

COUNTERING TRANSNATIONAL CRIME ON THE BALKAN ROUTE: THE ROLE OF INFORMATION SHARING AND CROSS-BORDER INVESTIGATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Criminal networks continue to use the Balkan Route to smuggle drugs, firearms, migrants, and other goods into and across Europe, taking advantage of its geostrategic position and other conditions that make smuggling easier. At the same time, they constantly adapt and refine their tactics to stay ahead of law enforcement and avoid being detected. That’s why law enforcement has to advance the intelligence gathering and cross-border investigations to detect and suppress these illicit flows. Therefore, this paper aims to assess how transnational law enforcement cooperation contributes to more effective responses to the criminal networks operating along this route.

Design/Methods/Approach: This study uses a qualitative research design. It includes two methods: desk research of academic literature, including relevant institutional reports by international organisations and regional law enforcement initiatives, and case studies presenting successfully conducted regional operations. Also, the operational use of Joint Investigation Teams (JITs), regional intelligence-sharing platforms, and real-time data exchange mechanisms is analysed to evaluate their functionality and results.

Findings: Important improvements in the regional coordination and intelligence-sharing among the countries along the Balkan Route through different law enforcement initiatives are evident. This means that Western Balkan countries can be considered as credible participants in the international operations. Many examples of successful joint cross-border investigations have shown that intelligence-led operations significantly increase their efficiency and impact. However, certain gaps in national legal harmonisation, operational capacities, interoperability, and mutual trust among agencies still exist and limit the broader effectiveness.

Originality/Value: This paper contributes to the academic literature linking intelligence-led policing and cross-border investigations with transnational crime control along the Balkan Route by providing a regionally specific analysis. The findings and conclusions from the study show that international law enforcement cooperation through information sharing and conducting joint operations is vital for detecting and suppressing transnational crime along the route.

Keywords: Balkan route, transnational organised crime, information sharing, cross-border investigations, regional cooperation.

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INTRODUCTION

The Balkan Route remains a strategic corridor for transnational crime, including organised crime, which enables the smuggling of drugs, firearms, migrants, and other illicit goods into and across Europe. In the literature, as well as police circuits, several terms are used for this route, including “Balkan corridor”, “Western Balkan Route”, and “Balkan circuit” often interchangeably, to describe a transit zone marked by blurred entry and exit points (Hameršak et al., 2020). Since the corridor passes through other Balkan countries, not only the Western Balkan countries, in this paper, the term “Balkan Route” will be used.

The term “Balkan Route” is most commonly used to frame movements between Southwest Asia and Europe geographically. Its meaning varies across contexts: technically, it refers to geography, direction, or flows of people, money, and goods; politically, it reflects relations between Balkan states and the European Union; criminologically, it represents an area of police focus and securitisation; and culturally, it is tied to stereotypical representations of the Balkans (Stojić Mitrović, 2022). In this paper, the term “Balkan Route” will be used, referring to the geographical area that covers the Balkan Peninsula, used by the criminal networks for illicit trade across borders.

Recent migration flows emphasised the route’s dynamic nature, characterised by shifting patterns, intensities, and directions (Jano & Vještica, 2025). The Western Balkans route remains one of the main migratory paths into Europe. After reaching a peak in 2015, irregular migration declined for several years but has risen again since 2019 (European Council, 2025).

The Balkan Route continues to receive considerable scientific attention in Balkan studies and criminology. Besides a migration pathway, it is also an important corridor for illicit trade, because it facilitates the movement of different types of goods through many borders into and from Europe (Dimovski et al., 2013). Many factors have influenced the illicit trade and organised crime across the Balkan Route, including its geographical position, the opening of the Balkan road, Yugoslav liberalisation, economic crises, corruption, the 1992 sanctions against the former Yugoslavia, the arms embargo, and the broader transition period (Krasniqi, 2021).

In the last several years, due to the Euro-Atlantic integration and the support received from the international partners, improvement of the law enforcement and cross-border cooperation is evident. But



illicit trade networks have become increasingly dynamic, and they are adapting their modus operandi to the current political shifts, social changes, law enforcement measures, and technological change (Zoppi & Puleri, 2021).

The primary focus of the paper is to explore the role of transnational law enforcement cooperation in combating transnational crime along the Balkan Route, including the smuggling of drugs, firearms, migrants, and other illicit goods into and across Europe. First of all, it outlines the research purpose and methods before presenting the findings. The paper highlights how intelligence-led policing, cross-border investigations, and joint operations contribute to more effective responses against the dynamic nature of the criminal networks, thus strengthening security and stability. It also identifies key challenges, such as gaps in legal harmonisation, operational capacity, and mutual trust that hinder the effectiveness of the detection and suppression of transnational crime along the route.

PURPOSE

All the mentioned factors and conditions facilitate transnational crime on the Balkan route. In addition, loopholes in legal frameworks, institutional capacity deficiencies, and weaknesses of international coordination and cooperation, along with the advantages offered by technological advancements, render criminal networks capable of trading illicit goods across borders. They are also very flexible and adaptable in their operations, tactics, and methods, which makes it difficult for the authorities to detect, prosecute, and stop them from operating. Law enforcement, therefore, has to continually come up with new investigative tactics and focus their work on information exchange and improved international cooperation if they want to continue being effective in combating transnational crime along the Balkan Route.

For this reason, the purpose of this paper is to examine the role of intelligence gathering, intelligence sharing, and cross-border investigations in addressing the flows of illicit goods and activities along the route. More specifically, the paper evaluates how intelligence-led policing, combined with international and regional cooperation, can enhance the capacity of law enforcement to counter the evolving tactics of organised criminal groups.

The paper further explores the practical mechanisms of cooperation, including the involvement of international organisations, as well as regional law enforcement initiatives established in the Western Balkans. These mechanisms are assessed in terms of their ability to facilitate intelligence sharing, joint operations, and real-time data exchange. At the same time, the paper identifies the remaining obstacles and backlogs – such as gaps in legal harmonisation, operational capacity, interoperability, and mutual trust – that countries along the Balkan Route must continue to address to strengthen their collective response.

DESIGN/METHODS/APPROACH

The research is conducted through a qualitative approach, merging desk research and case study analysis. This design aims to capture the current dynamics of the Balkan Route, thus offering an understanding of how transnational crime is enabled and addressed in the area.

The desk research method maps the Balkan Route and illustrates its geographical paths. Also, it summarises the socio-political and economic factors that facilitate transnational criminal activities along the route. Academic literature, policy documents, and earlier studies are assessed to understand the



historical background and structural context of illicit flows in the region. Also, the review of the findings from the reports compiled by the major international organisations and regional law enforcement initiatives, such as INTERPOL, the World Customs Organisation, EUROPOL, FRONTEX, SELEC, SEEPAG, and the PCC SEE, is conducted. These relevant documents offer valuable insights into the characteristics and extent of illegal trade along the route (types, forms, and trends) and the operating procedures and tactics of criminal networks. It also reviews the trends recognised in intelligence assessments, risk evaluations, and operational analyses to show how criminal networks adjust their tactics to the enforcement methods and regional socio-political dynamics.

The research additionally includes examples of effective collaborative regional efforts. The case studies aim to showcase effective practices, operational insights, and results accomplished via cross-border collaboration. Special attention is given to the practical implementation of Joint Investigation Teams (JITs), regional intelligence platforms, and real-time data sharing systems in these cases. It aims to demonstrate how collaborative mechanisms can improve the efficiency of law enforcement actions.

Through the integration of insights from both methods (desk research and case studies), the research aims to identify the challenges and prospects in addressing transnational crime along the Balkan Route. This methodological design enables an evaluation of the function of intelligence-led policing, joint investigations, and international cooperation in addressing the evolving tactics of criminal networks along the Balkan Route.

FINDINGS

Transnational Crime Along the Balkan Route

The Balkan Route was first exploited as a major trafficking corridor for illicit opiates, particularly heroin, moving from Afghanistan to Western and Central Europe. Some claim it began in the 1970s (Scaturro, 2022). Originating in Afghanistan, it passes through the Islamic Republic of Iran and Türkiye before splitting into three main branches across the Balkan Peninsula (UNODC, 2014, EUDA & EUROPOL, 2024):

1. The Northern Branch: crosses South-Eastern Europe via Bulgaria and Romania, continuing into Western and Central Europe.
2. The Western Branch: passes through the most countries of the Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, before reaching Western and Central Europe.
3. The Southern Branch: enters the European Union by moving from Türkiye into Greece and then on to Italy.

Importantly, this route does not function as a fixed corridor but rather as a dynamic network that constantly adapts to shifts in border controls, migration pressures, and regional or EU-level policy changes (Karaj, 2025).

Reports mention that opiates are consumed along the entire route, but the use of both heroin and opium is widespread in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Western and Central European countries (such as France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) remain the primary destinations and consumers for Afghan heroin (UNODC, 2025).

In addition to the Balkan Route, two other major trafficking routes supply Afghan opiates to international markets and, to a lesser extent, to Western and Central Europe. The Northern Route runs



through Central Asia into the Russian Federation, while the Southern Route passes through Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, serving consumer markets in Africa, Western and Central Europe, and South Asia (UNODC, 2024; UNODC, 2025).

The Balkan Route was primarily associated with the trafficking of illicit goods from the beginning. However, in 2015, with the migrant/refugee crises, it took on a new dimension when around 1.5 million refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, who were forced to migrate in part due to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, travelled through Türkiye and Greece to the Western Balkans, wishing to continue their trip to Western Europe (Scaturro, 2022). According to recent data reports published by FRONTEX (2024), the Western Balkan route remained the second most-used migratory pathway into the EU in 2023, with 99,068 irregular border crossings detected. This confirms the route's continued use by the migrants, although the figure shows a 31% decrease compared to 2022 (Siviero, 2024).

The Balkan route has increasingly become a key corridor for human trafficking networks exploiting the region's complex geography, porous borders, and socio-political challenges. Traffickers use this route to smuggle vulnerable individuals, particularly women and children, for purposes of sexual exploitation, forced labor, and organ trafficking. The Balkan Route represents one of the most significant pathways for human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Southeast Europe, beginning primarily in Türkiye as a major entry point from the Middle East and Asia (UNODC, 2022). Traffickers and smugglers strategically alter their pathways to exploit weak border management, limited regional coordination, and corruption, ensuring the continuation of illicit flows of people from recruitment zones to lucrative exploitation markets in Western Europe (Karaj & Xharo 2025).

The Western Balkan region continues to be a key source of illicit firearms trafficked into the EU (EUROPOL, 2025). It links surplus weapons from post-conflict zones and illicit manufacturing sites to demand markets across Europe and beyond (Šorović & Kostić Šulejić, 2025). Small arms and light weapons – often originating in the Western Balkans' legacy arsenals, the Black Sea region, and conflict-affected areas farther east – are moved along complex land and maritime corridors that mirror migration and drug smuggling pathways: across Turkey into the Balkans, through Bulgaria and Romania toward Central Europe, or via the Western Balkan chain through North Macedonia and Albania toward Adriatic ports and onward to Western markets. Traffickers exploit porous borders, corrupt official networks, and informal transport nodes to conceal shipments in mixed cargoes or using clandestine landings, and they continuously reconfigure routes in response to law-enforcement pressure and changing geopolitical dynamics (Prezelj, 2010). This adaptability, combined with fragmented national stockpile controls and uneven regional cooperation, complicates detection and interdiction efforts, amplifying the risk of weapons diversion into organised criminal groups, terrorist cells, and local violent conflicts—thereby posing a persistent threat to regional stability and public safety (EUROPOL, 2025).

The Balkan Route also serves as a versatile channel for a range of other illicit trades – most notably the trafficking of cultural goods, smuggling of gold and precious metals, and diversion of pharmaceuticals – linking source areas, transit hubs, and consumer markets across Europe and beyond (Prgomet, 2024). Looted antiquities and cultural artefacts move from conflict-affected or poorly protected heritage sites through informal networks and corrupt intermediaries, often concealed within legitimate consignments or diverted via secondary markets in the Balkans (Interpol, 2022). Illicit gold and precious metals, frequently originating from illegal mining or fraudulent trade schemes, are transported along the same land and maritime corridors, exploiting weak customs controls and opaque financial channels to enter global value chains. Similarly, the illegal trade in medicines – ranging from counterfeit pharmaceuticals to diverted prescription drugs – takes advantage of supply-chain vulnerabilities, regulatory gaps, and demand in more affluent markets (OECD/EUIPO, 2020). Traffickers adapt routes and their concealment methods to avoid detection and prosecution, using mixed cargoes, false



documentation, and transshipment points in regional ports and border crossings. Fragmented enforcement, inconsistent customs practices, and limited regional coordination increase the problem, allowing criminal networks to profit while undermining cultural heritage protection, public health, and legal market integrity across the region.

Cross-Border Cooperation Along the Balkan Route: Legal and Institutional Frameworks

The theoretical and legal framework on cross-border law enforcement coordination and cooperation reveals its complex nature with multilateral structures and bilateral mechanisms established for tackling illicit trade and transnational crime (Lemieux, 2010; Benyon, 1996). Existing challenges, such as divergent legal systems, different operational procedures in the countries, and political contexts, push law enforcement to cooperate at macro, meso, and micro levels (Brodeur, 1982). Multilateral cooperation offers structure and accountability, but bilateral initiatives provide flexibility and efficiency (Guille, 2013). Both are equally important for building resilient and responsive policing networks. This approach is foundational to addressing the increasingly sophisticated and borderless nature of today's criminal threats. As a result of such new and serious challenges and current emerging security threats, cross-border police cooperation requires a real-time, non-bureaucratic information exchange among all countries without geographical limitations (Kemeny, 2018).

Besides all the conditions that allow criminals to smuggle different goods and hinder the detection of this crime, not long ago, a UNODC report (2008) noted that the crime situation in Southeast European countries was improving. There are several factors that contributed to this trend. First, the region was "normalising" as it moved further along its transition to democracy and a market economy. Second, the region is also recovering from the conflicts of previous years. Third, this process was and is still supported by extensive efforts to strengthen regional cooperation on crime-related issues and to address shortcomings in national criminal justice systems, supported by the international partners providing relevant assistance.

International law enforcement cooperation is guided by agreements and directives from international bodies such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the European Union, as well as regional initiatives established by the Balkan countries, such as the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC), the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe (PCC SEE), the Southeast Europe Policy Chiefs Association, the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC), Integrative Internal Security Governance (IISG), and others. These agreements provide a framework for collaboration among countries to combat transnational crime effectively and ensure alignment with fundamental rights, data protection rules, and other shared legal frameworks. The Balkan region ratified the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, as well as several protocols regarding the prevention of trafficking persons, smuggling migrants, and firearms manufacturing and trafficking. Law enforcement cooperation among Balkan countries (covering EU member states but also non-EU member states, part of the so-called Western Balkans) is active within all these broader regional frameworks and initiatives, as well as EU bodies.

INTERPOL, as a worldwide organisation, plays a significant role in facilitating police cooperation by enabling data sharing on crimes and criminals across borders. This is possible through a secure network called I-24/7 that allows real-time access to databases and sensitive and urgent police information for law enforcement agencies globally. Each member country hosts a National Central Bureau,



which serves as the focal point for all INTERPOL activities by seeking and sharing information with other countries.

Cooperation with Europol is well established in most of the Balkan countries under a strategic and operational agreement on the trafficking of human beings, weapons, drugs, and criminal networks. National police forces are able to share crime data between themselves and with Europol using the Secure Information Exchange Network Application. Most of the Balkan countries continue to cooperate with EU police services through the European Network of Fugitive Active Search Teams, with observer status, and the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (Zvekić & Vlassis, 2024). Recently, EUROPOL has established operational agreements with all six Western Balkan partners (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), facilitating real-time information exchange, joint investigations, and enhanced cooperation. This collaboration has been further institutionalised through the establishment of liaison offices across the region (EUROPOL, 2019a). Additionally, initiatives like the Western Balkans Partnership against Crime and Terrorism (WB PaCT) project, implemented by CEPOL in partnership with EUROPOL, aim to bolster operational cooperation and capacity-building efforts in the region. These collaborative approaches to regional and European security risks and threats highlight the EU's commitment to integrating the Western Balkans into its security framework.

At the strategic and operational level, regional law enforcement action is coordinated primarily through SELEC and PCC SEE.

SELEC aims to enhance the cross-border police cooperation across the Balkans by providing a structured and operational platform for member states to jointly combat serious and organised crime. This includes intelligence exchange, joint investigations, and regional operations aimed at countering transnational threats, such as trafficking in drugs, weapons, and humans, and smuggling of migrants. It operates through eight specialised task forces, each addressing specific crime areas. It also fosters collaboration between law enforcement and customs agencies, engaging with over 25 international partners and observers, including Europol, Interpol, and UNODC. Its analytical outputs, such as the "Organised Crime Threat Assessment for South East Europe" (OCTA SEE), further provide member states with strategic insights into criminal trends, thus supporting more targeted and intelligence-led policing. SELEC has successfully coordinated several multi-country operations targeting different types of illicit trade along the Balkan Route, which have resulted in numerous arrests and the dismantling of transnational criminal groups.

SELEC created the Southeast European Prosecutors Advisory Group (SEEPAG) as a regional network of senior prosecutors established to enhance international judicial cooperation and facilitate mutual legal assistance among the countries of Southeast Europe. It promotes the exchange of legal knowledge, experience, and best practices among prosecutors, contributing to the harmonisation of legal procedures and fostering a culture of cooperation and trust within the region, including coordination of cross-border investigations and prosecutions, particularly in cases involving serious and transnational organised crime.

PCC SEE, as a multilateral treaty, aims to enhance cross-border police cooperation among its member states to combat serious and organised crime more effectively. It serves as a connection between the EU and the Balkans and provides a legal framework for the exchange of information, joint operations, and mutual assistance in criminal matters. The collaboration is facilitated through various mechanisms, including liaison officers, joint investigation teams, and the harmonisation of national legislation with European standards. It has been augmented by the PCC Prüm Agreement, a significant protocol that facilitates the automated exchange of DNA profiles, dactyloscopic (fingerprint) data, and vehicle registration data (VRD) among its member states. Modelled after the European Union's Prüm



Decisions, it enables law enforcement agencies to conduct cross-border searches in national databases, thus supporting the ongoing police investigations.

Bilateral police cooperation in the Balkans is well established on the basis of diplomatic agreements and collaboration on the ground. A significant number of police attachés support cross-border work on a daily basis, but ongoing political disputes in the Western Balkans continue to present an obstacle (Zvekić & Vlassis, 2024). Despite the necessity of closer cooperation, the intelligence cooperation between the Balkan countries is minimal and is limited to a narrow range of fields of common interest. It is a fact that globalisation has brought different challenges, trends, and ways of thinking. The Balkan countries have different views regarding certain areas in which intelligence services cooperate (Trifunovic, 2020). It can be explained further through the historical and political perspective. As long as Western Balkan countries remain outside the EU, their access to key law enforcement cooperation mechanisms is restricted, leaving gaps in collective security. Gradual integration into key EU structures and agencies is not just beneficial but necessary to strengthen security across Europe's southern flank (Zorić, 2025).

Cross-Border Cooperation in Practice: Operational Insights from the Balkan Route

This section presents selected illustrative case studies that show the importance of information-sharing and cross-border police cooperation for the effective investigation and prosecution of transnational crime across the Balkan Route. The selected operations cover a range of transnational criminal activities, including drug and firearm trafficking, precursor smuggling, illicit trade in cultural heritage items, and migrant smuggling.

Joint Investigation SUNSHINE (2017–2018)

This joint investigation was conducted under the coordination of SELEC and serves as a prime example of effective cross-border police cooperation in the fight against organised drug trafficking (SELEC, 2018). The 14-month-long investigation involved law enforcement agencies from Albania, North Macedonia, Greece, Italy, and Türkiye, targeting an organised crime group trafficking large quantities of marijuana across the Balkans and into Europe. The traffickers used a speedboat route from Albania to Turkey as their main modus operandi for drug transport. The operation concluded successfully on 12 May 2018, resulting in the seizure of a total of 8.4 tons of marijuana and the arrest of 66 individuals across multiple coordinated operations in the participating countries. This joint action not only disrupted a major trafficking network but also exemplified the strength of regional collaboration and set a precedent for future multilateral law enforcement efforts in Southeast Europe.

Joint Action Day (JAD) Western Balkans 2019

This major international operation coordinated by EUROPOL HQ in September 2019 brought together law enforcement from 30 countries, including EU member states and Western Balkan countries, to combat serious and organised crime in the region. Coordinated under the umbrella of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT), by facilitating real-time exchange of information, the operation focused on four strategic priorities: firearms trafficking, illegal immigration, document fraud, and drug trafficking. The operation brought together key EU agencies – Europol, Frontex – and institutional partners, including INTERPOL, UNODC, SEESAC, IPA/2017 Countering Serious Crime in the Western Balkans, PCC-SEE, and SELEC, showcasing a



comprehensive and coordinated response to cross-border crime in the region. Overall, JAD Western Balkans 2019 demonstrates the value of structured, multilateral collaboration in disrupting illicit trade and reinforces the importance of continued investment in regional partnerships and interoperable frameworks.

Operation TAKSIM

Operation TAKSIM represents a landmark case of successful cross-border police cooperation between North Macedonia and Turkey, facilitated through the SELEC intelligence-sharing platform (SELEC, 2022). Both countries coordinated a controlled delivery operation based on intelligence indicating the shipment of drug precursors from Shanghai to Skopje via Istanbul. The operation culminated in the seizure of 1,105 kg of precursors used in the production of amphetamine and methamphetamine, with a potential street value exceeding €50 million (which is one of the largest of its kind in the SELEC region).

Operation ANKH

Operation ANKH illustrates the effectiveness of regional law enforcement cooperation in tackling the illicit trafficking of cultural heritage items (SELEC, 2024). Conducted over two years and supported by SELEC, the joint investigation involved Bulgaria, Greece, and North Macedonia, aiming to dismantle an organised crime group operating in the illegal trade of historical artefacts. The case began when Greek authorities identified a Bulgarian suspect selling religious and historical items online, leading to his arrest and the seizure of a 17th-century cross and ancient coins. Subsequent coordinated actions led to further arrests and the recovery of over 1,100 items with cultural significance, including coins, helmets, antique jewellery, pottery, and medieval artefacts, but also confiscation of illegal firearms, ammunition, forged documents, and nearly €10,000 in cash. Operation ANKH demonstrates how joint intelligence sharing and coordinated operational planning across borders can effectively combat cultural heritage crimes.

Internationally active Albanian organised crime network engaged in cocaine trafficking busted

In early August 2025, Albanian law enforcement, with the support of Europol, carried out a coordinated crackdown on a clan-based organised crime network (EUROPOL, 2025a). The operation, conducted on 7–8 August, led to the arrest of 10 suspects involved in large-scale cocaine trafficking and money laundering. The investigation spanned multiple countries – Albania, working with Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands – to dismantle a network with international links. The leader of the group, before the operation, was already wanted under a 21-year sentence from an Italian court for serious crimes, including murder and illegal possession of explosives, among others. A key piece of this operation was the use of data from Sky ECC, an encrypted communications platform dismantled in 2021. Despite its shutdown, the historical messages and metadata from Sky ECC continued to yield actionable intelligence, helping map out the structure of the network and identify high-value targets. Overall, this case demonstrates the power of international cooperation, intelligence sharing, and leveraging encrypted communication data – even after a platform has been shut down – to disrupt organised crime networks with global ties.



Six hundred migrants smuggled across the Western Balkans

In a cross-border effort to dismantle a migrant-smuggling network, law enforcement agencies made four arrests linked to a case involving over 600 people moved through the Western Balkans (EUROPOL, 2025b). The suspects allegedly coordinated the smuggling using encrypted messaging apps, allowing them to organise routes and evade detection. Authorities traced the network's operations to multiple locations and conducted searches at several sites, gathering electronic devices and other materials that helped piece together how the smuggling was organised. This operation proves that the Western Balkans remain a key transit region for secondary movements, where criminal networks actively offer their services to irregular migrants. The border section between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia has now emerged as a key route used to smuggle migrants from the Balkans into Western Europe. The case highlights the importance of international cooperation, intelligence-gathering, and technical investigation methods – especially involving encrypted communications – to counter increasingly sophisticated smuggling operations.

CONCLUSION

Over the past few decades, the Western Balkan countries have introduced significant reforms to harmonise their legislative and institutional frameworks regarding the investigation and prosecution of transnational crime with international standards (such as UN frameworks and the EU acquis). Also, important improvements in the regional coordination and intelligence-sharing among the countries along the Balkan Route (both EU and non-EU member states) through different law enforcement initiatives are evident. This means that Western Balkan countries can be considered as credible participants in the international operations. Many examples of successful joint cross-border investigations have shown that interagency coordination, timely information exchange, joint operational planning, and intelligence-led investigations significantly increase their efficiency and impact. The presented cases above offered insights into how well-coordinated enforcement actions can achieve certain significant results in tackling various forms of illicit trade and transnational crime. Improved intelligence sharing among participating countries made all those operations possible. As a collaborative effort, they are an important capacity-building opportunity for Western Balkan countries. They provide them the opportunity to strengthen their law enforcement practices by working alongside EU member states and to benefit from shared expertise. The scale and visibility of these operations sent a clear message to the transnational organised crime groups about the risks of cross-border criminal activity, and very likely they had a certain deterrence effect on them. However, certain gaps in national legal frameworks, operational capacities, interoperability, and mutual trust among agencies at the national and regional levels still exist. They harm the broader cross-border law enforcement cooperation. By understanding the nature of the transnational crime along the Balkan Route and possessing the relevant information, law enforcement can anticipate future threats, adjust its strategies and tactics, and effectively investigate and prosecute the illicit trade. Therefore, policymakers, law enforcement practitioners, and international security actors need to work together to improve the coordination and real-time information exchange. It is valuable for enhancing security and stability not only in South-east Europe but in the European Union as well, since the earlier criminal groups are dismantled, the less likely illicit goods are to reach its territory. Therefore, this leads to the conclusion that the Western Balkans has a strategic importance in addressing transnational crime.



ORIGINALITY/VALUE

This paper contributes to the academic literature by linking information sharing and cross-border investigations with transnational crime control along the Balkan Route. It provides a regionally specific analysis through presenting legal and institutional frameworks for law enforcement cooperation and how they function in practice. The findings and conclusions from the study show that international law enforcement cooperation through information sharing and conducting well-coordinated joint operations is vital for detecting and suppressing transnational crime along the Balkan Route.

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