UNDERSTANDING A ‘CULTURE OF VIOLENCE AND CRIME’: THE KANUN OF LEK DUKAGJINI AND THE RISE OF THE ALBANIAN SEXUAL-SLAVERY RACKETS

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1. Introduction

In the last decade there have been numerous international and local publications trying to summarise the organised crime situation in the Balkans. Press images of this region have repeatedly drawn upon the themes of hostility, violence and organised criminal activities. Along with the themes of disintegration and perplexity, violence and organised crime have become encompassing and evocative components of the term ‘Balkan’. While the vision of the Balkans as a permanent or ‘natural’ source of violence and instability in Europe predates World War I, it gained new currency particularly during and after the wars of the Yugoslav Succession (1990s). Nonetheless, the Balkan region is inhabited by seven major nationalities and a number of ethnicities each with its own uniqueness and defining character. Recently, among all these ethnicities one has particularly attracted the international attention.

According to many sources ethnic Albanians have been massively involved in various criminal activities. A number of ethnic Albanian criminal groups have been swiftly taking over criminal markets all over Europe. They have become known as one of the main threats to the EU and Norway.1 These ‘ferocious’ criminal groups have escalated from being simple service providers to other organised crime groups to reaching the highest echelons of international organised crime. They have been depicted as ultra-violent, hierarchical, disciplined and often homogeneous, as well as based on ‘loyalty’ (having very strict codes of conducts), ‘honour’ and clan traditions. They have been also described as

relatively ‘old fashioned’.\(^2\) Because of these characteristics the ethnic Albanian crime groups have often been associated with the traditional Sicilian Mafia.

Nonetheless, research studies readily point out that the most significant features of the ethnic Albanian criminal groups are their cruelty and readiness to use violence.\(^3\) They have been using intimidation to maintain discipline, silence and absolute unity within the criminal groups, to settle inter-groups disputes and to control their victims. Violence and threats have also been used against law enforcement and judicial officials. According to law enforcement agencies, the members have not hesitated to use violence at any given occasion.\(^4\) The frequent use of violence has been also regularly confirmed by various victims of ethnic Albanian criminals. In a number of available reports based on victims’ statements, ethnic Albanian criminals have been described as highly aggressive.\(^5\) This ultra violent behaviour can readily be observed in the cases of trafficking of human beings.

Besides trafficking of human beings, including children, for so-called ‘medical purposes’, the ethnic Albanian organised crime groups have also been involved in drug and arms trafficking, trafficking of human organs, exploitation of prostitution (in many cases linked to episodes of slavery), facilitating illegal immigration, extortions and all kinds of property crime.\(^6\) One Italian prosecutor made clear that, ‘Albanian organised crime has become the point of reference for all criminal activity today. Everything passes via the Albanians’.\(^7\) As a result Westerners have readily associated Albania and ethnic Albanians with the problem of international security. They have been combining this recent evolution of violent organised crime activities with the historical stereotypes of the Albanians as ‘bloodthirsty’ tribesmen, concluding that individual interests, revengeful nature and lack of laws and culture are the explanation for such behaviour.

However, what many Westerns have failed to elaborate on is the degree to which the social construction of right and wrong across the broad social, historical and cultural landscape can shape the definitions of and responses to

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