







Weekly Briefing

Serbia Social briefing:
Public Security and Organized Crime-Challenges for State
Authorities becoming ever more Visible
IIPE

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Public Security and Organized Crime-Challenges for State Authorities becoming ever more Visible

Serbian society in the months of July and August was preoccupied with the perception of the increase in organised crime murders. These murders often happened during broad daylight, in public places, had for its victims distinguished members of society and followed a same pattern of execution. This survey is concerned with factual background of the increase of mafia-related murders and with problems experienced by responsible government authorities in dealing with them.

Introduction

„The overall rate of crime was decreased by 19 percent in comparison with the previous month, and none of the murders committed were part of the criminal groups’ gunfights“. The cited sentence was part of the Minister of Internal Affairs’ speech at the media conference on the 28th of July. Just a few hours later, famous lawyer Dragoslav Miša Ognjanović was killed in front of his apartment building with several shots fired by an unknown perpetrator, in the part of the building’s courtyard not covered by security cameras. This murder prompted a discussion in Serbian society on the causes of organized criminal activities which have recently endangered public security, and the efficiency of state security organs responsible for their suppression and investigation.

Murder Statistics

The Black book of murders that bear qualities of mafia liquidations, which was created by the „Network for investigation of crime and corruption“ and the „Radio Free Europe“ indicates that during months of July, August and the first half of September this year there were 15 murders of this type in the Republic of

Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro. This project whose purpose is to monitor mafia murders is permanently updated and available online. It was created with the aim of showing that mafia murders have become a threat for security of citizens, since they are becoming more and more brutal and frequent, being perpetrated in public places and during daylight. The territory of both Serbia and Montenegro is monitored as a single unit since mafia groups from both sides of the border between two countries are closely cooperating and in some cases have even become integrated. The Black Book project shows one more important indicator of the danger to public security. From the start of the monitored period, back in 2012, from 133 mafia murders that occurred, only 14 cases got their judicial epilogues with final verdicts for the perpetrators, while in 84 cases perpetrators are still unknown. The importance of this project is further enhanced by the fact that official murder statistics in these two countries are incomplete and unrevealing. As an expert from local NGO – „Belgrade Center for Security Policy“ explains, official statistical institutions only record cases of deaths caused by violence. Republican Public Prosecutor records numbers of people indicted for crimes of murder and manslaughter, but this statistics is clouded by the fact that sometimes more than one person is indicted for one case of murder. Ministry of Internal Affairs is recording overall numbers of murders.

Factual Background of Mafia Murders

These rough statistics can therefore mislead public officials such as the Minister of Internal Affairs at the beginning of our text to reach inaccurate conclusions. It is true, as Minister stated, that overall rate of crime in Serbia is diminishing in 2018 in comparison with 2017. For example, number of murders has decreased in the first half of 2018 for one quarter in comparison with the rate of murders for the same period observed in 2017. However, a percentage of mafia murders has doubled in the first half of this year compared with 2017. Causes of this increase are related to mafia wars between clans with origins in Montenegro. One of the longest standing and most violent conflicts erupted

between clans of Škaljari and Kavač (two small communities in Montenegro) in 2014 after one group stole the other's shipment of heroin in the Spanish port of Valencia. Retaliatory murders quickly ensued and escalated further during 2017 because of another theft of heroin shipments in one of European ports.

It is well known that Serbia is a part of a heroin route, so called „Balkan route“, which starts in Afghanistan, and uses some of the Balkan countries' territories as transitory routes to reach rich markets of Western Europe. Local mafia groups in the Balkans serve as organisers of this transport, which means that they smuggle narcotics over borders and distribute a smaller part of shipments themselves to local markets. Profit-led operations such as these are usually executed far from the eyes of public in order to retain discretion. However, when various competing clans clash over market share, their conflicts quickly become bloody dangerous to ordinary citizens, while the credibility of state authorities responsible for internal security quickly comes into question. Some estimates indicate that 58 organised criminal groups operate in Serbia, among them 5 are extremely well organised, with defined structure and hierarchy, almost army-like. Almost 90 percent of their activities is concerned with illegal trade in drugs and its smuggling.

This year is definitely the worst one when the percentage of mafia murders is concerned. 28 murders for first 8 and a 1/2 months is already higher number than that recorded for the whole length of 2017. However, it is doubtful if this increase in mafia murders is related to inefficient and incompetent institutions only. It is a fact that Serbia confiscates large amounts of narcotics every year, and just a few days ago a person designated as the leader of Škaljari narco-clan was arrested in Turkey and promptly extradited to Serbia. He is currently being investigated for organisation of murders, assaults and narcotics smuggling in both Serbia and Montenegro. It is claimed by media that prior to arrest he had established a web associates which are involved in real-estate, construction and security businesses, and help his clan for money-laundering purposes.

Challenges for Responsible Authorities in Serbia

His profile confirms the problems related to investigation of these crimes and prosecution of these criminals that the Ministry of Internal Affairs is often complaining about. Firstly, members of organised criminal groups usually have citizenships of both Serbia and Montenegro, a fact which facilitates their movement across borders. Therefore, one of the measures often used to suppress this movement is to ban the entrance to a country by people suspected for mafia-related activities. However, cooperation between Serbian and Montenegrin police was so far less than satisfactory. Ministers of Internal Affairs or Directors of police departments met with each other for the last time over two years ago. In this regard, pressure from the international community, interested in lowering the amount of smuggled drugs to its markets, and from the public opinion, worried about its security, was a welcomed spark which started to move the state of affairs from the deadlock of inactivity. Ministers of Internal Affairs of both countries have signed a common declaration last month in which they indicated fight against organised crime as a priority of mutual cooperation.

Secondly, there exist some structural deficiencies in the organisation of organs with authorities for combating organised crime. Prosecutor's investigation, adopted with changes in the Criminal code of Serbia in 2013, which posited prosecutors as the most important factor of investigation activities, is marred with personal and material lack of resources on the part of public prosecutors, which prevents them in turn from being fully operational for prosecution of most dangerous crimes.

Thirdly, public is perception of lowered security due to increase in mafia murders is aggravated by the passive public relations of the responsible authorities. Head of criminal police department's position, one of the most important posts in the fight against organised crime, was unoccupied for more than two years. Public interaction of most important authorities is close to non-existent. Political figures such as the Minister of Internal Affairs are admittedly regularly providing some statistical information, although these information can

be dubious as we have shown, but this is mainly used for political promotive purposes. On the other hand, important professionals, such as the Republican Public Prosecutor or Head of criminal police department are remaining silent. This is not a good message to concerned citizens.

In this context, murders of distinguished citizens such as the lawyer Ognjanović additionally disturb the public. Ognjanović had worked in the police department before he started a law practice. His clients were always high profile political and criminal figures, such as former president Slobodan Milošević, and Luka Bojović, one of the strongest mafia bosses in the Balkans who is currently serving a sentence in Spain, and is related in media with the current mafia clashes. Therefore, speculations appeared immediately that motives for his death should be searched for in his connections with mafia. This murder was connected by some assumptions with the murder of another lawyer, Vladimir Zrelec, in 2015, who was an advocate for Slobodan Šaranović, chief of a clan rival to Luka Bojović. It is believed that the two clans are in constant blood feud, a custom still viable in Montenegro, whereas a death of one member of the family must be avenged by all other members of the same family. It seems to this author, however, that more prosaic interests are the issue in this war of two families, interests concerning the control of and profit from drug-trade and drug smuggling activities.