»BALKAN« ORGANISED CRIME INCONTEXT

Socio-cultural factors fostering »Balkan criminality«

Jana Arsovska (Leuven)

Today, it has been internationally recognised that organised crime is having a detrimental impact on the development, stability and security of the Balkans. According to various international organisations, it is corroding the regulatory apparatus, and is a major obstacle to legal, political and economic reforms. The existence of grey zones in the post-Yugoslav space, with blurred responsibilities for the rule of law, transparent borders, displaced persons, unreturned refugees, and a population living in dire social and economic conditions without tangible prospects, combined with frustrated paramilitary formations and corrupt high-level officials linked with organised crime have been identified as factors creating fertile ground for radical Islamic organisations, organised crime and the regeneration of past conflicts. There is no doubt that the international community has been investing enormous sums of money and human resources in the Balkan region in order to stabilise it and help governments in their fight against organised crime.

Yet 11 years after the Dayton Agreements, 7 years after the Kosovo war and 6 years after the fall of Milosevic, the region is still unstable. Securing stability in the Balkans, which is plagued with criminal networks, is therefore a major challenge for the European Union and the Balkan countries. The EU Security Strategy, »A Secure Europe in a Better World«, endorsed by the European Council in December 2003, considers that »restoring good government to the Balkans, fostering democracy and enabling the authorities there to tackle organised crime is one of the most effective ways of dealing with organised crime within the EU«. In order to be able to evaluate the threat posed by organised crime groups in the Balkan today and bring effective counter measures, one needs to understand all major factors fostering the rise of criminality in this region, as well as the various backgrounds of this criminality. Solutions only have meaning if one has a firm grip of the problems being addressed and of why these problems matter in each particular context. We very often hear about the different economic, political and demographic factors contributing to the development of organised crime; however, not so much is said about the socio-cultural factors that might be equally important in understanding this phenomenon.

In this panel we will raise questions such as: What do we mean by »Balkan organised crime«? Does ethnicity matter and why? Are governments from the Balkan region able to fight organise crime as ›enforcement problems‹ and by ›customs officials, police officers, lawyers, and judges‹? To what extent organised crime should be seen as a civil society ›problem‹ and why? To what degree the public perceives crime as ›beneficial‹ and ›essential‹ for survival and criminals as ›heroes‹ and ›wise-guys‹? Do the civil society and the political elites from the different Balkan countries clearly see the harmful effects of organised criminal activities? How can analysis of various cultural factors help us to understand better mass involvement in organised crime activities in certain countries from this region?