.*

**Keywords:** Organised Crime, Balkan, Albanian Mafia, European Union, Europol.

## Introduction

Speaking the situation of Organised Crime in the European Union highlights the considerable level of criminal activities during the last few years. Serious and organised crime remains a main EU security threat (Europol, 2021a). This report proposes to show the links between the Western Balkans organised groups in general, and more specifically the Albanian Mafia, based on the security at European Union and try to answer the following research question: Is the Albanian-speaking organised crime threatening the EU? To do this, we need first to understand the full spectrum of criminal activities, their *modus operandi*, their roots, links and so on and to identify the key criminal issues, such as facilitators, intermediaries or guarantors. To defeat it, a comprehensive approach to this phenomenon will provide better knowledge about the Balkan criminal landscape.

The article is divided into three clearly defined sections. Firstly, the methodology used to collect the data is based on this research. Secondly, criminal organisations in the Balkans set out the characteristics that make these groups unique. For this purpose, previous studies on the subject have been considered, as well as institutional reports and academic papers, to contextualise the reader. Finally, the focus is placed on the Albanian Mafia precisely. In this part, and to answer the above question, we analyse the operations carried out by Europol and published in *Europol News Press Release*. To analyse the data obtained, six key points have been considered. They are shown in graphs: (1) the number of police operations carried out, (2) the type of criminal activity, (3) police operations by type of drug trafficking, (4) the countries involved in the operations, (5) the number of Albanian Mafia member's arrested and (6) the number of police operations carried out against the different criminal groups which are the subject of this investigation.

The limit of the scope of the research is the actual number of police operations carried out against criminal organisations in the Balkans, including the Albanian Mafia, during the period in focus. The data presented in this investigation should be taken with caution, bearing in mind the frames of this work. However, we intend to lay the groundwork for a much broader study in the future.

## Methodology

The research carried out in this article has been approached from two perspectives. Firstly, we present a general theoretical framework of criminal organisations in the Balkans, which helps us to contextualise the subject under study. It is at this point that, through previous research by relevant authors such as Lamallari & Zhilla (2015, 2016), Rama (2021) and Saggars (2019), among others, the aim is to deepen the specific characteristics that make both Balkan groups and Albanian Mafia into a unique group of criminal organi-

sations. To highlight this point, the dismantling of one of the largest Albanian criminal organisations in the world, *Kompania Bello*, is exposed.

Secondly, having explained the general characteristics of both, and to answer the question raised in the title, the police operations carried out by Europol during the years 2018-2021 have been analysed and published in *Europol News Press Release*. From all this news, a few key points have been extracted, presented in graphical form, showing the relevance of the threat posing the Balkans organised criminal groups, especially the Albanian Mafia, to the European Union as a whole.

The limitations of our research lie in the fact that only the data of the news published in *Europol News Press Release* have been analysed, so we are aware of the police operations carried out during these years, which we have not had access to in details, and which would extend the scope of this study. This leaves the door open for further research on the subject.

## Analysis

### Part One: The Organised Crime in the Western Balkans

In this first part of the research, we start to provide an overview of the essential characteristics of criminal organisations in the Balkans. This will allow us to understand the Albanian Mafia better. Secondly, we will briefly analyse the main illegal markets of these organisations based on the several police operations carried out by Europol between 2018-2021.

#### Crime and perpetrators in the Balkans

The Balkans have constantly been forming a complex framework about ethnicity, religion, geographical crossroads, social factors, historical regional and political grievances among countries, wars, terrorism and finally, when the former Yugoslavia collapsed, this brought an addition of a booming breeding ground to develop criminal activities at southwest European region. If these factors are combined, we will find one of the most critical issues about these states' future entrance into the European Union. The lack of a strong democracy and legal values added to the weakness of political institutions have made a perfect storm for criminals and their activities (UNODC, 2020).

Globalisation has contributed to a more connected and less safe world, and the Balkans' criminal groups have taken advantage of this to move from a regional threat to a global one. The Balkans have become one of the most significant criminal hubs of international organised crime. Nowadays, the known Balkan Cartel and mainly Albanian-speaking Mafia organisations not only have been constituted as a primary drug gate to European Union but also have created an essential criminal business model which threatens to monopolise all drug trafficking markets to flood Europe.

One of the key factors to understanding the essential characteristics of these groups can be found in the words of Krasniqi (2016):

*“Organised crime in the Balkans could not have developed to this point without establishing networking and cooperation between regional groups belonging to organised crime. These groups, becoming increasingly criminally sophisticated all over the Balkans, are characterised by their ability to work together and adapt to any new social circumstances well enough to achieve their criminal goals”* (p.212).

Taking these words as a beginning point, the most relevant characteristics are *cooperation*, *networking* and *adapting*. These three points give us the key to understanding how these criminal groups become a global threat. Conversely, the current trends, most of the Balkan criminal groups, named as a family or place, evolved familiar mates or different sibling grades, even other people from a shared community. This consists of a hierarchical Mafia-style organisation. The larger groups have shown a predilection for a networked structure in contrast to small or medium which are more hierarchical. They usually operate around main hot-spots or transit corridors like ports, crossroads, border crossings or airports (UNODC, 2020).

The criminal cartels of the Balkans are formed by more entrepreneurs than only criminals, developing an unbeatable business model, taking risks, and developing new business opportunities focused on adapting and innovating the criminal markets (Kemp, 2020). One of the most relevant points related to their structure is the second generation (usually forming a diaspora) of younger gangers who are completely tech and device savvies, using proficient computer skills, languages, and communications such as satellites phones or Voice over Internet Protocols (VoIP) among others, which makes them a potential law enforcement’s adversary. All these characteristics allow the new generation of criminals to become under the law’s radar, which facilitates their criminal activities on the one hand and makes police work more difficult on the other (Kemp, 2020).

### **Current Situation: An Overview of Police Operations 2018-2021**

The following section briefly analyses the developments in the activity of organised crime groups in the Balkans between 2018 and 2021, considering Europol’s newsletters (Europol, 2018a; Europol, 2018c; Europol, 2019d; Europol, 2020b; Europol, 2020d; Europol, 2021d; Europol, 2021e). We appreciate that almost half of them, 40.45% joint operations, have been against the Western Balkan organised crime network known as the Balkan Cartel. From the international security point of view, all these joint police operations have been involved not only in national law enforcement authorities and departments but also in international security agencies such as Europol, Frontex, Interpol, and Eurojust, among others. It is essential to highlight the role played by non-EU countries (in the Balkans, the Americas, and Asia) and the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in these operations, showing us the complexity of the criminal activities spread around the globe.

It can be observed the development of police operations against different groups of organised crime originated in the Balkans during the years 2018 and 2021:

- Firstly, in 2018 there were five police operations directed against these criminal groups. The most relevant operations were Operation KOLUMBI (Europol, 2018c), NANA (Europol, 2018a) and ARME72 (Europol, 2018c).
- Secondly, in 2019, two operations were carried out; the most relevant was Operation FAMILIA (Europol, 2019d).
- Thirdly, in 2020, two international operations were against Balkan organised criminal cartels (Europol, 2020b; Europol, 2020d).
- Finally, in 2021 the operations carried out two, in this case, dealt a blow to several criminal cartels during the Joint Action Days, JAD (Europol, 2021d; Europol, 2021e).

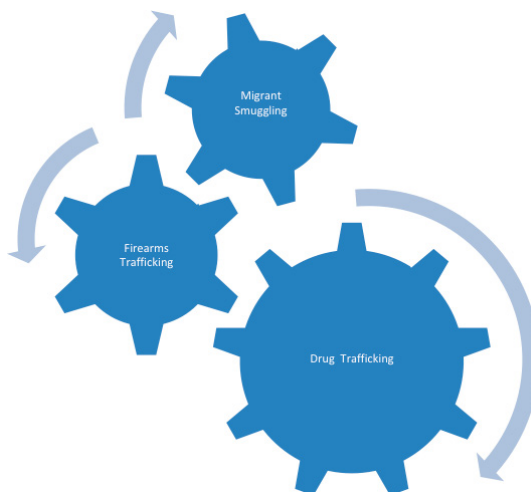
Law enforcement agencies worldwide have tackled this global threat thanks to continuous cooperation, intelligence sharing and performing joint operations (ten in four years) to capture high-value targets (HVT). The term originates from the military, explaining high-value targets as assets that an enemy commander requires to complete their mission successfully. The loss of high-value targets would be expected to seriously degrade essential enemy functions throughout the friendly commander's interest – specifies the Field Manual of the US Army (2010).

Europol transforms the terminology from the military to the law enforcement sciences explaining that:

*“HVTs are the key enablers and facilitators of criminal processes. They are not limited to the obvious categories of leaders, organisers, brokers, coordinators, fences or large-scale money launderers. They can also be persons offering specialist expertise or access to crucial contacts or infrastructures such as technical experts, legal and financial advisors, or services providers”* (Europol, 2021a, p. 22).

Concretely between 2018 and 2021, five HVTs, including two kingpins (Mafia's *capo*) considered by Europol as two cartel leaders, have been arrested by law enforcement authorities (Europol, 2021d). Most of these operations are part of a broader European strategy developed by European Union law enforcement authorities inside the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT).

By summarising these police news reports, the highest threat posed to societies by criminal issues were drug trafficking (mainly cocaine from South America to European Union), firearms trafficking and migrant smuggling. As far as these illegal activities are concerning this current report, we can state the following (UNODC & Europol, 2021):

**Figure 1.** Synergies between main criminal activities

It is well-known from *drug trafficking* that this is the primary source of income for the cartels (UNODC & Europol, 2021). The Balkans are one of the most prominent transits regions for all kinds of drugs, as we have been able to appreciate through police operations. During the analysed years, the authorities apprehended nearly six tons of drugs. Regarding the different types, the following issues are found:

- Heroin: Balkan routes are the hub of trafficking heroin from Afghanistan and Pakistan to European markets via Turkey (Kemp, 2020). It is important to note that heroin is also processed in the Balkans in smaller amounts. Still, there is no evidence of this trafficking currently at these Europol police operations between 2018-2021.
- Cannabis and Marijuana: Albania is the leading top producer and exporter of Cannabis to the European Union. For example, the village of Lazaret, in southern Albania, is referred to by experts as *Marijuana Mecca* or Europe's cannabis capital (Kemp, 2017). Law enforcement seized 474 kg of marijuana (7.81%) and 719 kg of Cannabis (11.85%). Both have supposed nearly 20% of the whole drug trafficking period analysed.
- Cocaine: Currently, the most lucrative market for these groups is the cocaine trafficking from South America to Europe (UNODC & Europol, 2021; Bargent *et al.*, 2021), near 4 540 kg above 74.84 % of all drugs seized, thanks to the previous contacts created between cocaine cartels and Balkan cartels using the Italian Mafia relationships.

In addition, according to *firearms trafficking*, there are millions of weapons and explosives out of control in this region (Rama, 2021). Most of them have their origin in the Yugoslav wars. The smuggling of these weapons flows mainly to other criminal groups, such as motorbikes gangs from Nordic countries, Italian Mafias or even under terrorists' hands.

Brussels, Paris, Italy, Netherland, and Germany, among other European countries, collect the leading destination of these weapons and explosives. During the police operations led by Europol in these years (mainly during Joint Action Days-JAD<sup>1</sup>), it is observed that the authorities have seized a total of 1122 pieces of small firearms (pistols, machine guns and rifles, among others) (Europol, 2018c). It is relevant to notice that police could also find rocket launchers, hand grenades, detonators, and a high amount of ammunition, almost 4 482 bullets for small arms and light weapons (Europol, 2018c).

At this point, we must highlight the strong relationship between contract killing and the hitman phenomenon. The violent reputation which precedes criminals from the Balkan region is well known, being used as 'muscle' or 'foot soldiers' for many criminal gangs worldwide, especially in Europe. Such individuals were selected from a wide range of young unemployed people with a lack of future expectations and belonging to minor gangs working as thugs or assassins. Due to the legacy of the 1990s wars, the region is an invaluable source of former soldiers and paramilitaries who became unemployed (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2019). They have developed specific skills to act as perfect hitmen (Rama, 2021) and repeatedly seek such challenges. If we add the great facility to acquire weapons and explosives from the local region, we will find a potential asset to carry out a professional assassination (Lamallari & Zhilla, 2015).

Finally, *migrant smuggling* is a well-known organised crime sector in the region. The Balkan Route became a priority transit path of aliens for multiple reasons circulating along with the crossing road between countries and continents. These individuals from several countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East belong to different ethnic, cultural, and religious groups. The humanitarian crisis means a point of beginning of a lucrative business, and there are more criminal groups obtaining large amounts of money from smuggling people through the Balkan's migrant routes across different countries to the European Union. One main issue related to this phenomenon is the use of these routes for *foreign fighter returnees* to come back to Europe. In 2018 the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) and Europol broke down the major organised criminal groups in an extensive cross-border operation (Europol, 2018b). Still, the topic remained the member states' law enforcement focus. However, this operational success provides evidence of the importance of law enforcement cooperation in Europe and elsewhere.

Considering the main countries involved in the cross-border crime committed by organised criminal groups in the Balkans, we can see that the threat is real. Their scope is global; their area of operation covers not only the Balkans and the EU member countries but also South America, Asia (with a focus on Hong Kong, Macao and Malaysia), and even Australia (Europol, 2019d).

<sup>1</sup> "Joint Action Days (JADs) are cross-border law enforcement operations focusing on key crime priorities" (Europol, 2018e).

## Part Two: The Albanian Mafia

In this part of the research, we first propose an overview of the Albanian Mafia's essential characteristics, making them unique. Let us take the example of dismantling *Kompania Bello* as a prototypical organisation and analyse several police operations carried out by Europol and its partner agencies.

### General Overview

Security threats originating from the Balkans have significantly been affecting countries beyond the borders of the Balkan region and have a significant impact on the countries of the European Union. Our scope will be the Albanian-speaking organised criminals, also known as the Albanian Mafia. As mentioned before, the spread of these organised criminal groups has been influenced by several favouring reasons, such as geographical specificities, the political and economic situation in the Balkans still having roots in the consequences of the collapse of Yugoslavia, the high degree of unemployment, immigration waves to Europe (imported criminal experiences and foreign contacts) and support offered by members of the Albanian diaspora (Lamallari & Zhilla, 2015). These organised criminal groups have made a perfect storm to develop all kinds of criminal activities around the region, creating a complex criminal landscape that challenges law enforcement agencies. For identification purposes, Europol and other law enforcement agencies speak about Albanian-speaking groups, referring not only to citizens of Albania *strictu sensu* but also Albano-Kosovars and Albanese-speaking people of Montenegro.

Law enforcement agencies across the EU, including Europol, have noted in the beginning that these groups appear as *facilitators* and *service providers* (couriers, hitmen, or thugs) for other criminal groups. Even though these groups do not only appear this way, they could also often be part of a more comprehensive criminal network (Lamallari & Zhilla, 2015).

Europol has described the Albanian-organised criminal groups as Mafia-style organisations. According to Raufer's definition (2018):

*"Mafia is a permanent secret society uniting a coalition of families bound by blood or marriage; it is closed, elaborate hierarchies and rules. The law of silence surrounded all and usually joined only by family or clan co-option"* (p. 62).

The Albanian Mafia has successfully combined traditional and modern elements of organised crime; they follow ancient patterns and updated ones in their business models. These groups are ruled by members of the family clans, called "*fis*", with strict internal rules of behaviour and loyalty to the clan. These clans are based on family blood ties (difficult to infiltrate) and marriage links. Their communications also have characteristics, such as coded language, dialects like *Gheg Albanian* and the so-called **code of silence** (Micha-



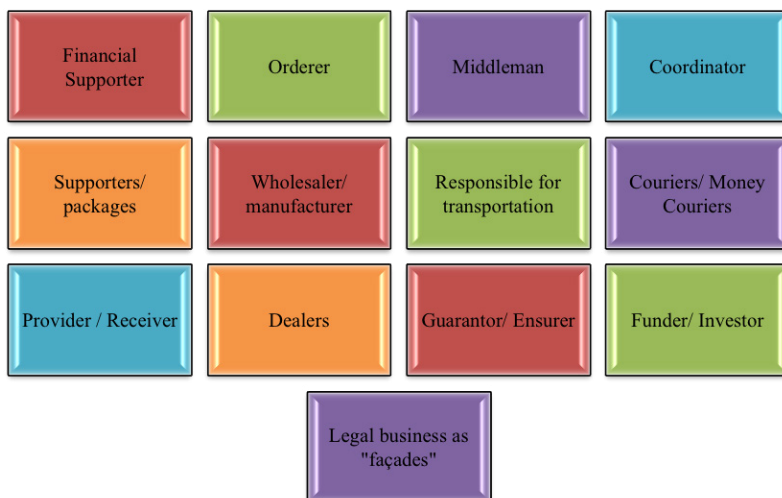
letos, 2007). The member's relationships often originate from their childhood, school, and neighbourhood, which ensures strong ties between them (Lamallari & Zhilla, 2015).

Although more flexible, the Albanian criminal groups follow a robust internal hierarchy to interact with other teams. They follow diverse interests in commodities and have recently developed a poly-criminal business model (dealing with drugs and firearms, and providing services as hitmen, for example), as Europol specified. Some members of organised criminal groups in the Balkans, especially the Albanese-speaking ones, are considered the former staff of intelligence services (*Sigurimi*<sup>2</sup>) or police officers and paramilitaries, with those elements remaining part of their character, despite changes over the years in the typology of criminal activity (Rama, 2021). Nevertheless, the Albanian-speaking Mafia organisations are considered one of the most violent criminal groups in the European Union (Lamallari & Zhilla, 2015; Rama, 2021).

It can be appreciated that the Albanian Mafia has shown an incredible capacity to develop highly complex international operations creating a vital outpost mainly in the European Union. One of its major successes is the great secrecy and high level of professionalism while operating abroad (Raufer, 2018).

According to our investigations, some individuals from the above-mentioned criminal networks could be identified according to their roles, and therefore they could be targets of prosecution (Lamallari & Zhilla, 2015):

**Figure 2.** Members of the Criminal Networks



2 Directorate of State Security of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania.

All these targets within criminal chains are important breaking points and could lead us to high-value targets to defeat the real threat. From our point of view, a clear connection between Albanian Mafia groups and State institutions exists and shows the actual scope of the threat. We are talking about the figure of the *guarantor*, formed by personnel from institutions, such as border police officials, law enforcement investigators, judges, and prosecutors, for instance (Lamallari & Zhilla, 2016), whose primary role is to guarantee that criminal business goes smoothly without any problem. Another relevant actor in the chain is the so-called *middleman*. This subject is a crucial element inside the criminal structure, mainly abroad, and is considered a perfect broker to contact people, saving both sides in an unlawful arrangement (Lamallari & Zhilla, 2016). Summarising this point, if law enforcement forces could discover and tackle one of these elements on the illegal chain, they would be breaking down and defeating some criminal organisations.

On top of that, Albanian-speaking Mafia networks are spreading worldwide, but their ties are incredibly dense in the European Union. A detailed awareness of these ties is a condition to understand how these regional groups have become an international high-level security threat to our societies.

Finally, the more relevant hotspots of international networks with constantly reported participation of Albanian criminal groups related to illicit markets of drug trafficking are as follows (Rama, 2021):

- *Cocaine*: 'Ndrangheta, Camorra, Colombian, Dominican, Moroccan, and Spanish criminal groups;
- *Heroin*: Sicilian, Apulian, Tunisian and Moroccan criminal groups;
- *Cannabis*: Lazio, Apulian, Sicilian, Moroccan, Tunisian and Spanish groups.

Furthermore, another critical market in Europe is firearms trafficking, where the Italian organised criminal groups, primarily the 'Ndrangheta, act as the Albanians' primary clients, as Europol indicated in 2011 (Europol, 2011, p. 38.). It is relevant here to expose that Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Germany are the main European countries where the Albanian-speaking Mafia maintains their dissemination networks and roots go deep inside the criminal underworld. The United States and Latin American countries are their main outposts outside Europe (Kemp, 2020).

### **The Kompania Bello: A Perfect Albanian Crime Syndicate<sup>3</sup>**

During this period, where we have focused our investigation, the police operation LOS BLANCOS, in September 2020 coordinated by Europol, has involved more than ten

<sup>3</sup> At the end of this investigation, according to sources consulted, *Kompania Bello* is reorganising its criminal structure in Ecuador and forming new alliances in Europe (Mistler-Ferguson, 2022).

countries, from Europe and outside, against the most dangerous and complex Albanian-speaking Mafia, named *Kompania Bello*. Briefly, we expose the main characteristic of this criminal organisation, which is relevant to the main aspects seen before, and the composition of Albanian criminal groups worldwide (Qyno, 2021; Europol, 2020c).

The criminal syndicate was led by Dritan Rexhepi (40), who was from Ecuador's prison managing one of the most complex illegal businesses. The *Kompania Bello* controlled the whole chain of drug trafficking, from departure to distribution, between South American drug cartels and Europe, concretely the ports of the Netherland and Belgium. The cocaine was delivered to Germany, Italy, and Albania from these points. Based on a solid hierarchy, the criminal group involved nearly fourteen Albanian criminal groups and recruited their members from the extended Albanian-speaking diaspora across European countries. Following this kind of Mafia-style organisation, the strict loyalty and the ability to intimidate others have created a strong sense of code of silence among all members (Michaletos, 2007).

Apart from that, we must focus on several capstone issues. First, during the investigation, the intelligence capabilities developed by the *Kompania* showed that the members of the groups exchanged information about police operations and criminal cases while being processed in the court as a strategic analysis focused on future illegal activities (Qyno, 2021). Secondly, the use of *guarantors* and bribing public officials at cargo ports. Thirdly, the payment system uses a Chinese organisation system (*feich'ien*) without carrying cash (Europol, 2020c). And finally, the more significant deals with South American drug cartels. One of them, Cesar Camilo Montenegro, called *Don Monti*, ruled Ecuadorian drug trafficking. And other cartels, in this case from Colombia, are known as Norte del Valle and Sinaloa's cartels from Mexico (Qyno, 2021).

### Current Situation Between 2018-2021

*The following statics are based on open source from Europol's News Press Release about the police operation leading across Europe and other countries, but Europol has participated and coordinated them between 2018 and 2021 following the same structure showed previously at Balkan's operations, offering specific statistics (Europol 2018d; Europol 2019a; Europol, 2019b; Europol, 2019c; Europol, 2019b; Europol, 2019b; Europol, 2020a; Europol, 2020c; Europol, 2020e; Europol, 2021b; Europol, 2021c).*

To answer the question of whether the Albanian Mafia poses a threat to the EU, six key points of reference have been used against which we assess the data obtained:

**Figure 3.** Key Issues



Source: The author's drawing.

The following section will dissect these key factors by employing graphs. The data extracted from Europol's press releases will provide valuable information to assess the threat of the Albanian mafia in the European environment.

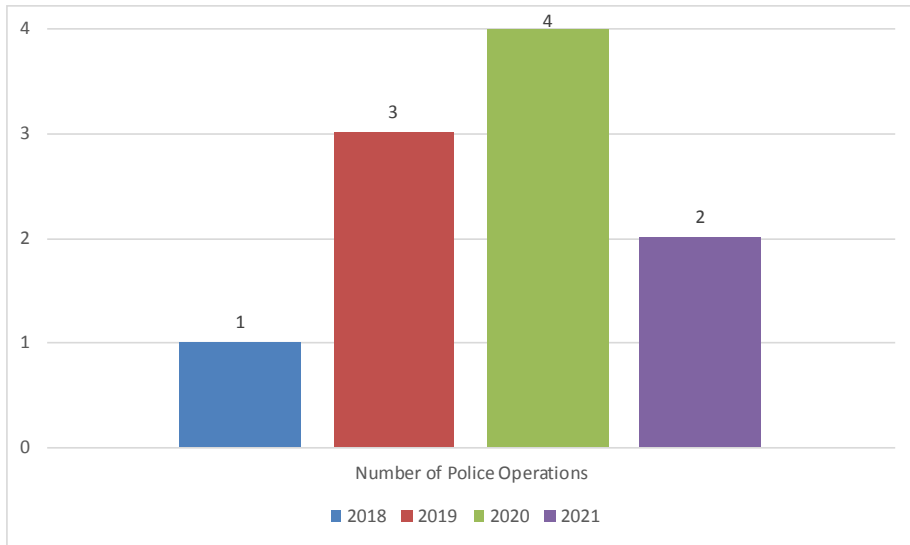
### Statistics and Graphs

The first graph demonstrates the number of police operations carried out against Albanian-speaking organised crime during the period of this research.

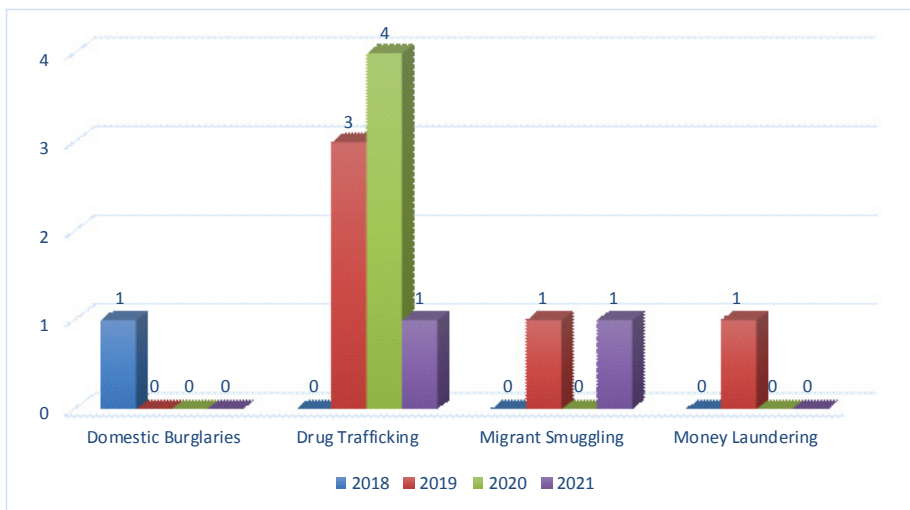
The most relevant information, which can be observed in graph 1, is the increasing police operations from 2018 until 2020 and the subsequent decrease in 2021. It seems that COVID-19 does not affect criminal activities. One of the main characteristics of the new organised criminal groups is their ability to be adapted to these specific circumstances, as the graph indicates.

In the second graph, the criminal activity is shown by the type committed by the Albanian Mafia groups. The most significant developing sector was drug trafficking between 2018-2021.

**Graph 1.** Number of Police Operations



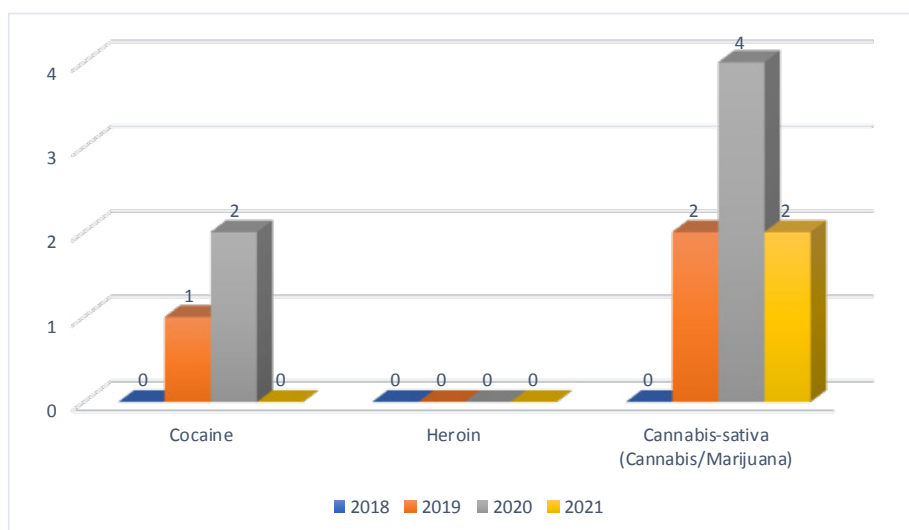
**Graph 2.** Type of Criminal Activities



Inside the entire scope of police operations led by Europol in these years, we noticed that the main criminal activity is drug trafficking, as seen in graph 2. In most studied cases, an additional crime to drug trafficking could be identified, such as money laundering and

migrant smuggling. The term poly-criminality is a business model in which the organised criminal group expands their crime portfolio, engaging other crime sectors simultaneously. The multiple illegal activities in the portfolio make the business model more robust and capable of resisting quick market changes. (Europol, 2017, p. 15) Once it has been established that the main criminal activity of the Albanian Mafia is drug trafficking, the third graph shows the number of police operations by type of narcotic substance carried out in this period:

**Graph 3.** Police Operations by Type of Drug Trafficking



In 2019 there were three operations carried out, while in 2020, there was an increase to a total of six, followed by a decrease in 2021 when just two such operations happened. Concerning the type of drug, three operations were carried out against cocaine trafficking and eight against cannabis-sativa (four related to cannabis and four against marijuana) trafficking too. Surprisingly, during the period under review, there have been no operations related to trafficking in opiates, such as heroin.

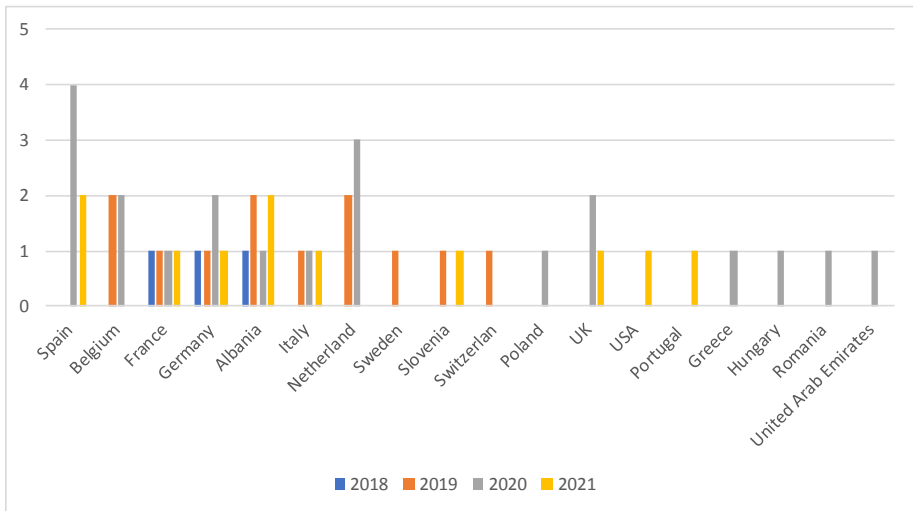
Following the data obtained in police operations related to drug trafficking (*Europol News Press Release*, 2018-2021), we can notice that the primary illegal substance is Cannabis Sativa and their derived products such as Marijuana (74 755 cannabis plants; 73 plantations; 3400 kg seized; and 280 kg of Marijuana seized), followed by cocaine (5 650 kg seized, mainly at *Kompania Bello*, during LOS BLANCOS operation, and operation GOLDFINGER too). As we have seen above (see pg. 7), Albania is the central hub of the production and

trafficking of cannabis to the EU. Currently, one of the main cocaine gates from Latin America to Europe, using the so-called Balkan Route, is similar to the Balkan Cartel (Qyno, 2021; Europol, 2020c).

In general, one of the most critical strengths of the Balkan criminal organisations, and more specifically the Albanian Mafia, is their incredible territorial expansion.

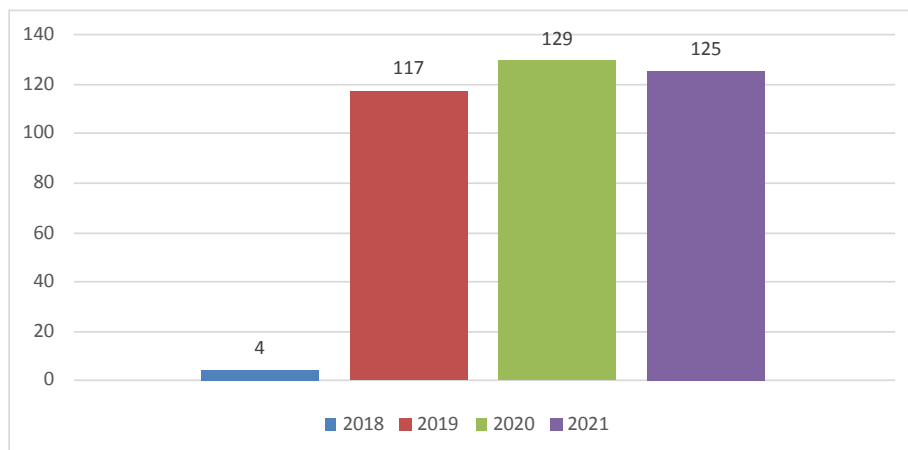
Fourthly, the figure below displays the number of countries in which Europol has carried out operations against the Albanian Mafia throughout the world:

**Graph 4.** Countries Involved in Police Operations



Analysing all Europol’s joint police operations, we notice that 47 countries (the graph shows the most relevant) have been involved in these operations. The main countries are from the EU (14 of the whole), as it can be observed Spain is leading the role of this “black-list”, followed by Germany, Netherlands, France, Belgium, Italy and finally, the UK. The most relevant data about non-EU countries are Albania, in the same position as Spain, with six police operations in its field. It is essential to highlight the operations which have also involved countries from South America, Asia, and the Middle East (Qyno, 2021; Europol, 2020c).

Another point to consider when assessing the threat of these groups is the number of arrested in this period. In the fifth graph, we investigate the arrests.

**Graph 5.** Number of arrested members of Albanian-speaking criminal groups

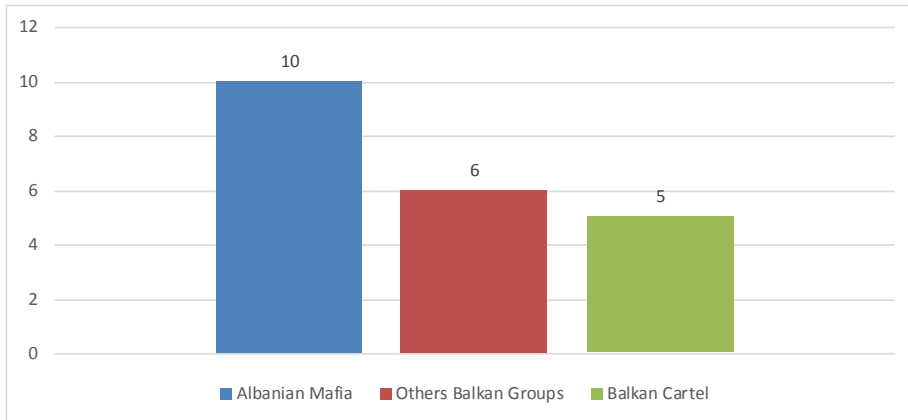
The analysed data shows a worrying trend from 2019. The number of arrested individuals related to the Albanian Mafia rose to about a hundred twenty detainees per year, and the volume seems to be constant for a longer term. The European security agencies should consider that between 2018 and 2021, 375 people were arrested in several police operations supported by Europol as a coordinative body. No data available describes the actual number of detained individuals related to the Albanian Mafia in the EU member countries in those operations, not mentioning Europol. This is undoubtedly one of the significant methodological shortcomings of this research since knowing the current number of operations and arrests carried out throughout the European Union. Still, no such figure is published by the member states or the EU.

We have assessed the set of police operations against all criminal groups in the Balkans to highlight the volume of operations against the Albanian Mafia.

At this specific period, the number of police operations against all organised groups from the Balkan region was up to twenty-one. The Albanian Mafia is spearheading the operational targets by ten (47.65%), followed by other Balkan groups with six operations (28.57%) and finally, the operations against called "Balkan Cartel" with five operations (23.80%). Although Balkan Cartel is in the third position of the graph, they can be considered the second highest threat due to their structural advancements and organised crime syndicate character over the rest and multiple Balkan groups mentioned in the graph at the second position. (Europol, 2018a; Europol, 2018c; Europol, 2019d; Europol, 2020d; Europol, 2021d).



**Graph 6.** The Number of Police Operations by Targeted Groups (2018-2021)



## Discussion and Conclusion

In the review period, criminal organisations from the Balkans, including the Albanian Mafia, were active in the EU. The collected evidence proved that even the COVID-19 pandemic could not significantly impact it. This data is relevant and shows the adaptability of these groups. Of the six critical points analysed (graphs 1-6), the most relevant is the number of operations, the geographical scope, the countries involved, and the number of arrests. Another noteworthy fact is that of the 21 operations carried out against Balkan organisations, 10 of them were explicitly against the Albanian Mafia, resulting in about every second of the total.

Similarly, in the criminal markets, drug trafficking remains the leading criminal activity, with cannabis-derived products followed by cocaine constituting the main narcotic drugs. Other critical factors on which we base we claim that the Albanian Mafia is a continuous threat to the EU on the one hand, the power these groups wield in Latin America with the trafficking of cocaine into Europe. This involves the control of the entire production chain and a complex network of facilitators who ensure that drugs reach European markets (UNODC & Europol, 2021; Bargent *et al.*, 2021). The latter is particularly relevant because of the diaspora and connections with other criminal groups. And on the other hand, the volume of cannabis trafficking within our borders has made the Albanians the primary producers and distributors, respectively (Kemp, 2017).

One of the most important issues to cope with this kind of criminal organisation is targeting the key factors or primary enablers of their activities, legal and illegal. When we fight

not against second-rate organised criminals but Mafia-style ones, we need to identify the weak points of the entire business chain. As shown above, the Albanian Mafia is one of the most complex and adaptive criminal networks nowadays, which law enforcement must cope with. A clear example is the *Kompania Bello*, which, far from being completely dismantled, its new restructuring remains a threat to the security of the EU (Mistler-Ferguson, 2022).

The key issues to be identified by law enforcement are these:

1. The clan structure;
2. The global spread of diaspora;
3. The international links established among other criminal groups;
4. A vast number of brokers or intermediaries, and *guarantors* are developing their criminal business (both legal and illegal) around the world.

Law enforcement must improve their intelligence capabilities to create better tools to anticipate criminal activities, for instance, by increasing the programs following the methods of Intelligence-Led Policing (ILP). Moreover, we should maintain and reinforce the cooperation between police and security agencies and benefit from analysis programmes coordinating efforts against Albanian-speaking organised crime, such as Europol's "AP Copper" or "IPA 2019 Countering Serious Crime in the Western Balkans" led by Albanian authorities.

Despite the data obtained in this research, these results should be measured with caution due to the complexity of the phenomenon and the limitations of our investigation. Despite the multiple police operations in recent years, significant information gaps remained. This urges us to continue researching Albanian-speaking organised crime in the EU and elsewhere to understand better the threat that has a considerable impact on our societies in Europe.

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