Aleksandar Fatić

Serbian Prime Minister assassinated: organised crime proclaimed the prime security threat

The culmination of the 'soft' security crisis in Serbia in 2003

On 12 March 2003, the Serbian Prime Minister, Dr. Zoran Đinđić, was assassinated by sniper fire while getting out of his car, in the courtyard of the Serbian Government's building in Beograd City Centre. Đinđić was hit by shots to the chest and stomach and, although operated on immediately, he passed away within hours of being wounded. The shock that spread through Serbia clearly demonstrated the level of insecurity present in society, as well as the determination of organised criminal gangs to try to maintain their grip on the informal levers of power in the country. Đinđić was clearly an obstacle, and the assassination thus created the first political victim of the process of the tackling of organised crime in Serbia. As a result, a 'government of continuity' was established with all the same ministers but a new Prime Minister in Mr Zoran Živković, Vice-President of the Democratic Party and a close ally of Đinđić, and a new Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Ćedomir Jovanović, formerly Head of the Parliamentary Club of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia in the Serbian Parliament and also a functionary of the Democratic Party. The assassination occurred in the midst of the process of appointment of the federal Council of Ministers of the newly-established state union of Serbia and Montenegro, but the constitution of the new federal organs progressed unhindered and according to the originally-envisaged dynamics. Mr. Svetozar Marović, of Milo Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists from Montenegro, is now the President of Serbia and Montenegro, and the four new federal ministries are covered by two Montenegrin and two Serbian ministers.

The political developments in Serbia and Montenegro appear against the backdrop of a major, albeit mostly hidden, security crisis within the two societies, with organised crime presenting an increasing level of threat. Criminal organisations have systematically branched out in numerous areas of life since the wars in the former Yugoslavia, with large quantities of weapons falling into private hands, and when, during over a decade of the autocratic regime of Slobodan Milošević, an unknown number of criminals have been virtually free to do whatever they wished without having to answer for their actions. The synergies between the state and organised crime that characterised the former regime allowed the development of a situation in which members of the new democratic government, in late 2000 and during 2001, had to face threats not only to their political projects but also to their lives. Zoran Đinđić is but the latest victim of organised crime but the previous victims should not be forgotten. One of these was Police General Boško Buha, who was assassinated while entering his car in the vicinity of the Hotel Jugoslavija, in New Belgrade.

A situation in which organised crime is the main security threat to both the state and to individual citizens is not specific to Serbia in relation to other countries within the region. There is organised criminal activity in Montenegro too, and victims from

the high echelons of the state administration have fallen there as well. For example, in 2001 the Security Adviser to the then Montenegrin President, Milo Đukanović, Goran Žugić, was assassinated while getting out of his car in front of the building where he lived in Podgorica. The same year, a police functionary of Montenegro, and a former member of the State karate team, Samir Usanagić, was also killed. Looking back at the series of political assassinations, one can trace these back through the years of the rule of Milošević. In 2000, the Minister of Defence of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Pavle Bulatović, was assassinated in Belgrade and in 1997 the Deputy Minister of the Interior of Serbia, Police General Radovan Stojičić (Badža) was also killed in the capital.

During Milošević's years, an attempt was made on the life of the former leader of the opposition in Serbia, Vuk Drašković, by a staged traffic accident at Ibarska magistrala road, when four of his close aides were killed. Drašković himself miraculously survived the attack, when a truck loaded with sand slammed into the cars in which he and his associates were travelling. This assassination bears a striking resemblance to the first attempt made on Đinđić's life a few weeks prior to his assassination, when a truck suddenly veered towards his car on the Belgrade-Zagreb motorway while he was travelling to Bosnia for official meetings. The driver of the truck was later arrested and charged with counterfeiting documents and car theft, but he was released by the courts. He is now one of the suspects and, at the time of writing of this piece, he is nowhere to be found by the police. Clearly, there is an industry of murder in Serbia in which the perpetrators do not shy away from aiming at the very highest state officials. This presents the gravest possible internal security threat to any society and it makes an anti-organised crime policy the first and foremost priority for the state.

The newest tragedy shows just how much Serbian society is endangered even today and how necessary it is to continue with the initiated reforms in almost all sectors, especially in those that are the most susceptible to ideological conservatism and stagnation. Support by the EU and international organisations for Serbia and Montenegro should by no means stop or be diminished; on the contrary, in line with the statements made by the highest European representatives in the days following Đinđić's assassination, it should now be increased in order to enable Serbian society to continue on the road on which it started under his leadership. The immediate announcements are to the effect that this need has been fully realised among European and North American policy makers, but it remains to be seen how fully and effectively such insights will be translated into concrete policy.

One of the new priorities in the development of policy towards Serbia must clearly be the encouragement of new training tools and institutional mechanisms for stemming the 'soft' security crisis. Unlike 'hard', military, security – and the respective insecurity that characterised security considerations in the Balkans until the newest political changes – security threats today mainly come from organised crime, which increasingly works in close networks with terrorists. Thus, the money laundering chains and abuses in the economy that were possible under the neo-communist rulers of the last decade now lead to violent terrorist actions aimed at stopping the processes of institutional reform that would obliterate the cleavages in the system on

which organised crime is, at the moment, hinged. This comes together with the global structuring of the fight against organised crime. The Serbian police force is undergoing organisational transformations and special training to attack organised criminal networks. The Serbian Ministry of the Interior recently introduced a special Directorate for Organised Crime, and specialist militarised gendarmerie units are involved directly in search and arrest operations at suspect locations during the largest hunt of organised crime in the history of the Serbian police. Support of the new, 'soft' security-related activities of both the first, i.e. the governmental, and the third, i.e. the non-governmental, sector should be a must in the development policies of donor countries and in EU policy generally. The forthcoming Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Serbia and Montenegro should include, specifically, elements for the enhancement of 'soft' security as key parts of the EU accession process.

The gang

According to state officials, the gang that is responsible not only for the assassination of Zoran Đinđić but also for a series of killings over the past decade and more is the so-called 'Zemun Gang'.[1] The Serbian Minister of the Interior, Dušan Mihajlović, has accused the Zemun Gang of having organised a spree of assassinations for the former State Security organisation under the previous regime, including the assassination of journalist Slavko Ćurivija on Christmas Day in 1999 and the kidnapping on 25 August 2000 of Ivan Stambolić, a former President of the collective Presidency of Serbia and a mentor of Slobodan Milošević, when his name was mentioned in terms of a possible candidacy in the presidential election against Milošević. The gang has also allegedly assassinated numerous members of competing criminal clans, including Petar Milošević; Mirko Tomić (Bosanac); Radislav Trlajić (commonly nicknamed Bata Trlaja); Branislav Lainović (Dugi); Zoran Uskoković (Skole); Zoran Davidović (Ćanda); Sredoje Šljukić (Šljuka); Jovan Guzijan (Cuner); and a number of other victims, most of whom were assassinated during the first half of 2000 subsequent to the assassination of Željko Ražnatović (Arkan), the former commander of the 'Tigers', a paramilitary unit that participated in the wars in the former Yugoslavia and which has been frequently mentioned in the context of the atrocities committed in these conflicts.

The chronology of these killings reflects the intertwined nature of crime and the connections between criminal networks and the former state apparatus. After the killing early in 2000 of Željko Ražnatović (Arkan) at the Belgrade Hotel Intercontinental, Branislav Lainović (Dugi) was taken in by the police for questioning. Soon afterwards, he was assassinated in Belgrade. Returning from Lainović's funeral, on 23 March 2000, Zoran Davidović (Ćanda) and Ivan Stojanović were assassinated in their car. They had been shot by automatic fire from a green van that was later found burned out in the Zemun part of Belgrade. Zoran Uskoković (Skole) was the leader of another clan in Belgrade and was often mentioned as the possible organiser of Ražnatović's assassination. He was murdered on 27 April 2000 after a long high-

---

1   Zemun is a part of Belgrade where this gang is based.

speed chase and automatic fire along the streets of Belgrade. Zoran Stevanović, a policeman, was also killed together with him in the same car. The attack car, an Audi, was later found burned in Novi Beograd, a part of Belgrade adjacent to Zemun. The methodology of the murders showed a clear pattern of consistency.

One of the specificities of the criminal gangs in Serbia during the former regime was that many criminals bore State Security ID cards, which were very popular in the criminal underworld. This suggests that the former State Security apparatus actually used criminals for its 'dirty operations' against its targets. Indeed, a special concern for the Serbian police today is to investigate the possible links between the criminal underworld, especially the Zemun Gang, and the remaining parts of the state apparatus that have survived the removal of the former regime. In early March 2003, the Deputy Public Prosecutor for Serbia, Milan Sarajlić, was arrested based on alleged connections with the Zemun Gang. However, these arrests were made on the level of police discretion applying during the state of emergency in which the police may arrest basically whoever they suspect of criminal activity and hold that person for 30 days without having to present any evidence or contact the court. In other words, it remains to be seen which ones of those who have been arrested will actually be tried and convicted, especially given the new conflict that has arisen between the executive government and the judiciary, with the Minister of Justice calling for the Head of the Supreme Court to resign since, 'She has not achieved anything significant in judicial reform.'

Gang members in Serbia have been prominent during the past few years and are even recognisable in the streets, usually with short hair cuts and black leather jackets; 'dangerous looking' people whom it was best to avoid, as it was common knowledge that they were armed and prepared to be violent at any time; and, even more importantly, that they were somehow 'untouchable'. This caused an extremely unfortunate atmosphere which has led to the approval with which much of the Serbian citizenry greeted the new police actions in which hundreds of 'known criminals' have been arrested and removed from the streets. This has been combined with an effort to address the crisis in the courts. Some of the measures include authorisations given by the Acting President of Serbia, the current Speaker of the Serbian Parliament, Nataša Mićić, to the Acting Head of the Supreme Court of Serbia[2] to appoint and sack judges in all the courts, along with the authorisation given to the Serbian Head Prosecutor to appoint and sack prosecutors throughout the state. Normally, judges and prosecutors are appointed and removed by parliament and these measures deviate from that normal practice. However, the application of such unusual measures may lead to a more efficient trying in the short- to medium- term of cases connected with organised crime, with all the risks that it carries as a policy. The Serbian Democratic Party, the major opposition party in Parliament, has strongly criticised this decision, arguing that 'Even in special circumstances, this is dictatorship.' Tensions on the political front remain high and the need to conduct an anti-organised crime policy effectively and swiftly in the short-term goes hand-in-hand with the political struggle.

---

2   The popular Head of the Supreme Court, Leposava Karamarković, has resigned following an attack by the Minister of Justice.

The nature of organised crime in the region as demonstrated by the Serbian PM's assassination

The character of organised crime in south-eastern Europe generally conforms to worldwide trends in the development of organised criminal syndicates. These trends are describable as evolving from hierarchy-based, traditional 'gang-style' groups, to less formal but far more widespread and, interest-wise, interconnected *networks*. Hierarchy gives way to networking and vertical organisation gives way to a horizontal organisation of criminal groups. This is so much the case that, in theory, a new concept – *netwar* – has emerged. Netwar is a state of extended conflict between organised criminal networks and the traditional state actors, but even the boundaries between criminal networks and states are blurred in this perspective because networks often co-opt, or buy out, state officials to the point that members of state hierarchies often become members of criminal networks. Such criminal networks engage the state in a new form of warfare, in which state officials are directly targeted, economic flows become disrupted, state interests are more difficult to define and defend because of the manipulation of market principles and movements by criminalised interests, and internal security becomes a major issue on the policy agenda. Traditional, hierarchically-organised gangs were less likely to engage the state in such a manner because their interests, or criminal 'turfs', were more readily and more easily definable, while it was not in their interest to encounter the wrath of the state so they rather opted for recruiting state officials. Criminal nets, on the other hand, are sufficiently powerful to take on the state and they have used their high functionality to reduce inter-organisational rivalry and competition. Instead of confronting the similar interests of other groups, which was often the case with traditional gangs, they have created a type of division of labour in which differing criminal interests intertwine and reinforce each other. For example, drug trade in one region is intertwined with arms trade in a neighbouring region and both work in synergy with human trafficking and/or the industry of violent crime, including assassination. In this way, all members of the net have an interest in preserving all the others as they are no threat to each other while they are functional, but they become a threat once they are captured because the net can then be disrupted.

Networked organised crime is fundamentally dependent on widespread corruption, serious fraud and the manipulation of financial and political systems,[3] thereby creating a situation between war and peace in which internal insecurity has escalated so much that nobody can feel fully secure, yet where there are no conditions to introduce a state of war. Civil liberties are threatened from the side of crime but, at the same time, they are also threatened by the increasing authority conveyed by the legislators and the very highest policy-makers in repressive state organisations, such as the police, so that citizens gradually start to feel as though they live in a perpetual state of

3   This point was convincingly put forward by Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan (1998): "Cartel evolution: Potentials and consequences", *Transnational Organised Crime* Vol. 4 No. 2, Summer, p. 56.

emergency. This is, perhaps, the most palpable form of a situation existing between war and peace.

The theorists of networked crime argue that the success and the degree of stability of criminal networks depends on three key factors, namely:

1. the provision of security for its members
2. the creation of a stable form of economic exchange within the network (currency)
3. the achievement of cultural and ideological superiority.[4]

In addition, such authors point to a three-phase process of the evolution of criminal organisations. They apply this scheme to drug cartels but there is no reason in principle why the same scheme should not apply to the evolution of any contemporary 'netted' criminal organisation. The diagnostic chart for the status of the development of organised crime in a given region, according to this scheme, is as follows:

Diagnostic chart[5]

First phase cartel (criminal organisation)	Second phase	Third, advanced phase
Aggressive competitor to the state	Subtle co-opter of the state	Criminal state successor
Predominantly hierarchic organisation	Locally internetted organisation with emerging transnational links	Globally internetted and multi-enterprise oriented
Use of indiscriminate violence	Predominant use of corruption and symbolic violence where necessary	Discriminate violence and highly entrenched corruption, which is largely legitimised in the system
Recruitment, training and use of criminals only	Use of both criminals and mercenaries	Training and provision of mercenaries, as well as their use
Conventional technology	Transitional (some advanced) technology	Advanced technology (information, weapons, etc.)
Entrepreneurial economic reach, limited in scope	Semi-institutionalised economic reach, widening in scope	Institutionalised global economic reach
Small-scale public profiting	Regional public profiting	Mass public profiting
Criminal entity	Semi-developed 'net-warrior' against the state	Evolved 'net-warrior', successfully challenging the state

4   ibid., p. 58.
5   ibid., p. 59.

These eight diagnostic elements in organised crime applies to the situation in south-eastern Europe in the following way.

On the first parameter, organisations in the region fluctuate between being aggressive competitors to the state and subtle co-opters of the state, depending on the circumstances and some regional specificities. For example, the assassination of the Serbian Prime Minister and the subsequent investigation led the authorities to believe that, while the act itself was the most drastic example of the criminal organisations taking on the state aggressively, some of those from the state apparatus who were apparently involved with the criminal network included co-opted prosecution officials. For some time, this synergy has functioned as co-operation between those co-opted individuals and the criminal syndicate and only later did the syndicate decide to attack the state directly.

On the second parameter, Balkan criminal organisations are in the transitional phase as they are locally 'internetted', with emerging regional connections, but their global influence remains limited. This is why they are relatively accurately definable as 'south-eastern European organised crime.'

Regarding the third parameter, gangs in the region intermittently use indiscriminate violence, symbolic violence combined with a focus on corruption and highly discriminate violence in combination with entrenched and partly-legitimised corruption. Consequently, there are contradicting elements in this perspective as they fall in all three category groups.

On the fourth parameter, they use both criminals and mercenaries but not to the extent that would satisfy criteria for an advanced network; namely they are still criminal gangs albeit that they have ambitions to become mercenary-based networks that will be able to challenge the state openly.

On the fifth criterion, criminal organisations in the region tend to use some advanced technology but are still based largely on conventional technology so here, too, they tend to be in a transitional category.

On the sixth parameter, the region's organised crime remains based on limited entrepreneurial potential. Groups may have ambitions to globalise but they appear not yet to have arrived at such a position.

On the seventh parameter, relatively narrow sections of the population profit from their activities and they have not managed to develop into becoming major networks that cater for public needs in a variety of areas, thus effectively competing with the state, so here they are in a rudimentary phase.

Lastly, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not south-east European circumstances of organised crime constitute criminal networks as conventional or transitional entities/warriors against the state. However, some light can be shed on this issue by simply comparing the diagnostic results arising from the answers to the previous seven category-related questions. It appears that the Balkan form of organised crime has dominant elements (some being duplicated in two or triplicated in three categories), with five parameter groups in the first category, five in the second and only one in the third. In other words, it would appear that the Balkan criminal organisation is emerging in a transitional phase towards becoming globally-netted;

namely, that it is at a stage at which it may still be possible to crack it through well-targeted and sufficiently widespread repressive action.

The relative vulnerability of the region's criminal organisations to a well-organised and targeted repressive strike also arises from their failure to secure two of the three key elements in the long-term sustainability of any organisation; i.e. security for its members, a stable method of economic transactions within the organisation and the achievement of cultural and ideological superiority. The atmosphere within society in south-eastern Europe has changed considerably towards criminal stereotypes, especially after the violent wars in the territories of the former Yugoslavia but also elsewhere in the region where there have been no wars, and, while the ideals for much of the younger generation have become based on criminally-acquired wealth and power, only very conditionally could it be argued that the criminal culture has become dominant over the culture of legitimate transactions. This is seen in that citizens in Serbia still react relatively well to sweeping operations against mobsters and that there is a craving for greater security and legitimacy in everyday life. Thus, the third element of stability regarding criminal organisations has only partially been achieved. At the same time, the other two elements are also lacking: criminal organisations have proven unable systematically to protect their members from arrest and prosecution, especially in the context of a cleaning-up of the prosecution and the courts; and their ability to maintain a stable system of internal transactions is also threatened, as these transactions, either in strategic raw materials (petrol, tobacco, etc.) or in currency, used to depend heavily on synergies with the criminalised state under the previous regime. Consequently, the withdrawal of support by the state, through the democratic changes over the past few years, has caused this system to become heavily exposed to risk.

Thus, a critical juncture in the fight against organised crime appears to have been reached, at which it may still be possible to strike it effectively, although any delay could cause the network to evolve beyond the stage where it can be controlled.

Exactly for this reason the Serbian government has started a large and widespread attack on organised crime following the assassination of Zoran Đinđić. So far, several thousand people have been arrested. The sheer number suggests a serious threat to individuals in the streets, but the context of the evolution of criminal networks in the region provides some explanation for the extreme action that is being taken. It remains to be seen whether special mechanisms for fighting organised crime, whose establishment is being contemplated in all south-eastern European countries, will bear fruit in the medium-term future. Furthermore, it is also open to conjecture whether economic development and further institutional integration with the EU will eventually lead to a lowering in the crime rate and the creation of more stable circumstances. At the moment, it is clear that the most dominant threat to the entire region comes from the soft security crisis and that this threat is so pronounced that quite extreme measures are being put in place in order to address the calamity of criminal networks.