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Article

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Abstract: The conflict in Ukraine has already changed the picture of the regional security and some changes may be permanent. The shifting power structures created by the war and the illicit market opportunities will continue to increase criminal activity.
This article assesses the impact of the conflict in Ukraine and its implications for organized crime and security-related issues for neighbouring countries, with a focus on Romania. These include organized crime and illicit trafficking (including trafficking in persons, drugs, arms, illicit tobacco, and other goods), cybercrimes and fraud. The paper uses a multidisciplinary approach, which includes both intelligence analysis and operational actions, with a benefit role in the prevention, detection and tackling of serious and organized crime affecting the European Union and its citizens.
This study used a mixed-methods approach. The literature review along with a content analysis and statistical analysis of organized crime was conducted using a combination of online databases, as well as academic journals and conference papers.
The research findings show that the impact of the conflict in Ukraine and its implications for organized crime and security-related issues will have long-term consequences for European Union countries.
Keywords: criminal groups, European security, law enforcement, organized crime, war in Ukraine.

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1. Introduction

In the context of the geopolitical, social and economic transformations that the states are currently facing, organized crime has acquired new values, expanding its ramifications at the international level. Conflicts often create opportunities that lead to the increasing of organized crime, amplifying the threat that criminal groups can pose to domestic

security. The heightened dynamics of the international security environment and, in particular, the instability with the potential for contagion manifested in the Eastern neighbourhood, exacerbate the risks posed to European Union by transnational organized crime.

The main criminal activities in Europe are drug trafficking (with over a third of organized crime groups operating in the EU involved in this sector), cybercrime, excise fraud, migrant smuggling and human trafficking. Cross-border organized crime is a set of factors that includes all serious criminal actions of an international nature, produced by a group or several groups of people on the territory of at least two countries. This threat leads to the alteration of national and international peace and security, as well as the economic-social, political, and civil undermining of society. The magnitude of the phenomenon of organized crime obliges us to know the main forms of manifestation, their evolution and their dynamics in order to prevent and counter criminal actions. Every year, we count millions of victims as a direct or indirect result of the activity of cross-border organized crime, whether we're talking about victims of drug use or human trafficking, whether we're talking about people who fall victim to terrorist actions or who don't have anything to eat because the state they belong to has failed (UN-ODC, 2012: 3).

Before February 2022, Russian and Ukrainian organized crime formed the strongest criminal ecosystem in Europe. Having developed along similar lines in the 1990s, Russian and Ukrainian criminal groups and networks controlled a lucrative transnational smuggling highway between Russia and Western Europe that carried gold, timber, tobacco, coal, counterfeit/untaxed goods, humans and drugs. Also, with an infrastructure built for such operations (especially the port of Odesa – a global smuggling hub), Ukraine was a growing route for criminal activity.

The war changed everything by creating a favourable environment for organized crime, as Ukrainian Ports at the Black Sea have been closed or restricted to shipping, road or rail infrastructure is severely affected by the war, the workforce used by gangs has been conscripted, and martial law has halted a wide range of criminal activities. The effects are felt globally as smuggling networks are reconfigured to bypass Ukraine. Some of the countries near Ukraine had reported large seizures of drugs and contraband goods.

The need for an active, preventive and participative approach to the management of the common European security space is the optimal way to protect the national security of the EU member states against the threats of organized crime. Thus, in March 2022, EU home affairs ministers argued for the mobilization of the EU platform for Fight Seriously and Organized Crimes (EMPACT) to protect Member States against the actions of organized crime networks exploiting the conflict in Ukraine. Within the platform were introduced a number of priorities, such as high-risk drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms trafficking, oil and cigarette smuggling, cyber threats, and money laundering (European Council, 2022).

2. The Re-Organization of Crime

2.1. Drug trafficking

The European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), the anti-drug agency of the EU, warned that the invasion of Ukraine will cause „new vulnerabilities" in terms of drug trafficking, such as: the emergence of new drug transport routes or the exposure of more people to drug consumption (Morozan, 2022).

Although Ukraine was not a major drug source country, before the conflict, its location next to several important drug trafficking routes into Western Europe made it a critical transit country. Ukraine was an attractive route for Afghan heroin destined for Western Europe, although the amount trafficked was smaller compared to opiate flows moved along the Balkan route. Afghan opiates would travel through Iran, Türkiye, Mariupol, and Odesa. Ukrainian seaports also served as a major conduit for Latin American cocaine destined for Europe and Russia (UNCRI, 2022). Before the Russian invasion, Ukraine had a growing number of synthetic amphetamine drug laboratories (including amphetamine, methamphetamine, and alpha-PVP) covering the needs of Poland, Romania, Moldova, Belarus, and Russia. Almost 80 were dismantled in 2020, compared to 17 in 2019 (UNCRI, 2022: 25).

It is expected that the war in Ukraine will cause certain mutations in drug trafficking. On the one hand, it can cause a significant change in the illicit drug trade, which will lead to an increase in traffic flows, especially heroin and synthetic drugs. The experience of conflict zones has shown us that they represent fertile ground for drug traffickers.

Like, for example, Afghanistan, the world's largest producer of opium and where opium cultivation reached huge heights during the US-led war on terror, or Myanmar, which became a major producer of methamphetamines after the start of the civil war in 2021, the Myanmar Spring Revolution, and which continues to keep the country in a permanent humanitarian crisis. Another example is Syria, where the manufacture of amphetamines, particularly captagon, increased following the civil war, although millions of tablets were regularly seized in the region (EMCDDA and BKA, 2023). Ukraine may turn out to be another example.

The United Nations has issued a warning that narcotics production and trafficking could increase in Ukraine as a result of the conflict (VOA, 2022). Another red flag is the fact that Ukraine is one of the largest markets for heroin consumption in the world. Figures from 2018-2020 estimated a total of 350,000 adults (1.7% of the adult population) addicted to injecting drugs – mainly heroin (UNAIDS, 2021: 340-347). At the same time, data on the quantities of drugs seized before the invasion suggested that drug trafficking through Ukraine had expanded. Traffickers could now take advantage of the chaos to increase narcotics flows or the production of synthetic drugs because pre-conflict Ukraine hosted many clandestine laboratories producing synthetic drugs.

On the other hand, evidence from other conflicts suggests that traffickers often want to use alternative routes, as areas of active military combat may become too risky for their operations. The violence on the battlefield and the adoption of increased security measures in Ukraine could divert drug trafficking to other countries, considered less dangerous. For example, the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, which forced traffickers to use alternative routes.

Disruption of drug trafficking flows through Ukraine and increased militarization could force most drug traffickers from Ukraine to look for good opportunities elsewhere. There have been a number of cases of Ukrainians related to drug production and trafficking outside Ukraine, since February 2022. Although these cases are just a few, we have to take into consideration that the activities of some Ukrainian organized criminal groups could move elsewhere.

As flows to the port of Odesa have been disrupted by the Russian blockade, this may lead to an increase in cocaine flows to other entry points near Ukraine.

Before 2022, some of the cocaine arriving in Odessa was also destined for the markets of South-Eastern Europe. There is currently no evidence of disruption to supply chains and that, combined with small variations in the price of cocaine in South-Eastern Europe in the post-

war months, does not suggest significant effects on the flow of drugs from the region. However, the closure of Ukrainian ports may lead to a change in traffic patterns through South-Eastern Europe, which is becoming a transit region, as indicated by significant catches in Adriatic, Aegean and Black Sea ports in recent years. These ports may become key entry points for drugs into Europe in the future (EMCDDA, 2022: 5).

Recently, the ports of Constan?a in Romania and Varna in Bulgaria have become important centers for exports from and imports to Ukraine. These ports are known to have had issues with corruption and security (Scaturro, 2023: 8). The increase in licit traffic, without investments aimed at improving cargo scanning and verification systems, could lead to the emergence of security vulnerabilities in the case of ports in the Black Sea region, with the risk of becoming future entry points for drugs (cocaine or heroin) intended for Ukraine. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) shows that traffickers' networks are increasingly targeting smaller ports in the EU space (Pavel and Leonte, 2023).

Drug smuggling was also present across the Moldova-Ukraine border, with significant seizures reported in 2021. After that there were attempts to move some of the synthetic drug laboratories to Moldova, and there were reports of criminals looking for chemists with relevant skills in Chi?inău (UNCRI, 2022).

In conclusion, the war in Ukraine will cause an increase in drug trafficking, whether we are talking about trafficking through Ukraine, decimated by the war, and there to UE countries or whether we are talking about trafficking through other countries, close to Ukraine.

2.2. Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling

Two years after the start of the Russian invasion, the number of refugees from Ukraine in other European countries has exceeded the 6 million mark, according to figures updated by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2024). Of this total, 4.8 million are already included in various European protection programs, mentions the UN agency, which counted over 28 million exits from the country at the Ukrainian borders, but also approximately 20 million returns, from 2022 until present. Poland continues to be the country with the largest number of refugees from Ukraine (1.64 million), followed by Germany – with 1.1 million, the Czech Republic – with 589,000, Spain – with 192,000, Italy – with 169,000 and the United Kingdom – with 253,000. Other countries where more than 100,000 refugees from Ukraine are registered are the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Ireland and the Netherlands, according to UNHCR statistics. Apart from refugees arriving in other countries, more than 6.5 million Ukrainians are internally displaced due to the war, according to the latest data provided by the UN Agency – International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2023).

With reference to the current situation, the statistics show that approximately 90% of the people who left Ukraine are women and children, in the context in which the Ukrainian authorities do not allow the exit of men of the necessary age to be enlisted at the front. Thus, the risk of Ukrainians becoming victims of human traffickers will continue to increase the longer the war continues (DOS, 2022b). This vulnerability combined with the need for protection or financial support is often used by traffickers and may force refugees to be involved in acts such as sexual exploitation, forced labour, begging and criminality, and illegal adoption.

With the unprecedented movement of people forced to flee Ukraine since the start of the war, NGOs and the media have sounded the alarm about suspected cases of human trafficking. Before 2022, people of Ukrainian origin who are victims of human trafficking had been ex-

ploited for forced labour and sex trafficking in the EU, Russia, and the Middle East. Since the Russian invasion, EU states have reported more than 80 suspected cases of human trafficking, fortunately only 5% of these were confirmed as cases of human trafficking following criminal investigations (COE, 2022).

Other suspected trafficking cases were reported to Europol from across the EU, involving suspected Ukrainian traffickers recruiting Ukrainians for labour exploitation and forced begging. There were also suspected cases of trafficking involving suspected Ukrainian traffickers recruiting Ukrainians for exploitation through begging or forced labour. As well as reported suspected cases of child trafficking, particularly related to commercial surrogacy and illegal adoption (EPMT, 2022).

Also, there are concerns about the risks of online abuse and sexual exploitation because many Ukrainians use social media and messaging apps like Facebook and Telegram to seek support, and sex traffickers could use them to recruit victims and advertise some online exploitative services (OSCE, 2022).

However, the majority of EU and surrounding countries have taken measures to facilitate safe and regular entry and stay for people leaving from Ukraine, and to facilitate their access to labour markets, education and health systems (IOM, 2022).

On the other hand, migrant smuggling networks took advantage of the war and the Ukrainian refugee crisis because all the border police's efforts and resources were occupied with the Ukrainian refugees, at the Ukrainian border. As a result, the number of illegal migrants from the Middle East traveling via the Western Balkans route has increased (Bezlov et al., 2023: 5-9)

At the beginning of September 2022, Frontex reported documenting the highest number of irregular entries since 2016, with an increase of 75% compared to the same period of the previous year. Thus, in 2022, the Western Balkan route became the most active European migration route, surpassing the Central one and the Western routes of the Mediterranean (Frontex, 2022). Although the war in Ukraine has little to do with the factors that have generally driven irregular migration from the MENA region along the Western Balkan route, it has nevertheless had a significant impact on the dynamics in 2022 and 2023. The effects were indirect and primarily related to the pressure placed on the institutional resources of some countries along the route, such as Bulgaria and Romania, which experienced a large influx of Ukrainian refugees.

Also, the outbreak of the war triggered a significant emigration of the Russian citizens. Like Ukrainians, Russian citizens also had the legal right to visa-free entry and could stay up to 30 (sometimes 90) days in most Western Balkan countries (except Kosovo). Russian citizens with Schengen visas could also enter Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Greece. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Albania and North Macedonia suspended visa-free entry for Russian citizens, but Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia did not (Bezlov et. al, 2023). Estimates from the Serbian Internal Affairs Ministry indicate that, in 2022, almost 220,000 Russians entered Serbia, although not all remained there (Krstic and Gocanin, 2023).

Meanwhile, human trafficking networks remain active inside Ukraine, and Ukraine is also becoming a source for trafficking, although by 2022 it was only a transit country for the networks. Official data reveal that a large number of non-EU nationals (especially from North Africa and Central Asia) were still living in Ukraine at the beginning of the conflict. These extremely vulnerable people had to use migrant smuggling networks to leave the country. With the introduction of temporary legal admission to the EU this problem has been solved (US-AID, 2022).

Another important aspect is the smuggling of Ukrainian men. Since the legal framework prohibits recruitable men from leaving the country, this has created opportunities for smugglers. More and more Ukrainians have turned to the services of these illegal migration networks to leave Ukrainian territory. Networks that have lost customers as a result of the Russian invasion that has made it impossible for people smuggled in from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria to enter Ukraine by air. Before 2022, Ukraine was on the northern route of migrants from the Middle East and Southeast Asia to EU countries, and illegal migration groups were familiar with the routes across the borders (Bezlov et al., 2023: 7).

2.3. Firearms Trafficking

There has been a history of illicit arms trafficking in Ukraine, dating back to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, when large amounts of small arms and light weapons were left behind without adequate record-keeping and inventory control. According to the Small Arms Survey, a portion of the 7.1 million small arms stocks held by the Ukrainian military was "diverted to conflict areas" (Martyniuk, 2017: 4). Also, according to the 2021 Global Organized Crime Index, Ukraine has one of the largest illegally trafficked arms markets in Europe, especially when it comes to small arms and ammunition.

About 300,000 small arms and light weapons were reported lost or stolen after Russia seized land during the invasion of Crimea between 2013 and 2015. Of these, only slightly more than 13 percent are recovered, while the vast majority remains in circulation on the black market (Martyniuk, 2017: 5).

In the months following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Council of the European Union, the US, and several other states provided weapons and ammunition, including heavy conventional weapons, large-calibre artillery systems, and small arms and light weapons. Such an unprecedented accumulation of new military hardware has also led to concerns of diversion given the logistical challenges of tracking systems, efficient end-use monitoring, and the previous experience after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Cohen, 2022).

There have been some reports of suspicious firearms trafficking. And there have been widespread allegations from Russia that deliveries of weapons to Ukraine would not be used to defend against Russian aggression but instead sold to criminal organizations. According to the report, titled "DoD's Accountability of Equipment Provided to Ukraine" there have been some plots to steal the weaponry and equipment, but they were disrupted by Ukraine's intelligence services and it was ultimately recovered (DOS, 2022a).

Diversion to criminal groups is a risk inherent to all arms transfers, but it is especially relevant in a context of active conflict without appropriate safeguards in place. Some respondents from Ukraine claimed that light weapons and arms were given out to the population in the first days of the conflict without proper accounting and registration. People willing to get arms only needed to show their ID, but often, these would not be requested or checked. In later periods the process has become better organized and managed (Focus, 2022).

In conclusion, the conflict in Ukraine has significantly increased the opportunities for illicit arms trafficking, both regionally and to and from the EU. Existing criminal structures and new trafficking routes can offer access to these weapons and the possibility of smuggling them across the borders. We can see this trend in Moldavia, where the number of weapons seizures on the border with Ukraine rise exponentially after the start of the war. From March to June 2022, the Moldavian authorities identified at the border with Ukraine almost 43 cases of arms

and ammunition trafficking and seized 24 weapons and more than 2,000 cartridges, which is a significant increase from the beginning of the war (UNICRI, 2022: 27).

Although the overall number of documented cross-border arms trafficking remains low, there will be a consistent threat of small arms and light weapons proliferation from Ukraine in the future after the active war fighting ends. The world has seen similar damage: in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have used U.S. weapons left behind to arm themselves and generate profits (Thrall and Cohen, 2021) and in Yemen, when U.S. weapons sales to Saudi Arabia turned the United States into an unwitting participant in the conflict (Cohen and Allen, 2022).

2.4. Cybersecurity threats

Cybercrime, in its various forms, represents an increasing threat to the EU. Cyber-attacks and online frauds, are highly complex crimes and manifest in diverse typologies. Offenders continue showing high levels of adaptability to new technologies and societal developments, while constantly enhancing cooperation and specialisation. Cybercrimes have a broad reach and inflict severe harm on individuals, public and private organisations, and the EU's economy and security.

The conflict in Ukraine has increased concerns for cyber security incidents and the resilience of critical business functions and services. Many analysts feared that the Russian military advance would be accompanied by destructive cyberwarfare and attacks from Russian-backed agents. And so it happened, several cybercriminal groups turned to attacking Ukraine, in particular. Basically, we are talking about a fight between hackers, who are divided into two camps, pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian. Search groups in the virtual environment to obtain or transmit as much information as possible to influence citizens in a certain way.

The effects of some cyber-attacks have also been observed internationally, especially in the EU. The boost in these malicious activities targeting EU is mostly due to a significant number of Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks affecting national and regional public institutions. These attacks were often politically motivated and coordinated by pro-Russian hacker groups in response to declarations or actions in support to Ukraine (Europol, 2023b). Also, ransomware groups have remained the most outstanding threat and have established a clear approach of going after international companies, public organisations, critical infrastructure and essential services. According to the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and reports from the private sector, ransomware attacks caused most concern for the manufacturing industry. Affiliate programs remain the dominant form of business organisation for ransomware groups. They work closely with other malware-as-a-service groups and initial access brokers (IABs) to compromise high-revenue targets and post huge ransom demands, running into millions of Euros (ENISA, 2022: 46).

Groups specializing in online fraud quickly responded to the circumstances and exploited the crisis by developing a variety of narratives related to it. Their targets represented people from EU which under the pretext of supporting Ukraine or Ukrainians were tricked into providing access to their financial data or providing sums of money. Fake Web Pages have been created to request money, using URLs that include fraudulent keys words. Emails claiming to raise funds for humanitarian efforts were sent out of fraud addresses. In some cases, groups have impersonated celebrities who have led or supported actual campaigns or falsified the domains of humanitarian organizations, inviting victims to donate in cryptocurrencies. Cyber-crime groups

continue to take advantage of legal and criminal privacy services to mask their actions and identities as their knowledge of countermeasures increases (Europol-IOCTA, 2023a).

Thanks to the joint efforts of defence and security institutions in several countries, it was possible to arrest prominent hackers, who were being prosecuted for attacks against several institutions and organizations (Europol, 2023b). Because this war is still ongoing, its impact on cyber security is considerable as group members reorganize their attack strategies and operate more on social media to attract supporters. In conclusion, it is found that cyber-attacks are increasingly complex, and the war in Ukraine is a source of motivation to support or not the parties involved by cyber-crime groups, hence the division of these groups into camp.

2.5. Trafficking of tobacco

With billions of cigarettes crossing its borders into the EU every year, Ukraine remains one of the largest sources of counterfeit and contraband cigarettes smuggled into the EU. Due to the extremely high profit margin, the fact that they are relatively easy to manufacture and move, as well as the low detection rates and relatively low penalties compared to other prohibited substances, cigarettes are among the most commonly traded products on the black market (TraCCC, 2019). According to a KPMG Stella report, there were 43.6 billion illegal cigarettes on the EU market in 2018, amounting to 8.6% of all cigarettes, and 4.2 billion were from Ukraine (KPMG, 2019).

Tobacco smuggling is particularly prevalent along the Eastern border, where it takes many forms, from small scale packages being hidden in vehicles to larger scale packages being clandestinely transported over the "green" border, usually at night. Also, the very large number of refugees entering Romania every day has made the smugglers take full advantage of the situation. The quoted sources stated that most of them started filling whole vans with cigarette cases, after which they wrote on the cars: children. In this sense, to be more believable, there are even some children in the respective vehicles, who are made to sit on the tobacco boxes. The very large amount of contraband goods introduced into Romania caused the price of Ukrainian cigarettes to drop three times, so that a pack ended up costing between 5 and 7 lei on the black market, while before the war it costs around 15 lei (Dumitrescu, 2022).

Only in Romania, in the last two years, significant increases in cigarette smuggling have been reported compared to the pre-conflict period. According to the website StopContrabanda.ro, which monitors the seizures of contraband cigarettes, in 2022 over 110 million contraband cigarettes were confiscated, and in 2023 over 150 million contraband cigarettes were confiscated by the Romanian authorities. In the south-east of Europe, at the eastern border of the EU, smugglers use new routes, including through the mountainous terrain of the Carpathians, which does not allow police patrolling. Losses to the EU common budget and national budgets from cigarette smuggling or the illicit tobacco trade amount to more than €10 billion annually (Gherasim, 2023).

Border guards in Lithuania and Latvia have also noticed an increase in the quantity of illicit tobacco coming from Belarus since the start of the conflict (Euroradio, 2022; Delfi Novosti, 2022). In the first quarter of 2022, Lithuanian border guards intercepted four times more illicit cigarettes than in the same period of 2021 and five times more compared to the first quarter of 2020 (Delfi, 2022). This is especially notable given the sanctions-related limitations on cargo movement from Belarus that make illegal commodities more difficult to hide in the trade flow.

In July 2022, Ukrainian intelligence agencies alleged that Belarussian authorities are not obstructing but actively encouraging smuggling on the borders with Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania to replace lost revenues resulting from sanctions and allow the flow of sanctioned goods (Babel, 2022).

Meanwhile, as the Odesa port has become impossible to use, most of the tobacco smuggled from Transnistria will likely find a way over Moldova's western land borders. In August 2022, a truck was detected by Moldovans attempting to transport a large amount of illicit tobacco from Moldova to Romania (Pravda, 2022). With the cost of living increasing in the West, it is a potential opportunity for smugglers to take advantage of an increasing appetite for cheap cigarettes.

2.6. Fuel smuggling

Eastern European countries have a history of smuggling activities. Ever since the war in the former Yugoslavia and despite international sanctions, thousands of tons of excise goods have been transported by cross-border organized crime groups. So, it is no wonder that Russia's war in Ukraine and Western sanctions against Russia have triggered risks fueling the smuggling of Russian crude oil along the well-known smuggling routes that cross the South East of the continent.

The port of Novorossiysk, an important oil export hub in southern Russia, appears to serve not only as an exit point for legitimate trade but also as a gateway for illicit transactions involving Russian oil. "Bulgaria, Romania, Albania and Serbia may emerge as hubs for fuel smuggling activities," and "ports like Burgas [Bulgaria], Constanta [Romania] and Durres could serve as entry points for smuggling operations in the Balkans, connecting with existing routes along the Danube River, where almost 40 locations in Serbia alone are at risk of fuel smuggling along the river"

With a history of oil smuggling, several countries in Southeast Europe including Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Albania could become hubs for Russian fuel smuggling activities. Also, ports on the Black Sea, Aegean Sea and Adriatic Sea, as well as ports on the Danube River with several locations with risk of fuel smuggling in Serbia alone, could serve as important hubs for smuggling activities (Kurtic, 2023).

The most important fuel smuggling route is Black Sea with ports of Constan?a in Romania and Burgas in Bulgaria, as important hubs. In December 2022, Bulgaria replaced Turkey as the world's third-largest buyer of Russian crude oil after China and India (The Jameston Foundation, 2023). The port of Burgas was the only one in Europe where Russian crude oil could still be on boarded following the EU's exemption of Bulgaria from the ban on Russian imports. Russian crude oil deliveries to Bulgaria increased by 30% in 2022. In the Black Sea port of Burgas there is the Neftohim refinery, connected to Lukoil, Russia's second-largest oil manufacturer. In 2022, Lukoil processed more than 7 million tonnes of crude oil at the Neftohim refinery – nearly twice as much as in 2021, when around 4.2 million tonnes were handled (Shikerova and Wesolowsky, 2023). At the same time, the media has reported that, from January to November 2022, Bulgaria exported €700 million worth of Russian fuel to Ukraine (Kotseva and Krassen, 2023). In October 2022, Romania stopped importing Russian crude oil, as the government officially announced that it had found alternative resources. However, at the same time, it appears that fuel from Russia is leaving Novorossiysk and is being shipped to Constanta on the Black Sea (Tănase, 2023).

In 2022, authorities around the Balkans confiscated a total of more than 3,000 tonnes of illicit fuel valued at 4.3 million euro, nearly four times the amount seized in 2021, along the Danube, the second largest river in Europe. The jump coincided with the start of the war in Ukraine. Such figures, however, are only the tip of the iceberg, in 2019, for example, Bulgaria alone suffered budget losses of some 250 million euro from the unlawful trade in fuel (Kurtic, 2023). Customs officials believe that the war in Ukraine have affected increased fuel smuggling on rivers, because fuel is lacking, prices are rising and Ukrainian crews are on ships with smuggled oil (Dordevic, 2023: 20-21).

Another fuel smuggling route is Mediterranean Sea with ports of Durres in Albania and Kalamata in Greece, as prominent hotspots. In February 2023, Albanian authorities intercepted a Liberian-registered ship in Durres. It is believed that the ship was involved in the transportation of Russian oil, loaded in Novorossiysk, through the waters off Kalamata, Greece (The Maritime Executive, 2023). These areas seem intended to serve as a hub for ship-to-ship transfers of Russian petroleum throughout 2022 and in 2023.

2.7. Money laundering

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 posed significant risks associated with money laundering and terrorist financing, according to a report by the European Union (EU). Conflict zones are particularly vulnerable to these risks, as criminal organizations and terrorist groups take advantage of the chaos and instability to carry out illicit activities. In the case of Ukraine, the conflict created a situation in which large amounts of money were being moved across borders, often with little oversight, creating a high risk of money laundering. The report also highlighted the role of corruption in facilitating these activities, noting that corrupt officials and businessmen have been able to use the conflict to engage in money laundering and other forms of financial crime (COM, 2022).

The situation was further exacerbated by the use of cryptocurrencies, which provide anonymity and can be easily used to transfer funds across borders, according to a Financial Action Task Force (FATF) report. Also, the report emphasized the risks posed by cryptocurrencies in the context of the conflict, noting that they offer a high degree of anonymity that can make tracking and tracing illicit funds very difficult for law enforcement agencies. Also, noted that the conflict has led to a proliferation of fake charities and other entities that are used to funnel funds to terrorist groups and other criminal organizations (FATF, 2022).

However, one of the most vulnerable regions for organized crime groups from Ukraine and the Russian Federation remains the Western Balkans, especially when it comes to exploiting governance gaps in the illicit finance domain. The opportunities are endless when it comes to money laundering in pro-Russian countries like Serbia and Bosnia, or with Albania's „fiscal amnesty" which allows cash deposits of up to 2 million euro without requesting supporting documents, enjoying legal immunity and only 5-10% tax, as well as schemes like „citizenship by investment" in Montenegro and North Macedonia (Intellinews, 2023).

3. Conclusion

The armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine will have long-term consequences for European security. At the moment, it is difficult to assess the consequences of this war in terms of security, but it is certain that in two years of war, the activity of organized criminal groups has

undergone significant changes, managing to adapt to the current context and affect European security. Also, there is a need for continuous monitoring of the threats and risks posed by cross-border organized crime in the context of the EU border conflict, together with a strengthening of the response capacities of law enforcement bodies in the region.

In the following period, new strategies to prevent and combat the activity of criminal organizations will have to benefit from an integrated approach in the fields of cross-border investigations, interoperability, and the exchange of operational information. Success will depend on how quickly and effectively the strategies or programs are implemented.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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