

**High Crime Rates, Weak
Enforcement, and a Surprising
Sense of Safety
in the Western Balkans:
How Come and for How Long?**

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LAW ENFORCEMENT AND SAFETY PERCEPTION GAPS

While much has changed over the last two decades, and although the overall situation is better than during and in the aftermath of the wars of the 1990s, widespread crime in the Western Balkans remains a critical obstacle to achieving regional peace, security, and development. Despite variations across the region, neither the level of crime – particularly organized crime – nor the capacities to combat it have reached a satisfactory standard in any of the states. In recent years, especially in Serbia, crime-related violence of different kind has claimed dozens of lives, including those of young people and children, highlighting a concerning downward trend. At the same time, little progress has been achieved in tackling various forms of crime or in delivering a strong criminal justice response to high-level corruption in the recent years. Citizens' trust in law enforcement reflects this reality. Across the region, many perceive their police, and especially their judiciary, as corrupt and heavily influenced by of political and organised crime networks.

Nevertheless, despite this grim context, citizens throughout the region report feeling relatively safe. While situation varies from country to country – with Croatia notably ahead in terms of both actual safety and perceived safety – this sense of security appears to be largely independent of citizens' perceptions of crime levels in their countries and, even more so, their trust in the authorities' willingness and ability to address it effectively. Although this may initially seem like a promising finding, it raises important questions about the disconnect between states' crime-fighting capacities and citizens' perceptions of safety. How do individuals in the region maintain a sense of security despite lacking trust in the state's ability to uphold social order? What are the broader implications of this gap? Finally, how can it be addressed, primarily, how can states enhance their capacities to sustain these public perceptions of safety across the region? Given Serbia's recent prominence as a negative example of these trends, this policy paper will centre its analysis on it.

CRIME RATES AND CRIME-FIGHTING CAPACITY ACROSS THE WESTERN BALKANS

Looking at the overall crime and violence levels, the Western Balkans has become a significantly safer and more peaceful region to live in over the last two decades. However, progress in combating crime has been neither consistent nor linear, varying across the region and by crime type. In recent years, rates of conventional crimes such as homicide and theft in most Western Balkan states have aligned with European averages. Nevertheless, the situation remains unsatisfactory in Albania and Montenegro, largely due to the spillover effects of organized crime. Serbia has also seen a significant deterioration, marked by the tragic mass shootings in May 2023. Meanwhile, gender-based and domestic violence continues to be a pervasive issue across the entire region, including Croatia. Hence, despite the overall decrease in violent deaths from various types of crime, the persistent culture of violence, coupled with weak institutions, remains a significant obstacle to eradicating violence from all spheres of life, including politics, business, and family life.

The most critical challenge in combating crime in the Western Balkans remains the widespread prevalence of organized crime. Countries in the region continue to be key points of origin and transit for drug and cigarette trafficking, human trafficking, illicit arms trade, and financial crimes. New forms of organized crime, such as illegal logging and cybercrime, have also been on the rise. Recent geopolitical events, including the wars in Syria and Ukraine, have reactivated old trafficking routes through the region, exacerbating these challenges and increasing its vulnerabilities. According to the latest Global Organized Crime Index report, Western Balkan countries rank among the worst in Europe, with Serbia scoring the lowest in the region. As said, organized crime significantly spills over into conventional crimes as well, such as weapon proliferation, gun violence, narcotics distribution, drug-related violence, property crime, armed robberies, and murders. The availability of illegal firearms, facilitated by organized crime, has led to a high number of unregistered weapons in the hands of individuals and small criminal groups, with the region continuing to rank among the highest globally in per-capita gun ownership. This danger was tragically underscored by the mass

shootings in Serbia in May 2023, where access to illegal firearms played a significant role in at least one of the incidents.

Finally, the prevalence of organized crime in the region is both a consequence and a driver of state involvement in criminal activities. While its intensity has fluctuated over time, the involvement of state apparatuses – primarily through high-level corruption – has never entirely ceased. Organized crime groups routinely bribe or intimidate officials, undermining the capacity of police and judiciary systems to combat criminal networks effectively. This issue is further compounded by unresolved political situations in the region, such as the ongoing tensions in Kosovo. Both Belgrade and Priština have been accused of leveraging organized crime networks to maintain influence on the ground in exchange for protection and impunity. A stark example of this was the Banjska incident in September 2023, which resulted in multiple casualties among both Serbs and Albanians. More recently, a tragic event in November 2024 in Novi Sad, Serbia, underscored the dangerous nexus between political and economic elites and corruption, particularly in the context of large-scale infrastructure projects often marred by secrecy and a lack of public accountability. Claiming the lives of 15 people and severely injured two others, it highlighted the devastating human cost of corruption and collusion between political and criminal actors in the region. Therefore, while the prevalence of state-organised crime in the region has diminished since the cessation of wars, evidence suggests that political actors in the Western Balkans continue to maintain both direct and indirect connections to criminal networks, ranging from involvement in illicit trafficking networks to activities associated with the so-called construction mafia.

Consequentially, despite two-decade long reforms, the region's capacity to combat crime remains inadequate. While the lack of human and material resources in the police contributes to this issue, the inefficiency of the judiciary and its susceptibility to political influence are far more pressing concerns – in some countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, even the legal framework guarantying its independence is under threat. Judicial systems, including public prosecution offices, remain heavily influenced by political actors, leading to the frequent failure to resolve high-profile corruption cases. Among Western Balkan states, only Croatia has demonstrated meaningful progress, initiating proceedings against high-ranking politicians. In Serbia, as noted in recent EU progress reports,

the situation has deteriorated due to government interference, the discretionary powers of court leaders and prosecutors, and pervasive political influence.

Democratic governance in the security sector has also been backsliding, further complicating efforts to address crime. The proposed new law on the police in Serbia marks a significant step backward, raising concerns about political interference and potential abuse of authority. Similarly, reforms to Serbia's Security Information Agency have drawn criticism for expanding the agency's powers to arrest citizens, signalling increased securitization of state institutions. These developments reflect a troubling trend of state capture, where security structures are weaponized to suppress political dissent, investigative journalism, and critical voices. Recent years have also seen instances of police being used for political purposes, as highlighted by their controversial role during massive protests in Belgrade.

SOURCES OF (MIS)TRUST IN SOCIAL ORDER?

Despite these challenges, citizens across the Western Balkans report a strong sense of safety, with many feeling safer than residents of some EU states, as reflected in the global Safety Perception Index and the regional Western Balkans Securimeter. Croatia, for example, consistently ranks among the top 10 countries globally in terms of subjective safety perceptions. However, the situation in ethnically divided areas, such as North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, is more complex – trust often aligns along ethnic lines but does not preclude a prevailing sense of safety. While there has been a slight decline in recent years, Serbia also maintains a solid sense of safety among its citizens. Notably, this perceived safety seems largely disconnected from trust in state institutions responsible for ensuring personal and property safety. Across the Western Balkans, trust in the police is moderate at best, with only about half of citizens expressing confidence in law enforcement. Trust in courts and prosecution is even lower, with widespread concerns about impartiality and efficiency. In Serbia, roughly half of respondents trust the police (compared to nearly three-quarters who trust firefighters and the Serbian Army), while only about a third express confidence in the prosecution, courts, or the Security-Intelligence Agency. According to available surveys, a significant driver of this mistrust is the perception that the police serve

political elites, organized crime networks, and economic interests rather than the general public. This disconnect between a strong sense of safety and low institutional trust presents a paradox, raising an important question: what underpins this sense of safety given the widespread mistrust in institutions tasked with crime prevention and control? At least three factors contribute to this phenomenon, each carrying significant implications for policymakers and analysts.

Resilience and Normalisation of Crime

Decades of conflict, political instability, and economic hardship have fostered resilience among the people of the Western Balkans. Citizens have normalised the presence of crime and corruption, adapting to these challenges without always perceiving them as direct threats to personal safety. However, while this adaptability may contribute to a sense of security, it also undermines the development of a democratic political culture rooted in accountability and justice. By tolerating or becoming desensitized to crime, societies risk perpetuating a culture of impunity that fails to deter individuals from turning to crime as a source of income or security. The lack of prosecution of high-profile offenders exacerbates this issue, sending the message that security is a 'club good.' In Serbia, this is particularly evident in the protection afforded to those aligned with the ruling Serbian Progressive Party; membership often guarantees immunity. Conversely, those not aligned with the regime experience heightened insecurity. Such dynamics creates a deeply divided society, where some feel overly shielded from both crime and accountability, while others live in growing anxiety and fear.

Reliance on Informal Networks

Another reason for the surprisingly solid sense of safety in the Western Balkans is that many citizens rely on informal networks, family ties, and local solidarity for protection, which enhances their sense of security despite the weakness of state institutions. While they are aware that law enforcement systems are unlikely to guarantee their protection, citizens take their personal security – and by extension, justice – into their own hands rather than succumbing to feelings of insecurity. Many individuals hesitate to even report offenses out of scepticism about the

efficacy and impartiality of law enforcement – in Serbia, for instance, nearly two thirds of citizens are unwilling to report a case of corruption, regardless of whether it is reported anonymously. This reliance on community-based responses instead of formal law enforcement creates a statistical gap, where official crime rates fail to reflect the true extent of criminal activity in the society. Domestic and gender-based violence serves as a clear example, with civil society organisations working with victims consistently report significant underreporting across the region. Furthermore, the erosion of trust in state institutions creates a dangerous vacuum, encouraging reliance on other informal authorities for protection. In Serbia, the so-called "people's patrols" have emerged in recent years under various names. These groups occasionally conduct citizen arrests, often targeting specific populations, including vulnerable groups such as migrants. While these groups may provide a sense of security for some, they highlight the dangerous erosion of trust in formal institutions. As a result, this sense of safety can obscure deeper social issues, as the sources of security for some citizens may, in fact, contribute to the widespread patterns of crime and insecurity in society.

Media and Political Communication

One of the most significant factors contributing to the distorted public perception of safety is the way politicians in the region communicate and how the media reports on crime. In an environment of controlled media, policymakers frequently underreport the actual levels of crime while simultaneously overstating the state's efforts and successes in combating it. Political leaders often emphasize stability, security and determined fight against organised crime in their public statements, even as they struggle to address the root causes of crime. In Serbia, reduced transparency from the Ministry of Interior and the near absence of parliamentary oversight in the recent years further hinder public access to an accurate picture of crime rates and the government's capacity to combat crime. Meanwhile, media manipulation – such as discrediting or targeting individuals who highlight government failures or implicate authorities in criminal activity – further shapes public opinion about the state's efforts to protect citizens. By conflating regime stability with state security, the government and aligned media outlets skew the public's understanding of safety and their assessments of the police or judiciary's

efforts. This dynamic is particularly impactful in Serbia due to the large number of ruling party supporters, whose personal sense of safety is often tied to their perception of regime stability. In other words, while many citizens view the police as corrupt and politically influenced, a segment of the population equates the regime's stability with their own personal security, believing that as long as the regime is secure, they are safe as well. None of this is beneficial for combating crime in society, on the contrary.

CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS

While a sense of safety can be a positive indicator, it should not be taken for granted, especially when it does not accurately reflect the reality of crime levels or the state's capacity to combat crime. A false sense of safety can be equally harmful, not only masking deeper societal challenges but also passivating citizens, making them apolitical or apathetic. This contributes to a vicious cycle of privatising justice, where individuals taking justice into their own hands only perpetuate further crime. To break this cycle and ensure true public safety, it is essential to strengthen institutional responses, prioritize transparency, and rebuild public trust in the rule of law. Recent waves of protests in the region, which have put pressure on authorities, have yielded some results over the past few years, though these outcomes remain insufficient. Tragically, a series of events in Serbia over the last two years has demonstrated the devastating costs of privatizing security and justice. The growing number of citizens taking to the streets in Belgrade and across Serbia indicates that the gap between reality and citizens' sense of safety is narrowing – unfortunately, in the wrong direction, as there is an apparent decline in citizens' sense of safety rather than an increase in state capacity and willingness to combat crime. Addressing these systemic issues through a comprehensive, multifaceted approach is essential for the Western Balkans to build a safer, more just society – one in which the sense of safety is grounded in the reality of strong, accountable institutions and effective democratic governance of the security sector.

- **Institutional Reforms:** Strengthen judicial and law enforcement systems to ensure independence, transparency, and accountability.

Halt legislative changes that undermine the impartiality, autonomy, and democratic governance of law enforcement and the judiciary.

- **Data Transparency:** Make crime statistics and institutional performance data publicly accessible to foster accountability. Enhance parliamentary and independent oversight, including by the Ombudsperson, over police activities.
- **Localized Crime Prevention and Community Policing:** Develop localized programs to build trust between citizens and state institutions. Utilize local security councils as platforms to encourage stronger citizen participation and awareness of police work.
- **Civic Education:** Promote awareness of citizens' rights and the importance of reporting crimes to state institutions. Inform the public about the competencies and authority of security sector actors, particularly those with arrest powers.
- **Media Independence:** Support independent and investigative journalism to counter misinformation and foster informed public discourse on crime rates and the state's capacity to address them.

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