

Public administration, police and security services, corruption and organised crime in Albania

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I will speak about the relationships that exist between public administration and organised crime in Southeast Europe in general, and in Albania in particular. Although this day is dedicated to Albanian organised crime, I think it is appropriate to make some general remarks about the conditions that existed across the region that made corruption and organised crime a problem that is shared by all other countries in this region as well. The countries whose problems I will shortly address are Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro (including Kosovo). On the one hand I will present you with the characteristics of the relationship between politics, public administration and organised crime. On the other hand I will provide examples of these relationships from the countries that I am discussing, in order to show that each country has to deal with the same phenomena.

First of all the common communist background of Southeast European countries will be briefly addressed, in order to explain the (current) weakness of the public administration in this region. Secondly, the wars in former Yugoslavia will be briefly elaborated upon, in order to clarify the opportunities of corruption and smuggling businesses that evolved for several politicians and criminals in this region. Thirdly, the current situations vis-à-vis a weak public administration and the development of organised crime in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia-Montenegro (including Kosovo) will be dealt with. I will deal separately with Kosovo, because it is separated from Serbia since 1999 and effectively a UN protectorate. Finally, the biggest part of the presentation will deal with the relationship between the public administration and organised crime in Albania.

This presentation is based (1) on analysis by the Center for the Study of Democracy, the International Crisis Group and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), and (2) on reports by journalists from these countries (mostly translated by the French association Courier des Balkans or working for IWPR). Some might pose question marks as to whether reports or articles from the media are sufficient and credible. I am of the opinion that they are, and generally more so than reports or statements from the police or public administration (such as the Ministry of Interior). The reason is that official statements or reports often do not present the whole picture about the linkages between politics and crime, which is understandable in two respects: (1) corrupt officials do not want their illegal affairs or

relationships to become public, and (2) public institutions would increasingly risk their legitimacy if such relations become public. In contrast, independent (and in general not the state) media do publish about relationships between politicians, government officials and criminality. These reports are not so much sensational stories appearing in tabloids. Reporting about the relationship between politicians, officials and criminals is such a risky business that it has two consequences: (1) it could result in physical threats or even death for the journalist, and (2) it more often leads to self-censorship among the media.

1. The heritage of communist rule in Southeast Europe

Black market trade grew most extensively during the 1970s. At the end of the communist regimes, mismanagement and other shortcomings of the command economy, controlled and underdeveloped international trade, and scarcity of available resources and goods forced the majority of companies and enterprises to rely at least partially on the black market. The side effect was corruption, especially among those institutions that were tasked to curtail the black market and other illegal activities: secret services and law enforcement agencies. The bad economic situation presented the officials who were working in these institutions with opportunities for personal enrichment. Members of the secret services were those who were most directly involved in criminal activities. Most of the smuggling channels in communist states in Southeast Europe were set up and controlled by them, and used predominantly for smuggling arms to third countries. In addition, these channels were used for the smuggling of cigarettes, drugs, historical objects, generating hard currency. Secret services also made use of criminals operating outside of the country, who were given specific tasks and assisted with smuggling of items to the country or with transferring money from the regime to bank accounts in other countries.¹

2. The wars in former Yugoslavia

The wars provided new opportunities for illegal enrichment. In the name of protection of national independence, the leaderships of the seceding Yugoslav republics had to set up and arm their newly created armies. The only way to do this was illegally, through already existing smuggling channels. The newly proclaimed independent states Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina did not have sufficient weaponry (the stocks of the Yugoslav People's Army –

¹ 'Partners in crime. The risks of symbiosis between the security sector and organized crime in Southeast Europe', *Center for the Study of Democracy* (Sofia, 2004).

JNA – were located in Serbia) and small Yugoslavia (now named Serbia-Montenegro) did not have access to fuel. In a short time smuggling channels were set up across the Balkan region along which weapons and oil were transported. Criminal groups and customs officials from neighbouring countries like Albania, Bulgaria and Romania were involved, and made big profits.

War has made the Balkans a traffickers dream, as their illicit trade could flourish as a result of the chaos, which has weakened border controls and fractured and impoverished communities that were once held together by strict moral codes. Throughout the region, checkpoints are badly policed by often corrupt officials, who take bribes and let smugglers go their way. Forged or stolen passports are easily available and visa regulations are ignored.² In all the countries of former Yugoslavia that were involved in the wars (also in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina) military and paramilitary structures became great players in regional smuggling and trafficking channels (weapons, drugs, human beings, fuel, food, cigarettes). In neighbouring countries as Albania, Romania and Bulgaria there have been reports about relationships between criminal groups and politicians who co-operated with criminals, officials and politicians within former Yugoslavia in order to circumvent the imposed embargoes and sanctions. According to the *Courier des Balkans*, these links have been facilitated by intermediaries within the military, police, judiciary and secret services.³

For example, in Albania former agents of the Sigurimi (the communist secret service that was disbanded after 1991) set up smuggling routes. Many ex-agents joined criminal groups and others got high positions within the customs and tax authorities. One of their activities was the smuggling of oil by railway to former Yugoslavia, which took place in such enormous quantities that it is hardly probably it was done without the accomplishment of high officials.⁴

3. Politics and crime in Southeast Europe

As a result of the demise of communism, the wars in former Yugoslavia, and the feeble political and economic reforms that were initiated in the countries of Southeast Europe, a certain power vacuum was created in the region. Due to the weak public administrations and the lack of democratic oversight and accountability it was quite easy for corrupt officials

² 'Trading in misery', *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 15 september 2003.

³ P. Chassagne and K. Gjelošhaj, 'Cadavres exquis dans les Balkans', *Le Courier des Balkans*, 5 April 2003.

⁴ M. Hajdinjak, 'Smuggling in Southeast Europe. The Yugoslav wars and the development of regional criminal networks in the Balkans', *Center for the Study of Democracy* (Sofia, 2002).

(whether from the public sector or security services) to enrich themselves through smuggling. Given the open economies of all Balkan countries, cross-border actions make up around two-thirds of the GDP of any country.⁵ This element, put together with the instability caused by the wars, led to a favourable environment for smuggling and trafficking by corrupt officials, politicians and criminals.

Countries of Southeast Europe all have high levels of corruption, much of it is attributable to ineffective state institutions and the weak implementation of legislation. Old networks of influence and 'parallel systems' offer a semi-legal or illegal way of gaining access to services or products. While parallel systems provide a sense of security and continuity, they also perpetuate older patterns of corrupt behaviour.⁶

The crux of the problem of corruption, and the resulting development of organised crime, is that the countries in Southeast Europe generally have underdeveloped public administrations, and a lack of independent control and accountability mechanisms (that are both effective and have sufficient capacity) within the state. The combination of weakness, lack of transparency and overburdening the public sectors constituted fertile ground for both petty and large-scale corruption.

Bulgaria

"The Bulgarian society is nothing more than a jungle dominated by the law of survival, and only strong individuals with a great capacity for adaptation will survive."

Anthropologist Haralan Aleksandrov about the 'social darwinistic' views of thirty legal and illegal entrepreneurs, interviewed between 1995 and 2000, Sega daily, February 2003

The careers of businessmen Iliya Pavlov and Filip 'Fatik' Naydenov had a similar start. Both had contacts with the communist elite, for which both performed services with relation to the accumulation of capital, in co-operation with the secret service. Pavlov was married to the daughter of the last director of Bulgaria's 'communist' intelligence agency. Fatik enjoyed good relations through his father, who set up illegal arms smuggling routes to the Middle East for Bulgaria's secret service. This was before 1989. Later many of the old nomenclature got influential positions in the post-communist governments. Meanwhile Pavlov set up Multigroup, which had many of the old Bulgarian nomenclature on its payroll, also from the

⁵ 'Corruption, contraband and organized crime in Southeast Europe', *Center for the Study of Democracy* (Sofia, 2003).

⁶ 'Global corruption report 2003', *Transparency International* (2003).

secret services. According to the German secret service and the American embassy in Sofia, Multigroup possessed 180 million dollars from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and 'managed' these funds at foreign bank accounts. This was mediated by Andrei Lukanov, a former communist leader who was assassinated in 1996. He is claimed to have said to Pavlov that he was Lukanov's creation, and that he could destroy him. Pavlov answered by saying that now he was the one who gave the orders.⁷

Interestingly enough, the drug market in Sofia is divided along the exact same lines as police districts. According to dealers, this is a direct reflection of the key role played by the police in distribution within the market. Without proper contacts in a respective police district, it is impossible to defend a 'territory'. Per area the bribes for a police executive would be around 10.000 to 20.000 Lev per year. Some of the names of implicated police officers were confirmed by the Interior Ministry to have been internally investigated. The punishment is only a transfer to another police district.⁸

Serbia

"In European police forces, when five criminals sit down to make a plan, two informers from the police are among them. Here, when five policemen sit down to make a plan, two informers of the criminals are among them."

Late Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, 30 December 2002, Reuters

Just as in other former communist countries as Albania and Bulgaria the secret service (DB) of Yugoslavia played a dubious role outside its borders. During the seventies and eighties it co-operated with criminals such as Arkan to control smuggling routes or to liquidate opponents. The DB also engaged in money laundering, for which purpose several companies were created in other countries. During the wars in Yugoslavia the DB got engaged in smuggling of fuel from Bosnia and Croatia, and of other commodities from other countries (there was a co-operation with corrupt officials and criminals from these countries). Under Milosevic the DB got so powerful that it had influence over politics and economy. His right hand Mihalj Kertes controlled smuggling routes and transferred large amounts to bank accounts in Cyprus and Macedonia. Drugs that was confiscated by the police was given to DB agents, who sold it.

⁷ T. Mangalakova, 'Crime et politique en Bulgarie: les héros de notre temps', *Osservatorio sui Balcani*, 19 March 2003 (Translated by Le Courrier des Balkans). G. Peev, 'L'heure de la relève a-t-elle sonné dans le monde criminel bulgare?', *Kapital*, 23 Augustus 2003 (Translated by Le Courrier des Balkans).

⁸ 'The drug market in Bulgaria', *Center for the Study of Democracy* (December 2003).

Later prominent criminals got high positions within the DB. The DB acquired special import and export monopolies from Milosevic. Eventually the DB got involved in the smuggling of drugs, cars, women and weapons. The head of DB Jovica Stanicic (now in The Hague) controlled paramilitary forces as well as cigarette smuggling. In 1995 Milosevic created a special unit within the DB, the JSO. It was the successor of the clandestine paramilitary group the Red Berets. In 1997 Milorad 'Legija' Lukovic was appointed as new chief of the JSO.⁹ The radical Serbian politician Vojislav Seselj (who is now in the Hague, waiting for his case to come to court) has been mayor of Zemun from 1996 till the end of 2000, in which period the gang rose to power. The party coalition that existed until 5 October 2000 (Milosevic' SPS, his wife's JUL and Seselj's SRS) offered the Zemun gang and the Red Berets a solid political base.

The fall of Milosevic was only successfully completed because the opposition struck a deal with the leading political-criminal elements within his regime, that is the top figures of the DB and JSO (and through them also the powerful criminal gangs of Belgrade: Surcin and Zemun). The agreement was supposed to be that the corrupt officials and criminals could retain all that they had acquired during Milosevic. However, with the case of Milosevic under way, also names of DB (now BIA) and JSO officials became public. Djindjic used this to start a cautious offensive to break the financial and political power of the officials and criminals that were still conducting their affairs. There were some successes, but there was also an assassination attempt against Djindjic. In the morning of 12 March 2003 Djindjic signed the arrest warrant against 'Legija', and in the afternoon he was killed by snipers.

After the death of Djindjic the authorities launched operation Sabre, during which 11.000 persons were arrested (criminals, policemen, judges, prosecutors, public officials), 28 murders were solved, 23 murder attempts, as well as other criminal acts. However, it became clear that operation Sabre was mainly aimed to dismantle the Zemun gang, the Surcin gang was only slightly dealt with.¹⁰ In addition the deputy prime minister Cedomir Jovanovic acknowledged that he was in contact with top criminals of the Zemun gang, whom he visited whilst they were in prison. Jovanovic said that his and Djindjic' contacts with the underworld were made with full knowledge of all state institutions, and that they were made out of political necessity. The investigating parliamentary committee concluded that

⁹ 'Serbia after Djindjic', *International Crisis Group*, Balkans Report 141, 18 maart 2003. H. Griffiths, 'A mafia within the state', *Transitions Online / Balkan Reconstruction Report*, 28 maart 2003.

¹⁰ 'Serbian reform stalls again', *International Crisis Group*, Balkans Report 145, 17 juli 2003.

Jovanovic could not be charged with anything.¹¹ Curiously, despite the government actions against organised crime, the press freedom has been curtailed.

The murder of Djindjic and the relationships between politicians and criminals has made clear that the public administration in Serbia is too weak to counter the power of organised crime. But apart from weakness there also seems to be a lack of political will. The BIA has retained its power, and still operates without any external control. The chairman of a corruption committee has been pressured time and again by the government to remove some of the companies he was to investigate. The government neglected a warning given by the EU that one company was involved in large-scale fraud with import and export of sugar: it was financing an important political party. To conclude: it appears that the financial-economic elite that rose to power during the years of Milosevic has easily switched allegiance to the parties who are currently in government.

The reaction of Belgrade's political establishment to Legija's surrender is symbolic for the secretive relationships that existed (or continue to exist) between politicians, officials and criminals. Nervous politicians courteously spoke of 'Gospodin Legija': Mister Legija. The trial of the suspected murderers of Djindjic is widely seen as one under great influence by the political establishment. According to the lawyer of 'Legija' "Lukovic was encouraged by the performance of the new government, which has demonstrated the will to observe the law". Many independent observers as well as opposition figures believe that 'Legija' turned himself in because he struck a deal with the government. 'Legija' bears a grudge against the opposition DS, and would be willing to give damaging statements to discredit them. The DSS of Kostunica, of which some officials have been detained during operation Sabre, would thus be given a chance to take revenge.¹²

To become a stable state, Serbia must undergo two transitions. The first is from the Milosevic-era criminalised state to a more normal society. The second is the classic Eastern European transition from a socialist command economy to a democratic market economy. Until there is significant progress in the first transition, the second will not happen. Unfortunately, the new government has indicated that it is more interested in removing traces of Djindjic than Milosevic. With the December 2003 elections, the past has partially returned to endanger the scant progress made to date. Milosevic-era structures and personnel are still relatively intact in the judiciary, police, army and other key institutions. Serbia's media and judiciary are less independent today than two years ago. The myriad intelligence services still

¹¹ 'Contacten leiders Servië met maffiosi', *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 juni 2003.

¹² 'Legija surrender poses test for Kostunica', *IWPR Balkan Crisis Report* 496, 8 May 2004.

appear out of control and engage primarily in spying on domestic political opponents. It is nearly as difficult to do business in Serbia in 2004 as it was under Milosevic.¹³

Montenegro

“Montenegro has not sought international assistance in fighting organised crime because that problem does not exist in Montenegro. The government will not make up stories about a non-existent crime simply to attract funds from abroad.”

Minister of Foreign Affairs Dragisa Burzan, 16 April 2003, Podgorica newspaper ‘Pobjeda’

Senior officials of Montenegro’s public administration have been implicated in cigarette smuggling and trafficking of human beings. Deputy state prosecutor Zoran Piperovic is alleged to be involved in human trafficking, along with three other officials. A Moldovan woman stated that during three years she has been abused, and that during previous flights the police brought her back to the criminal organisation. For her safety, she has been transferred outside of Montenegro. When the minister of justice was conducting a promising investigation, he got fired. Later, the senior state prosecutor ruled that there were insufficient grounds for prosecution, even though the UN said that at least 45 persons gave detailed accounts against the suspects. In a reaction the OSCE stated that the Montenegrin judicial system is unable to cope with the complexity of cases related to human trafficking.

It is known that the Montenegrin authorities were active in cigarette smuggling during the nineties, transporting cigarettes by plane into and by speedboats (under escort of the coast guard) out of the country. But in 2003 the public prosecutor in Naples issued an arrest warrant against current prime minister and former president Milo Djukanovic. Along with 14 other Montenegrins and Italians he is suspected to have created, organised and controlled a network that smuggled foreign made cigarettes through Montenegro, in co-operation with the Sicilian Mafia, the Napolitan Camorra and the Puglian Sacra Corona Unita, of which some probably operated from Montenegro. High government officials provided false documentation. Djukanovic was supposed to have arranged, via intermediaries, facilities and licenses. The security service arranged the transport of the cigarettes to the coast or the borders. Some Montenegrin witnesses are living abroad, and have adopted new identities.¹⁴ On 28 May 2004 murder of journalist Dusan Jovanovic, who wrote about the relationship of Djukanovic with human trafficking and cigarette smuggling.

¹³ ‘Serbia’s U-turn’, *International Crisis Group*, Europe Report 154, 26 March 2004.

¹⁴ H. Griffiths en G. Igric, ‘Djukanovic smuggling claims persist’, *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 23 juli 2003.

Kosovo

“The majority of people here earn their money from trafficking in drugs and women. KFOR is not intervening because they don’t want to risk a conflict and they’re not interested. Not long ago a rocket was launched against a UN checkpoint. The KFOR guys are not from this area so they don’t really care about what’s going on.”

Senior officer of KFOR to IWPR, 15 September 2003

In Kosovo many people have little faith in the rule of law. This mistrust goes back a long way before the war of 1999, and is rooted in the Albanian’s historical reliance on self-defence because of the weak power of central governments in this region in the last centuries. The lack of state and of state institutions leads people to take justice into their own hands.¹⁵

Persons who endanger the power and influence of criminal organisations are risking their lives, and became apparent by the murder of a key witness to a trial against former KLA guerrillas who killed adversaries from FARK. Former UNMIK head Michael Steiner has said that potential witnesses for trial cases in Kosovo have been systematically intimidated or killed. Protection is absent or ineffective. The Hague’s War Crimes Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia chief prosecutor Carla del Ponte added that the main obstacle in the fight against crime is the lack of willingness of eyewitnesses to appear in the courtrooms. According to UNMIK witnesses should be relocated outside of Kosovo, and not in countries with Albanian communities.¹⁶

From June to September 1999 neither KFOR nor UNMIK had the capacity to maintain law and order in Kosovo. In addition, the newly arrived international police officers did not speak Albanian, and were helpless in the face of organised crime. In September 1999 the Kosovo Protection Force was created, from disbanded units of the KLA. Dubious elements exist within Kosovo Protection Force (KPC). According to the USIP there are still criminal and extremist elements within the KPC. Up to 2003, 27 ex-officers and senior KLA commanders have been charged with murder and other crimes by KFOR and UNMIK. UNMIK and KFOR are not capable of maintaining law and order in Kosovo, not to speak about organised crime. Due to the absence of a capable public administration, porous borders, weak police and judiciary, well-organised gangs are not bothered. Criminal groups are active in the smuggling of drugs, stolen cars, weapons, fuel and human beings. Custom stamps are being tampered

¹⁵ ‘Armed to the teeth’, *IWPR Balkan Crisis Report* 470, 27 November 2003.

¹⁶ A. Qirezi, ‘Kosovo: witness protection fears grow’, *IWPR Balkan Crisis Report* 426, 29 April 2003. N. Miftari and D. Quin, ‘Policing the protectors’, *IWPR Balkan Crisis Report* 440, 30 June 2003.

with. According to a KFOR official, there exist parallel structures along political lines between politicians, military and police officers. Almost every high official has his own militia.

Macedonia

“At the customs there is a corruption price list. The tariff is known upfront, so no one has to wait to hear how much the customs officers will ask for.”

Slagana Taseva, director of Macedonia's anti-corruption commission on the standardisation of prices of bribes, IWPR 18 March 2003

Macedonia has a crucial location in the Balkans, bordering Bulgaria, Greece, Albania, Kosovo and Serbia. It has more shared borders than any other former Yugoslav republic, and its mountainous poorly patrolled borders are ideal for traffickers.

Ethnic Albanian Dilaver ‘Leku’ Bojku owns a dozen hotels and brothels around Velesta in Western Macedonia, and is considered to be the main criminal in the region of Struga. In June 2003 he got a six-month prison sentence (even though the minimum punishment for trafficking was four years in prison, with forced prostitution five years), but he escaped from a minimum-security prison in Struga and fled to Montenegro, where he was captured and extradited to Macedonia in July 2003. Both the Struga prison director and a senior prisons official have been dismissed and faced criminal charges.¹⁷ He enjoyed a good relationship with the police in Struga (at least two of the chiefs attended his bars upon his invitation) and probably also with the central authorities in Skopje, as at least one time he was notified before an operation against him was launched.¹⁸ This operation did not include local policemen, as that was probably considered to be too risky.

The government of Ljubco Georgievski (1998-2002) was widely believed to be harbouring corrupt officials and to be engaged in corrupt practices. In this period, the ruling political parties (VMRO-DPMNE as well as DPA) functioned as corrupt coalitions, dividing turf among and within ministries. ICG called it bi-ethnic corruption, with a division of the illegal profits along ethnic lines (two thirds for Slavic Macedonians, one third for Albanian-Macedonians). There are plenty of examples available from this period, which show that enterprises that co-operated with ruling politicians and government officials were awarded with economic benefits, while those who did not would face fines. If media reports would become too

¹⁷ ‘Trading in misery’, *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 15 september 2003.

¹⁸ J. Bjelica, ‘Le trafic humain sur la route des Balkans’, *Reporter*, 7 mei 2002 (Translated by Le Courrier des Balkans).

serious, then a relatively small company would be chosen to serve as a scapegoat. One of the most notorious officials was Dragan Daravelski, the director of customs from 1998 to 2002. Among other illegal sources of revenue, he is alleged to have enriched himself and both coalition parties through cigarette smuggling (although this term is not applicable here, as the state was complicit), both with imported tobacco as with locally produced counterfeits.¹⁹

Georgievski responded to the international criticism by creating a commission to investigate corruption. Most cynically it was chaired by Ljube Boskovski, alleged to be one of the most corrupt politicians in his government. The commission set out to only investigate those companies that refused to engage in illegal businesses with government officials. Despite its newly created strategy against corruption, the fight against corruption has also not been tackled effectively under the government of Branko Crvenkovski (who has just been elected as president).

4. Politics and crime in Albania

“Organised crime, implicated in several murders committed in recent months...is becoming a potential danger to democracy and the structures of the state which are already too fragile in Albania. Politicians and high officials of the state and the judiciary have openly supported these traffickers and facilitated their money laundering through crime.”

Tirana police chief Pjerin Ndreu, 19 November 2003, AFP

The Albanian community in Southeast Europe and elsewhere

Albania: 3,5 million

Kosovo: 1,8 million, which is 90 percent of the total population.

Macedonia: 500.000 (in the western valleys bordering Albania and Kosovo, and in Skopje), which is 25 percent of the total population.

Serbia: around 60.000 in the Presevo Valley (90 percent in Presevo, 54 percent in Bujanovac and 26 percent in Medvedja)

Montenegro: 60.000, which is 7 percent of the total population.

Greece: 400.000, these are mainly seasonal workers.

USA: 400.000

Germany: 350.000-400.000

¹⁹ ‘Macedonia’s public secret: how corruption drags the country down’, *International Crisis Group*, Balkans Report 133, 14 August 2002.

Switzerland: 160.000

The Albanian community in the West is not a tight one: there are clear differences between those from Albania and those from Kosovo. The community in the US, Germany and Switzerland, and presumably also other countries in Western Europe, is mainly constituted of persons coming from Kosovo. Émigrés from Albania have only left after 1991. This group is also often returning to Albania, and can be considered as seasonal workers. The Kosovo Albanian diaspora has been crucial in the backing of Albanian fighters in Kosovo, Macedonia and southern Serbia. Help did not so much come from Albania. In addition to financial support given by the diaspora, there are reports that ethnic Albanian criminal groups in the West have supported the fighters with money from the drugs trade.

Heritage of communism

Historically Albania, as well as other areas in Southeast Europe, has not been ruled by a strong central government. Rather it was characterised by small local societies, which were dominated by primitive extensive clan systems based around a few large and influential families.

The communist regime that dominated Albania until 1991 has had a decisive impact on Albanian society, which still suffers from its consequences. For more than four decades there has been an elimination of the existing social structures with the Albanian society and a psychological repression of the individual, who had to submit to an indoctrination that aimed to change the existing norms and values in the country. As a result there has been a decay of the morale within society. A culture of lies emerged, because to speak the truth could endanger your life or the lives of your relatives. A lie became practical, it became the norm, and it became normal.

Whilst the communist regime did display the features of a strong state, it was mainly caused by the exercise of violence. The Albanian regime engaged in a social engineering project which destroyed many of the age-old moral norms and values. The regime tried to build a new type of citizen, 'the New Man', resembling the Homo Sovieticus, except in Albania this concept was promoted by force. The regime undermined the moral principles and social fabric that had been built. A communist society had to emerge, where every individual served the state and community.

Development of the public sector

After 1991, the whole idea of community was swept away together with all other things that communism had tried to create. One of the consequences was that the basis of a functioning

democracy, that is a civil society, was absent. Together with the inherited ineffective state institutions, Albania was not ready to engage in democratisation. This situation, where society was not involved in politics and where the public administration was ineffective, presented criminal organisations with opportunities to increase their power and influence. This and the absence of transparent accountability mechanisms resulted in a situation in which ruling political parties could sell their influence over the decision-making process to the highest bidder. As a result, organised crime groups have been able to strengthen their power and influence. This again has led to a situation where these group have the influence to permanently distort the political system, and to obstruct the implementation of structural reforms.²⁰

In the year 1997 civil unrest broke out in Albania, as a result of the collapse of 'pyramid' investment schemes. People had risked their money into private funds which promised high returns – but had no financial foundation and could pay out dividends only as long as new investments kept coming in. When the schemes collapsed thousands lost their money, and demanded compensation from the government. People began looting shops and raided to army stockpiles. According to government data, the army lost 550.000 weapons, 31.000 hand grenades, 840 million rounds of ammunition and large amounts of explosives. The government estimates that 200.000 of the stolen weapons have been recovered, 150.000 have been smuggling out of the country, and leaving the remaining 200.000 in civilian hands.²¹ Now, eight years later, all of the country is more or less under control, except for the upper north.

Development after 1997

One observer told me that whilst there have been numerous cosmetic changes since 1997, in fact not much has changed in the way the public administration works. In addition, there is no real effort to eradicate corruption. This is understandable, because it is a way of life and a way of governing. A political party has to keep its members satisfied. This is primarily being done by rotating government functions among party members. For example, a minister has his job for two years, and then someone else replaces him. In the meantime, he has the time to acquire enough resources in order not to worry for the rest of his life (lower officials also give some percentage of their bribe taking to him). As a result of almost 8 years of rule by the Socialist Party, this party now has a few hundred ex-ministers (the former ruling party, the Democratic Party has however the same 'corrupt' potential). This principle is applicable to

²⁰ E. Trimcev, 'Organized crime in Albania: an unconventional security threat', *Connections. The Quarterly Journal* 2 (December 2003) 61-68.

²¹ 'Armed to the teeth', *IWPR Balkan Crisis Report* 470 (27 November 2003).

the entire public administration, functions can be bought from top to bottom, but at a price. However, once you are in, you can easily make up for your investment.

The most tragic of all is the indifferent attitude of the Albanian population towards the recurring stories about the corrupt relationship between the political establishment, the public administration and organised crime. It has become a more or less accepted way of life. People do not attempt to change it, it looks as if many think: how can I become part of this?²² Which is not strange, considering that the average Albanian has a little less than 3 dollar per day to spend, whilst one quarter of the population suffers from extreme poverty.

Examples of political-criminal relationships

Organised crime was able to develop so easily, and still prospers, as a result of the failing police and judiciary. The government has adopted strategies against organised crime, and there have been spectacular and widely publicised actions and operations against human traffickers (in co-operation with foreign countries). However, the results have been meagre. When police officers are being dismissed because of their involvement in smuggling, the perception of many is that the authorities want to present an image to their international donors that something is being done. A good example is the handling by the authorities of the seventeen persons that were arrested during the international operation Pune that aimed to interrupt the human and drugs smuggling across the Adriatic: all of them, except for a simple policeman, have been allowed to go free by the courts.²³ Another example is the International Center for the Struggle against Smuggling, that was set up in Vlore. It has not started working since its creation in 2001.

According to a report from the Albanian intelligence service from 2002, there are relationships between politicians, public servants and criminals. Criminal organisations have strengthened their position and influence at the borders and in ports through bribing customs officials. As a result the smuggling of heroine is unimpeded. Trafficking of human beings is facilitated by corrupt policemen, who assist with falsifying documents. Criminal organisations are aided by 'normal' businessmen in the laundering of money. Most of the investments are being done in Tirana. In addition to relationships with corrupt elements within Albania's police and customs organisations, there are also relationships with Macedonian police. Albanian

²² K. Spahiu, 'Albanie: bombe sociale en 2004', *Koha Jone*, 5 January 2004 (Translated by Le Courier des Balkans). F. Zeneli, 'Albanie: la facture de la corruption', *Koha Jone*, 9 February 2004 (Translated by Le Courier des Balkans).

²³ E. Trimcev, 'Organized crime in Albania: an unconventional security threat', *Connections. The Quarterly Journal* 2 (December 2003) 61-68.

criminal organisations co-operate with Italian and Montenegrin counterparts, especially in stolen cars.²⁴

According to the US Department of State and the International Organization for Migration, traffickers often operate with the co-operation of police and government officials. Last year Minister of Interior Luan Rama said that authorities knew of policemen and politicians who were either directly involved or who maintained links with mafia rings involved in people smuggling. In one case, seven repatriated Albanians (who were detained in Belgrade en route to the USA) told that they were supposed to pay 7.000 euro on arrival in the USA to ring members including policemen from Tirana's Rinas airport.²⁵ One observer alleged that the police know all the persons who are involved in smuggling and trafficking of human beings and drugs. Even the general public knows some of them, because these persons and organisations can conduct their affairs openly on the street and within bars or restaurants.

On 29 March 2003 the businessman Fatmir Rama was gunned down outside Kartodrom 2000, an entertainment complex he owned on the outskirts of Tirana. He had private telephone numbers of senior politicians stored in the memory of his GSM. Media reports claimed that he had connections within the Socialist Party, dominated by the current prime minister Fatos Nano. Even though there was an international arrest warrant issued against him (by Italy on charges of drug trafficking), he could freely conduct his business in Albania.

At the end of 2003 one Albanian – Bledar Mane, who had been convicted by a court in London of human smuggling – wrote a letter to an Albanian daily in which he elaborated upon his work, and upon the relationships that facilitate the smuggling business. Bledar Mane was of the opinion that the Albanian authorities would not be able to suppress human trafficking, because high-ranking individuals from the judiciary, police, customs and the administration are involved in it. For example: the centre of the smuggling operations was Tirana's international airport Rinas, where the police chief was involved as well. Both political parties, the Democrats as well as the Socialists, have been implicated of being involved in smuggling affairs. Bledar Mane explains that after the change of government in 1997 (when the Socialist Party took over from the Democratic Party) new intermediaries came to the fore, who came from another group close to one high official from the new government.²⁶

²⁴ 'Albanie: la mafia et le pouvoir', *Korrieri*, 18 April 2002 (Translated by Le Courier des Balkans).

²⁵ A. Bala, 'Albania: football trafficking scam', *IWPR Balkan Crisis Report* 425 (25 April 2003).

²⁶ A. Puto, 'Albanie: les confessions d'un trafiquant', *Osservatorio sui Balcani*, 6 November 2003 (Translated by Courier des Balkans).

Aleksander Kuqo, a 28-year old man from Berat was sentenced to life imprisonment by an Italian court for human and drug trafficking and murder. He escaped to Albania, where he was arrested by the police who were informed by their Italian colleagues. When he appeared before court in Albania, he was judged by a group of medical experts to be mentally ill, and therefore immune to prosecution. He has not been seen afterwards.²⁷ Corruption in the courtroom is a symptom of a lack of faith in the law. According to an Albanian journalist many believe that the best way to secure justice is through payment, and otherwise violence.

International reactions

Although the political climate is calmer, and stability has been restored to most of the country, grave social and economic problems still exist according to the International Crisis Group. Albania's institutions are weakened and the reform process greatly hindered by endemic corruption and an inefficient public administration. Other negative factors include an increase in organised crime, a weak judiciary, high unemployment, low production, severe environmental problems, and an ongoing energy crisis. The government shows no signs of seriously tackling corruption. While a degree of political, economic and social progress is clearly evident in Tirana and the major central and southern towns, the North remains largely unaffected. There the lack of infrastructure and investment, combined with extreme poverty, is producing a constant migration, which in turn fuels the trade in human trafficking and contributes to the lagging social and economic development.²⁸

According to the US ambassador to Albania, the crime leaders are the same persons who hold great influence over the state structures who are supposed to combat organised crime. When Albanian criminals are being sought by Western police forces, they simply go back to Albania, where the police will not bother them. While in Western Europe they keep a low profile and live in modest apartments, in Albania they live a life of luxury. They invest their money in motels, restaurants and apartments in Albanian cities. Police and fiscal services are simply being bribed.²⁹

The Council of Europe has composed a list of items that should be changed:³⁰

- A weak public administration, especially within the police and customs there is no capacity to control financial transactions or to prevent money laundering

²⁷ I. Aliaj, 'Albania: rough justice', *IWPR Balkan Crisis Report* 416 (20 March 2003).

²⁸ Albania: state of the nation 2003, *International Crisis Group*, Balkans Report N°140, 11 March 2003.

²⁹ F. Cocoli, 'Intégration européenne: l'Albanie marche à reculons', *Koha Jone*, 2 February 2004 (Translated by Le Courier des Balkans).

³⁰ 'Le Conseil de l'Europe met l'Albanie sous surveillance', *Korrieri*, 16 April 2004 (Translated by Le Courier des Balkans).

- The judicial system is weak and inefficient, personnel is underpaid and partially corrupt
- The financing of political parties is not regulated, nor is there any control of the incomes of public servants
- Laws have to be implemented, not just created
- There is no capacity among the police, judiciary, procurators and judges to investigate, arrest and condemn persons that are part of organised crime groups. This results in freedom of action for criminal organisations, which in turn endangers the democracy and rule of law, the economy and the political stability of the country.

To conclude

The authorities appear not to acknowledge the full extent of organised crime links with individuals in top state offices, the police and politics. The real challenge is to deprive organised crime of its political backers in Tirana. In many areas the traffickers work with the complicity of police and customs officials and enjoy the protection of high-ranking politicians.³¹ There is a fear within the police and judiciary for the criminal kingpins who exercise control over operations. It looks like an impossible task for Albania to effectively combat organised crime, when politicians and officials who should conduct this fight are part of the criminal enterprises, and vice versa.

³¹ Albania: state of the nation 2003, *International Crisis Group*, Balkans Report 140, 11 March 2003.