

# **M**AFIA LINKS BETWEEN THE BALKANS AND SCANDINAVIA. STATE OF AFFAIRS

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## **Abstract:**

*The last twenty years has seen an increasing presence of Balkan organized crime groups in security reports and newspapers' headlines. This does not mean that mafia groups did not exist during Socialist Yugoslavia – even if its collapse and the following war made criminals and smugglers useful for politicians and leaders to maintain their power; it rather means that Balkan organized crime came outside its traditional areas of action in Serbia, Montenegro and Albania: less territorial and nationalist than it was before, it is now gaining prominence in an international scenario, making agreements with Italian and South American mafias – the so-called Holy Alliance – to manage drug routes towards Western Europe. One of the most interesting factors concerning Balkan mafia groups today is their presence in countries which traditionally do not have a history of organized crime, such as the Scandinavian states. One of the reasons lies in the wide percentage of immigrants moving from Balkan countries to Sweden or Norway. Since the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, war-crimes fugitives were able to become common criminals in these countries, such as the infamous Željko Raznjatović (“Arkan”). However, year by year, these gangs grew larger, taking advantage of the “expertise” and the resources gained during the war. In particular, the most spectacular case – the Västberga helicopter robbery in 2009 – showed how these groups operate with military-style precision, utilize a wide number of participants, and have at their disposal laerge amounts of weapons and money. This paper will draw on the importance of Scandinavian – Balkan mafia relations in relation to three main criminal areas: drug and weapon smuggling and human trafficking, in order to underline the role of diasporas in enforcing*

organized crime groups and the extent to which these mafias could be a threat for the stability in both Eastern and Western Europe.

**Rezumat:**

Ultimii 20 de ani au cunoscut o creștere a prezenței grupurilor de crimă organizată din Balcani în rapoartele de securitate și în titlurile din ziare. Aceasta nu înseamnă că grupările mafioate nu au existat în timpul Republicii Socialiste Federative Iugoslavia – chiar dacă destrămarea și războiul care a urmat au creat criminalii și traficanții utili politicienilor și liderilor pentru a-și menține puterea; mai degrabă înseamnă că crima organizată din Balcani a venit din afara zonelor sale tradiționale de acțiune din Serbia, Muntenegru și Albania: mai puțin teritorială și naționalistă decât fusese anterior, a câștigat importanță pe scena internațională, încheind înțelegeri cu mafia italiană și sud-americană – așa-numita Sfânta Alianță – pentru a gestiona rutele drogurilor spre Europa de Vest. Unul din cele mai interesante aspecte cu privire la actualele grupuri mafioate din Balcani este prezența acestora în țări fără o istorie a crimei organizate, cum ar fi țările scandinave. Unul din motivele acestui fenomen îl reprezintă procentul mare de imigranți care se deplasează din Balcani în țări ca Suedia sau Norvegia. Din timpul războaielor din anii '90 din fosta Iugoslavie, fugari acuzați de crime de război au fost capabili să devină criminali comuni în aceste țări, precum Željko Ražnjatović ("Arkan"). Cu toate acestea, an de an, aceste bande s-au dezvoltat, profitând de „expertiza” și resursele acumulate în timpul războiului. În special, cazul cel mai spectaculos - jaful Västberga în 2009 – a arătat modul în care aceste grupuri operează cu precizie militară, utilizează un număr mare de participanți și au la dispoziția lor cantități mari de arme și bani. Această lucrare va valorifica importanța relațiilor mafioate scandinavo-balcanice în legătură cu trei domenii penale principale: contrabanda cu droguri și arme și traficul de ființe umane, cu scopul de a sublinia rolul diasporelor în întărirea grupurilor de crimă organizată și măsura în care aceste mafii ar putea constitui o amenințare pentru stabilitate atât în Estul cât și în Vestul Europei.

**Keywords:** Transnational organized crime, Western Balkans, Scandinavia, European law enforcement, European enlargement

## **0. Organized crime in the year 2000: links, nodes and webs**

This paper will discuss some concepts – transnational organized crime, globalization, international law enforcement and post-conflict transitions – which are acquiring a growing moment in international relations and in security studies.

Each one of these terms has its own history, and passed through different stages of discussion and deepening; however, their importance in the Old Continent is shown by their recurrent quotation in official documents released by European Union's officials. EU is experiencing the worst economic crisis in its history, and trying to manage, at the same time, the enlargement to Eastern Europe, and more specifically to Western Balkans.<sup>1</sup>

It is not surprising that several of these words, spread by mass medias, have already entered many languages' daily lexicon, often in an over-simplified fashion, which could help in keeping coherent and somehow interesting a story that has gradually lost appeal to Western audiences since the end of the armed conflict.

This is never a good approach to an object of analysis, and it is still worse when dealing with countries like Western Balkan states. No need to go back again to the nineties to recall, as reported by many scholars (i.e. Bianchini and Gagnon<sup>2</sup>), that a similar simplification of the meaning connected to technical *terms* – just as like the ones above – played a central role to prepare Western public opinion to a decisive intervention in Yugoslav wars.

Handling with few care words and concepts like “multiculturalism”, “ethnic cleansing”, “ethnic war” and “humanitarian war” (as its pretended solution), Western media and public officials fostered the representation of the conflict as a medieval-like bloody civil war between peoples fighting along centuries; a point of view which completely misread the situation, and naively attributed to the consequences (ethnic violence, deportations, concentration camps) the rank of causes. Moreover, it underestimated the role of local political elites in creating the conditions for the war, and the responsibilities of Western diplomats and Special Envoys: sometimes legitimating these leaders' claims, sometimes certifying the conquests made through ethnic cleansing

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1 As for this moment (July 2012), Croatia will become a full member on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013, while Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania enjoy full candidate status, which means they are into negotiations to become full members. Bosnia-Herzegovina is preparing its application for EU membership, while Kosovo – considered a potential candidate as well – is still waiting a final resolution over its international status as a state.

<sup>2</sup> Stefano Bianchini, *Sarajevo. Le radici dell'odio* (Rome: Edizioni Associate Editrice Internazionale, 1994); Valéry-Paul Jr. Gagnon, *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

and deportations producing dozens of “maps for the peace” which granted territorial ownership on the sole basis of census statistics and demographic majority.

This simplification depicted, in Western countries, a harmless and self-exculpatory description of the war, good to justify the right of NATO and its allies to enter into the fight, and later to become cops, judges and guarantors of the peace.

This article will then discuss the meaning of the words presented above, whose implications appear clear and logical until we are asked to unwrap them. And - as demonstrated by the dimensions of the related bibliography - sometimes a whole book won't cover the complete answer.

However, it is possible to underline the minimum features these phenomena share: they all problematize the existing relations between nation-states and supra-national (or infra-national) entities in the contemporary world, assessing the relations between the parts and the whole in the global system of governance. That is to say that the classical distinction between global and local has lost a great part of its meaning, and that researchers should now discuss about the mutual influence of local events and dynamics of much greater extent.

Thus the first goal of this paper should be, even before presenting its proper subject, to define a methodology which is able to take into account at the same time local and global, recognizing that an analysis of the contemporary world means in first place to put spared elements in correlation, to highlight the connections between these points, to explain the transformations occurring in the nodes, and to show the means of translation to the following one.

A task that can be labeled using the verb "to map", referring to a practice not so distant from the geographical operation of mapping the territory. The map, as a concept, is in general the representation of a certain area, which reports the points of interest in a territory and the relations between them (roads, ways, rivers and so on).

Obviously, the map is not the territory, and always brings a certain amount of simplification (a scale, some conventional signs and colors). But it permits, at least, to put every element together at the same time in the same set: rather than on single points, this analytic behavior focuses on the relations between elements, whose significance and value depends on their mutual connections.

If we focus only on the local side (the single event, i.e. a node of distribution on a drug route) we risk to underestimate the role this node plays in the general environment; vice-versa, at a global level, we may forget that every ring in the chain has a role, and that its simple existence has its consequences in the other nodes.

The main difference is that the maps we are going to draw in this paper have a different shape, showing a territory whose borders are muddier and more rarefied, and roads of flu and mutating nature. Moreover, these maps do not just focus on relations, but also on *transformations*, showing how concealed links could appear, when you master the correct language to interpret it.

This analytic point of view owes its conceptual basis to the work of two founding father of semiotic studies, Yuri Lotman and Umberto Eco.<sup>3</sup> The central concepts are that of *semiosphere*, firstly introduced by Lotman<sup>4</sup>, and that of *encyclopedia*, presented by Eco<sup>5</sup>. Besides the differences in their approaches, they both describe culture and societies as organized and locally contradictory set of elements, held together by a complex web of mutual relations structured by languages in constant translation.

These cultural formations – structured languages and ideologies – could be called, to use Michel Foucault's terminology, *social discourses*, that is to say systems which organize and discipline societies, personal and collective identities through the articulation of the *power* and the *knowledge* inside a human group.

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3 Semiotics will be applied, along this paper, consistently with its nature of *critical* discipline, whose primary goal is to guarantee an ecological approach to academic research through the consolidation of its terminology. A feature which does not cover the whole field of semiotic research but represent its main peculiarity, which made French sociologist Latour [Bruno Latour, "Petite philosophie de l'énonciation", in *Eloqui de senso. Dialoghi semiotici per Paolo Fabbri, Orizzonti, compiti e dialoghi della semiotica*, eds. P. Basso e L. Corrain (Milano: Costa & Nolan, 1999)] to grant this discipline the role of a *methodological organon* for other human sciences like sociology and anthropology.

<sup>4</sup> Yuri Michalović Lotman, "O semiosfere", in *Töid märgisüsteemide alalt/Trudy po znakovym sistemam/Sign Systems Studies* 17, Tartu (1984).

<sup>5</sup> Umberto Eco, *A theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976).

This definition sheds lights on some characteristics of contemporary world societies, which are themselves complex system of organization, more or less stable and more or less contradictory.<sup>6</sup>

The shape the society assumes is then the consequence of the persisting dynamics of translation, adaptation and even contradiction between discourses created and spread inside a given semiosphere.

This is also true if we consider only a portion of a cultural system, or even very specific areas like the one which will constitute the real object of the following analysis: it can be called “gray economy”, and involves those layers of a society on which crime (organized or not) emerges in everyday life, influencing it and sometimes – as we will see – taking control of a wide spectrum of activities normally considered “lawful”.<sup>7</sup> And moving towards (state and cultural) borders means then to pass into heavier seas, where stratified and conventional meanings are negotiated by marginal discourses and often completely manipulated by a bigger power coming from outside.<sup>8</sup>

But let us not go too far on this trace, for the moment, as it seems too much theoretical to grasp in the proper way the factual reality of the subjects we are talking about. We are still suspended far from the ground, the surface where happens the most part of those practices we are going to deal with.

To speak about the boundary between lawfulness and unlawfulness in the Balkans involves much more than theoretical issues: it refers to organized crime's way of supply and money laundering, and to its relations with politics and economic groups; it concerns human, drug and weapons traffic across Europe, with Scandinavia as one of its final destinations, and implies a widespread web of communication, provision and distribution. It features trucks filled with drugs and people which transit across European borders, docks receiving cocaine and heroin stored in rusty containers,

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6 Possible sources of contradiction are, for instance, the presence of an organized opposition to the government in a parliament, or the existence of significant national minorities on the territory of a nation-state

7 It goes without saying that the critical perspective provided by semiotics will also problematize the concept of lawfulness itself, de-constructing its implications in contemporary societies.

8 This is the case, for instance, of the Republic of Kosovo, completely subjugated to those Western powers like USA which allowed its recent independence. See for a deeper analysis of Kosovar situation: Matteo Albertini, “Kosovo: an identity between global and local”, *Ethnopolitics Papers*, no. 15 (2012).

public officials turning their head, and businessmen with a gentle face investing money into new buildings in former Yugoslavia's capitol towns, and abroad. But it also means to recognize that specific conditions can exist in which criminal economy serves patronage or surviving purposes, supplying the black market with food, medicines and other goods, or even constructing new structures (schools, hospitals) with the proceeds of their activities.<sup>9</sup>

It is now time to go deeper in these remarks. Since every stage of the story is meaningful, let's start from Zagreb, on May 22, 2008, where 15 people were arrested after an investigation conducted jointly by Croatian and Swedish police.

It was the end of an investigation began in November 2007, when a Swedish citizen of Croatian descent, holding a pound of explosives in his suitcase, was caught by Slovenian police while trying to return to his country. This man was working on the behalf of a criminal organization based in Croatia and responsible for the manufacturing and distribution of explosives in many different European countries, including Sweden where, according to Croatian police, these bombs were to have been used in a gang war in Goteborg.<sup>10</sup>

This event shows quite well the existing relations between these European regions; relations which have been tight since the 1950s, at least, when the first wave of Yugoslav émigrés (mainly former Ustashi or Chetniks supporters) arrived there, fleeing from the persecution operated by the winning communists, and later persecuted by criminals serving the regime's secret service.

The break-up of Yugoslavia and the following wars changed much this scenario.

As a matter of fact, they made criminals and smugglers useful for politicians and leaders wishing to maintain their power, and to acquire the weapons they needed for their conflicts. After some years of lurking activity, when most of their leaders were committed in making business under their homeland's flag, Balkan organized crime began operating

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9 Many examples can be pointed out, in the Balkans and abroad: Serbian paramilitary group, the UCK in Kosovo, but also al-Fatah and later Hamas in Palestine, the Taliban and the mujaheddin in Afghanistan, and so on. The fact that we mentioned three areas which experienced a major armed conflict in the last twenty years is, quite obviously, not casual.

10 Source: Stockholm news, <http://www.stockholmnews.com/more.aspx?NID=1072>

outside its traditional areas of action in Serbia, Montenegro and Albania: less territorial and nationalist than it was before, it gained prominence in an international scenario

Not by chance, the new millennium saw an increasing presence of Balkan organized crime groups in security reports and newspapers' headlines in these countries, and in the rest of Europe as well. The conversion of arms and human routes to drug one also made these mafias sought-after partners for agreements with Italian and South American groups – the so-called Holy Alliance – to manage drug routes towards Western Europe.

This is one of the reasons for why this paper began with the clearing of the traditional opposition between global and local: talking about organized crime, today, is no more a matter of regional or national order, as it had been during the cold war.

As a matter of fact, before the 1980s, organized crime was considered a threat for a very little number of states: Italy, the United States, China, Colombia and a few others. And many countries did not consider themselves as possible targets of mafia groups at all: one example among others was Germany, which awoke quite shocked after the Duisburg showdown of 2007, in which 6 persons died just in front of a central café. It was the last chapter of an enduring *faida* between two 'Ndrangheta families from Calabria.

This event highlighted that the situation has now been completely turned upside down, with organized crime profiting from the opening of countries' borders, the speeding up of travels and communications and the lifting of economic sanctions.

And Balkan organized criminal groups seem to be much more adaptable than traditional mafias to the mutated conditions of international relations in the contemporary world. How they gained this ability, will be plain once analyzed its features, and chronicled its history.

## **1. A matter of definition**

Let's then go back to the terms we presented earlier.

International organized crime is deeply linked with globalization, and in some ways represents the most neglected side-effect of this phenomenon: it has been usually considered as a matter of internal security and states' relative effectiveness in counteracting it. Yet analysts and

security officers themselves have often lacked a proper definition of international organized crime, essential to define possible countermeasures. The term "global organized crime" has been used in criminology since the mid-1990s, some years after this kind of mafia relations started to develop.

It is the general way of describing the activities of criminal groups and networks all around the world, leaving no geographical space untouched. In this paper, we will rather deal with its daughter-terms, *transnational* and *cross-border organized crime*, but it is important to stress from the beginning that studying and contrasting organized crime implies, in the contemporary world, to take into account dynamics of global extent, linking local chains of transport, supply, and distribution to the global confluences of drugs and goods.

What is important now is to be clear about the terms in question: in fact, there is a common misunderstanding about the identity of organized crime itself, which is considered only a matter of deviance, in the sociological sense, as deviance from the "normal" behavior of member in a society. A term which include criminality but also, for example, madness.

There is no need to recall again Michel Foucault<sup>11</sup> and his deconstruction of the philosophical basis of this term, showing deviance as a way to categorize and to "tame" the personal identities of the citizens, for control and repression purposes. But we do want to underline that this term is useless for understanding contemporary organized crime, which is much more than a matter of deviance and sometimes – if we consider mafia groups such as the Balkan ones – they rather seem to generate from an environment where the deviance is the norm, then causing problems in distinguishing what is deviant and what is not.

As Strazzari<sup>12</sup> carefully notes, an approach which avoids making this state of things problematic would not just fail in explaining its case study, but would be deviant – in this case literally deviant! – in the development of policies designed to counteract mafia groups.

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<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) and Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975. English trans.: *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Francesco Strazzari, *Notte balcanica. Guerre, crimini e stati falliti alle soglie d'Europa* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2008).

That is because the majority of organized criminal groups active in the world today have been born during a war. Pay attention: this definition does not exclude “traditional mafias” like the Sicilian or the Chinese ones, organizations which nevertheless have changed their shape in the last twenty years. Rather, it means that we must conceive war itself as something different from the traditional definition set in stone by Baron von Clausewitz.

In particular, what leaps out in front of our eyes is that contemporary wars are less and less being fought today between two nation-states, or similar entities. Therefore the classical tripartition delineated by the Baron (the people, the government and the army as a balance between emotive irrational instincts, rational urges and creative forces) does not apply anymore to describe contemporary world societies, where wars can be fought between two - or three, or even more - enemies with none of them representing a state in the classical sense.

In any case, the state still represents the best way of organizing and managing people and money, and also a guarantee for international recognition as a “conflicting party”. This is why the armed factions which fight these new kind of wars usually aim at gaining control of a nation state, or even at creating one of their own, when it comes to organizing, distributing and getting the most income and the “assets” obtained during the conflict.

The way in which these conflicts are fought is normally asymmetric, with a growing importance being played by those tactics usually labeled as “guerrilla” and traditionally excluded in the classic concept of war.

Asymmetric conflict has indeed changed shape in recent years: it is no more a ploy made by some desperadoes, and it has also lost much of his similarities with revolutionary or liberation armies. Now it resembles more closely *counterinsurgency* tactics, the actions aimed at containing revolutionary movements by the systematic use of terror.

It is not difficult to make some example: the Farc in Colombia, Mexican drug syndicates, Pakistan and Afghanistan smugglers, or nearer to us Serbian paramilitary leaders, or the UCK in Kosovo.

And we must not forget that new wars have also a feature more: they are strictly connected with the way they are reported and told, as

showed by Arquilla and Ronfeldt<sup>13</sup> on their major work on net-wars, and by Montanari<sup>14</sup> in his analysis of the languages of war.

I begin this presentation speaking of armed conflicts, because the question of the new shape and realities of this kind of war also contains the answers for why peace-building projects are often now so difficult, delayed and incapable of stopping the consequences of the fighting. We become then used to talking about unstable peace, about post-war challenges, and to analyzing situations containing at the same time elements of war and conflict and elements of peace and stability.

In a similar situation, we typically assist the formation of a four-level system, in which every layer is permeable to the functioning of the markets - as a non-territorial and fluid dimension - and to the action of international companies: 1. an official economy (in constant contact with international financial institutions), 2. national-patronage economies (though this English term does not cover the entire meaning of its translation from Italian, where the original word is "clientelare"), 3. gray and survival-status economy, 4. criminal economy.

This scheme shows quite well the existing correlation between the official economy and the "underground" one, rooted in the persistence of the routes and the convenient relationships made during the war for supplying the so-called black market, to be recognized as an often underestimated, but specific, model of economy in wartime.

The reason for this neglect lies in another frequent misunderstanding, one which draws on the dichotomy above reported between licit and illicit, or legal and illegal.

In fact, whenever international or national laws adopt a new prohibition, imposing a determined behavior in specific social and private sphere as "lawful", they also create new fields of opportunity, new markets, new needs for new services, which stimulate the need to elude or breach the prohibition.

We must then conceive the act of "prohibiting" something as a renunciation<sup>15</sup>: the state abdicates from its regulatory functions, and the existing demand - along with all the risks linked to the fulfilling of this

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<sup>13</sup> John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, eds., *In Athena's Camp. Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Federico Montanari, *I linguaggi della guerra* (Rome: Meltemi, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Strazzari, 45.

demand – make prices rise, with high incomes for those who decide to take care of these “services”.

The more that these “businessmen of the illegal” are able to gain a monopoly in their sectors, and the more they are able to corrupt or to intimidate public officials and legislators, the higher their profit margin becomes. Thus we arrive at the co-existence and often the cooperation between politics and criminal organizations, which is a crucial feature of what we call contemporary mafias.

The prohibitions themselves are thus involved in the development of contemporary transnational crime, and even more in a post-war context. Forbidden goods represent the fulcrum of criminal transnational actions. In a limit-situation, when some goods and practices considered socially licit – let's think about traditional rituals or moral codes like the Albanian Kanun – are prohibited, the most probable outcome is the complete collapse of the state in the hand of so-called criminals, who can appear not just as “saviors” but also as heroes of their ethnic-national-political part: the ability to profit from the conflicting narrations of the war is then useful also to justify their acts as defensive necessities for their people.

Organized crime is first of all an organization: it certainly intimidates, but also assists, finding those areas where the state is weaker, or where it has abdicated from its jurisdiction. There's also a third element, together with coercion and assistance, which characterizes contemporary mafia groups: the “icon-effect”, that is the typical reticence in speaking about a fact “smelling of mafia”, which help to make the crime “invisible”.

This invisibility is the main explanation for the persistence of these criminal organizations at the end of the wars which they have often at least in part generated. The reason must not be sought in their deviance or in the “aftermath” of a cruel conflict, but rather in the “white-collar crimes”, in the propensity to participate in corruption and money laundering.

How is it possible, asks Strazzari<sup>16</sup>, to lump together narco-traffickers, smugglers of counterfeit medicines (which indeed cover a demand, even through a fraud), and white-collar criminals?

The first answer is that not every criminal or illegal activity is the product of clever and sophisticated planning, but quite often comes as the

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<sup>16</sup> Strazzari.

consequence of a lack of coordination between individuals, and of the emulation effects guided by the market.<sup>17</sup>

We assist in these situations to a double de-politicization of larger and larger dimensions of society: a financial one, conducted by international institutions and organizations – public and private – and a criminal one, which stamp out the already narrow area of the state's ability to act.

The contemporary presence of weak states and strict prohibitions may lead to the “conquest” of the state by criminal groups, with their leaders passing from a criminal/paramilitary background to the complete legality and often domestic and international legitimacy (i.e. former UCK leader Hashim Thaci in Kosovo).

Thus global organized crime and transnational crime have indeed a close relation with globalization, since only in the last twenty years has the shape assumed by new conflicts and financial world made possible these evolutions from a war economy to a legal economy.

Yet it is not a simple consequence of globalization, or we would conclude simplistically that global organized crime is nothing but a distorted outcome of the overcoming of state authority (unable to fight properly local criminal organizations) – which is actually yet to be demonstrated.

We should instead agree with Kaldor<sup>18</sup>, and say that transnational crime is rather the effect of a new kind of relationship between the state, organized violence and common criminality. And this mixture usually expresses itself through the dynamics of state disintegration or fragmentation (former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Colombia), in a context which makes it difficult to distinguish legal from illegal, public from private, politics from economy, civic from military (or paramilitary). The story goes that at this point came the time, for these warlords, to just clean the money, the hands, and the face.

This state of things, depicting a world in which the legal and illegal nexus are intertwined, levering on weak states “captured” by legitimated former criminals who have become heads of state, or kingpins transformed

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17 Which is to say that the more an economic sector – be it legal or not – shows itself to be profitable, the more “investors” would be attracted by it.

18 Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

into reliable businessmen, permits us to underline at least three reasons why transnational organized crime should be considered a key factor in the study of international relations:

1. The dimension of its action;
2. Its ability for exploiting the open nature of transnational business;
3. The relevance that the criminal agenda has in firing political instability, or even in detonating uprising and revolts which enhance the resilience of violent structures.

To conclude this introduction, let's clarify some general remarks.

The origins of contemporary transnational mafias resides only partly in globalization and in faster communication and transports of money, people, and goods; to a greater extent, the origins are in the evolution of paramilitary or criminal organizations involved in new kinds of wars. Wars which often lead to fragile peaces and weak governments, where peace-building actions are inadequate to intervene in those sectors where state power is nonexistent.

It stands to reason that in similar situations the liberalization recipes forged by international financial institutions – and often slavishly implemented by post-war states – have not helped in improving the legal economy, and rather granted organized crime with new profitable ways for money-laundering through financial investments. Imposing a standard model of economic organization with few regards for the pre-existing wartime dynamics guaranteed also new “fields of demand” to organized crime, causing more instability and social vulnerability.

Let's save these considerations for our conclusions, and move now to the central subject of this presentation.

Why can these general tendencies of contemporary transnational organized crime help us to better understand Balkan mafia groups, and their links with northern Europe and Scandinavia? We can think at least at two reasons:

1. Scandinavia was a traditional destination for Yugoslav emigrants, and refugees; not by chance was it one of the European regions in which UDBA's interests focused. In the 1990s, the biggest part of the financial support for the war (except in Serbia, where Milosevic found the money he need from the citizens themselves), came from donations made abroad, in the enriched émigrés clubs, anxious to get rid of the communist system and triumphantly head back to their homeland. Influxes of money that paid for

arms and ammunition used by the warring factions, and the electoral campaign of the leaders thus reinforced the “patriotic” image these figures preferred. It was another demonstration that nationalism was not the destiny nor the choice of Balkan peoples, but a strategy of defense of the existing hierarchy of power, with a different outcome for each country. Nationalism then as the shadow, thicker or less so, of contemporary democracy.

2. The current international economic crisis could boost organized crime also in countries very seldom associated with this kind of crime. According to the last report of the Institute for Security and Development Policy<sup>19</sup>, the crisis has fortified organized crime in the Baltic Sea, in particular for what concerns human trafficking and cigarette smuggling. Cigarette routes are mainly controlled by Balkan organized crime, which manages a chain starting in the Netherlands, and passes through Macedonia, the Greek port of Thessaloniki, and ends in a northern European destination, usually Sweden. We should not think about cigarette smuggling as a “secondary” business: cigarettes are very expensive in Scandinavia, and they still generate a remarkable profit.

However, more generally, the answer that Europe is giving to the crisis is made by a balance of financial severity and welfare deregulations, and still lacks a common model of law enforcement against organized crime, which slows repressive and investigative actions.

While organized crime, as the famous quote says, never sleeps.

## **2. Balkans organized crime from the 1950s to the 21st century**

Many stereotypes linger about the binomial relation between mafia as a concept and the Balkans. During the wars of the 1990s, these stereotypes became part of the orientalist interpretation of the war portrayed by many Western media outlets: the Balkans was depicted as an indistinct area, a land of war and hatred, a region led by despots and inhabited by crooks and people who were, generally, desperate sorts.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Kegö and Alexandru Molcean, “Russian Organized Crime: Recent Trends in the Baltic Sea Region”, Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2012. Available online at the url: <[http://www.isdp.eu/images/stories/isdp-main-pdf/2012\\_kego-molcean\\_russian-organized-crime-recent-trends.pdf](http://www.isdp.eu/images/stories/isdp-main-pdf/2012_kego-molcean_russian-organized-crime-recent-trends.pdf)>

<sup>20</sup> Marija Todorova in *Die Erfindung des Balkans: Europas bequemes Vorurteil* (Darmstadt: Primus-Verl, 1999) told in depth the long story of the concept related to the word *Balkan*, since Bismark to Morillon; a term which have become, in Western countries, a way to

This public perception must be the reason why, paradoxically, the role of mafia and organized crime – and their connections in finance and politics – have often been underestimated or even “taken for granted” by journalistic and academic accounts concerning South-east Europe. It took over a decade after the end of the war to see the first researches openly problematizing the relations between post-war Balkan states and organized crime as a mutual and profitable agreement.<sup>21</sup>

The image of the predecessors of today’s Balkan organized crime groups depicts common criminals coming back to Yugoslavia from their foreign residence – and officially aligning themselves along national lines – conducting the war while profiting from black market and plundering incomes.

As we will see, during the 1990s, in most former Yugoslav countries – but also, for instance, in Albania<sup>22</sup> – public power was based on a mixture of kleptocracy, organized crime and alleged patriotism, as a consequence of internal reorganization of political power and of external interests and disagreements.

But this was not the first chapter in the mafia connections between Scandinavia (mainly Sweden) and the Balkans, which we will now discuss. Failing to mention this part of the story would mean that we could fail to understand some of its later evolutions.

## **2.1. Balkan criminals in Scandinavia during the Cold war**

During the Cold War, as mentioned above, Scandinavia became for a certain period a safe haven for political refugees from Yugoslavia.

The Socialist regime targeted both common criminals and wanted killers, on the basis of their connivance with fascist regimes and armed groups during the II World War. The targets most ‘in-demand’ were former Ustasha and Chetnik members, who often hid abroad, were they

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distinguish themselves (the pretended *civil* Europe) from its black side, the “Balkans”, uncivil, warlike and unreliable.

21 This evident state-of-things does not mean that international institutions aren't supporting leaders explicitly fitting in the profile described above, made authoritative partners by gray processes of social and international legitimation. One thus might also note (with some despair) that news regarding people and institutions involved in organized crime affairs are more and more being confined to judicial reporting or specialist publications.

22 As a matter of fact, Albania did not experienced a war; but indeed passed through a complete collapse of the state itself after the pyramid scandal exploded in 1997.

planning revenge or just fled from Yugoslav state persecution. But the intelligence and other operations by the Yugoslav secret service, UDBA, saw spies and assassins start to follow the routes of emigration, increasing the flourishing Serbian-Croat underworld in many Western European towns: Frankfurt, Stockholm, Paris, Vienna, Milan, and so on.

Sweden saw a large influx of emigrants during the 60s and 70s, when the "Arbetskraftsinvandring" took place, granting citizenship in exchange for labor (a program similar to the Gastarbeiter one).

It is worth noting here that in most cases the criminals, sent there by UDBA, were sons or relatives of higher military officials, seeking through this stratagem a way to unburden themselves from troublesome legacies and at the same time to take advantage of the expertise of these people in their "field of action".<sup>23</sup>

A second element to stress is that, in Yugoslav army, the Serbs had always been the majority. And Tito himself, half-Slovene and half-Croat, had seen in the Ustasha a mortal threat to his Partisan movement during the war. Thus it is not a surprise that the higher number of UDBA clandestine retaliatory acts, including threats and assassinations, were directed towards Croat immigrants.

Sweden, along with Spain and Italy, has been indeed a crucial hub for the European web of former Ustasha and neo-fascist dissidents and armed groups.

One of these emigrants, who experienced a long period of celebrity, was Milo Barešić. He and another Croatian militant were convicted in 1971 for the murder of the Yugoslav ambassador to Sweden, Vladimir Rolović, the former head of the Yugoslav Secret Police, UDBA, while yelling "Long live Ante Pavelić"- the name of the former Ustasha leader.

Barešić's act of murder came at a time during the 1970s when many Yugoslav immigrants lived in Sweden, many of whom belonged to the exiled Ustashi-movement that had a network of Croatian terrorist groups and people in Europe. This was the first major crime committed in Sweden by a non-Swede. He was later arrested, and freed during a prisoner exchange with the hijackers of a plane in Spain, in 1972. With the help of Spanish and Paraguayan authorities, Barešić left Europe and started a new life in Paraguay as Toni Sarić.

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<sup>23</sup> When the situation became critical or risky, they withdrew to Yugoslavia to allow the dust to settle, and reappeared somewhere else the following year.

One example of this kind of émigré group was the Hrvatski narodni odpor (Croatian National Resistance), which was created and led by Vjekoslav "Maks" Luburić, a World War II war criminal who was the commandant of the Jasenovac concentration camp in the Independent State of Croatia, and who managed to reach Franco's Spain as a political refugee after the war, living there for 20 years.

Luburić commanded the organization for twenty-five years from his refuge in Spain. His organization was heavily involved in racketeering, attempted murder, extortion, hijacking (like the attempt to free Barešić) and other violent crimes. After his death, his successors in the organization's command structure sought out criminal organization ties with La Cosa Nostra, the Provisional IRA, and the Croatian Mafia in San Pedro.

Widening the spectrum of our reconstruction, we must recall that the 70s marked a crucial turning point in the history of Cold War organized crime: France's police dismantled the *French connection* in Marseille, where Turkish heroin was manufactured and shipped to North America. The closure of this route brought Turkish drug lords to look for new distributors. They quickly encountered the warm and professional embrace of the Sicilian mafia, which was thus able to convert its logistics structure for cigarette contraband to heroin smuggling. This strategic agreement between groups in Turkey and Italy made the routes of the Balkans crucial to the supply chain of Western Europe.

Traditionally, this route went from Istanbul to Sofia or Skopje, and then branched towards Belgrade, Zagreb or Ljubljana, and then to the continent, with Vienna and Milan as initial destinations. Often drugs reached northern Europe by boat, and were distributed by local smugglers.<sup>24</sup>

One more example could be the story of Željko Ražnatović, aka Arkan. The son of a Yugoslav Army colonel, he undertook some secret missions on behalf of UDBA adding to them, during the period abroad, some personal "joyride" involving kidnapping and bank robberies, which resulted in some jailing time. Arkan acted in Sweden from 1970 until 1979,

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24 To complete Barešić's biography, we must add that, just like many "colleagues", when the Croatian war broke out in 1991 he came back to Croatia from Paraguay. He was later killed in a skirmish with Serb rebels in Krajina in July of that same year, at the age of 40.

burgling banks and wealthy people's villas, and took part in retaliation against Croat nationalists.<sup>25</sup>

When Arkan left the country in 1979, his place was taken by Dragan Joković, aka "Joksa", one of his local friends, who became famous in 1981, when he was seen leading a Serbian demonstration contesting Croat demands of freedom for Tadjman and Veselica, who were in a Yugoslav prison as a consequence of the so-called Croatian Spring.<sup>26</sup>

## **2.2. The war: a change of balances**

This state of things radically changed with the fall of the Berlin Wall and Communist regimes, which complicated the international chessboard and guaranteed new profitable ways for illegal trafficking: it also rendered useless the huge armies and arsenals of former Socialist countries, that were usually sold abroad, to the Third World or to conflicting countries.

In the meanwhile, internal and external factors opened the way for war in Yugoslavia, making traditional routes more complex to follow, and opening new ones to provide arms to those Republics facing the international embargo. Let's think for example of Tadjman's Croatia, which soon after independence countered contraband, but later became more and more attracted by the influxes of money granted by illegal routes, and set up a new one of its own, from Dalmatia to émigré groups in South America - the heirs of Pavelić's bloody regime. The director of this plot was Gojko Šušak, a Herzegovinian émigré in Ottawa, who organized the supply of arms in overt violation of the international Embargo.

Thus, rather than in drug smuggling - a sector in which Balkan groups held a minor importance until the eve of the millennium - we must look for the origins of transnational Balkan organized crime in finding the routes for the supply of arms from the countries where emigrants lived. But this must not surprise: they were impossible to be legally purchased but however they were needed. Here it is a kind of illegal action necessary to the survival of the state itself, not different from the examples provided above.

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<sup>25</sup> It is reported to have committed, only in Sweden, 20 burglaries, 7 bank robberies, in a few cases outside assistance to prison escape, and some attempted murder.

<sup>26</sup> Joksa was eventually killed in 1998, while Ražnatović was supervising the troops making the dirty work in Kosovo.

Croatian officials followed also the road to Italy, making agreements with the northern branch of Italian criminal organizations, usually known as *La Mala del Brenta* (from the name of the river Brenta, flowing in Veneto) or *La quinta mafia* (the fifth mafia, after Cosa Nostra, Camorra, 'Ndrangheta and the Sacra Corona Unita), led by Felice Maniero, who is now a collaborator with justice. This deal, signed in 1991, provided to Croatian forthcoming army the heavy weapons they needed, and guaranteed to Maniero pistols and light guns for his robberies.

Arkan himself sought in Italy new allies to perform his actions during the Bosnian War. As reported in the inquires by Italian prosecutors, he made an arrangement with Francesco Schiavone, boss of the rebellious Camorra clan of the Casalesi, and ironically nicknamed after a tiger too (the book character Sandokan, aka the Tiger of Malaysia, by Emilio Salgari). Arkan did not just ask him weapons for his paramilitaries; he primarily requested Schiavone's help to solve two crucial problems: 1. to keep calm Albanian mobsters that were spoiling "his" war by stopping Serbian arms supplies, and 2. to bypass the international embargo which impeded foreign trade and the receipt of money laundered abroad.<sup>27</sup>

For what concerns Arkan's Tigers, their transition from common criminals and killers to warlords and paramilitaries was mediated by an unexpected phenomenon: football supporters' groups, which became a veritable training pool for future members recruited amongst Belgrade Red Star's hooligans.

During those years, criminal organization, mafia groups and local clans acquired a central role in supporting political leaders, doing the dirty work and profiting from plundering, smuggling, the black market, drug and human trafficking across the renewed Balkan state borders.<sup>28</sup>

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27 As documented by Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), Sandokan firstly intervened to stop his Albanian friends, allowing to Arkan the opportunity to conduct a bloodier war against Muslims in Bosnia; later, he stimulated his bank contacts and managed to send the money in Serbia disguised as humanitarian aids. In exchange, the entrepreneurs affiliated to Schiavone's clan (residing in all Italy) had the opportunity to buy at the lowest price factories, companies, shops, farms, thus spreading in half Serbia.

28 Just like Arkan, in 1991-2 many criminals who had once served UDBA (or have been persecuted by it) came back to their homeland and personally took part in the conflict. Amongst the conflicting troops, we would find also common mobsters like the Bosnians Ramiz Delalić "Celo" e Musan Topalović "Caco", or the Croatian Jusuf Prazina, alias Juka. We should not be surprised to acknowledge how the war was, for the most part of them, the continuation of their criminal action by other means.

Organized groups based in the collapsing Yugoslavia and in neighboring countries became much more powerful abroad because they controlled areas deprived of any state control; a position which authorized them to perform agreements with Italian and Turkish mafias, but also Colombian drug dealers. Balkan organizations showed themselves as useful and quick partners, because the instability in their home countries guaranteed a faster development, wider possibilities for money-laundering, uncertainty of penal action.

Belgrade itself, at the turn of the millennium was a bombed-out city transformed into a battlefield for gangs, where bosses and smugglers went to wash dirty money financing the building of new apartment blocks and commercial centers in the Novi Beograd section of the city. The leading faction was then the feared Zemun clan, located in the so-named suburb north of Belgrade. The group's connections with the army and the government (pre and post Milosević) became clear after the assassinations of Socialist Serbia's former president Ivan Stambolić in 2000, and of the acting prime minister, Zoran Đinđić, in 2003.

As became clear, many members of this organization were originally part of a disparate but well-sponsored section of the army: the special operation unit (*Jedinica za specijalne operacije*), also known as Red Berets, who merged many paramilitary units that fought in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo under the command of Legija. Amongst them were the remnants of Arkan's Tigers, who regrouped after their leader's murder in 2000.<sup>29</sup>

This situation could not last, and the fall of the leaderships that led the war, as Milosević's SDS in Serbia and Tudjman's HDZ hardliners in Croatia, unveiled the importance of mafia in the social and political order of these new states. The war, the multiplication of borders and checkpoints, the international intervention and the problems experienced by traditional allies (such as the Italian Mafia's increasing loss of political protection after the season of mass murders) made the Balkan route more and more difficult to follow without the support of local allies.

This period corresponds also with the "golden years" of the Albanian mafia, which opened new smuggling routes in the Balkans, avoiding areas of open conflict. It has been labeled "the golden triangle",

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<sup>29</sup> The first leader of the Zemun clan, Dušan Spasojević, was killed by Serbian police two weeks after Djindjić's death.

and refers to the smuggling web between the three cities of Pristina, Tirana and Podgorica.

And one of the reasons for the apparently long-lasting peace in Kosovo from the Yugoslav government's repression in the 1980s to the explosion of the conflict in 1996 (which nonetheless did not mean "stability") resides exactly in the opportunity this routes represented for both Albanians, besieged by Serbs, and by the Serbs themselves, still facing the international embargo.

Aside from the golden triangle, the second route opened to substitute the original Balkan one was still starting in Bulgaria, but it sought nothing more than to ship drugs on Turkish trucks crossing Yugoslavia. A sophisticated chain of small middleman smugglers, under the control of Kosovar groups allied with the Italian 'Ndrangheta, moved goods along the line between Turkey, Budapest and Bratislava, a city which became for a certain period – roughly defined, the 90s – a strategic hub of drug smuggling towards Northern and Western Europe.

That is the reason why at the end of the Balkan Wars (up to the last fighting in Macedonia in 2001) the Albanian mafia, literally arising from nothing, became one of the leading groups in the international arena. The consequences of the war, the connivance of political elites, the large corruption and the scarce range of intervention of international forces made them crucial partners in international trafficking in the Mediterranean Sea.

An example may help to understand the scenario here: the police operation "Pristina", guided by Italian police with the support of Europol's analysts and conducted in Europe, South America and Central Asia, dismantled a joint Colombian-Albanian syndicate capable of shipping 40 tons of cocaine per year, thanks to the protection offered by police officials in Tirana. Not by chance did this come after the collapse of Albanian financial system in 1997, after the pyramid schemes scandal occurred, and many high-rank coverings were dismissed.

### **2.3 After the deluge: the growth of transnational organized crime**

At the middle of the last decade this new behavior and this new shape of new Balkan Mafias became more evident, when a broader collaboration between local and foreign police officers and more transparency, throwing a light on what had survived hidden under the

ashes of the war. This change was sensible for two reasons: on the one hand, the arrest and prosecution of many war criminals often was supplemented with their indictment for drug trafficking and money laundering, as well as for goods “unofficially” acquired during the war, with the compliance of police and government officials.

On the other hand, the institutional stabilization of Balkan states gave inquirers more freedom in investigating those relations between politics, finance and organized crime that had lurked for years behind the official affairs of state.

Especially in Serbia, some decisions marked a firm line: the killing of Spasojević, the disbanding of the Red Berets and the arrest of more than 10,000 criminals for a time beheaded local mafia and disclosed its relations with the army and politics. But these police operations by no means eradicated organized crime in Serbia.

In this country, and in the other Western Balkan states, organized crime survived by changing its shape and methods- just as the Italian mafia had been forced to do during the 1990s. In Italy, the capos came to understand that public bombings and audacious killings in broad daylight could have a boomerang effect: these acts ended up arousing public anger, and brought increased attention from the police. This unwanted visibility in turn made doing deals more difficult, forced potential allies to become enemies, and increased the chances of being prosecuted before an approving public.<sup>30</sup>

The last major act related to the old kind of mafia behavior in the Western Balkans happened in Croatia in 2008, an act that also represents in many ways a turning point: the killing of the Croatian journalist Ivo Pukanić, murdered by a bomb in the very center of Zagreb.

In less than six months, Serbian police arrested the supposed perpetrators: their leader was Sreten Jočić, a.k.a ‘Joca Amsterdam,’ a businessman and alleged kingpin of drug smuggling. Police accused him of having received 1.5 million euros from unknown parties to kill the journalist. Once arrested, Joca claimed innocence, accusing the “high spheres” of Balkan governments of using him as a scapegoat to cover up for the alleged deeper connections between politics and criminal organizations. The trial in Belgrade has already featured some “coupes de

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30 Even in Bulgaria, where no war had occurred, organized crime became less visibly violent, following several high-profile assassinations

theater." The suspect behind the murder, Serbian (but Geneva-based) businessman Stanko Subotić or 'Cane' (one of the richest men in Eastern Europe), gave a controversial interview for the Croatian magazine *Jutarnij list*, in which he supported Jočić's claim, accusing top leaders of Serbia's Democratic Party, such as Vojislav Koštunica's entourage. Subotić was arrested in Russia in 2009, but will freely attend his trial and his extradition after a generous bail. However, he was not arrested for the death of Pukanić: he was actually arrested for alleged involvement in international cigarette smuggling said to have occurred back in the 1990s.

Before exploring this subject further, it would be wise to consider the profiles of the alleged protagonists of the "Pukanić affair": businessmen, politicians and lawyers. The time of Arkan and Legija has passed: if we are looking for the prototype of the current mafia leaders in the Balkans, we should not seek the same warlords who built their fortune conducting massacres and robbery during the conflict in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo.

In those countries where changes at the top made contacts with power more and more difficult, mafia survived by submerging in the society, trying to become "invisible," to gain freedom for its trafficking operations.

### **3. Meanwhile, in Sweden: the re-opening of the Nordic route**

At the same time, the international scenario was moving as well, with the beginning of the war on Terror and the progressive lifting of the tight control international organization used over Balkan states in the 90s, due to the diminution of its strategic importance. Assets and routes set during the conflicts were disposable to be converted in new business of drugs from Middle East and people from Eastern Europe and Northern Africa.

In the war years in Yugoslavia fellow countrymen in Northern Europe went on playing a role at the bridgehead for drug and cigarettes routes coming from the Balkans through Adriatic and Dutch ports. Cigarettes, as mentioned above, became the key good.

Swedish-based associates of Arkan, such as Dragan Joksović, gained notoriety in the Swedish media, and were regarded as Stockholm's leading

gang bosses, becoming integral part of a pan-European smuggling network.

That year, the number of cigarettes smuggled into Sweden more than doubled, reaching close to 40 million according to Swedish customs. A single Macedonian lorry intercepted at the port of Trelleborg was found to be carrying 16 million cigarettes.<sup>31</sup>

Joksović was murdered in Stockholm in 1998 in a dispute over smuggled cigarettes by a Finnish hitman.<sup>32</sup> Police investigations following his death and the so-called cigarette War unveiled the existence of a double chain of smuggling during the nineties. The first one comes from the other side of the Atlantic, with US cigarettes arriving in the port of Antwerp, in the Netherlands, where they were not subject to duty because they were directed to a third country, usually Macedonia. A local state-held company, "Macedonia Tabak", resold these cigarettes to Yugoslav companies – amongst others, one led by Milošević's son Marko – that would export them through the Greek port of Thessaloniki to Sweden.

The second chain started from Montenegro and continued to Italy – this has been prominently connected with Montenegro's former President and Prime Minister Milo Đukanović. In the lengthy Italian investigation, two names repeatedly appeared: that of Stanko Subotić, and that of Brano Micunović, the alleged leader of the "Belgrade faction" of this new criminal organization based in Montenegro.

By the end of the inquiry, the Italian weekly, *Espresso* reported that the Office of the Prosecutor in Naples and Bari had put together 4,000 pages of evidence against them, including recorded conversations and testimonies.

In 2000, the leader of Serbian mafia in Sweden became Ratko Đokić, called "the Godfather", who was in business with Walter Perez, a famous Uruguayan mobster. Đokić was eventually killed in 2003 by Nenad Misović, a Serbian veteran in Vukovar, following the orders of Rade Kotur. Kotur, the "gambling king", allegedly killed him to gain full control of the

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31 "Arkan and Joksović represented the Serbian and Swedish control points of network which smuggled cigarettes from the Balkans into northern Europe" a Swedish customs official working in the Balkans told IWPR.

32 His funeral was attended by Arkan himself, who soon after began a bloody showdown with a rival group to demonstrate who was in charge. He claimed that Joksa's murder was ordered by a certain Dragan Ković, and ordered his man to kill him. Ković was caught in a restaurant and shot dead in summer 1998.

market in the Swedish underground. He was arrested in the UK in 2007, and sentenced to 14 years for instigating to murder, illegal gambling and tax evasion.

The last boss of the Serbian Mafia in Serbia, Milan Ševo, married Đokić's daughter in a lavish wedding in 1999 with more than 400 guests, of which most were notable businessmen and criminals, including the leader of the Swedish Hells Angels chapter.<sup>33</sup> He later went back to Serbia, where he is now - not surprisingly - considered a responsible businessman; he also declared in an interview to *Kurir* to have survived six murder attempts. And we know, when it comes to these bloody showdowns, the power balance inside organized crime is swinging.

We must also note the presence of new varied and sophisticated of Balkan groups, some of them members of the Pink Panthers, a criminal group able to act on an international arena and to accomplish high-level robberies: more than 250 million dollars in bold robberies in Dubai, Switzerland, Japan, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Spain and Monaco. This means we are no more talking of drug smugglers and arms dealers: Pink Panthers are directly in contact with 'upper crust' buyers and banks.

We are now talking about recent times. And recent times mean the meditated introduction of new European laws and directives aimed at harmonizing the member's countries' penal codes against organized crime. Speaking of organized crime relations between Scandinavia and the Balkans is to discuss juridical issues in response to criminal webs between EU and non-EU states, a line along which reside the fortunes and the glories of many of these new mafia leaders.

### **3.1 European answer to transnational organized crime**

The fifteen years between the Maastricht Agreement in 1992, which opened European borders, and the Lisbon Treaty in 2007 - the first one specifically dealing with measures against transnational organized crime - demonstrate how the matter can be tricky, because it implies attempts to harmonize different models of justice and procedures of investigation.

The last Treaty, although far from untangling the knot, set some juridical basis for the identification of a criminal organization (with some

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33 Hell's Angels and their counterpart, the Bandidos, are two motorcycle gangs quite powerful in Sweden, and are usually considered by local sources as the organizations more similar to other countries' organized crime.

new indictments to be implemented in each country's law). According to it, organized crime can be identified by 11 criteria, 4 of which are mandatory:

1. The crime implies more than 2 persons;
2. The offenses have been committed repeatedly over a long period;
3. The offenders are suspected of the commission of serious criminal offenses;
4. The criminal action is determined to the pursuit of power and/or profit, but does not include terrorism.<sup>34</sup>

Although it introduced these criteria, the Lisbon Treaty did not codify a description of transnational crime, nor did it provide the basis for a deeper international collaboration. To make an example, it does not authorize direct involvement of foreign police departments on the territory of another member state, making investigations longer and harder. The Treaty foresaw the constitution of a dedicated committee, which is still far from being properly operative.

More improvements came with the Stockholm Program, signed in 2009 to set the guidelines for justice and internal affairs for member states during following five years. It went beyond the mainly repressive stance that the EU undertook with the previous plan, signed at the Hague in 2004, while still holding to a post 9/11 concept of counter-terrorism measures. It gave more power to Europol and recognized a common anti-corruption standard.

The persisting problem in these pieces of legislation is bureaucracy, while contemporary mafia groups tend to specialize their area of operation to make trafficking faster. So we can have specific groups managing drugs import, others controlling its distribution, others monopolizing human trafficking and so on. A network performs an operation, and then the goods pass into a different network for the following step, thus making the work of inquirers more difficult without a complete cooperation between European polices and institutions.<sup>35</sup>

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34 The complete list reports also the following 7 criteria: each participants has prearranged functions; the organization is subject to the application of some form of discipline or monitoring; it acts on an international level; it uses violent behaviour or other means serving to intimidate; it utilises commercial or business structures; it is involved in money laundering and, finally, it exercise influence at a politcal level over the media, public administration, judicial authorities or the economy.

35 Coherently with the theory introduced above, we must then look at these points as nodes of a wider web in which legal and illegal goods may be manufactured, manipulated,

As a matter of fact, what attracts criminal groups is always the possibility of performing an activity which will allow it, on determined conditions, to obtain the biggest gain at the lowest risk.<sup>36</sup>

That is why the main goal of this program is to have inserted in the future European justice agenda some "complementary" strategy, in addition to "repressive" ones, which complement them by indirect means. Repressive actions are normally aimed at discouraging people from doing something by punishing them afterwards, but can work only if crimes are discovered to have been committed, if the criminals are seized, if the trials are quick, if inmates cannot interact with one another and with the organization, and so on.

Repressive measures of this kind include the introduction of new specific criminal offenses, as the crime of mafia-type association, broader investigative powers, ability to penetrate the protection-shield of mafia-men, their patrimonial assets and economic activities, and regulations concerning financial transactions and money laundering.

Complementary actions are instead policies addressing civil society and public administration, and only indirectly the mafia. These strategies promise to be particularly effective against transnational crimes, because it has a vital need of bureaucrats, businessmen, IT experts, corrupted officials and so on, with links in the very center of state systems, when they're not already controlling it (the so-called narco-states: Guinea-Bissau, Northern Mexico, Afghanistan, Kosovo).

### **3.2. The economic crisis and the consequences on Balkan organized crime in Sweden**

Turning to the future, the evolutions of these historical connections between the Balkans and Scandinavia, concerns the possible consequences of the financial crisis on organized crimes. An intuitive hypothesis is that criminals have in fact benefited from the crisis.

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exchanged, sold. In a word, they are converted (or, better, *translated*) into something else, like money, which in turn can be invested and/or laundered thus financing new transformations in this or a different node.

36 Let's think again about Arkan, who turned from arms and cigarette smuggling to the contraband of fertilizers in 1999, when this traffic became more profitable and could grant him a businessman profile.

It is worth recalling that Sweden constitutes one of the major problems in harmonizing European justice against mafia crimes. As a matter of fact, European laws follow three different approaches: the common law one used in Anglo-Saxon states, the civil law one in Southern Europe, and the Scandinavian approach.

This latter system is based upon a precise definition of the crime, which may be worsened by aggravating circumstances. However, in these penal codes there is no mention of specific rules about the participation in criminal organizations, which usually falls under the allegation of "conspiracy", but may cause loopholes if crime's presence would increase.

That is the reason why organized crime groups could benefit from this period of financial crisis in these countries. In particular, the absence of the crime of mafia type association impedes the prosecution of members of these trafficking operations, who often come under trial for minor crimes only.

As a matter of fact, Sweden and Norway have put emphasis on fighting economic crime since the mid-70s, whereas other European countries and the United States have devoted more attention to organized crime. This choice is useful in the fight against business crime, and is maybe a reason that can explain why the profit gained by drugs and human trafficking in the Baltic Sea are almost impossible to be invested *in loco*. Since the best traffic is that one which guarantees the highest income at the lowest risk, Balkan gangsters prefer to bring money back into the former Yugoslavia (Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia) or elsewhere where financial controls are less tight.

This state of things makes the study of distribution chains and racketing networks a priority in understanding the real situation of organized crime in Sweden. Unfortunately, we lack data, since there is not a specific archive in this country and scholars and investigators must rely on surveys made by public authorities and police officials. Thus the extent of actual crime in relation to reported crime is largely unknown.

What we know from journalistic sources, is that despite the removal of such key players, Swedish customs officers say that ex-Yugoslav gangsters still dominate cigarette smuggling across much of Europe,<sup>37</sup> and

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37 "We have a number of cases which make it clear that the import and distribution of counterfeit cigarettes is controlled by people from former Yugoslavia", IWPR was told by investigator Tomas Petersson, Swedish customs' foremost expert on tobacco smuggling.

Sweden is still a transit route for counterfeit cigarettes smuggled onwards to Norway and the United Kingdom.

As the gangs have matured, they have diversified away from their traditional trafficking routes through the Balkan countries. Petersson explained how crime bosses have used the money and expertise gained from earlier operations to open up new networks in Poland, the Baltic states and Belarus, which indeed were strengthened with the entrance of the former in the European Union.

Magnus Ramebaeck, a Swedish prosecutor who has handled a large number of cigarette smuggling cases, confirms this hierarchy. The people he prosecutes are typically drivers from Poland or the Baltic, but "from our investigations we know that we have not yet reached the key ex-Yugoslav persons high up in the hierarchy. Arrested suspects have talked about former Yugoslavs during questioning, but their information is not enough on its own for us to take action against these people."

What seems to have changed, after the period of the showdowns, is the pyramidal structure Serbian mafia kept also in its Swedish bridgehead, among the immigrants in Malmö and Goteborg. What is certain is that the alleged leaders prefer now to live in Serbia as businessman, covering their income from alleged illegal activities by money-laundering in white economy or through creative finance.

The recent story of Darko Sarić, the heir of the feared Zemun Clan who is now reported to be hiding in South Africa, shows the typical trajectory of this criminal transformation. Still, it is unclear if Serbian and Albanian groups are collaborating in managing these routes, if they are covering different sectors of trade or, again, if they will assist in new killings.

According to former Serbian Interior Minister Dačić, fragments of the Zemun clan survive still today, and are still able to act beyond Serbian territory. The example frequently evoked is the spectacular 2009 VÅstberga helicopter robbery in Sweden - in which armed men used a stolen helicopter and decoy explosives to land on top of a cash depot and make off with some \$5.3 million.

This daring, Hollywood-style operation unfolded with military-style precision, and involved a number of participants involved with everything from acquiring SIM cards, explosives and machine guns to staging a traffic accident and placing false bombs by police helicopters to

thwart a response, as a detailed report from Sweden's 'The Local' explained.

According to this article, seven of the 10 men charged (several, Serbian) were found guilty after the heist. It also came out the Serbian intelligence had warned their Swedish counterparts several weeks earlier that plans for a major criminal operation were in the works.

And maybe this kind of spectacular robbery, calculated with military precision, represents the last kind of viable traditional organized crime actions in the contemporary world. But it is not by chance that this event happened in Sweden, where criminal can rely on a solid web of relations and cover-ups.

Widening the spectrum of this recognition, it is possible to focus on the general situation in this country; indeed, after 2008, Sweden was often presented as a happy island as concerns the economy: after a short decrease, the consequence of US's financial crisis, all the indexes went again on pre-2008 levels, which permitted the maintenance of most of the envied Swedish Welfare state. Anyway, some observers worry about the high unemployment amongst young people, which reached 10% and even higher rates in the peripheries of towns typically hit by crimes associated with mafia-style organizations.

Then the biggest part of organized crime, and specifically drug, weapons and human trafficking, tries instead to hide, making itself invisible or masking itself behind a gentle face. And following these stratified and complex routes, touching many countries and constantly balancing between finance, gray and real economy, does not just need a strict cooperation between international police forces. It also needs integration strategies towards migrants and citizens of the peripheries, and law-enforcement actions towards the institutions, through complementary and repressive actions.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This presentation aimed at described the current relations of organized crime groups acting between Scandinavia and the Balkans, with brief historical contextualization.

Speaking about this kind of transnational mafia was meant to shed light on the tendencies of contemporary criminal groups, which are no more confined to a specific territorial area: it germinates from a mixture in

which politics, economy and war are strictly intertwined, partly located in South Eastern Europe, and developed in a globalized context.

A collateral conclusion, for those who still believe that the problems in the Balkans depended on ethical issues, and that humanitarian wars could constitute a proper solution, is that the facts controvert their hopes. The solution Europe provided to the instability in the Balkans has been to adopt the principle of self-determination, granting support for independence to groups on a national basis, and *de facto* confirming their ethnic claims.

But we also saw how nationalism was often a shield to hide more profitable business, with Kosovo as the main example of a tendency in other hard peace-keeping missions in the world: in 1999, NATO bombing of Serbia brought not a containing of the war, but rather led to its escalation, with an Albanian counter-offensive and Serbian defensive maneuvers which had some success, such as the downing of a US aircraft. This hard power reaction also led, most memorably, to the brief danger of a real conflict when NATO bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, which was believed to be sheltering Milosevic or helping in other ways with his defense of the territory.

Balkan organized crime groups' fortune, in the last few years, has depended also on the relations between local groups and émigré clubs and gangs abroad, useful to move goods and drugs arriving in the Balkans from Middle East and South America.

The present analysis concentrated on Scandinavia, a region that has always been a preferred destination for Yugoslav emigrants. We underlined at least three phases in the mafia relations with the Balkans.

The first one gravitates around the fight between Ustasha organizations, which usually financed themselves from organized crime, robberies, and drug smuggling - and the countermeasures of the Yugoslav secret service (UDBA).

The second stage arrived with Yugoslavia's collapse and the Wars of Secession, which changed the strategic assets of drug and weapon smuggling, forcing Italian and Turkish mafias to deviate from the traditional Balkan Route. Weapons, in particular, were highly required to be found on the black market, since the UN resolution in 1991 prohibited

the selling of arms to Yugoslav Republics. Another prohibition, another field of opportunity for gangsters and organized crime thus lies in guns.<sup>38</sup>

The other chain of smuggling, during the war, was the cigarette one. As described above, it was based on the change of course of American cigarettes to Macedonia through Netherlands, then moving to Northern Balkans and Montenegro. Joka, Arkan's successor in controlling smuggling in Sweden, made up an empire upon cigarettes, which are heavily taxed in this country.

The third one is the current period, when the game has moved to the next level. Now, transnational crime, in which Balkan mafias are born, has become the norm. The re-opening of the Balkan route and the growing prominence of the Serbo-Montenegrin and Albanian criminal organizations show the ability of these groups to adapt to contemporary world, to new technologies and new markets. Their burgeoning relationships with cocaine producers and mafias in South America, for example, have commanded great attention in the last two years.

This is also the reason why is better to handle with care the meaning of recent arrests, like those accomplished with the international police operations "Checkmate" and "Domino" in Serbia, Italy and Croatia. The "invisibility" organized crime gained from fragmentation and the multiplication of boundaries, often benefiting from political protection and presenting a gentler businesslike face, makes possible, for criminal webs, to continue their work also while the boss is fugitive.

There is no need to recall that, in Italy, mafia bosses went on managing their criminal *cupola* also when they were jailed or hidden in some refuge, communicating with the outside world through mouthpieces or coded messages (like Provenzano's *pizzini*).

However, saying that the power of organized crime organizations resides in its relations with politics and economy is not sufficient to define a solution. As this presentation underlined, it the same boundary between legal and illegal, licit and illicit, that has become fluid, when we look at the importance of black market and "gray" practices in post-war societies, and

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38 We mentioned, for example, the role of Gojko Šušak in the creation of the Croatian Army from Canada and Italy and Arkan's trafficks with Camorra, but it is possible to add the role of the ethnic Albanian community in the US in raising funds and sending mass amounts of weapons to the UCK in Kosovo.

the only available economic system; or, to the contrary, the profits from illegal activities laundered through ostensibly lawful business investments.

Thus analysis and policies contrasting organizing crime must keep into account every level of criminal action: proper criminal action, black market supplying necessary goods (i.e. medicines), and the gray and official white economy. Without forgetting that also this last one may be of support to criminal action through the so-called white-collar crimes: vital for contemporary organized crime - moving in a world with less and less boundaries and distances - as once were territorial relations.

The European Union started only at the eve of the millennium to understand the threat of transnational crime, but have indeed defined some useful basis with the Lisbon Treaty and the Stockholm program. Some European countries already make use of a new category of analysts, investigators and politics experts in the mixed routes of organized crime, namely those who knew a longer tradition of organized crime. But other countries still lack tools and expertise required by a similar task.

European Union formation projects, and exchange programs between police corps are highly required, at least similar to the training courses American DEA held with Serbian anti-drug police before their successful maritime operation off of Uruguay.

Since it was created, Europol's investigation lead to some signifying discovers - making us foresee that a deeper involvement of regional polices may help in unfolding some "awkward relation" between economy, politics and organized crime. One of the major results of these investigations is that criminal webs in Europe usually rely on weak states, which are used as fulcrum of criminal operations. States compromised by a widely corrupted leadership, sometimes itself active in managing smuggling trades and profits; and states where the larger part of the traffics towards Europe is stored and shipped through well-functioning distribution and selling chains.

It could be useful to list these states, as a conclusion. Concerning the Balkans, in our opinion we should not include Serbia and Croatia anymore: two of the major conquests of the last Serbian government were the arrests of war criminals Karadžić, Mladić and Hadžić and the fight against organized crime - also required to obtain the status of Official EU Candidate received last March. Croatia has recently begun to square up with its past too, with the opening of Sanader's trial, the most important in

a long series of indictments for corruption and money laundering. In some of them the names of two historical criminal leaders (Bagarić and Slisko) made their appearance.

Bosnia-Herzegovina represents a peculiar case study, which would require an analysis on its own, but is worth citing because, as Bosnia was the biggest military storage area of Yugoslavia thanks to its geographical defenses, now is a useful deposit for smuggled goods; but we can also note that its complex bureaucracy, internal rivalries, and international military presence generate different markets on the same territory, each with autonomous rules and chains of supply; and each one is viable if you have the right contacts.

But we can also bypass the former Yugoslavia's borders, where those new wars, which were the point of departure of this article, are still fought: let's think of Transdnistria, the self-declared autonomous region from Moldova, whose economy relies almost exclusively on goods provided by black market smugglers - including drugs and human traffic.

Or let's think of Chechnya, where criminal, ideological and survival reasons contribute to inflame what seems a corner of the Russian Federation, but rather represent a great value for Russian organized groups, benefiting from conflict in the Caucasus, just a few thousand miles from Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, and the porous border with neighboring Pakistan, is of course where the production of opium drugs has increased year by year since the beginning of the so-called war on terror. The collapse of the state itself has resulted in no answers but the military one. And here originates the Eastern route to Europe, whose following stop is Turkey, or - better - Kurdistan, a region shared by Iran, Turkey, and a still unstable Iraq. The Turkish police has been deeply involved in the control of drug traffic, with surprising results. As has been reported, 40% of the total of smuggled drugs is seized on Turkey's eastern border, managed by Turkish, Iranian and Kurdish drug lords.

This fervor by Ankara's police officials has led some drug lord to look for new routes across the Black Sea, directly heading to Bulgarian ports, with the same destination: the Balkans.

Police say that Istanbul and Çanakkale straits are the routes of choice for cocaine smugglers who opt to utilize Bulgarian and Romanian-flagged ships, having they the right of free passage through the straits, to

transport cocaine to Russia and Black Sea countries.<sup>39</sup> In the Balkans, a major point of arrival of this route is Kosovo, where contraband goods are stored and prepared for their distribution in Europe.

We can also add that the Green revolutions in North Africa are having some side-effects, especially when the transition of power became tough and bloody. Thus the proximity between Turkey and the conflicting Syria, when the Assad family is by any means trying to save its personal power, became an opportunity for organized crime. Not by chance, some Turkish gangs are reported to have opened a new smuggling route through Syria and its Mediterranean harbors; the open support Turkey's government is granting to the Syrian Free Army and the meritorious hospitality offered to refugees also contribute to the creation of those grey-economy zones which intertwine black and white economy.

The second supply route comes from South America, and is currently managed by the Italian 'Ndrangheta and Camorra together with Serb-Montenegrin Mafia groups, united in the "Holy Alliance".

This is the route through which Colombian heroin and cocaine arrive in Adriatic's ports, often after a stop in a third country, ready to be distributed in Western Europe bridgeheads like Milan or, as seen, Stockholm.

Taking into account some general conclusion, the analysis of Balkan organized crime from a strategic point of view showed its role as a crucial factor on the current international chessboard. It was born during the wars, led by gangsters, and tends to be extremely persistent. Its links with politics and economy, on one side, and its role in providing goods which are impossible to obtain in a legal way, on the other, lead to a persistence of organized crime groups in the society well after the peace has been implemented. In a sentence: wars finish, but mafias remain.

And many issues are still in discussion.

For example, it is still not possible to analyze the economic role these criminal organization play as proper economic actors in the contemporary world, as shown by the data on mafias' incomes. And only ex-post inquires demonstrated that illegal organized prostitution rings in the Balkans are directly related to narcotics, since police investigations in several countries have revealed over the years that the drug dealers first

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39 Today's Zaman, 12.06.2010, available on: <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-212869-100-report-drug-trafficking-via-turkey-on-the-rise.html>

raise capital by illegal prostitution, before venturing into the narcotics trade, which is even more profitable.

Yet maybe this is just a matter of instrument of analysis. Indeed some explanations have been formulated, as the one by Gambetta<sup>40</sup>, who inserts organized crime in paradigms of rational choice, in which the transition of mafia "troops" and leaders into bodyguards and businessmen signals the resilience of structures of defense of pre-existing power hierarchies. This thesis explains why the security sector became central in the transformation to these new mafias, but at a closer observation, it appears too linear.

More interesting appears to be Pino Arlacchi's concept of "entrepreneur mafia", already proposed in 1983<sup>41</sup> and recently re-elaborated by Scalia<sup>42</sup>, which convincingly outlines a complex model in which traditional "peripheral" elements and elements of adaptation to post-fordist societies co-exist. Thus complexity is maybe the factor which we need to keep always present, as one of the most famous Italian mafia victims, Peppino Impastato, once said.

Let's then conclude by saying that it is on a global level that we must conceive answers and put into action policies against global organized crime. The solutions reside again in the relations between global and local. On the one hand, this is because only through cooperation (maybe even more than through harmonization) will it be possible to counteract local variations of organized crime's matrix. On the other hand, it is because even considering local and regional differences, mafia practices always resemble each other all over the world, from Nigeria to Mexico, from Afghanistan to Kosovo.

Meanwhile, World Bank reports themselves underline the self-evident relationship between social unfairness and organized crime, but they do not explain why the refuge of a warlord on an Afghan mountain, or in a huge mansion many miles away in Ciudad Juarez, seem so similar

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<sup>40</sup> Diego Gambetta, *La mafia siciliana. Un'industria della protezione privata* (Turin: Einaudi, 1992).

<sup>41</sup> Pino Arlacchi, *La mafia imprenditrice. L'etica mafiosa e lo spirito del capitalismo* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1983).

<sup>42</sup> Vincenzo Scalia, "I fenomeni mafiosi nelle ricerche del centro Peppino Impastato", Palermo: Centro Siciliano di Documentazione "Peppino Impastato" ONLUS, 2005; available on web at the url: <[http://www.centroimpastato.it/publ/online/scalia\\_centro.php3](http://www.centroimpastato.it/publ/online/scalia_centro.php3)>

to some images of European towns' peripheries, and in places where unfairness is lower, in people's perception.

But the term "periphery" itself seems now completely depleted in its meaning, if we consider that in some cities – like mine, Milan – the money earned from criminal activities was recycled in the acquirement of restaurants and stores in the very center of the town, few steps from the Duomo.

In those countries less effective in fighting money-laundering and corruption, and in controlling and directing the financial market, mafia and organized crime can arrive very close to the core of the political or economic system.

Thus while saying “periphery” we don't intend to support the common-sense belief that crime and violence always resides in the margins. At the contrary, we want to stress that “periphery” must not be used simply as a geographical term, but as a sociological concept: in the global world, there exists a *no man's land* where violence is curbed, expected or even simply made describable, where the war is similar to organized crime. This land stays between the real wars along the axes of international traffics, and the curtain of "normality" of our life in Western cities, where criminal organizations hide, strengthening their resilience with the profits of invisible crimes, with the shifting of borders, with the incorporeal finance, with the imposition of new prohibitions and, finally, taking advantage of the dynamics of stability maintenance, legitimacy and public accreditation in contemporary states.

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