

Organized Crime in Kosovo: A Comprehensive Analysis of Narcotics and Human Trafficking (2019-2023)

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Abstract

Organized crime poses an imminent threat in our society, driven by the pursuit of rapid wealth and power. The path to amassing large profits in a short time leads to various criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and counterfeit goods, reaching global levels. This research is about the Republic of Kosovo. The intent is to analyze organized crime from 2019 to 2023, taking a comprehensive interest in drugs and human trafficking. Post-war countries struggle with extensive criminal networks that cause internal turmoil. Fostering criminal cooperation and combating corruption while ensuring security and safety remain significant internal issues. Its favorable location along the Balkan route is a pathway to illicit activities driven by criminal groups, with Europe as a destination. Additionally, by using a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative research through document analysis, data analysis, and statistical examination, the research offers a holistic perspective on the changes over the years, emphasizing key enforcement challenges. It also uncovers how criminal networks take advantage of security challenges and legislative gaps to operate freely. The research concludes that stricter enforcement laws and intensified anti-corruption efforts are urgently required. Improving security policies and practices, focusing on greater collaboration with other Balkan countries, enhancing border control, and tightening oversight in northern Kosovo are also priorities. Implementing the proposed measures would enhance Kosovo's

fight against organized crime and serve as a combat model for other Balkan countries.

Keywords: Balkan route, drug trafficking, human trafficking, Kosovo

Introduction

Post-war countries are usually hosts of crime and illicit activities; Kosovo is no exception. Kosovo, a country in southeastern Europe, otherwise known as the Balkan peninsula, has served as a transit area for the trafficking and smuggling of people and goods by criminal groups from Asia to Western Europe (Krasniqi, 2016).

Kosovo's position along the famous Balkan route makes Kosovo a host of illicit activities. Therefore, leading to the following research question: How have drug and human trafficking evolved in the last four years, what challenges have been posed, and what actions have been taken against these illicit activities? The evidence through the years suggests that the transition process is always filled with challenges.

Kurtenbach and Rettberg (2020, p. 1) argue that a clean break from violence to stability, theft to production, and repression to democracy remains evasive. This perspective highlights the difficulties in post-conflict countries and the effort to take accountability for creating stability.

Similarly, seen from a criminal perspective, weak and failing states, as well as conflict regions, have traditionally been considered crime-facilitative environments (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023).

According to Darby (2006), high crime rates make peacebuilding efforts and reconstruction of the country difficult. They also create other challenges, such as deterring investment and hindering infrastructure rebuilding.

Albanese and Reichel (2013) describe transnational organized crime as it characterizes the 21st century in the same way that the traditional street crimes characterized the 20th century. Illicit goods and infiltration of government and businesses have become the major problems of the modern age of globalization, technology, international travel and communications, multinational migration and business, and their downsides: smuggling, trafficking, laundering, and corruption.

Criminal networks usually target countries with weak legal frameworks and weak security enforcement, and they take into consideration the country's political state, meaning political tensions. Internally, Kosovo faces several challenges with organized crime, which is present in various forms according to UNODC's (2020) research on measuring organized crime in Western Balkans, including not only drug trafficking but also trafficking in

persons, migrant smuggling, firearms trafficking, money laundering, and corruption.

Among these illegal activities, narcotics trafficking remains the most profitable one, where the interest of criminal groups lies the most. To create a well-defined strategic plan against organized crime, it is more than necessary to understand the characteristics of organized crime.

Therefore, according to UNODC (2023), there are three general types of organized criminal groups: groups with organizational structure or hierarchical structure, groups based on ethnic connections, and groups relying on economic business relationships.

Further, Abadinsky (1994) defines organized crime with several features, such as hierarchical structure, limited membership, non-ideological nature, self-perpetuating nature, the willingness to use violent means and illegal acts, specialization of roles, and precise regulation. His definition highlights that group positions are assigned depending on kinship or friendship.

So, it is of higher interest to study these criminal organizations to understand their operation direction and features. Furthermore, different groups have different characteristics worldwide, but what characterizes the Kosovan groups is more interesting; other groups might see other criminal networks as rivals, but the Balkan groups are more than open to collaboration and believe that there is a place for everyone.

Meanwhile, according to Haziri (2017, p. 40), criminal organizations in Kosovo are characterized by ethnic homogeneity, reliance on friendship ties, and readiness to cooperate with other regional criminal groups to expand their enterprises. The highlight is that they act with less caution but greater violence, resorting to the use of firearms to overcome obstacles.

The research argues that the Balkan route directly impacts Kosovo, and only by studying these illicit activities can better strategies against organized crime be developed.

Therefore, understanding organized crime in Kosovo is of higher interest. Only by studying the last four years can we understand whether there has been advancement or suggestions to improve security and provide stability in Kosovo and the Balkans.

Methods

The research has various objectives, including examining organized crime over the last four years. By comparing the results, the aim is to provide a clear view of these illicit activities and their effect on internal stability and socio-economic situation.

Secondly, the purpose is to examine the crime rates in the last four years to comprehend the gaps and advancements in the protective system and

further suggest defensive strategies to enhance stability within Kosovo regarding drug and human trafficking.

Furthermore, by emphasizing a mixed-methods approach, it was possible to provide a better understanding of the current challenges by comparing and incorporating document analysis, data analysis, and statistical analysis.

The qualitative method was applied by systematically reviewing documents to provide information by measuring the evolution of organized crime. Additionally, a legal analysis was conducted by researching academic literature, different reports, media articles, and previous research in the field. The legal analysis aims to assess the effectiveness of the law and understand the potential gaps in the legal framework.

This analysis provided a better understanding of the legal context and evaluated the legal framework in the last four years. Further, statistical analysis was applied using quantitative methods, which provided a numerical analysis of crime statistics and empirical evidence on the prevalence of organized crime in Kosovo.

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods and data integration provided a holistic view of organized crime. Examining criminal cases is necessary to comprehend the advancements made within criminal networks.

Results

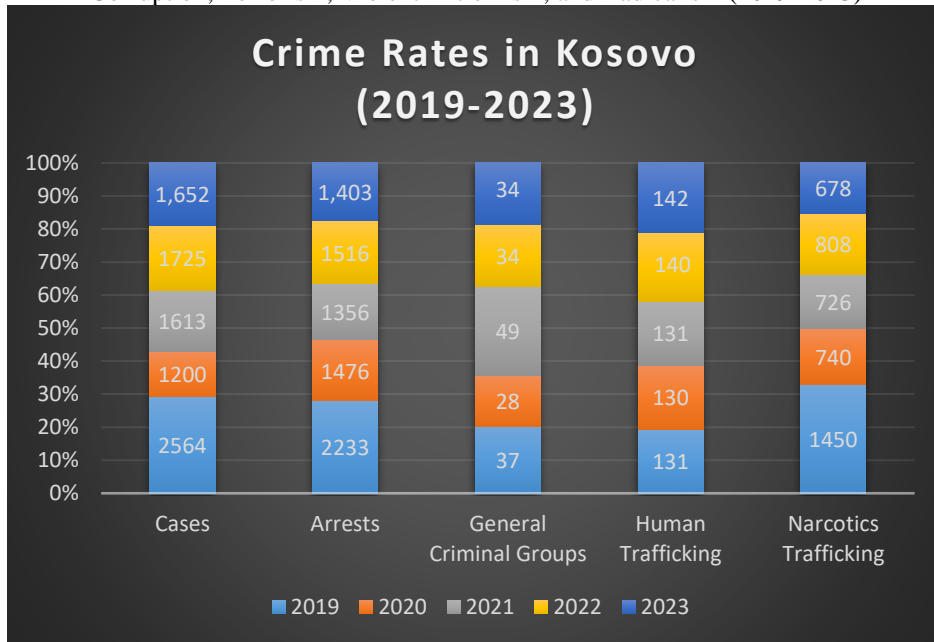
As mentioned above, post-war countries tend to show struggles in which criminal organizations benefit by finding it more accessible to operate with their illicit activities and using the gaps in the legal framework, political struggles, insufficient protective measures, and inadequate border control to their advantage.

By studying the crime rates from 2019 to the end of 2023, it is possible to understand what advancements the Republic of Kosovo made against organized crime and how it influenced the local economy. The high crime rate can hinder potential investments and create more possibilities for money laundering, leading to the economy collapsing.

Evaluating policy and decision-making can help governments and law enforcement agencies develop strategies, create policies, allocate more resources, and signal a need for reform or new strategies.

The police's annual report and the interviews with Kosovo police members increased the value of this research by offering valuable insights into the current situation in Kosovo.

Figure 1: Crime Rates of Organized Crime, including Serious Crimes, Economic and Corruption, Terrorism, Violent Extremism, and Radicalism (2019-2023)



Source: Data retrieved from the Annuals of Police Work from 2019-2023 (Kosovo Police, 2019-2023)

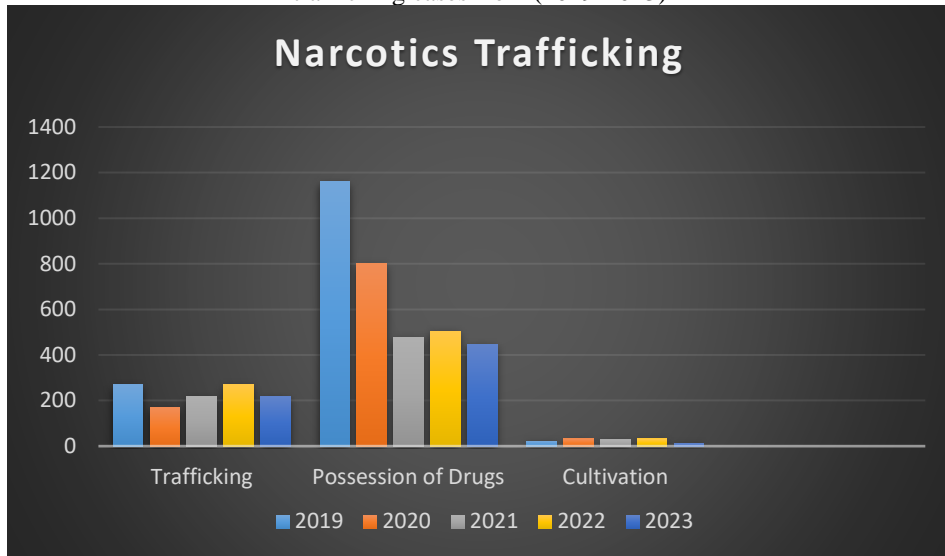
Figure 1 provides data from 2019-2023 of the crime rate in Kosovo. The data categories reflect the police efforts to combat organized crime, which include organized crime, serious crimes, economic crimes, corruption, terrorism, violent extremism, and radicalism.

Critical observations from the analysis of Figure 1 show that narcotics trafficking consistently occurred in the highest numbers over the years, while human trafficking ranks second. Other forms of trafficking, such as arms and illegal goods, follow closely behind. There is a clear dominance of narcotics-related cases.

The broader crime landscape is significant to understanding the reason behind the interest in narcotics and why narcotics are ranked first.

The high number of narcotic cases ranked first indicates that narcotics are the primary focus of organized crime groups, which correlates with Kosovo's position as a key transit hub in the Western Balkans.

Figure 2: Crime threat assessment-organized and serious crimes-showing narcotics trafficking cases from (2019-2023)



Source: Figure 2: Data compiled from the Crime Threat Assessment—organized and serious crimes—showing narcotics trafficking cases from 2019-2021. Meanwhile, the 2022-2023 data compiled from the Annuals of Police Work in Kosovo (Kosovo Police, 2019–2023)

Figure 2 illustrates the narcotics trafficking cases from 2019 to 2023 by highlighting the influence of organized transnational crime in the region and also the integration into international trafficking networks. The rise in cultivation cases, particularly in 2020, directly indicates the growing focus on local production.

There were approximately 802 narcotic possession cases and 170 human trafficking cases, suggesting that during the COVID-19 pandemic, criminal groups capitalized more on the global disruption, particularly by enhancing their cultivation operations and operating less in human trafficking.

Also, by examining the year 2020, which indicates the timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of cases made it more apparent that human trafficking was more challenging. The focus was more on narcotics trafficking and less on human trafficking, which also clarifies that due to movement regulations, human trafficking encountered more difficulties.

Table 1: Narcotics confiscation (2019-2023)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Heroin	7.7 kg	8.9 kg	3.6 kg	246.6 kg	2.8 kg
Cocaine	1.58 kg	2.66 kg	414.95 kg	4.16 kg	5.5 kg
Marijuana	824.2 kg	256.7 kg	499.5 kg	662,69 kg	601.1 kg
Cannabis	25 kg	0.749 kg	0.026 kg	24.51 kg	21.98 kg

Source: Table 1: The data compiled the cases of confiscation of narcotics: source crime threat assessment—organized and serious crimes (2019-2021) and (2022-2023) data from the Annuals of Police Work in Kosovo (Kosovo Police, 2019-2023)

Table 1 provides clarification of police efforts starting with 2022, where 246.6 kg were confiscated, suggesting that the interest in 2022 was more in heroin than other drugs. The confiscation from the police of Kosovo shows that either a new, inexperienced, organized group or more enhanced police investigation methods were applied. There is also the possibility of using a new route to the border. The drastic change in 2023 suggests improvement by the traffickers to better detect the Kosovo authorities or a change of drug focus, depending on the market demand.

As for cocaine in 2021, it shows an influx of 414,95 kg, indicating that there could have been a shift in trafficking routes or successful police efforts. As for marijuana, there was a stable flow.

The changes suggest better detection of criminal groups or more accessible ways to create corruption opportunities. It might also suggest the concentration of other drugs that could create more profit.

Therefore, it is necessary to know more about drug prices in Kosovo to gain a clearer understanding of the profits from these illicit activities and comprehend the shift in interest in specific drugs. Unlike other drugs, cannabis is produced in the Western Balkans (Kemp, W., Amerhauser, K., & Scaturro, R. 2021).

The research concentrated on drug prices in Kosovo to understand why drugs rank first in Kosovo. Therefore, the research compared two sources of drug prices, provided by GI-TOC and GI TOC SEE's Observatory, which showed the current drug price situation.

By examining these different datasets, it is possible to identify the trends, demand, and regional variations in drug pricing, which clarify the dynamics of market demand in Kosovo.

Table 2 shows drug prices based on data from analyzing people, drugs, and money flow in the Western Balkans (2021). (t.2)

Marijuana	Retail Market	1 gr = 5-7€
	Wholesale market	1 kg = 900- 1300€
	Grown indoors:	1 kg = 2.300- 2.600 €
Cocaine	Retail Market	1 gr = 35-50 €
	Wholesale market	1 kg = 40.000-50.000 €
Crack cocaine	(to smoke)	0.2 gr = 20-25 €

Source: Table 2: Data compiled on drug prices 2021 from the Global Initiative against Transnational Crime-Analysis of people, drugs, and money flow in the Western Balkans

Furthermore, indica (*Cannabis indica*) and sativa (*Cannabis sativa*) are the two main types of marijuana plants from which other cannabis hybrids can be made. Different strains of cannabis are used for various ailments or effects. When comparing indica and sativa, the first factor people often consider is how they "make you feel." Although this can vary, the THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol) and CBD (cannabidiol) content determine their effect on the brain and moods (Saleh, 2024).

Table 3: Drug prices in Kosovo 2021/2022 (t.3).

Substance	Quantity	Price/€	Information by	Region/Hotspots	Year
Cannabis	1 kg	€400 – €600		North Kosovo	2021
Cannabis	1 g	5 €		North Kosovo	2021
Cannabis	1 kg	€800 – €1000		North Kosovo	2021
Cannabis	1 g	€2.80 – €3	Journalist	Prizren	2021
Cannabis	1 g	€5 – €10	Police		2021
Cannabis	1 kg	€600 – €700	Police	Podujevo	2021
Cannabis	1 kg	€1 600 – €1 700	Albanian Police		2021
Cannabis	1kg	€2 500 – €3 000	Police		2021
Skunk (Cannabis)	1kg	€800 – €1000		North Kosovo	2021
Cocaine	1g	€60 – €70		North Kosovo	2021
Cocaine	1 kg	€45.000 – €50.00		North Kosovo	2021
Cocaine	1 g	€80 – €100	Journalist	Prizren	2021
Cocaine	1 kg	€50 000 – €70 000	Police		2021
Cocaine	0.6 g	€50 – €70	Police		2021
Ecstasy	One pill	€1.7 – €2.5		North Kosovo	2021
Ecstasy	One pill	€5 – €10	Police		2021
Heroin	0.25 g	€5			2021
Heroin	1 kg	€12 000 – €13 000		North Kosovo	2021
Heroin	1 kg	€5 000		North Kosovo	2021
Heroin	0.6 g	€20 – €30	Police		2021
Heroin	1 kg	€20 000 – €25 000	Police		2021
Heroin	1 kg	€18 000 – €21 000	Albanian Police		2021

Source: Table 3: Data compiled on drug prices 2021/2022 by GI TOC SEE's Observatory (2021)

So, by analyzing both sources on drug prices from 2021, the marijuana prices are 1 gr- 5 € on the retail market from the first source from (t.2), while on the second (t.3), it is North Kosovo. The difference in the price of marijuana

lies in the region of sale, thus showing that in North Kosovo, the price is 5 €; meanwhile, in the city of Prizren, the price is 2.80–3.00 €. Marijuana in the wholesale market for 1 kg costs 900–1300 €. By ‘wholesale market,’ it means buying the drugs in large quantities.

By analyzing the data from GI TOC SEE, the price for 1 kg of marijuana can go around 400-600 € or 800-1000 € in North Kosovo, 600-700 € in Podujevo, 1.600-1.700 € - 2.500-3.000 € by the information of Albanian Police, while from the first analysis from the report from the global initiative against transnational organized crime, it is stated the price for grown indoors cannabis is 2.300-2.600 €. The higher price of cannabis indicates the indoor-grown cannabis. In contrast, the lower prices indicate the outdoor-grown cannabis, demonstrating just how competitive and influenced cannabis is when it is imported in Kosovo vs. local cultivation. According to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2022), Kosovo continues to be both a transit and a storage country for drugs, particularly herbal cannabis and heroin.

Globally, the growth in indoor cannabis cultivation has surpassed that of out-door cultivation, and thus, there is an increasing demand for cannabis cultivated indoors in Kosovo, Europe, and elsewhere (UNODC, 2022). The demand for potent strains, such as Skunk cannabis, priced at 800-1000€ per kg, indicates a shift toward more robust products.

Figure 3. A cannabis laboratory located near the Izvor border crossing point in Kosovo (demonstrating indoor cultivation)



Source: (Kosovo, Police, 2023)

The prices of retail cocaine varied depending on the territory where it was sold per gram; prices ranged from 35–50 € per gram (within the territory of Kosovo, controlled thoroughly by Kosovo police), while in North Kosovo, prices ranged from 60–70 € per gram, indicating a premium for this market.

The high prices of wholesale cocaine highlight the high value and also their interest in dealing with more profiting drugs. The range of wholesale cocaine ranges from 40.000 -5-.000 € per kilogram.

The cocaine consumption market is relatively homogenous, and the existence of smaller niche markets in capital cities seems to be a typical pattern in the region. In capitals, cocaine is available (and often more common) in portions usually smaller than the conventional gram (Kemp, W., Amerhauser, K., & Scaturro, R. 2021).

The interest to pay more for different drugs lies in the quality or purity of the drugs. As for criminal organizations, they are cooperating with global drug trends, indicating that these are well-informed criminal networks. In conclusion, tables 2 and 3 show the narcotics market and the price varieties, mainly Kosovo in general and in different ranges in the northern part.

Additionally, the shift toward indoor cultivation shows the ability of criminal groups to adapt quickly to new trends and their capacity to respond fast to market demands, highlighting thus their flexibility and their intelligence to act according to the market. In 2022, police found 10 laboratories and arrested 28 people (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime,2023).

As a result, it demonstrates that it is being dealt with well-informed organizations that follow global developments and possess significant capabilities to organize, develop, and execute large illicit operations. Their fast ability to shift into indoor cultivation and incorporate the new substances in market demand showcases just how sophisticated and professionalized these groups are in conducting illegal operations.

The ability to adjust to new methods and substances does not come without practice and knowledge. According to Agence France-Presse (1998), Kosovo Albanians were running well in the drug business, indicating that drug operations have not started recently. Kosovo Albanians were known as ‘drug lords’ even before the war around the world.

The high prices of drugs create profit opportunities for criminal networks, which leads not only to trafficking but also to other crimes such as corruption and money laundering, at the same time focusing on corruption, which is what these illicit groups use as a mechanism to operate freely within Kosovo and cross the borders easily. Therefore, it does not only shape the internal situation but also the local economy. This way, it harms the broader socio-economic conditions. The internal situation is not only harmed by drug trafficking but also by corruption and money- laundering, where regarding GI-

TOC (2021), there was a lack of institutional willingness to follow up on corruption and money-laundering cases.

On the other perspective, drug prices also depend on the purity of the drugs, which means that there are drugs that often get mixed with other substances. The traffickers in Kosovo concentrate more on delivery, meaning that they either produce or import-export the drugs. Supporting Chen's (2024) definition of wholesaling, where wholesalers do not manufacture the goods they sell but instead buy them from the source and concentrate on the business of sales and delivery to retailers. According to EMCDDA (2022), despite seized heroin quantities doubling from 2011 to 2021, retail prices dropped while purity increased, indicating a stable heroin supply in European countries.

The lack of drug reports from 2019–2021 in Kosovo limits the knowledge of exact prices for these years. According to the European Union Drugs Agency (EMCDDA, 2022), the prices of heroin in Europe did not change much. What changed was a slight decrease in purity since 2019, likely due to supply disruptions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions. Drug traffickers have adapted to travel restrictions and border closures (EMCDDA, 2021). However, price and purity varied widely both within and between countries. The Western Balkans showed involvement from 2019 to the end of 2023 and are continuing operations in 2024. As described by Global Initiative (GI-TOC, 2022), the Western Balkans remain a central transit region.

The six countries of the Western Balkans remain a central transit region for the trafficking of cannabis, heroin, cocaine, and synthetic drugs. Recent seizures show how drugs are brought to the area, stored (usually near logistics centers), cut, repackaged, and distributed to markets further afield (GI-TOC, 2024).

Therefore, the 'Balkan route' continues to function as a pivotal transit zone for various drugs and, lastly, as a source of synthetic drugs, human trafficking, and other illicit activities. Following the recent reports from 2024, it is clear that the Balkan route exists and functions effectively with illicit operations led by sophisticated criminal groups. Moreover, coinciding with the recent report of EUDA and Europol, where criminal networks originating from or linked to the Western Balkan region appear to maintain their role in the supply and distribution of heroin in the EU. While some may be involved in the wholesale trafficking of heroin in the EU, most appear to be active in trafficking and distribution across EU Member States or in providing logistical services such as storage and transportation. These criminal networks were linked to other drug trafficking activities and large-scale trafficking of firearms to the EU (European Union Drugs Agency & Europol, 2023).

In Kosovo, human trafficking ranks second in the crime rate analysis. Therefore, it raises concerns about security and safety within Kosovo and cross-border trafficking. The data analyzed provides an understanding of human trafficking cases from 2019 to 2023. At the end of 2023, through a report from Kosovo police, it was stated that efforts to combat human trafficking, which ranks second among illegal activities, resulted in the registration of 142 cases, 199 arrests, and the filing of 81 criminal charges against 128 suspected persons. Additionally, 46 charge sheets were filed for offenses against 96 persons, 33 trafficking victims were identified, and 58 victims were assisted (Kosovo Police, 2023).

Figure 4: Human Trafficking cases (2019-2023)

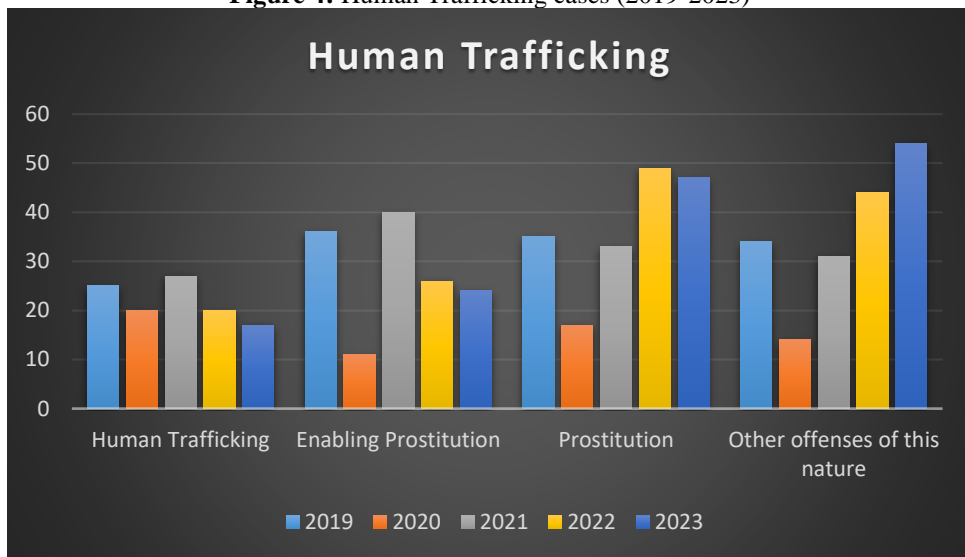


Figure 4: Crime threat assessment-Organized and Serious crimes show human trafficking cases from 2019-2021. Meanwhile, the 2022-2023 data is from the Annuals of Police Work in Kosovo (Kosovo Police, 2019–2023)

By analyzing the data, the growing trend of human trafficking cases highlights the challenge of combating organized crime while considering the status of the victims.

The data analysis between 2022 and 2023 shows a significant increase in prostitution cases. Although there was a slight decrease in 2023, it remains a concerning issue that supports the continued activity of criminal operations. In 2021, enabling prostitution saw the highest increase. The interesting change was in 2020, when COVID-19 restrictions made it more difficult for these illicit groups to operate freely.

Other offenses of this nature uphold the current rates of human trafficking, with the most significant numbers in 2023, indicating a shift of interest and upholding the line of illicit activities, followed closely by

prostitution. The data suggests that in 2022-2023, there was a marked rise in interest in both prostitution and other related offenses.

Table 4: The crime rate cases communicated directly by the Police of the Republic of Kosovo, in coherence with Article 277 of CODE NO—06/L-074 (personal communication, September 19, 2024)

	Number of Cases
2019	3
2020	5
2021	7
2022	5
2023	7

The table provides the number of cases required by Article 277 of the Criminal Law of the Republic of Kosovo. The authorities of the Republic of Kosovo personally communicated the data displayed in the table. They confirmed that they work by the provisions of Article 277 of the Criminal Law, as outlined in Code No. 06/L-074.

According to Code No. 06/L-074 of the Criminal Law of the Republic of Kosovo, Article 277 defines participating in or organizing an organized criminal group as follows:

1. Anyone who willfully and with knowledge of the purpose and general activity of the organized criminal group or the intention of the group to commit one or more criminal acts which are punishable by a maximum penalty of at least four (4) years or more actively participating in the criminal activities of the group, knowing that such participation will contribute to the realization of the criminal activities of the group, shall be punished by a fine of up to two hundred fifty-thousand (250,000) Euros and imprisonment of at least seven (7) years.
2. Anyone who organizes, establishes, supervises, manages, or directs the activities of the group of organized crime is punishable by a fine of up to five hundred thousand (500,000) euros and imprisonment of at least ten (10) years.
3. When the activities of the organized criminal group provided for in paragraphs 1. or 2. of this article result in death, the perpetrator is punished with a fine of up to five hundred thousand (500,000) Euros and imprisonment of at least ten (10) years or life imprisonment.
4. The court can mitigate the sentence of the member of the organized criminal group who, before the group criminal organized to have committed the criminal offense, reports to the police or prosecutor the existence and formation and provides information about the organized criminal group in sufficient detail for it enables the arrest or prosecution of such a group.

5. For this article, "actively participates" includes, but is not limited to, the provision of information or material means, recruitment of new members, and all forms of financing of group activities (CODE NO. 06/L-074, 2019).

Based on the data provided by personal communication with the Kosovo police, the number of cases is in accordance with Article 277 of the Criminal Law, suggesting that detecting human trafficking operations is somewhat more challenging.

This raises the possibility that criminal groups are exercising greater caution and operating more discreetly to avoid law enforcement authorities.

These criminal groups prefer cash transactions over banking channels, eliminating the possibility of leaving traces and aligning with Friedrich Schneider's assertion that most illegal transactions are in cash due to the reduced risk of detection (Schneider,2020; European Union Drugs Agency & Europol, 2023). Operating with cash as a transaction method provides a safe net of untraceable funds. Rather than being seen as a vulnerability, using cash rather than the Internet for financial operations is viewed as advantageous.

Meanwhile, according to the EU World Bank Report (2020), money laundering also has a strong connection. Balkan criminal networks are notably involved in these illicit activities, where transnational organized crime groups in the Western Balkans cause significant financial harm in their countries of origin.

Furthermore, institutions that are still in the state-building process have difficulties providing adequate rule of law implementation as well as combating organized crime, which are vital structural constraints to job creation and economic transformation in the region's six countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo (European Parliament, 2021).

This aligns with the conclusions drawn by Omelicheva, M. Y., & Markowitz, L. (2021), who argue that criminal and terrorist groups thrive in environments where governance is weak, corruption is high, and the rule of law is unreliable.

The NNICC report (1996) also highlights the economic dimensions, indicating that the profits from drug trafficking fund other forms of criminal activity, such as money laundering.

In agreement with the report on global illicit findings (2023), Europe shows the most significant continental increase in criminality, while resilience has grown only marginally. This also implicates the Balkan countries, noting that continents that have previously shown high levels of resilience are now assessed as vulnerable to organized crime, with Europe being a prime example. Although the inclusion of new indicators has certainly affected

criminality scores, the original ten markets have increased on their own, worsening the criminality environment on the continent.

However, while criminality is pervasive and affects the entire continent, albeit to varying degrees, there is a clear division in levels of resilience. There is a clear East-West divide, with Eastern European countries still struggling to shake off their authoritarian legacies, which have defined organized crime dynamics and resilience frameworks, or the lack thereof, for the past three decades (GI-TOC, 2023).

The grave situation of the Western Balkans between 2021 and 2023 clearly shows that money laundering exists due to organized crime, which directly hinders the economies of these countries. As a result, transnational organized groups in the Western Balkans cause significant financial harm, not only in the Balkans, but also to the European Union, its member states, and its allies and partners. (Stanicek, 2021).

Furthermore, according to Collier, Hoeffler, and Söderbom (2008), post-conflict societies face two distinctive challenges: economic recovery and reduction of the risk of recurring conflict.

Therefore, the advancement of criminal networks toward online banking and other methods in the Internet sphere would make it even harder for Kosovo to track money movement within the country, providing more opportunities for money laundering and harming the country's economy.

According to Yami no Tentei (2023), Money laundering is a complex and clandestine process that involves disguising the origins of illegally obtained funds to make them appear legitimate. Therefore, it includes a broader challenge, since it is not only targeting drugs and human trafficking, rather it is a chain collaboration linking organized networks.

The strategy to combat transnational organized crime supports the arguments by the National Security Council (2023), where the strategy of addressing this evolving nature includes cybersecurity, with efforts focusing on national infrastructure and prosecuting criminals linked to these illicit activities.

Additionally, it is crucial to adapt law enforcement strategies to counter evolving money laundering tactics, just as in the West, where tactics are usually organized based on the towns in Kosovo from which the criminal members originate.

According to the European Commission's (2023) report, Kosovo remains in the early stages of its fight against organized crime, with limited progress in investigating and prosecuting cases. Even though Kosovo has adopted a new police organizational structure and improved its intelligence and analytical capacities, these developments have yet to translate into practical action.

Despite ongoing law enforcement operations, the powerful tools outlined in the Criminal Code and the law on extended confiscation powers have not produced the desired results. Additionally, combating organized crime in the northern region of Kosovo continues to pose significant challenges.

This indicates the ongoing struggle with investigating and prosecuting cases. Additionally, it highlights that the legal framework for extended confiscation powers has yet to be fully established and applied.

Even in Jane's intelligence review (1995), it was argued that criminal organizations were gaining power not only economically but also socially and politically. Through bribery and intimidation, they had significant influence over political and judicial systems.

The situation in the northern region remains challenging, further complicating the country's political landscape. In particular, the challenges concern the rule of law and controlling the area. Where organized networks exert much influence in the absence of the state. In the last months, a politician who had spoken out against the mafia was assassinated.

According to Podvorica (2015), due to the prevailing nationalist ideas regarding border demarcation and the complicated political situation between Kosovo and Serbia, it was very difficult to transform the border crossing system according to the rules set forth by the IBM process. Therefore, these components did not guarantee progress in the implementation of IBM along the border between Kosovo and Serbia, where, as a consequence, the free movement of people and goods was put into danger due to inefficiency in preventing and combating cross-border crime, which manifested itself in the form of organized crime by certain groups of interest.

Efforts to restrain criminality should address the structural weaknesses in governance, financial regulation, and law enforcement to provide a progressive and strategic system for combating organized crime. Structural weaknesses in governance, financial regulation, and law enforcement create instability.

Discussion

Analyzing crime rates in Kosovo from 2019 to 2023, it is evident that narcotics trafficking remains a predominant issue. Significant increases in cultivation and trafficking cases are still present in 2024. This trend aligns with the findings of the European Commission (2023), which highlights Kosovo's ongoing struggle against organized crime despite persistent governance challenges.

The high crime rates of narcotics possession and trafficking justify the need for stronger legal enforcement and more effective use of the legal framework provided by the Criminal Code. Moreover, the growing reliance

on cash transactions complicates detection efforts, as Schneider (2010) emphasized.

As Kosovo continues to navigate these challenges, a multidimensional approach that includes regional cooperation will be essential in combating organized crime. Further, an analysis of the human trafficking situation in Kosovo and its growing trend reveals a concerning issue. Vulnerable populations, particularly those facing socio-economic hardships, are at heightened risk of exploitation. In this case, Kosovo, just as mentioned above, is still in the state-building process and faces socio-economic difficulties.

Therefore, the existing legal framework presents challenges, with law enforcement agencies often lacking the necessary resources and training to combat trafficking effectively. Moreover, the complex nature of trafficking routes highlights the problem's transnational nature, necessitating a collaborative approach across borders; targeted policy measures must address the underlying vulnerabilities and enhance victim support services.

Furthermore, analyzing the crime rates in Kosovo reinforces the assertion that the situation has changed slightly over the past four years, echoing the findings of the European Commission's (2023) report. This stagnation highlights the urgent need for effective interventions and comprehensive strategies to address the region's entrenched challenges with organized crime.

The research findings have significant implications for Kosovo's policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and community safety initiatives. As organized crime continues to thrive amidst persistent governance challenges, policymakers must prioritize the development and enforcement of robust legal frameworks that address both narcotics and human trafficking.

Enhanced training and resources for law enforcement are essential in combating these illegal activities, while community engagement strategies must be applied to support vulnerable populations and prevent exploitation. Ultimately, a comprehensive and collaborative approach is vital to fostering a safer environment and promoting long-term stability in Kosovo.

Addressing the multifaceted challenges of organized crime in Kosovo, particularly narcotics and human trafficking, is essential not only for the safety and stability of the region but also for the socio-economic development and future resilience of its communities. Kosovo can pave the way toward a more secure and just society by prioritizing effective law enforcement, regional cooperation, and comprehensive support for vulnerable populations.

Limitations in resources made it difficult to provide the exact drug prices for 2019-2021; instead, general data from different reports supported the results. Additionally, the absence of an annual police work report from 2020 posed a significant challenge. While it was possible to gather information

directly by contacting police authorities in Kosovo, the lack of a yearly report expedited the research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has thoroughly examined the evolution of narcotics and human trafficking patterns in Kosovo over the past four years, highlighting significant shifts. The data reveals a concerning increase in narcotics trafficking, particularly in local cultivation and production methods, demonstrating organized crime's adaptability and resilience in the face of law enforcement efforts. The data also indicates that the year with the most significant decrease in human trafficking, based on the data, was 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings indicate that while there have been advancements in the legal framework and police capabilities, these measures have not kept pace with the sophistication of criminal networks. The data clearly shows a high narcotics possession rate, and this is supported by the further development of indoor labs and the transnational nature of trafficking routes. This confirms the ongoing challenges in combating organized crime and supports the claim that the Balkan routes are still more active than ever.

By addressing the research question regarding the changes in the last four years, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of narcotics and human trafficking in Kosovo, emphasizing the necessity for targeted policy interventions and community engagement to counter these criminal groups.

Kosovo, despite its independence in 2008, remains in the early stages of combating organized crime, even now in 2024. Some advances have been made, but there is still room for improvement. New policies and better control mechanisms must be implemented in northern Kosovo. Difficulties in controlling northern Kosovo make it easier for criminal networks to operate using alternative routes to cross the border. One urgent obstacle to change is addressing the underlying economic challenges.

The difficulty of controlling northern Kosovo makes it easier for criminal groups to operate freely, using alternative routes to cross the border. There is an urgent need for enhanced cooperation strategies. Ensuring the stability and security of Kosovo citizens has to be a priority. The active 'Balkan route' highlights the necessity to strengthen cross-border security measures.

Furthermore, Kosovo provides an ideal country for money laundering since corruption is not an issue for criminal networks, and neither is money laundering. This is further confirmed in cross-border control, which indicates the regular movement of traffickers.

While criminal networks in Kosovo have managed to outsmart the police efforts to combat organized crime by shifting from out-door to indoor laboratories, this showcases their ability to innovate according to their best interests. There is still significant effort from the authorities of Kosovo in the fight against these illicit operations, but criminal network cooperation is surpassing the cooperation of cross-border authorities.

In conclusion, Kosovo should focus on further developing strategies against organized crime. The focus must be on enhancing better collaboration with neighboring countries since cross-border control remains a significant issue. Mainly, the approach is to emphasize justice and security. Addressing the questions raised in this research requires effective responses to change the current situation.

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