CRIME IN THE WESTERN BALKANS
SIX AT THE TIME OF
CORONAVIRUS: EARLY FINDINGS

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Summary

In the Western Balkans Six, the first person officially infected with Coronavirus was reported at the end of February. Once this happened, regional authorities closed the borders and significantly restricted the movement of people to prevent further spread of the infection. In such an environment, the main priority of the police became to control the movement of the population rather than suppress criminal activities. In the meantime, criminals continue with their activity, looking for ways to take advantage of the crisis and earn a little bit extra.

Analysis of crime in the first six weeks of the pandemic shows several trends.

The region has experienced a small increase in the price of marijuana, which is still very much present on the market. The same applies to stimulant drugs. There is, however, very little heroin. At the onset of the pandemic, prices of protective face masks, disinfectants and medicinal alcohol skyrocketed due to attempts at price gouging. There have been cases of scamming using mobile and digital technologies, as well as breaking into newspaper/cigarette kiosks, shops, pharmacies, exchange offices, and other similar facilities.

At this moment, it is difficult to determine whether there has been a decline or increase in the smuggling of and trafficking in human beings. Unlike in Europe, no cases of sexual exploitation for the purpose of the provision of online services have been noted, but the number of calls to organizations providing assistance related to human trafficking has increased.

People with drug and alcohol problems, persons living with HIV, those who are susceptible to stress, citizens with mental health problems, pensioners, the poor, the homeless and recently released prisoners are the biggest potential victims of crime during this pandemic crisis.

Several scenarios can be envisaged for the future.

There will be a decline in the supply and quality of illegal drugs. The price of heroin substitutes is expected to increase. It is certain that criminal groups will find alternative ways of distributing narcotics and other illegal products in urban areas, using mobile technologies and couriers, but also corruption of law enforcement. It is possible that criminal groups will shift their manufacturing and logistics activities to smaller towns and rural areas, where they will be less visible.

Violent clashes between criminal groups are possible before stocks of illegal substances get used up. Investments made by criminal groups or money laundering through the production and distribution of medical and protective equipment are also to be anticipated. Organized crime cases may go uninvestigated, as they are not a priority at the time when contagion is spreading. The risk of corruption in the security sector, particularly within the ranks of the border police, is now higher.

There is a risk that online scamming and the number of fraudulent charities seeking to make money will increase. There could be more prisoners in the region because of new offenders who are, most often, citizens who violate restrictions on movement. Smuggling people will be more difficult. Should the pandemic crisis persist, in an environment of weak institutions, criminal groups may position themselves as partners to official authorities offering to deliver services or provide support.
Introduction

In the Western Balkans Six, the first person infected with the Coronavirus was officially reported on 26 February in North Macedonia. Shortly thereafter, the first infected people were also registered in the rest of the region: in Bosnia and Herzegovina (on 5 March), Serbia (on 6 March), Albania (on 8 March), Kosovo (on 13 March) and Montenegro (on 17 March). According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, there were 5,640 registered cases of Coronavirus infection in the area on 11 April 2020.

Authorities in the Western Balkans Six closed their borders in March and significantly restricted the movement of people to prevent the spread of infection. This decision quickly and significantly changed the lives of nearly 18 million people in the region, especially those of doctors, pharmacists, police officers, and soldiers, but also criminals. The health system, police and the military were asked to prevent the spread of infection, while people to stay in their homes. Criminals began to seek ways to take advantage of new opportunities while losing, at the same time, as little profit as possible.

As with any legal business, criminal enterprise relies heavily on the free movement of people and open borders, while good channels of communication accelerate placement and sale of products.

The police were tasked with controlling primarily the movement of people, especially during the curfew, which was introduced in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo or, in other words, in the entire region of the Western Balkans Six. Prosecutors were told that resolving cases of 'black market' sales of goods and public health violations were a priority during the outbreak. In Serbia, agencies that fight cybercrime are now focused solely on resolving instigation of panic through social networks and Viber groups, and cases involving international cooperation.

In such circumstances, fighting crime is not a priority. During the first ten days of the crisis, there was almost no talk of combating crime; what was talked about the most were people who did not obey the curfew and were violating isolation measures.

Based on the first reports on criminal activities at the time of Coronavirus, it can be concluded that criminals have continued to operate, but that they have also adapted to the new situation. Albania is already estimating that diversion of police attention to other tasks will lead to an increase in domestic cannabis production. An illegal marijuana production laboratory was found in a small village in Serbia with about 1,500 inhabitants. Meanwhile, information about where and when face masks, disinfectants, and medicinal alcohol can be purchased on the "black" market is being circulated in Viber groups.
The study analyses criminal activities that have been taking place during the first six weeks of the pandemic crisis in the Western Balkans Six, that is, in the period from 28 February to 11 April 2020. Its aim is to point out the possible consequences of redirecting law enforcement resources from crime prevention to preventing the spread of infection, and the new roles of criminal groups in the region. Particular attention was paid to the most vulnerable potential victims of crime in the new pandemic environment.

The study consists of five sections, each presenting the criminal activity in a particular area first, and then continuing with the possible development of the situation. Five areas of crime were considered: 1) narcotics; 2) economic crime; 3) cybercrime; 4) property crime; 5) smuggling of and trafficking in human beings. Recommendations for institutions as well as civil society organizations are presented at the end of the study.

The study was prepared by analyzing the content of legal acts passed by the executive authorities in the region during the crisis caused by the spread of Coronavirus infection, official press releases issued by police services and ministries responsible for home affairs, media analyses and news pieces that appeared from 26 February to 11 April 2020, as well as reports of international governmental and non-governmental organizations on criminal activities in the time of crisis.\(^5\)

Field data and recommendations to potential victims of crime were collected by way of consultations and interviews conducted with civil society organizations and networks in the region such as (among others) ASTRA – Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, Centre for Security Studies, Drug Policy Network Southeast Europe, Association of Public Prosecutors and Deputy Public Prosecutors of Serbia, and with representatives of various institutions.

Narcotics

Due to the impeded delivery caused by movement restrictions, the price of marijuana increased somewhat in most parts of the region. However, it is still available in large quantities, as evidenced by seizures and arrests that have been taking place during the crisis.\(^6\) At the beginning of the crisis, Albanian police made quite a scoop, seizing 613 kg of cannabis in the northwestern part of the country.\(^7\) Although the usual number of people arrested in Tirana, Albania's capital, did not increase during this period, most arrests involved the sale of drugs, next to persons who failed to comply with movement restrictions.

\[\text{In other parts of the Western Balkans Six, marijuana was seized mostly in amounts of 20 to 300 grams. Belgrade (Serbia) police, who arrested a 17-year-old in possession of 3kg of it, was the exception.}\(^8\)\]

Information from the field also shows that very cheap cocaine has arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that it is being sold at a price of EUR 30 for one gram. It is not known where it came from, but it is most likely that it has, by now, reached Serbia as well. Large quantities of stimulant drugs, or methamphetamines, are present in most of the region.
There is little heroin and its quality is poor. Users are injecting mostly suboxone, while trolons and synthetic drugs are used as a substitute for heroin.\textsuperscript{9}

There have been no major changes in Montenegro compared to the pre-crisis period – so far – except for the fact that drug users are sometimes receiving less than they paid for. Illegal drugs are delivered to the home address during the day, mostly by children younger than 14, which is, and used to be, the common method of delivery in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.\textsuperscript{10} In addition, rumors have emerged in Serbia that drugs are now being sold from certain betting shops.\textsuperscript{11}

The current pandemic crisis is likely to change the dynamics of supply, demand, and prices of illicit drugs in the market, as well as supply channels. Changes in the market will be greater if the crisis persists.

\textit{As a result of the closure of borders and more difficult acquisition, the current trend of availability of substances of higher purity will be reversed. Big dealers, as well as addicts, will stockpile drugs and mix them with different additives to make more money, that is, to make them last longer. The “dirty” drug scenario could cause a host of other problems in the future, especially for addicts and healthcare professionals who are attempting to wean them off.}

\textit{If the crisis persists, the number of people addicted to medication and narcotics could increase as a result of isolation, fear, and anxiety. The fact that doctors are burdened with trying to prevent the spread of infection happens to be an aggravating circumstance, and contact between medical professionals and persons trying to stop using drugs has already been reduced. It should, however, be noted that the appropriate behavior of drug users has been observed. They respect prevention measures on narcotic use and even organize your own distribution of sterile material.}\textsuperscript{12}

**Price Gouging**

Immediately after the onset of the pandemic crisis, citizens of the Western Balkans Six started to complain, especially in Viber groups and on social media, about the sudden increase in the prices of high-demand goods – disinfectants, face masks and medicinal alcohol. Just a few days after the introduction of passenger traffic restriction, all the pharmacies in Durres, Albania, were swiftly subjected to inspection because of price gouging, and the owners of two were arrested.\textsuperscript{13}

In Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, the price of face masks, disinfectant, and hand sanitation gel increased as much as ten times or more, especially in large cities, before these products completely disappeared from the market. At the beginning of the crisis, media reports from North Macedonia stated that there were no official reports from citizens about the increased prices of protective equipment and disinfectants, but that
citizens posted pictures on social networks of receipts showing drastically higher prices. The situation in Kosovo is quite similar.

Persons who allegedly intended to sell face masks on the street or through online shopping were arrested. In the Belgrade municipality of Zemun, in Serbia, while on patrol the police arrested a person in possession of boxes containing 6,000 face masks. The amount of EUR 250,000 was temporarily seized on suspicion of fraud in the process of acquisition of 1.5 million masks for Slovenia by companies from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Slovenian Government publicly confirmed the above event.

It seems that the authorities in the region have reacted quickly to the drastic increase in the prices of disinfectants and protective equipment. Maximum allowed prices of certain products were established, the number of inspections was increased, and contact telephone lines were opened for citizens to report overly expensive disinfectants and face masks. It is interesting to note that the official maximum price of a protective face mask in Serbia is currently RSD 120, i.e. almost ten times higher than in the period before the crisis when it cost about RSD 13.

*It is possible that criminal groups are currently investing in the production and distribution of protective, sanitary and medical equipment, as well as disinfectants. In such circumstances, it is likely that poor quality goods will appear on the market. There are also greater opportunities for laundering the proceeds of illicit activities, from the sale of narcotics or weapons, as they can now be invested in seemingly legal activities and assets under the guise of increased need for such products at the time of infection.*

### Fraud, Scams, and Theft

During the pandemic crisis in the Western Balkans Six, there have been cases where criminals presented themselves as people of trust, and then, using the crisis coupled with mobile and digital technologies tried to trick people into revealing their personal information or paying for certain products. However, it is difficult to assess whether there is a more or less cybercrime in the region than before the crisis.

It is now certain that the pandemic is being used for internet abuse, which is most often accomplished through email or SMS messages containing information regarding the Coronavirus whose access requires the person’s user name and password. As reported by national regulatory authorities for electronic communication, the number of e-mails containing various forms of “Nigerian fraud” misleading citizens that they will quickly make a profit has increased, as well as the number of current phishing and ransomware campaigns on the internet and malicious mobile phone applications.

Some people in Serbia received fake SMS messages regarding the payment of their pensions, in which they were asked to provide personal information such as their unique identification numbers, bank account numbers, PIN codes, and similar data. There are false
doctors who allegedly call from state health facilities and are trying to sell medical supplies at extremely high prices. There has also been an increase in internet communication through applications intended for such purposes, which, if not properly set up, can be used for stealing users’ credentials.

There are also examples of phone and internet ads that offer non-existent Coronavirus medicines, as well as tests, protective face masks, gloves, and disinfectants. Prices are drastically higher than regular ones, and products are offered to be delivered to a person’s home. In North Macedonia, on the fake “North Macedonia Postal Service” Facebook page, someone advertised an award – the iPhone11 mobile telephone, with a delivery charge of EUR 1 which served to “steal” credit card information.18

In the Western Balkans Six, there were not many reported cases of robbery and theft at the start of implementation of movement restrictions in the evening and at night. The media mainly reported on what was happening outside the region. However, the situation changed over time and now there are robbers who are making use of the fact that streets are deserted to break into shops, kiosks, pharmacies, cars, exchange offices, warehouses, but also into private homes and weekend cottages.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, persons are posing as apartment disinfection teams, police officers or employees of the Water Supply and similar public companies, trying to take advantage of the existing situation, enter people’s homes and steal their property.

There is likely to be a rise in cybercrime, online fraud, as well as sexual exploitation for the purpose of the provision of online services. Children and the Roma population are particularly at risk. There is a likelihood of a lack of resources required for solving cases that involve cybercrime, which is becoming increasingly sophisticated as priority is given to preventing the spread of fake news.

Smuggling of and Trafficking in Human Beings

The arrival of migrants and refugees in the Western Balkans Six has been largely reduced during the time of the Coronavirus infection crisis. In the week of 25 March, the number of arrivals in Serbia was reduced by almost 80% compared to the previous week. In the same period, there were no arrivals in Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, while only 14 new people came to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The situation did not change dramatically in the first ten days of April; only Serbia registered the arrival of 24 new migrants and refugees.19

It is difficult to establish whether there has been a decline or growth in human smuggling. Official statements indicate that police services in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia are continuing to register cases of illicit border crossing and human smuggling. However, it is still unknown whether these are just transit cases of migrant
transport within the country that does not involve crossing the border. However, human smuggling is expected to be more difficult.

Similarly, it is difficult to conclude whether the number of cases of human trafficking has fallen or increased. Unlike in Europe, sexual exploitation for the purpose of the provision of online services has not yet been observed in the region. So far, it is known that there is an ongoing case of labor exploitation on a farm in Serbia. Preliminary data indicate that the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia is the same as it was in the pre-crisis period.

In Serbia, there has been an increase in both the number of SOS calls related to trafficking in human beings and field operations. However, people who call often do not really have a problem with human trafficking but are instead suffering from the effects of the current situation. A particular problem for those who provide services to victims of trafficking is the restriction of movement and the curfew which is an effect in the evenings and at night since they are not allowed to move around during that time. Urgent delivery of food and hygiene products to victims is also a challenge.

Recommendations

Most vulnerable groups of people who may fall victim to criminal activity during the pandemic are those with drug and alcohol problems, living with HIV, susceptible to stress, with impaired mental health, pensioners, the poor, the homeless and recently released prisoners. State institutions and civil society should advise them, in a detailed and timely manner, how to overcome the infection period without serious consequences.

Police should monitor the situation in the illegal drug market and timely inform the health system of the changes therein in order to define appropriate solutions. It is important to also include prosecutor’s offices, courts, civil society, and international organizations, as well as anti-drug coordination bodies, such as offices for the fight against drugs in Serbia and Montenegro or the National Committee on the Fight against Drugs in Albania.

Before heroin completely disappears from the market, health systems should allow for replacement therapies in institutions that dispense methadone or buprenorphine. It should also be possible to initiate opioid substitution therapy for people who decide to stop using drugs. It is important for civil society to inform addicts and persons who are trying to quit about substances they should avoid, and ask drug dealers to stop hiding/storing drugs in their mouths and start stockpiling medications and sterile equipment.

During the pandemic, health systems should insist that people with pre-existing mental health disorders continue treatment and be aware of possible new symptoms. People susceptible to the effects of stress, fear and anxiety should be informed about medications that are registered for treating panic behavior. For example, the only benzodiazepine registered in Serbia for treating panic disorder is alprazolam, in doses of 0.25mg, 0.5mg and 1mg.
Governments in the region, and social welfare institutions, in particular, should inform welfare beneficiaries and pensioners how they can withdraw their assistance funds and pensions. This information is especially important in areas where people older than 65 are completely prohibited from moving around. Soup kitchens should raise the level of their sanitary and public health measures, as serving even one meal a day poses a risk.

Police services and regulatory agencies for electronic communication should step up information to the general public, especially pensioners and parents, about internet safety and all possible forms of fraud, digital harassment, identity theft, as well as stalking and surveillance through social media. In addition, they should regularly inform the public about new methods of internet abuse during a pandemic.

It is recommended that persons who use Internet communication applications take a closer look at invitations to meetings and that they do not respond to strangers, especially when meetings involve multiple users. Attention must also be paid to online meetings’ security settings. E-mails and SMS messages requesting personal information or passwords should be carefully screened, and credentials should not be provided without serious thought.

Notes


2 Interview, Lidija Komlen Nikolić, president of the Presidency of the Association of Public Prosecutors and Deputy Public Prosecutors of Serbia, 10 April 2020.


4 “Illegal marijuana production lab was discovered in the area of Nova Crnja and two people were arrested”, Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia, announcement from 25 March 2020.


6 Interview, Drug Policy Network Southeast Europe, 7 April 2020.


9 Interview, Drug Policy Network Southeast Europe, 7 April 2020.

10 Ibid.

11 Information was obtained from two anonymous sources.

12 Interview, Drug Policy Network Southeast Europe, 7 April 2020.


16 Interview, Lidija Komlen Nikolić, president of the Presidency of the Association of Public Prosecutors and Deputy Public Prosecutors of Serbia, 10 April 2020.

17 The aim of phishing is to obtain, fraudulently or through enticement, personal information of internet users by presenting oneself as a person of trust. Ransomware is used on the internet to extort money from a victim by threatening to publish, delete, or seize important personal information.


19 See: https://migration.iom.int/europe?type=arrivals

20 Interview, ASTRA – Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, 8 April 2020.

21 Ibid.