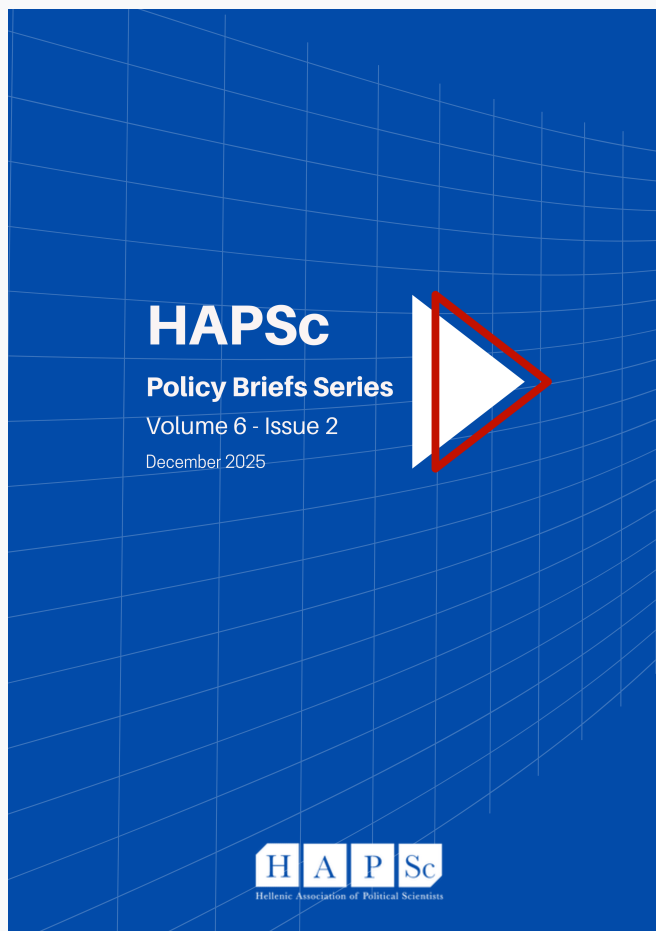


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Shadow Routes: The Evolution of Illicit Firearms Trafficking from Albania into Europe¹

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Abstract

Illicit firearms trafficking from Albania to Europe poses a severe and multifaceted security challenge, significantly impacting regional stability, public safety, law enforcement, and international anti-organized crime endeavors. Albania's history of having an abundance of leftover weapons after conflicts, combined with its easily crossed borders and widespread corruption, makes it a significant source and transit point for illegal firearms sold in European markets. This paper delves into the main routes employed by Albanian arms smugglers, their strategies to circumvent law enforcement, and the repercussions on the security framework of the European Union. The research paper evaluates the effectiveness of current countermeasures at regional, EU, and national levels based on interdiction data, law enforcement reports, and policy documents. The paper identifies gaps in the countermeasures and proposes a range of recommendations, such as increasing border patrol units, implementing advanced technology for cargo scanning, and establishing cross-border intelligence sharing platforms to disrupt trafficking networks. In conclusion, this research highlights the essential need for culture-specific and multi-faceted forensic, governance, technological, and socio-economic approaches to effectively combat arms trafficking from the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Illicit firearms trafficking; Albania; Balkans; Mafia; Organized Crime

Introduction

The illegal trade of firearms presents one of the most widespread organized transnational crime issues facing Europe today (Spapens, 2007; Arsovska, 2014; Felia Allum & Gilmour, 2023). The movement of illegal firearms augments the proliferation of violent crime and supports terrorist activity while also eroding political stability and public confidence in institutions (Galeotti, 2018; Duquet, 2022; Jang & Yang, 2023). Of several source regions for illegal firearms, the Western Balkans, particularly Albania, possess distinct historical, geopolitical, and socio-economic factors of note (Holtom, 2005; Arsovska, & Zabyelina, 2014). After the fall of the communist regime and conflicts in the 1990s, Albania was left with substantial inventories of Cold War-era weapons. Combined with low state capacity, institutional corruption, and persistent regional instability, Albania has evolved into a critical point of distribution for illegal firearms (Arsovska & Kostakos, 2008; Glenney, 2009; Varese, 2017). Firearms from Albania are widely circulated in the Balkans and further afield in the EU and

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continue to work against the increased violence and the challenges to the European security environment (Grillot, 2010; EUROPOL, 2021; Vasovic & Mcallister, 2025).

A clear understanding of the modalities of illicit arms trafficking originating from Albania is key to informing effective responses. This study presents an overview of the primary trafficking routes, along with the inventive adaptive approaches utilized by Albanian smuggling networks. The research discusses the wider security implications for the EU and assesses the effectiveness of current policy initiatives at the regional, EU, and national levels. It also puts forward recommendations to strengthen interdiction capacity and limit the flow of firearms. This scrutiny utilizes official interdiction data from law enforcement agencies in the Western Balkans, EU reports, and academic literature in order to offer an informed and usable perspective on the subject matter (UNODC, 2023; EUROPOL, 2024; Holt, 2024).

Trafficking Routes and Operational Modalities

Illicit firearm trafficking from Albania to Europe operates along sophisticated and adaptive trafficking routes and methods in response to enforcement changes and technological developments. Firearms Trafficking routes start in Albania due to its strategic location in the Western Balkans, characterized by a tumultuous political history, porous borders that facilitate illicit movements, and varying degrees of institutional strength and corruption, all of which play a pivotal role in the initiation of these routes. Understanding these routes and tactics will guide the design of effective interdiction and prevention approaches (Khakee & Florquin, 2003; Holtom, 2005; Chlebowicz, 2024).

Primary Land Routes: The Northern Corridor and Beyond

The main route for trafficking firearms from Albania into Europe is the Northern Land Corridor, which heads northward through Kosovo and Serbia and finally diverges to Central and Western European countries such as Hungary, Austria, Germany, and Italy (Holtom, 2005; EUROJUST, 2024; Vasovic & Mcallister, 2025). This trafficking route is particularly facilitated by ethnic and familial ties to Albanian and Kosovo Albanian communities, providing essential trust-based networks for the smuggling of the weapons. Traffickers exploit the differences in border controls in the area and the capabilities of the customs authorities, and firearms are often smuggled hidden within legitimate goods or private vehicles (Sagramoso, 2001; Khakee & Florquin, 2003; EUROPOL, 2022).

Trade along this corridor generally consists of small arms, including the AK-47 assault rifle, other rifles, pistols, and homemade weapons, in bulk quantities of ammunition. Vessels may include private

cars, vans, or passenger buses, with weapons hidden in clandestine compartments or with legitimate cargo (Holtom, 2005). Smuggling strategically employs low-threat mechanisms that utilize multiple transshipment points between borders, often transshipping not far from the previous border, thus shortening the time on any given side of the checkpoint (Morselli, 2009). Corruption is still a fundamental enabler of smuggling, where traffickers either pay border compliance officials a bribe or take advantage of institutional frameworks and weak sites to allow shipments to continue with no emphasis on border compliance (Holt, 2024). The Northern Corridor has offshoots to the east running towards Macedonia and Bulgaria, which further link into the networks of the Black Sea and Eastern Europe (Felia Allum & Gilmour, 2023; The Global Initiative, 2025; Sarhan, 2025). Although less trafficked than the northern corridor, such secondary routes are gaining importance with the formation of new alliances and new markets being established outside of the EU core (EUROPOL, 2021).

Maritime Routes: The Adriatic Corridor

Albania's extensive coastline along the Adriatic provides traffickers a significant maritime pathway for the transshipment of firearms into Europe, particularly into Italy and other Mediterranean states. The Adriatic Maritime Corridor of Albania incorporates both official seaports, such as Vlorë or Durrës, and numerous smaller, lesser-monitored landing sites that traffic operates disguised within fishing boats or private yachts (Holtom, 2005; Felia Allum & Gilmour, 2023). The Adriatic provides traffickers with a number of tactical advantages: hiding illicit cargo within legitimate cargo containers, the difficulty in monitoring a wide maritime space, and the delivery of deceptive commercial traffic that further conceals less-than-desired activity. Smugglers have implemented sophisticated concealment techniques, notably hidden compartments within the hulls of boats and false bottoms within shipping containers, for the trafficking of both assembled and disassembled firearms (EUROPOL, 2025). Smaller boats are used for transshipment over shorter distances, which reduces the likelihood of detection and interception by coast guards and police patrols. These maritime transport routes are also key in the shipment of firearms to various international criminal networks that operate in southern Italy, where Albanian criminal groups have established significant footholds (Glenny, 2009; Holt, 2024).

Jurisdiction challenges to maritime law enforcement are compounded. Although Albania's territorial waters are under the national jurisdiction, Papua and New Guinea's maritime waters are governed by international obligations with respect to port authorities and operations, which are exploited by traffickers (Khakee & Florquin, 2003). Even with increased surveillance, the availability of maritime patrols and corruption among port officials have undermined interdiction efforts (EUROPOL, 2024).

Parcel-Post and Darknet Smuggling: A Modern Innovation

Since 2023, Albanian trafficking groups have become increasingly reliant on international parcel-post systems and darknet marketplaces to traffic firearms in smaller, more discrete parcels (The Crime Messenger, 2024). Such a development marks a notable change in operational modalities from bulk trafficking through land and water to smuggling via parcels through globalized logistics networks and digital anonymization technology.

Firearms and fire components are taken apart, enclosed in legitimate goods, such as electronics, clothing, or parts from vehicles, and become difficult to detect with standard customs inspection (Duquet, 2022). The increasing sophistication in packaging methods, layering, vacuum sealing, and fake paperwork makes it more complicated for customs and postal authorities (SEESAC, 2024). Parcel shipments are most often routed through multiple countries' postal systems of poorer countries before reaching their final destination within Western and Northern Europe.

Darknet marketplaces facilitate these transactions by providing encrypted communication channels, digital wallets, and escrow services that provide anonymity and less risk of infiltration for parties on both sides of the transaction (The Crime Messenger, 2024; Duquet, 2022). This environment allows firearms trafficking operations to quickly scale, connecting Albanian supply networks with demand globally, even outside of the traditional Balkan-Europe transfer (EUROPOL, 2025).

Tactical Adaptations and Network Structures

Albanian trafficking networks exhibit a sophisticated ability to adapt and compartmentalize their operations. Trafficking networks reduce their risk by using decentralized cells in their operations, where individuals responsible for transportation, logistics, bribery, and sales may not have full knowledge of the entire trafficking process and decision-making. This compartmentalized arrangement limits exposure if a particular cell is compromised (Morselli, 2009). The cellular arrangement allows the trafficking networks to quickly reorganize following an arrest or a seizure, thereby maintaining resilience in the network.

Corruption in state institutions serves as a considerable facilitator of trafficking. Traffickers engage in bribery of customs officials, border guards, port authorities, and even local police to ensure the unhindered flow of weapons shipments (Holt, 2024; Vasovic & Mcallister, 2025). Investigations show that traffickers frequently have allegiance to corrupt officials, including methods of financial buy-ins, bribery, and intimidation, and use these relationships to situate the illicit trade in a series of local socio-political ecosystems (EUROPOL, 2021).

Furthermore, criminals are increasingly integrating technology into directing and concealing their operations. For communication and payment systems, traffickers utilize encrypted messenger apps, burner phones, and anonymized digital currencies, making it difficult for law enforcement to trace payments and transactions (The Crime Messenger, 2024). Some traffickers may also use counter-surveillance measures, including reverse routes, warning systems for police presence, or using vehicles registered in false names or license plates (Holtom, 2005).

Interconnected Criminal Activities

Arms trafficking seldom operates alone. Albanian networks often interweave arms smuggling with other criminal activities such as drug trafficking, human smuggling, and money laundering, creating multifaceted criminal ecosystems (Glenny, 2009; Varese, 2017). A key benefit for a criminal network that engages in diversification is that this provides the members of the network the ability to cross-finance distributed operations, capitalize on multiple revenue streams, and exploit a variety of legal and enforcement vulnerabilities. Firearms are oftentimes smuggled alongside drugs, utilizing the same concealment techniques and transit routes (EUROPOL, 2024). In some cases, human trafficking routes coincide with arms smuggling, offering a cover mechanism for illegal movements (Felia Allum & Gilmour, 2023). In a legitimate business setting, money laundering operations often provide the foundation for the cash infusion needed to maintain bribery and enable network expansion (Galeotti, 2018).

Security Impact on Europe

The transnational flow of illicit firearms from Albania into the EU raises serious challenges for internal security across the continent. Over the last ten years, data suggests steady increases in firearm-related incidents linked to Balkan-sourced firearm supplies (EUROPOL, 2021; UNODC, 2023). The Western Balkans saw an approximate 70% increase in firearms violence, which has intensified as smuggling from Albania and its neighboring countries increased in incidence (Vasovic & Mcallister, 2025). In EU member states, law enforcement agencies in Italy, Germany, and Greece are seizing firearms sourced from Albania, which often are used in organized crime conflict, homicides, and terrorist plots (EUROPOL, 2024; Holt, 2024).

Moreover, the trafficking of firearms allows criminal organizations to have and maintain stockpiles of weaponry capable of coercive violence, threatening public security and fueling the cycle of violence (Felia Allum & Gilmour, 2023). The process by which criminal organizations obtain arms is often price-driven, with firearms available in Albania for as little as €150. A trafficking organization can sell those firearms for anywhere from €1,000 to €1,200 in Western Europe (Glenny,

2009; Holt, 2024). Firearms trafficking also interacts with human smuggling, narcotics trade, and money laundering to form complicated ecologies of crime that make policing organizations challenging to combat (Varese, 2017; EUROPOL, 2025). Firearm trafficking also complicates aspects of counterterrorism. Firearms can be readily accessible to the radicalized individual, elevating the potential for attacks orchestrated against individuals and/or organizations (Galeotti, 2018; Duquet, 2022).

Policy Responses and Strategic Recommendations

Initiatives to combat the trafficking of illegal firearms from Albania include regionally coordinated mechanisms like Project Hermes focusing on customs capacity building, EU/international initiatives such as EMPACT Firearms and Joint Investigative Teams, and national reforms like amendments to arms control laws and digital registries of armories. There has been progress, but enforcement remains intermittent and reactive, highlighting the need for more integrated, proactive responses (SEESAC, 2024; EUROPOL, 2025).

On the regional level, the Western Balkan countries have developed projects, such as Project Hermes, concentrating on building customs' capacities and sharing information regarding cross-border movement. These initiatives ultimately aim to harmonize the legislative framework and improve effective interception; however, enforcement issues persist largely due to weakness of political will and institutional corruption (Khakee & Florquin, 2003; Holtom, 2005).

At the EU level, there are networks like EMPACT Firearms and Joint Investigative Teams (JITs) that enable efficient intelligence sharing, collaborative investigations, and coordinated law enforcement actions to combat illicit firearms trafficking across borders. Lastly, organizations like Europol and CEPOL provide training sessions and analytical support to national agencies (EUROPOL, 2021; EUROPOL, 2024). Conversely, enforcement is still piecemeal and under-resourced due to the transnational nature of this criminality (UNODC, 2023).

On the national level, Albania has made significant legal progress by amending the arms control laws to enhance regulation, establishing digital registries of armories for improved tracking, and implementing stricter punishment guidelines to deter illicit arms trafficking activities. Regardless, enforcement is a struggle due to corruption, problems with capacity to prosecute, and political interference, which impacts the rule of law (Holt, 2024; Vasovic & Mcallister, 2025). Recommendations regarding the regional situation include the development of a Regional Forensic Ballistics Hub in Tirana, which could provide advanced ballistic studies, facilitate fast tracing of weapons, and share intelligence across borders to try and begin curtailing flow-out of Albania.

Comprehensive governance reform for relevant roles at port site in Albania must be taken to facilitate better fourth-party control checks of the ship cargo taking place. Ports must implement digital tracking of containers, real-time scanning of boxes/cargo destined for the EU, and better screening of personnel for lawful efforts in reducing corruption leverage (Holtom, 2005; SEESAC, 2024).

Also recommended are enhanced parcel-post controls in alignment with new EU cargo management rules, like Import Control System 2 (ICS2), which would bolster pre-screening capabilities, identify pre-identified suspicious shipments, and ensure compliance with EU regulatory frameworks. Anti-corruption measures recommended to mitigate potential corruption include audits on customs/border official integrity, social network analysis to detect collusion, and whistleblower protections (Holt, 2024; The Crime Messenger, 2024).

Lastly, socio-economic interventions (preferably community-based weapons buy-back programs, along with rural development processes), can yield longer-term solutions for reducing illicit availability of firearms. Any initiatives must be culturally appropriate and practically connected to broader governance and economic opportunity enhancements (Khakee & Florquin, 2003; Felia Allum & Gilmour, 2023; SEESAC, 2024).

Conclusion

Illicit firearms trafficking originating from Albania is a multifaceted security issue, which extends beyond borders, creating a need for a global response (EUROPOL, 2025). Traffickers utilize Albania's geopolitical position and frail domestic institutions in a variety of different and adaptive ways, including traditional land routes, maritime routes, and shipping through parcels via the dark net. These flows not only support violent crime but also increase the risk of terrorism within the EU, continuing support for transnational crime networks (Felia Allum & Gilmour, 2023; Duquet, 2022).

In order to address the problem holistically, a mix of improved forensic capabilities, better governance, technological improvements in customs and parcel controls, and socio-economic development to reduce illicit firearm sourcing (SEESAC, 2024; Holt, 2024). The overlap between trafficking modalities and enabling factors, such as corruption, highlights the need for sustained international cooperation and political will (EUROPOL, 2025; Vasovic & Mcallister, 2025). A coordinated and multilevel approach is the only way to disrupt illicit firearms flows and ensure regional security (UNODC, 2023).

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