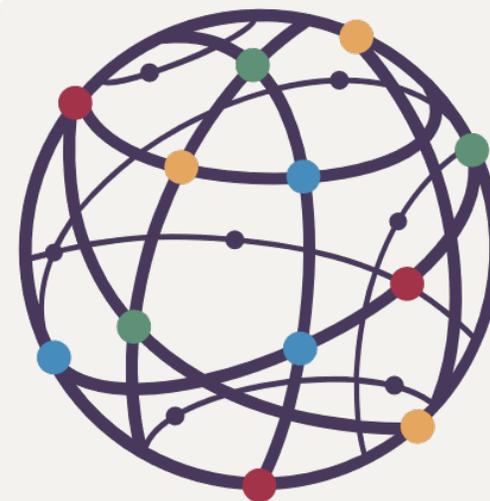


# THE WAR IN UKRAINE: POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

TRPE STOJANOVSKI, SENIOR ADVISER, GI-TOC  
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**GLOBAL  
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# The war in Ukraine

- When the war in Ukraine is mentioned, than the first image in our mind is the horror and devastation of the country.
- Organized crime is not on the cover page. But all wars have spillover effects and long-term consequences on the democracy, Rule of Law, criminal justice, as witnessed in Yugoslavia in the 1990s.
- The war in Ukraine - expand the opportunity space for OC in Western Balkans, like:
  - arms trafficking,
  - money laundering,
  - sanctions busting,
  - the movement of fighters,
  - shift in trafficking routes.

## About the impact of the war in Ukraine to the Western Balkans

- The Western Balkans countries have its own experience with the dissolution of former Yugoslavia,
- The current war opens new opportunities for organized crime and criminal networks related with the WBs.
- The war in Ukraine is an opportunity for the criminal groups to expand their activities, exploiting the crises and new economical reality, emergency needs imposed by the conflict, established sanctions to the aggressor and disconnection of the criminal justice connections.

# Experience from the dissolution of former Yugoslavia

- During the war in former Yugoslavia, OC groups shows their ability to meet the needs of the (illegal) markets much faster than the respective national governments.
- For criminal groups it was business as usual—no interruptions, no setbacks, no worries about being able to pay affiliates, or any other concern that legitimate commercial establishments faced—thanks to a steady cash flow from illegal activities (Scaturro 2022).
- Criminal groups took advantage of the chaos generated by the war to activate old or to build new, stronger ties with vulnerable, disadvantaged segments of society.

# Western Balkans as safe haven for Russian goods?

- Russia is facing almost unprecedented sanctions.
- In the past Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs were present in Serbia, along the Montenegrin coast, but also in other WB countries.
- Under the new circumstances some Russians could seek investment opportunities in the region and might well draw on the connections of well-established criminal groups with contacts in political and business circles.
- Russian money could be laundered into real estate, tourism, gambling and other sectors vulnerable to IFFs, impacting local economies and politics.
- Some WB countries have not joined the ban on Russian flights, so airports such as Belgrade's (and via Istanbul to all capitals in the region) have become key hubs for Russian travelers. Since February 2022 daily flights from Belgrade to Moscow is doubled.
- It is possible that Russian assets, which are frozen in many countries, could find a safe haven in Western Balkans where Russians already feel comfortable doing business.
- WB could also be a conduit for the trafficking of luxury goods, alcohol and cigarettes.

# Modalities of the war in Ukraine related with WBs

- The war in Ukraine, from active confrontation to the cessation of hostilities, absorb number of modalities of work of the OC groups, which recognise opportunities to be present on the new scheduled market in Ukraine and *vice versa*, on the markets in WBs.
- Significant amounts of weaponry and ammunition supplies have been flowing from the US and Western Europe, to Ukraine.
- Increased security concerns with the presence of the fighters from Europe, including those from SEE who joined the war in Ukraine.
- Their experience from the Balkans and other conflict areas increased the ongoing uncertainty.
- When the conflict winds down, significant SALW will land on the black market and become easily accessible to criminal networks and [terrorist groups](#).

## Some reflections from the war in Ukraine to WBs

- The fear of nuclear radiation: on the beginning of the war no potassium iodide pills available in pharmacies in North Macedonia.
- Globally and in Europe there are concerns about shortages of certain commodities; two of the most obvious in the WB are gasoline and sunflower oil.
- Scarcity markets could create incentives for smuggling in WB region and rising prices.

# Reflections or coincidence from the war in Ukraine to the Western Balkans

- The sanctions established by IC to prevent and discourage Russia in their aggression will initiate new forms of crime.
- In Serbia, Croatia, B&H, Montenegro and Kosovo big number of fake alerts for posting the bombs and explosives in the planes, airports, schools and other places significantly change the live.
- Western Balkan OC groups, experienced with the war and post war circumstances are steel vital to reinforce their potentials and to generate new circle of criminal activities.
- WBs already is recognised as safe haven for moving the money from the places affected by the restrictions.
- It is too early to speculate for the impacts on the politics in WB, more specifically speaking about the ethnic tensions, instability, but business with companies with unclear portfolio, money laundering and other fragile elements should be expected.

# Refugee and migration flows from Ukraine

- More than 8 million Ukrainian refugees cross into Poland, Slovakia, Moldova, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and other countries.
- The number of internally displaced Ukrainians is already doubled.
- The number of refugees moved to East is not known, but it is also high.
- WB countries made decision for temporary protection and identifying reception centers to help o the refuges.

# Shifts in Trafficking routes

- Balkan Route is traditionally used by smugglers. But some trafficking routes for drugs shifted towards maritime routes across the Black Sea or even into the Adriatic.
- The shifts of trafficking routes are confirmed by seizures of 400 kilograms of heroin from Iran in the port of Varna, Bulgaria, and 1 400 kilograms in Constanta, Romania, by authorities in February and May 2021.
- These ports may become more attractive to illicit flows if trafficking is disrupted in Odessa and other Black Sea ports because of the war in Ukraine.
- An increase in trafficking through a maritime Balkan route can also be noted by major seizures in the Adriatic ports of Koper, Slovenia (more than one tonne of heroin was seized in the last three years); Ploce, Croatia; and Trieste, Italy.
- This shift in heroin trafficking comes at a time when there is increased evidence of cocaine trafficking into Adriatic ports.
- The Danube river could also become a conduit for smuggling.

# Military and weaponry links of WBs and Ukraine

- A massive amount of weaponry is pouring into Ukraine, including from the Western Balkans. There are indications that automatic rifles and mortars made in Serbia are being used on the battlefield.
- On the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the prices of firearms on the black markets in WBs have risen up to 100 per cent - a trend that was evident in some countries of western Europe.
- The war has created an increase in demand of volunteer fighters. Some WBs are included in this roster.
- In all WBs going to serve in foreign army is illegal. It is anticipated that the numbers will grow if the war drags on, not least since Ukraine has created a so-called 'foreign legion'.
- There is a danger that some of the weapons flooding into Ukraine will trickle back into the Western Balkans, either to be used by criminal groups or paramilitaries, or sold on the black market.

# Security aspects of the war in Ukraine to the Western Balkan countries

- The flow of weapons and fighters between the Western Balkans and Ukraine could increase the risk of (particularly right-wing) violent extremism, homicides and paramilitary violence (GI TOC, May, 2022).
- The latter threat is particularly worrisome in relation to the destabilizing impact of armed groups in the regions where ethnic tensions can be quickly stoked.
- The flow of weapons and fighters from the war in Ukraine could swell the ranks of criminal and paramilitary groups in the Western Balkans, strengthen their arsenals and increase radicalization.
- The high number of people – particularly women and children – fleeing Ukraine could increase vulnerability to THB.
- Europol (2022) has issued an EW notification highlighting how women, children and vulnerable persons are potential victims of criminal networks in THB. The unaccompanied minors are most at risk for sexual and labour exploitation, as well as forced criminality and begging.

## Conclusion:

- The war in Ukraine has created the biggest upheaval in European security since the end of the Cold War and the most profound shake-up of the world order since 1945.
- Criminals are always first movers in times of change and conflict. The war will no doubt affect geopolitics in the Western Balkans and possibly even national politics and inter-ethnic relations.
- It could also revive discussions about the EU accession process, particularly given Ukraine and Moldova application for EU membership.
- The war in Ukraine will have an impact on criminal markets and IFFs, and it has triggered the departure of young men to Europe's new battlefield.
- This is something national LE agencies, regional organizations and all stakeholders in Western Balkans as well as in Europe should anticipate and watch closely, not least when these fighters and their weapons return home.
- GI-TOC will continue monitoring the impact of the war on criminal markets.

# THANK YOU

Contact

[secretariat@globalinitiative.net](mailto:secretariat@globalinitiative.net)

[globalinitiative.net](http://globalinitiative.net)