

## **PERCEPTIONS REGARDING ORGANISED CRIME IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE IS THERE AN INFORMATION GAP?**

### **Major Discussion Points and Recommendations**

#### **Public perceptions**

The general public in the countries of Southeastern Europe (SEE) is, at best, superficially informed about organised crime, the extent of its activities, and its implications. The mass media do not present organized crime as an 'institution' or as a well established line of 'business'. What normally attracts their short-spanned attention is the occurrence of big scandals. There is, consequently, a dearth of information and in-depth analysis which can fuel serious public interest and awareness of the long term dangers and negative repercussions that organised crime has for the economy, the political life and society of the region.

Furthermore the public in SEE, being aware of state corruption which feeds on criminal activities, exhibits growing apathy regarding organised crime as it believes that since the state does not fight against organised crime there is nothing else that can be done.

On the other hand a sizable part of the public in the post-communist countries of SEE considers crime as a product of capitalism, which is attractive as it generates income in otherwise slow growing or stagnant economies. The fact that criminal activities often go unpunished as a result of state-corruption enhances the image of crime to many citizens. There is also a very broad public consensus in the post-communist countries of SEE that economic and social success is pegged on criminality. In other words the prevailing perception is that very little can be achieved without resort to illegal means.

Balkan publics tend to perceive organised crime in specific countries as an imported phenomenon, something that results in feelings of xenophobia. Needless to say this is enhanced by one-sided media coverage.

The business community in SEE is aware of how organised crime works, as the monopolistic nature of organised crime activities and mafia's cooperation with the state destroy free market and fair competition environment within which legal businesses are trying to operate. Some members of the business community in SEE also argue that even when illegal business becomes legitimate they do not abandon some illegal methods they were used to, thus undermining free competition. Unfortunately the business communities in SEE countries are not effectively organised to lead public information campaigns designed to isolate criminals and corrupt politicians.

#### **The role of the media**

The mass media are both part of the problem and the solution when it comes to informing the public about organised crime.

More often than not the information provided by the media in former communist countries is limited, partial (depending on who sponsors them), and local in character. Links between local criminals and groups in other countries are not explored and the stress is on the victims of criminal activities and not the criminals themselves and their broader supportive networks. To a large extent that is the result of the lack of financial independence of the media that tend to

become penetrated by criminal funding / connections. In their fight for survival in a tight market publishers are befriended by local mafia bosses who are even emerging as media owners or sponsors.

Often governments in the former communist countries of SEE (the example of the Rumanian government was stressed), put pressure against media reporting on big mafia activities wishing to preserve a rosy image of the country both domestically and internationally.

In multiethnic states of SEE the media functioning in various ethnic communities often find it difficult to cooperate with each other in reporting on organised crime which cuts across ethnic divisions, as their audiences tend to criminalise in their minds members of competing ethnic communities.

In the final analysis the way that the media address organised crime reflects the fact that SEE societies are more politicised than information based societies.

### **The role of Civil Society**

The public in SEE to a large extent believes that the fight against organised crime is a police problem rather than a problem reflecting societal inadequacies.

Civil society (especially organizations with a modernisation /europeanization focus) cannot hope to achieve much against organised crime given the overwhelming scale of criminal activities. Therefore, it has to choose its battles carefully and focus its efforts.

To this end a number of NGO's in SEE can play a very important role in mobilising civil reaction against organised crime as they are financed by foreign capital and therefore maintain a degree of independence from criminal networks.

Organised crime thrives in societies where there is low social capital, i.e. there is little trust among follow-citizens. The post-communist countries of SEE fall into this category. Civil solidarity has been lost as a result of the tremendous political, economic and social change the post-communist countries have gone through.

### **The role of governments**

Governments in SEE do not include on their agendas the need to sensitise the public regarding organised crime activities.

Furthermore they find it difficult to take on the political cost of stamping out illegal activities as these offer income to a good a number of families in their countries.

### **Recommendations**

There is a strong need for more research on the relationship between public perceptions regarding organised crime and the growth of criminal activity in SEE.

Unless there is a strong public pressure to make the state attack organised crime the battle against it cannot be won. Therefore there is an absolute necessity to find means to educate the public regarding the ruinous effects (short and long term) of organised crime and mobilise public opinion against organised crime. In many post-communist SEE countries the media have

developed a negative image of themselves as they are seen as part of the political corruption game. Therefore, the Press (print + electronic) is not in a strong position to inspire the public in a campaign against organised crime. Nonetheless, the media and NGO's have to find ways to make the public truly aware of the degree of organised crime activities in their countries and to shake off public apathy. NGO's in particular need to develop ways to contribute to restoring a sense of civil responsibility among the public.

In the fight against organised crime international co-operation between media, civil society NGO's and business is essential, as crime is not a local but a transnational phenomenon.

With particular reference to the role of the media, investigating reporting on organised crime can be strengthened through transnational cooperation. In other words reporting should take place in parallel in many countries, so as to achieve major impact on the public mind by showing the transnational nature of organised crime.

The creation of international organised crime investigating teams offers also the advantage that reporters can overcome problems of intimidation they face when they investigate crime within in their countries.

Visa requirements for journalists from SEE countries who wish to travel abroad as part of their investigations of organised crime should be eased.

Laws regarding ownership transparency and funding of the media have to be enacted and strictly enforced. Laws which facilitate the investigation of organised crime should be put in place and enforced.

So far the international community has given money to the media in the post-communist SEE countries for training purposes. Though this kind of funding has been essential for international sponsors, there is now great need to support projects which aim at a serious investigative reporting of organised crime in SEE and at international networking among investigating reporters.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Participants in the Athens workshop stressed the following in relation to the battle against organised crime:

Organised crime is the result of the confluence of at least the following factors: transition to democracy, transition to a free market, low income levels and income inequality. It is essential to acquire more information and analysis regarding conditions that breed organised crime in order to be better able to fight against it. Transnational data on organised crime in particular is missing.

Academic research has to try to be more in touch with Western policy makers and their priorities in addressing the problem of organised crime in SEE, so as to have maximum practical impact.

The strategy against organised crime in SEE has to be reformulated as we are faced with the phenomenon of alliances between mafias and the state.

The lack of the rule of law and of properly working institutions in SEE is a fundamental handicap in the fight against crime.

Campaigns against organised crime should be substituted by policies of reforming and strengthening public institutions in the post- communist SEE countries. At the same time it has to be kept in mind that policing is not enough and economic development policies need also to be employed.

To date, there has been no genuine political will in the post-communist countries of SEE to address the need for legal and institutional reforms which will facilitate the battle against organised crime. It is in the interest of the international community to employ a carrot and stick policy so as to ensure that: First, SEE governments change their 'soft' perceptions regarding organised crime and corruption. Second, that they seriously commit themselves to the necessary reforms and to the fight against organised crime. International organisations, particularly, have to work harder and consider long term implications in order to deal successfully with these issues in SEE.

With particular reference to the EU, Brussels has proved to be a weak player in pressing the necessity for judicial reform of post-communist governments in SEE. The Copenhagen criteria should include more requirements especially when it comes to the chapter on home and justice affairs.

The international community should take the initiative and bear pressure upon SEE governments to increase transnational intelligence, police and judicial co-operation.

At a more practical level there is an absolute need for the countries of SEE to introduce modern methods of fighting organised crime.