

Part II:
The “classic” flows of criminal business

Cannabis cultivation and trafficking in and from Albania

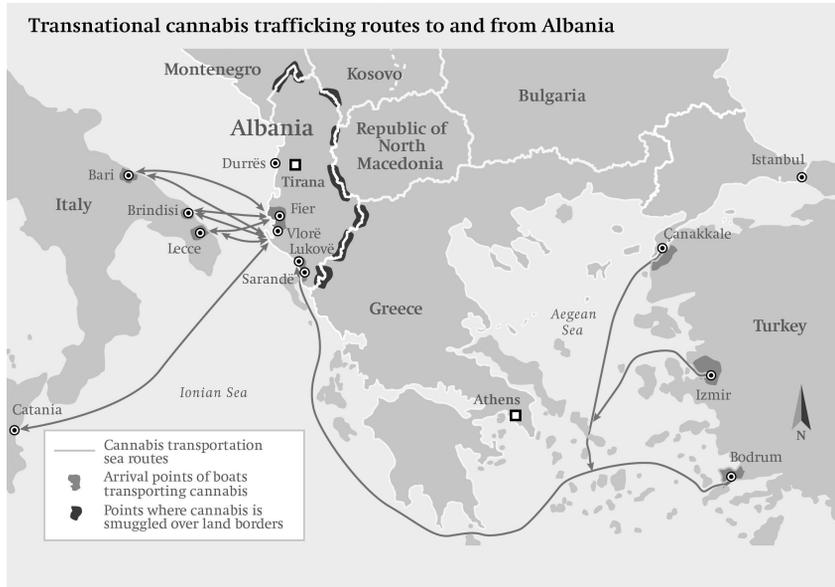
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An overview

Cannabis is the most commonly used drug in the world today, with an estimated 192 million consumers in 2018, corresponding to 3.9 per cent of the global population aged 15–64 (UNDOC 2020: 11). A study undertaken in the EU countries estimates cannabis use in 2020 among those aged 15–34 at 15.4%, ranging from 3.4% in Hungary to 21.8% in France (EMCDDA 2021: 16). Albania, in Southeastern Europe, has been one of the most important European suppliers of illicit cannabis throughout the continent for almost two decades. Albania borders two European Union members, Italy and Greece, and its outdoor-grown cannabis reaches these countries and then other parts of Europe. Via the so-called Balkans route, Albanian cannabis reaches Central Europe. Furthermore, illicit Albanian cannabis has also been supplying the markets in the eastern part of the continent and its surroundings, most notably Turkey (Mejdini and Amerhauser 2019: 8–9).

The cultivation of illicit cannabis in Albania has a long history and started immediately after the collapse of the communist system that left the country in poverty and isolation from the rest of the world for more than four decades. The weak and inexperienced institutions of the country were not ready to lead a successful fight against drug cultivation. Continued political crises, especially the civil unrest that swept Albania in 1997, took a toll on security institutions, leading to weak performance in the fight against drugs. From the early 1990s on, the cultivation of cannabis in Albania helped many families across the country to secure a living in a time when the prolonged and painful political and economic transition left many without access to the formal economy. But mainly, the cultivation and trafficking of cannabis helped Albanian criminal organisations to strengthen their position, become more sophisticated and develop the ability to be active in the trafficking of other drugs as well, such as heroin and cocaine. They often used cannabis as a currency, regularly exchanging it for heroin coming from Afghanistan and entering the Balkan region via Turkey.

Figure 1: Transnational cannabis trafficking routes to and from Albania



These criminal organisations were not only able to create large networks within Albania but soon started to do so throughout the European continent. Their experience in trafficking cannabis and heroin in Western Europe and the networks of distribution that they were able to create opened the door for their involvement in the lucrative cocaine market. Creating direct connections with the criminal groups in Latin America, these organisations were soon able to transport tonnes of cocaine to some of the main ports in EU countries and also take care of its distribution in the streets of Europe's largest cities. Towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century, cannabis became merely one of the illicit commodities that they had a grip on (Kemp 2020: 31). They were also able to launder money generated from the cultivation and trafficking of drugs, mainly in the construction boom that swept Albania after the fall of communism (Reitano and Amerhauser 2020: 27).

For three decades, cultivation and trafficking of cannabis in the country has been aided also by the corrupt governments and their collusion with criminal organisations (Transparency International and IDM 2021: 2–3). Criminal groups provide money and muscle in election campaigns (for example by buying votes or encouraging local constituencies to vote for a particular individual or party), and in return, once elected, the individual

or party provides political protection for criminal activities, as well as jobs and favours for their constituents (GI-TOC 2019: 31). Widespread corruption in the judicial system (Council of Europe: Commissioner for Human Rights 2014: 5–6) was also considered one of the main reasons why illicit cannabis cultivation and drug trafficking remained a persistent culture in the country.

As a result, cannabis eradication in Albania was a tough road. In 2014, police cracked down on the cultivation in the village of Lazarat, a two-decade symbol of massive cultivation. However, just two years later, in 2016, the country saw an unprecedented spread in cultivation. The government pledged to end the culture of cultivation in 2017 and adopted a new national action plan against cultivation which, together with efforts on the ground, was able to bring the cultivation to a historic low for three years (2017–2019) (Albanian Interior Ministry n.d.).

But with the reduction of cultivation within the country, Albanian criminal groups intensified their efforts to ‘save the business’. As a result, more effort was put into the indoor cultivation of cannabis in EU countries, a move that is keeping Albanian criminal groups present in this illicit market. Experience in cultivation and drug trafficking and good connections with the criminal underworld throughout the continent helped them to establish their presence in indoor cannabis cultivation in many European countries, including the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, Spain and Italy (Europol 2020). This move, however, is still negatively impacting Albania and stimulating human smuggling. Youngsters who used to cultivate cannabis outdoors in the country are now looking for criminal opportunities abroad. The Albanian criminal groups already established in the EU and in the UK, which are characterised by fluid clan structures based on kinship or neighbourhood relations, facilitate the process, offering these youngsters with experience in drug cultivation a place where they can carry on the cultivation. These groups are also able to pay for their travel and accommodation and settle them in housing where indoor cannabis is cultivated, and the youngsters can pay off the groups with their work. These youngsters usually turn into valuable members of criminal organisations. In this way, the cannabis economy triggers human trafficking.

Though cultivation has been low in Albania during the time frame 2017–2020, it is still too early to say whether the trend will continue. As mentioned above, during 2020 an increase in cultivation was noted compared with the three previous years. The COVID-19 crisis, with police in Albania having to perform duties during the pandemic that reduce the spread of the virus, is considered one of the major factors behind

the increase. Besides the lack of the necessary police power to tackle the problem, law enforcement alone is unlikely to break the cannabis culture cycle, and a rethinking of the approach is needed (Mejdini and Amerhauser 2019: 11). It is very important to discourage drug use through social and economic initiatives that provide alternative legitimate income. This is especially important for youngsters engaged or prone to be engaged in this illicit activity, at home or abroad.

Historical background

In March 1991, Albania held the first pluralist elections, after more than four decades of being ruled by a communist dictatorship. The collapse of communism started in December 1990, when students in Tirana initiated protests against the regime, demanding freedom and democracy, pushing the regime to accept pluralism. However, the change in power happened only in March 1992, when the newly formed Democratic Party of Albania won the parliamentary elections. At a time when many believed that the fall of communism would finally lead Albania towards democracy and prosperity, the transformation from totalitarianism to democracy turned out to be a difficult task. Lack of political and technical experience in successfully transitioning from a centralised to a market economy led to a severe economic crisis in the country. The breakup of the agricultural cooperatives at the beginning of the 1990s and the confusion over property rights led to food shortages. Also, most industrial enterprises ceased their activity or were operating far below their capacity from the beginning of 1991 (Muço 1997: 19–20).

The economic plight combined with the urge to explore the world – after 45 years of isolation – led to a massive wave of emigration, mainly to the two neighbouring EU countries, Greece and Italy. By the end of December 1991, more than 200,000 Albanians were estimated to have left their country since the exodus began in July 1990 (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 1992). The chaotic political and economic transition left a large part of the population without sufficient means for living, turning many to the illicit economy. Amidst this reality, according to people interviewed,¹ at the beginning of the 1990s, the first seeds of cannabis began to be smuggled from Greece by Albanian migrants who

1 Interviews with former cultivators of cannabis in southern Albania, January 2021, Tepelenë and Këlcyrë.

learned how to cultivate the plant in the neighbouring country. In Albania, they could easily plant the seeds without much risk, at a time when law enforcement agencies were weak and inexperienced and the country was facing other major problems. The areas near the Greek border became the first ones in the country to try out cannabis cultivation, which was usually done on the farmers' own land. Greece was not only a place where the seeds and practice of cultivating illicit cannabis came from, but also a place where it could be sold after having been harvested in Albania.

Soon, Albanians explored other lucrative markets for the illicit cannabis that they had started to grow. Italy became a favourite destination because of the short distance that connects the two countries by sea. The sea distance between Vlorë in Albania and Brindisi on the Apulian coast is only 72 nautical miles. From the beginning of 1993, people from Vlorë started to cross the Adriatic Sea illegally in speedboats.

Italy soon turned into not only a destination but also an important transit point for the further distribution of Albanian cannabis to Western Europe. Illegal migrant flows and drug trafficking via the sea pushed the Italian Guardia di Finanza in October 1997 to establish a presence in Albania and collaborate closely in the fight against organised crime (Museo Storico Guardia di Finanza n.d.). This opened up a major new route for cannabis smuggling and also raised the demand for Albanian outdoor illicit cannabis. In order to fulfil the rising demand, cultivation expanded in terms of both the number of hectares under cultivation and the number of locations where cannabis was grown. In the mid-1990s, cultivation began to be present all over the country, and farmers started to specialise in its cultivation. In parallel, smugglers also started to gain experience and create important networks, not only in Greece and Italy but also in many other countries across Europe. At the end of 1996, the Albanian police reported having been able to eradicate within that year alone 383,968 plants across the country, which showed that the phenomenon was widespread and that the police was aware of the need to crack down on cultivation. However, the country's political situation was not in their favour. In 1997, Albania was swept by civil unrest as citizens angrily reacted to losing their savings in failed financial pyramid schemes (The New York Times 1997). The unrest was accompanied by civilians looting ammunition depots, and hundreds of thousands of arms were in the hands of the population. The crisis took a heavy toll on the country's institutions and led to a collapse of the security sector. As a result, tackling cannabis cultivation in the country was deprioritised in the aftermath, since the government focused its resources on the overall crisis in the country.

One of the most negative impacts that the civil unrest brought was the creation of dangerous armed gangs in the south of Albania that terrorised and extorted local communities, as the state was far from able to provide order and punish them. Dealing with powerful local gangs with a strong influence in local communities remained one of the biggest challenges of the new government formed after the election of June 1997.

Cannabis strongholds and cultivation peaks

The creation of armed gangs because of the crisis of 1997 impacted many communities throughout the country. These gangs recruited vulnerable young men, gained control of large parts of the country and terrorised their communities. Over time, these gangs started to transform into organised crime groups and to also engage, besides extortion, in the trafficking of people and drugs, especially from the shores of Vlorë, the city at the centre of the unrest, to Italy. The newly created government, however, did not show any enthusiasm for fighting these criminal groups. In many cases, there was collusion instead, with political parties using the influence of these groups in communities for political gain (Zhillia and Lamallari 2016: 25–26). In return, they turned a blind eye to their criminal activities. The collusion was further facilitated by the widespread corruption in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

It was also at this time that one of the most notorious sites of illicit outdoor cultivation of cannabis in Europe was created in Albania, the village of Lazarat. This village with less than 5,000 residents lies along the national road that connects Gjirokastër with the Greek border, 27 kilometres from the border crossing point of Kakavia. During the 1997 civil unrest, armed criminals robbed the bank of Gjirokastër in southern Albania and sought refuge in Lazarat.² Despite pressure from the police, the fugitives were not handed over, and from that moment the village gained a ‘stronghold’ reputation. As a result, illicit activities began to take place, and for almost two decades cannabis was cultivated on a large scale. This is also an illustration of the transformation of the gangs formed in 1997 into organised crime groups.

Lazarat was an open secret. In 2013, the Italian Guardia di Finanza, who were patrolling by air, reported 500 plantations of cannabis throughout the country, estimated to produce 1000 tonnes of cannabis (Guardia di

2 Interview with a police officer in south of Albania, February 2020, Gjirokastër.

Finanza 2013). Most of these plantations were in Lazarat. Organised crime groups throughout the country had their share of cultivation within the village. Around 300–500 people were also engaged every year as a workforce, while bribes were used to keep the police away. However, Lazarat was not the only place in Albania where massive cultivation was taking place. Another important area at that time were the Dukagjini Highlands, a steep terrain in the northern municipality of Shkodër, where tonnes of cannabis were harvested every year.

Although the massive cultivation in these areas was a public secret, no police intervention happened until 2014. In June of that year, police undertook a major operation to eradicate cultivation in both areas. In Lazarat, the police operation lasted for days, as heavy ammunition was fired towards police. Police forces were able to seize not only

3 tonnes of marijuana and 133,000 cannabis plants but also five drug-processing laboratories. Heroin was also found in the village, together with arms and ammunition. Two months later, in August, the police also undertook a major operation against cannabis in the Dukagjini Highlands, also seizing large amounts of cannabis stored and also planted in the fields.

In 2014, many believed that the massive cultivation of cannabis in Albania had come to an end. However, it soon became apparent that this was far from the truth. In 2016, the entire country was swept by a massive new wave of cannabis cultivation. Cannabis was not only cultivated in so-called ‘traditional’ and remote areas but also very close to urban ones. The massive cultivation also engaged people without criminal records or experience in cultivation, including even professionals, university students and vulnerable groups in society. As a result of the extensive cultivation that year and the large number of people engaged in it, conflicts about the land used for cultivation, the price of cannabis and its trafficking became widespread. Conflicts over cannabis led to killings and injuries. Many analysts believe that the widespread cultivation during 2016 came as a result of collusion between senior officials and criminals. In a report on the crime situation in Albania, the Office of the General Prosecutor emphasised that elements of state police and local governments had colluded with criminals and were involved in cultivation (Republika e shqipërisë Prokuroria e përgjithshme 2017).

Political implications also arose as a result of the widespread cultivation in 2016. In October 2017, the prosecution started an investigation against former interior minister Saimir Tahiri and two high police officials, accusing them of abuse of office, drug trafficking and also being part of a criminal group. On September 2019, the court cleared Tahiri and his associates of drug trafficking charges but sentenced him to three years of

probation for abuse of office (Koleka 2019). The case, however, further eroded the trust of citizens in the government and reinforced their perception that cannabis cultivation and its trafficking were facilitated by the collusion of parts of the state with criminals. Also, during 2020 and 2021 there were court cases against people with power who had facilitated the cannabis cultivation, but only local police and community administrators were accused.

Trafficking opportunities

Over the last 20 years, cannabis cultivation in Albania has largely been controlled by organised crime groups that took advantage of the country's dire economic situation and lack of a serious state response to tackle the phenomenon. With the outdoor production of cannabis in Albania that has been estimated at up to 1000 tonnes in productive years, groups have become more powerful and expanded their portfolio of criminal activities. The Guardia di Finanza estimates that the annual production of cannabis in Albania yields around €4 billion in revenue for criminal groups. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, these groups not only had control of its cultivation but were also able to establish important trafficking lines from Western Europe to Turkey. Some of the members of these organised criminal groups were already placed in EU member states to coordinate and facilitate this illicit business. The majority of trafficking was directed towards Italy, Greece and Turkey, using both maritime and land borders. In Italy, several groups partnered with the Italian mafia, especially in Sicily. The speedboats loaded with cannabis (and sometimes also weapons) were handed over to the local mafia (Catania Today 2017). From this point, the mafia took on its distribution within Italy and in Western and Northern Europe. But in many cases, Albanian criminal groups had their own members on the other side of the Adriatic, who secured distribution in that country and beyond.

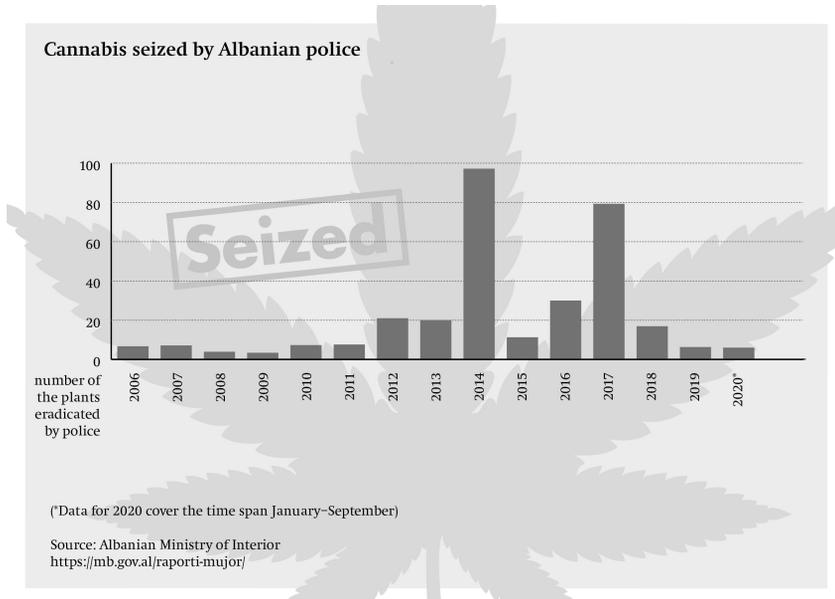
Cannabis trafficking opened important criminal channels and opportunities for Albanian criminal groups. Connections with the Italian mafia, but also other criminal organisations, were important for them also to gain access to the international trafficking chains of cocaine. First employed as drivers of Italian organisations in bringing the cocaine from the ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam to Italy, soon they started to create their own ties with cartels in South America. Soon cannabis became merely one illicit commodity in the hands of Albanian criminal groups, who had not only established a strong presence in the country but were also able to create

sophisticated criminal networks throughout Europe and beyond. They did so in countries that are considered important hubs where drugs are being shipped and consumption rates are high, such as Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium and the UK.

One of the most important criminal operations of these groups was to establish direct trafficking lines with organised crime groups in Latin America in early 2000 that helped them secure large amounts of cocaine from the source countries (Kemp 2020: 2–3). In the decade that followed, the collaboration between criminal organisations of Albania mainly active in Western Europe with these groups in Latin America was intensified. Countries like Ecuador have been used by these groups to secure deals on cocaine and its transport to central ports of Europe. In September 2020, Europol announced the takedown of a complex Albanian-speaking cocaine trafficking network after five years of investigations (Europol 2020). The cocaine, secured in countries like Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, was shipped to Ecuador and arrived in European ports, to be further trafficked and distributed on the streets of several EU countries. According to Europol, the entire chain, from securing the cocaine in Latin America to its distribution on the streets, was controlled by Albanians. The network also used a sophisticated alternative remittance system of Chinese origin, known as *fei ch'ien*. This system is similar to *hawala* and uses a large network of operators that deposit and withdraw equivalent amounts of money in different parts of the world in order not to leave traces in the legal financial channels. In this way, also aided by encryption technology used for communication, criminal groups have laundered large amounts of money.

Opportunities for these criminal organisations also came from the East. Collaboration with criminal organisations in Turkey and the Eastern Balkans not only gave Albanians an important market for their cannabis. It often involved the exchange of cannabis for heroin and thus also helped them expand their grip on heroin going from east to west via the Balkan route. This collaboration soon turned the country into an important route for heroin trafficking.

Figure 2: Cannabis seized by Albanian police



Money laundering

The money generated by cannabis trafficking was used by criminal groups to expand their criminal operations and also to invest in entering more lucrative illicit businesses, such as cocaine trafficking for the EU market. On the other hand, the criminal income gained through drug trafficking has also allegedly entered the licit economy of Albania, mainly through laundering in the construction sector (Reitano and Amerhauser 2020: 27). Albania emerged from communism with a severe shortage of housing for its citizens, and the first decade of its prolonged transition was characterised by a chaotic construction process, with people mainly building their own houses. However, in the last two decades, the city of Tirana has been characterised by a massive wave of construction, mainly of luxury and high-rise buildings. Despite this wave, the real estate prices doubled from 2017 to 2020 (Kemp, Amerhauser and Scaturro 2021: 59), creating difficulties for citizens who want to buy apartments. It is believed that a way has been found to launder the money being generated by the trafficking of cannabis and other, more potent drugs like cocaine in the growing

tourist sector in Albania. In recent decades, the country's 362-kilometre coastline has seen an increase in luxury bars and restaurants, as well as hotels and accommodation capacities. Experts estimate that hundreds of millions of euros were laundered every year in the construction business in the country during the last five years (Reitano and Amerhauser 2020: 28). The money generated from illicit activities flows outside banking channels and infiltrates the legal construction companies, facilitated by the fact that this industry remains largely cash-based in Albania.

A shift in cultivation

In 2016, Albania faced a difficult situation regarding cannabis cultivation. In the summer of that year, the phenomenon became widespread throughout the country. This situation created political tensions in the country, as well as international pressure. Intensifying the fight against organised crime was made a condition for progress on the path of Albania's accession to the EU (European Western Balkans 2019). Understanding the risk that it could bring for the country if this situation were to continue, in 2017 the government took strong measures to stop the cultivation, also implementing a three-year national plan that reinforced the fight against the phenomenon (Official Journal of the Republic of Albania 2017). This new plan took the approach of identifying and tackling cannabis especially in its early stages of cultivation instead of only focusing on eradicating grown plants. Also, the plan emphasised the need to identify and seize the assets created by this criminal activity. It also pledged to support economic activities in areas and communities affected by cannabis cultivation.

As a result, the cultivation of illicit cannabis in Albania has been significantly reduced since 2017. However, the year 2020 saw an increase in the number of cases of cultivation, according to data of the Ministry of Interior. Many believe that this is related to the COVID-19 situation and the fact that the police were put in charge of securing the imposed lockdown (March – June 2020) during the period in which cannabis is planted.

It seems that after the cultivation of cannabis in Albania was reduced since 2016, criminal groups have found alternatives to maintain their grip on drug trafficking. Transferring the cultivation to the EU and the UK is seen as an opportunity to stay in the business, avoid some of the risks of trafficking from one country to another and produce near the main cannabis markets (GI-TOC 2020: 4–7). The so-called “cannabis indoor houses” throughout Europe have become popular among Albanian organised crime groups. In the last five years, UK law enforcement has raised

awareness about Albanian criminal groups being active in the country, especially in indoor cannabis cultivation (Weaver 2017). In addition, the Albanian criminal groups in the UK are also present in the cocaine market, which is considered one of the most lucrative in the world.

Conclusions

Illicit cannabis cultivation has been a widespread phenomenon in Albania, although from 2017 to 2019 cultivation decreased after authorities got alarmed by the widespread cultivation in 2016 and took effective measures to crack down on it.

Cannabis cultivation has helped the Albanian criminal groups win experience and financial power and shift to trafficking more potent and lucrative drugs like cocaine throughout Europe.

In 2020, during the COVID-19 crisis, an increase in the cultivation of cannabis was noted, while police were at the forefront of safeguarding lockdowns in urban centres and less engaged in rural areas where cannabis is cultivated.

A decrease in opportunities for cannabis cultivation in Albania is pushing criminal groups to expand their foothold in cultivation of indoor cannabis in the EU and the UK, alongside their other criminal activities like cocaine trafficking.

This shift is also luring young people from Albania to illegally migrate to the EU and the UK and engage in indoor cultivation. Organised criminal groups push and sponsor this illegal migration.

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