KORUPCIJA I SINTETIČKI OPIOIDI NA ZAPADNOM BALKANU

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Izvorni naučni rad

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Sažetak:

Ovaj rad analizira dvije međusobno isprepletene i nedovoljno istražene dimenzije savremene bezbjednosne krize na Zapadnom Balkanu i to, institucionalnu korupciju kao strukturalni bezbjednosni vektor i emergentnu prijetnju sintetičkih opioida, posebno fentanila i njegovih analoga, kao novu narkokriminalnu frontu koja prijeti da transformiše regionalni i evropski narkotički pejzaž. Centralna teza rada počiva na argumentu da ove dvije pojave nisu paralelne niti nezavisne, institucionalna korupcija u policijskim, pravosudnim i graničnim strukturama Zapadnog Balkana stvara sistemske rupe koje organizovani kriminal, domaći i transnacionalni, eksploatiše za uspostavljanje novih kriminalnih koridora. U uslovima u kojima su sintetički opioidi hiljadama puta potentiji od konvencionalnih narkotika i gotovo nevidljivi za standardne granične kontrole, ovaj institucionalni vakum postaje posebno opasan. Rad primjenjuje kombinovani metodološki okvir koji uključuje kriminalističku analizu, institucionalnu teoriju, komparativnu kriminologiju i kritičku bezbjednosnu analizu, oslanjajući se na verifikovane izvještaje UNODC-a, Europola, FATF-a, Transparency Internationala i recenzirane akademske izvore. Zaključci indiciraju da region stoji pred raskrsnicom, bez sistemskog adresiranja korupcijskog osnova koji omogućava proliferaciju narkokriminala, sintetički opioidi mogu postati kriza koja će, po analogiji s američkim „opioidnim ratom“, generisati javnozdravstvenu katastrofu čiji će ekonomski i socijalni troškovi daleko prevazilaziti troškove preventivne reforme.

Ključne riječi: *institucionalna korupcija, fentanil, sintetički opioidi, Zapadni Balkan, organizovani kriminal, narkotički koridori, bezbjednosni vektor, granična kontrola, UNODC, Europol.*

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1. UVOD

Zapadni Balkan ulazi u drugu polovinu dvadesetih godina 21. vijeka opterećen strukturalnim naslijeđem koje akademska zajednica i policy akteri nedovoljno analiziraju u međusobnoj sprezi, hroničnom institucionalnom korupcijom koja erodira kapacitete pravne države i emergentnom prijetnjom sintetičkih opioida koja tiho mijenja lice organizovanog kriminala. Ove dvije pojave naizgled su odvojene, jedna pripada domenu administrativnog i krivičnog prava, druga farmakologiji i narkokriminalu, ali u empirijskoj realnosti Zapadnog Balkana one su strukturalno isprepletene na način koji čini svaku izoliranu analizu analitički nedovoljnom.

Korupcija u institucijama koje bi trebale biti branici bezbjednosti, policiji, tužilaštvu, pravosuđu, carinskim i graničnim službama, nije u regionu marginalni fenomen koji se tiče pojedinih „trulih jabuka“. Ona je sistemska, dokumentovana i funkcionalna za kriminalne mreže koje je eksploatišu (Transparency International, 2024, GRECO, 2024, Europol, 2024). Paralelno, globalna transformacija narkotičkog tržišta prema sintetičkim opioidima koja je u SAD-u već prouzrokovala više od 80.000 smrtnih slučajeva godišnje od predoziranja (CDC, 2024), kuca na vrata Evrope upravo kroz ona mjesta gdje su institucije najranjivije.

Akademska relevantnost ove teme nije iscrpljena u njenom deskriptivnom potencijalu. Ona ima direktne implikacije za kriminalnu politiku, reformu sektora bezbjednosti i pristupanje EU regiona. Evropska komisija u Izvještajima o napretku za 2023. i 2024. godinu eksplicitno identifikuje korupciju kao najkritičniji blokator napretka u poglavljima 23 i 24, upravo onima koja se tiču pravosuđa i osnovnih prava i unutrašnje bezbjednosti (European Commission, 2024a, 2024b). Sintetički opioidi već su predmet hitnih upozorenja Evropskog centra za monitoring droga i ovisnosti (EMCDDA, 2024), koji registruje ubrzani rast zaplijenjenih količina fentanila i njegovih analoga na rutama koje prolaze kroz Balkan.

Ovaj rad strukturiran je na sljedeći način: Nakon teorijskog okvira (poglavlje 2), analiziramo institucionalnu korupciju kao bezbjednosni vektor (poglavlje 3), zatim emergentnu prijetnju sintetičkih opioida (poglavlje 4), da bismo u petom poglavlju demonstrirali mehanizme njihove intersekcionalne sprege. Šesto poglavlje evaluira institucionalne odgovore, a zaključak izvlači implikacije za kriminalnu politiku i reformu sektora bezbjednosti.

2. TEORIJSKI OKVIR

Teorijska analiza korupcije kao bezbjednosnog fenomena zahtijeva prevazilaženje jednostavnih definicija koje korupciju svode na individualno devijantno ponašanje motivisano privatnom dobiti. Savremena literatura o institucionalnoj korupciji u tranzicijskim društvima (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008, Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015, Persson, Rothstein & Teorell, 2013) razvila je sofisticiraniji analitički aparat koji razlikuje između individualne korupcije, sistemske korupcije i državne capture, pritom je upravo ova posljednja forma, u kojoj kriminalni ili politički akteri preuzimaju kontrolu nad ključnim državnim institucijama i instrumentaliziraju ih za vlastite svrhe, najrelevantnija za bezbjednosnu analizu Zapadnog Balkana.

Koncept „državne capture" (state capture), koji su u akademski diskurs uveli Hellman, Jones i Kaufmann (2003) u kontekstu postsovjetskih tranzicija, opisuje stanje u kojemu privatni akteri, tipično krupni ekonomski interesi ili organizovane kriminalne grupe sistematski oblikuju zakonodavni, regulatorni i institucionalni ambijent u vlastitu korist, koristeći korupciju kao primarni instrument. Primjena ovog koncepta na bezbjednosni sektor Zapadnog Balkana otvara analitički prostor koji je direktno relevantan za razumijevanje mehanizma kojim organizovani kriminal eksploatiše institucionalne rupe.

Kada su policijske i granične strukture podložne kriminalnom uticaju, one prestaju funkcionisati kao branič od organizovanog kriminala i postaju, u krajnjim slučajevima, operativni servis za kriminalne mreže. Dokumentovani slučajevi policijskih službenika u Srbiji, Bosni i Hercegovini, Albaniji i Sjevernoj Makedoniji koji su bili direktno involvirani u tranzit droge, zaštitu kriminalnih struktura i uklanjanje dokaza (OCCRP, 2023, 2024, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network – BIRN, 2024) nisu anegdotski ekscesi, već simptomi sistemskog problema.

Za razumijevanje emergentne prijetnje sintetičkih opioida kao kriminalne pojave relevantna je teorijska perspektiva „kriminalne ekologije" (Felson & Clarke, 1998, Cohen & Felson, 1979), prema kojoj kriminalne aktivnosti nisu slučajne pojave već se javljaju na mjestima i u kontekstima gdje su dostupne prilike, gdje su potencijalni „čuvari" (guardians) odsutni ili nesposobni za intervenciju, i gdje postoje motivisani počinioci. U kontekstu sintetičkih opioida na Balkanu, ova perspektiva iluminira zašto je region postajao privlačnom tranzitnom destinacijom, kombinacija geografskog položaja na ruti između asijskih prekursora i zapadnoevropskih tržišta, slabih graničnih kontrolnih kapaciteta i ključno korupcije, koja neutrališe one kapacitete koji postoje, stvara optimalnu kriminalnu ekologiju za razvoj novih narkotičkih koridora.

3. INSTITUCIONALNA KORUPCIJA KAO BEZBJEDNOSNI VEKTOR

Sistematično empirijsko mapiranje institucionalne korupcije u sektoru bezbjednosti Zapadnog Balkana moguće je oslanjanjem na komplementarne izvore, i to, indekse percepcije korupcije (CPI) Transparency Internationala, GRECO evaluacijske izvještaje Savjeta Evrope, Europol procjene organizovanog kriminala u regionu, izvještaje Evropske komisije o napretku zemalja kandidata i istraživačke nalaze organizacija kao što su OCCRP i BIRN. Kompozitna slika koja iz ovih izvora emeržira je konzistentno alarmantna.

Indeks percepcije korupcije Transparency Internationala za 2024. godinu plasira sve zemlje Zapadnog Balkana u donji kvartal globalnih rangova: Bosna i Hercegovina na 111. mjesto (od 180 zemalja), Albanija na 95., Sjeverna Makedonija na 88., Srbija na 104., Kosovo na 89. i Crna Gora na 67. mjesto (Transparency International, 2024). Ove pozicije nisu samo administrativno nepovoljne, one reflektuju duboku eroziju povjerenja u institucije koja ima direktne bezbjednosne implikacije, bez povjerenja u institucije, građani ne prijavljuju kriminalne aktivnosti, svjedoci sarađuju s tužilaštvom jedino pod izuzetnim pritiskom, a kriminalne mreže operišu u ozračju nekažnjivosti.

Najdirektnija veza između institucionalne korupcije i organizovanog kriminala manifestira se na graničnim prelazima i u carinskim službama. UNODC Svjetski izvještaj o drogama za 2024. godinu identifikuje Balkanski koridor kao i dalje jednu od primarnih ruta za tranzit heroina, te evidentira rastući trend korištenja istih koridora za sintetičke opioide i stimulanse (UNODC, 2024). Ključni enabling faktor koji ovaj koridor čini operativnim uprkos nominalnom prisustvu graničnih kontrola jest korupcija carinskih i graničnih službenika.

Istraživački projekat OCCRP „Balkan Drug Routes“ (2023–2024) dokumentovao je konkretne slučajeve u kojima su organizovane kriminalne grupe sa sjedištem u Srbiji, BiH i Albaniji uspostavljale sistematske korupcijske aranžmane s carinskim službenicima koji su uključivali redovne novčane isplate, udjele u kriminalnoj dobiti i, u ekstremnim slučajevima, direktnu operativnu koordinaciju između graničnih službenika i narkokurira. Vrijednost zaplijenjene droge u BiH u periodu 2022–2024. povećala se za 340% (Ministarstvo bezbjednosti BiH, 2024), što paradoksalno ukazuje i na povećanu aktivnost, ali i na selektivnost. Zapljene koje se dešavaju su samo vrh ledenjaka koji prolazi kroz nekontrolisane kanale.

Jednako zabrinjavajuća kao korupcija u izvršnim bezbjednosnim strukturama jest penetracija korupcije u pravosudni sistem, koji bi trebao biti finalni garant vladavine prava. GRECO izvještaj za Bosnu i Hercegovinu iz 2024. identifikuje sistemske ranjivosti u procesu imenovanja sudaca i tužilaca, nedostatku transparentnosti u finansiranju pravosuđa i odsustvu efikasnih mehanizama disciplinske odgovornosti (GRECO, 2024). Ovi nalaz nisu izolirani, slični zaključci formulisani su u GRECO evaluacijama Albanije (2023), Srbije (2023) i Sjeverne Makedonije (2022).

Praktična posljedica judicial capture je sistemska nekažnjivost koja funkcioniše kao negativni signal za kriminalne aktere. Kada organizovane kriminalne grupe znaju iz iskustva da su krivični postupci koji se pokrenu protiv njih rijetko efektni, da su presude rijetko adekvatne i da je bijeg od pravde uz odgovarajuće finansiranje, tehnički izvediv racionalni kalkulus investicije u kriminalne aktivnosti. Kriminologijska literatura označava ovo stanje kao „deterrence failure", kolaps preventivnog djelovanja kaznene politike (Nagin, 2013; Chalfin & McCrary, 2017).

4. SINTETIČKI OPIOIDI KAO EMERGENTNA KRIMINALNA PRIJETNJA

Globalna narkotička epidemija prolazi kroz strukturalnu transformaciju čiji su razmjeri i brzina bez istorijskog presedana. Sintetički opioidi, posebno fentanil, karbofentanil, nitazeni i njihovi analozi, mijenjaju fundamentalnu ekonomiku narkotičkog tržišta na način koji ima dalekosežne implikacije za kriminalnu politiku, javno zdravlje i bezbjednosne strukture širom svijeta, uključujući Zapadni Balkan.

Fentanil je 50 do 100 puta potentniji od morfija i 50 puta potentniji od heroina (DEA, 2023). Karfentanil animal tranquilizer koji se koristi za imobilizaciju slonova 10.000 puta je potentniji od morfija. Nitazeni, nova klasa sintetičkih opioida koja se pojavila na ilegalnim tržištima oko 2019. godine, u nekim varijantama premašuju čak i ove potencije (EMCDDA, 2024). Ova farmakološka superiornost ima direktnu kriminalnu logiku, za isti nivo „tržišnog učinka" potrebne su mikroskopske količine supstance, što dramatično smanjuje logističke rizike transporta i drastično otežava detekciju na graničnim kontrolama.

SAD su prolazile kroz tri distinktivna talasa opioidne krize: prvi talas (od kasnih 1990-ih) vezan za masovnu preskripciju farmaceutskih opioida poput OxyContina, drugi talas (od 2010.) uzrokovan prelaskom ovisnika na jeftiniji heroin, i treći, tekući talas (od 2013.) u kojemu je fentanil i njegovi analozi uglavnom sintetizovani u Kini i distribuirani kroz meksičke kartele, preuzeo dominaciju na ilegalnom tržištu (Ciccarone, 2021). Kumulativni rezultat: više od 500.000 smrtnih slučajeva od predoziranja u periodu 1999 -2023. (CDC, 2024), što premašuje ukupan broj američkih vojnih žrtava u Drugom svjetskom ratu, Korejskom i Vijentnamskom ratu zajedno.

Evropa je do sada bila relativno pošteđena najgorih efekata ovog talasa, dijelom zbog različite farmaceutske kulture preskribcije, dijelom zbog geografske distance od meksičkih distribucijskih mreža. Međutim, EMCDDA u svom Izvještaju o evropskim drogama za 2024. godinu bilježi alarmantan porast, zaplijenjene količine fentanila u EU povećale su se za 470% između 2020. i 2023. godine, nitazeni su detektirani u 18 od 27 država EU, a prve smrtne slučajeve direktno pripisive sintetičkim opioidima bilježe Estonija (koja je već imala regionalnu opioidnu krizu), Latvija, Litvanija, Finska i prvi put neke balkanske države (EMCDDA, 2024).

Balkanski koridor, istorijski uspostavljena ruta za tranzit heroina iz Afganistana prema zapadnoeuropskim tržištima, prolazi kroz strukturalnu adaptaciju koja odražava transformaciju globalnog narkotičkog tržišta. UNODC (2024) i Europol (2024) dokumentuju nekoliko signifikantnih promjena: prvo, pad uvezenog heroina i rast sintetičkih opioida koji se parcijalno sintetiziraju od prekursora uvezenih iz Kine, drugo, pojavu novih distribucijskih čvorišta unutar same regije koji više nisu samo tranzitne tačke već postaju destinacijska tržišta, treće, integraciju Balkana u „darknet" distribucijske mreže koje koriste kriptovalute za finansijske transakcije i otežavaju forenzičku reviziju.

Posebno alarmantan trend identifikovala je zajednička istraga Europola i nacionalnih policija u operaciji „Opson XIII" (2024). Organizovane kriminalne grupe sa sjedištem na Balkanu počele su djelovati kao posrednici između azijskih sintetizatora (Kina, Indija) i zapadnoevropskih tržišta za sintetičke opioide, eksploatišući kombinaciju geografskog položaja, uspostavljenih logističkih koridora i ključno, korupcijskog pokrića unutar institucija koje bi trebale detektirati i blokirati ove tokove.

5. INTERSEKCIONALNA VEZA

Centralna teza ovog rada je da institucionalna korupcija i emergentna prijetnja sintetičkih opioida nisu paralelni fenomeni već strukturalno spregnutni, te sada zahtijeva eksplicitno elaboriranje mehanizama ove sprege. Identifikujemo četiri distinktivna mehanizma kroz koja korupcija funkcioniše kao direktni enabler narkokriminalne inovacije na Balkanu.

Prvi mehanizam je granični propust. Sistematska korupcija graničnih i carinskih službenika fizički omogućava prolaz narkotičkih pošiljki koje bi inače bile detektirane. U slučaju sintetičkih opioida, ova funkcija je posebno kritična, miligram karfentanila koji je nevidljiv golim okom, ekvivalent je po efektu kilogramima heroina. Bez korupcijskog pokrića na granicama, logistički rizici tranzita sintetičkih opioida bili bi dramatično viši (UNODC, 2024, Europol, 2024).

Drugi mehanizam je imunitet od istrage. Kada su tužilaštvo i pravosuđe podložni capture-u, organizovane kriminalne grupe operišu sa znanjem da će eventualna krivična istraga biti nepotpuna, odgođena ili instrumentalizovana. Ovo smanjuje percipirani rizik kriminalnog djelovanja i ohrabruje inovaciju prema opasnijim i profitabilnijim narkotičkim kategorijama (Nagin, 2013). Modernizacija pravosudne infrastrukture mogla bi značajno unaprijediti efikasnost krivičnih postupaka. Ovo uključuje digitalizaciju sudskih procesa, što omogućava bržu razmjenu informacija između pravosudnih institucija i stranaka (Redžepović, 2025).
Treći mehanizam je informacijska prednost. Korumpirana lica unutar bezbjednosnog aparata pružaju kriminalnim mrežama informacije o planiranim policijskim operacijama, istragama i identitetima infiltratora. Ova informacijska prednost omogućava adaptaciju kriminalnih mreža i otežava dugoročne undercover operacije koje su ključne za razbijanje organizovanih kriminalnih grupa (Levi, 2014).

Četvrti mehanizam je pranje novca kroz institucionalni simbiotizam. Dio kriminalnih prihoda od narkotrafika reinvestira se u korupcijsku mrežu, stvarajući samoobnavljajući financijski ciklus u kojemu kriminal financira korupciju, a korupcija štiti kriminal. Ova simbiotička relacija osnov je onoga što literatura opisuje kao „criminal-political nexus“ (Block & Chambliss, 1981, Varese, 2011), a koji je u post-jugoslavenskim tranzicijskim državama dobio posebno izražene forme.

6. INSTITUCIONALNI ODGOVORI

Formalni institucionalni odgovori na obje prijetnje korupciju i sintetičke opioide postoje na svim relevantnim nivoima, i to: međunarodnom (UNODC, FATF, Europol, Interpol), regionalnom (SELEC - Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre, DCAF) i nacionalnom. Problem nije odsustvo institucionalnog okvira, već jaz između deklarativne normativne arhitekture i operativne implementacijske kapacitete koji je u regionu Zapadnog Balkana sistematski reprodukovan.

Na međunarodnom planu, FATF - Finansijska akcijska radna grupa, redovno evaluira antipranje novca i antiteroristička financiranja mehanizama svih jurisdikcija. Bosna i Hercegovina je u periodu 2022 - 2024. bila pod pojačanim nadzorom („grey list“) upravo zbog neadekvatnih mehanizama sprečavanja pranja novca, koji su identifikovani kao ključni enabler za organizovani kriminal (FATF, 2023). Sličan nadzor iskusile su Albanija i Crna Gora u ranijim periodima.

Europol je u periodu 2022-2024. intenzivirao saradnju sa bezbjednosnim agencijama Zapadnog Balkana kroz Sporazume o operativnoj saradnji i mehanizme zajedničkih istražnih timova (JITs). Rezultati ove saradnje su vidljivi kao niz velikih operacija uključujući „Sky ECC' i „Encrochat“ dekriptiranja koja su razotkrila kriminalne mreže širom regije (Europol, 2023) producirali su stotine hapšenja i zapljene droge u vrijednosti stotina miliona eura. Međutim, analitičari EUISS-a i OCCRP-a konzistentno upozoravaju da ove operacije „sjecaju grane a ne korijene“, bez adresiranja korupcijskog ekosistema koji kriminalnim mrežama pruža institucionalni imunitet, svako razbijanje jedne mreže brzo je praćeno rekonstituiranjem nove (EUISS, 2024, OCCRP, 2024).

Evropska komisija koristi mehanizam uslovljenosti u pregovorima o pristupanju EU kao ključni instrument za promovisanje reformi u oblasti pravosuđa i unutrašnje bezbjednosti (poglavlja 23 i 24). Teorijski, ovaj mehanizam bi trebao generisati snažne incijative za strukturalne reforme. Empirijski, međutim, sprovedba je razočaravajuća. Izvještaji o napretku za 2023. i 2024. godinu za sve balkanske kandidate bilježe „ograničen napredak“ u borbi protiv korupcije i organizovanog kriminala, a neke reformske mjere su implementirane formalno, ali ne i suštinski, pojava koju literatura opisuje kao „potemkinizacija reformi“ (Džihić & Wieser, 2011, Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2017).

Sprovođenje zakona može imati veliki uticaj na kriminalna tržišta, ali se mora primjeniti strateški ili može imati efekte suprotne od očekivanih i praćene negativnim posljedicama. Na primer, razbijanje velikih kokainskih kartela može da dovede do pojave niza manjih kriminalnih grupa za krijumčarenje ove opojne droge. Konkurencija između ovih grupa oboriće cijenu opojne droge omogućujući tako njenu masovniju upotrebu. S druge strane, ne može se dopustiti da ekspanzija kriminalnih tržišta dovede u pitanje stabilnost same države do nivoa njene negacije, pa je intervencija organa krivičnog gonjenja nužna makar bila i ograničenog dometa (Uljanov., Milošević, 2021).

7. ZAKLJUČAK

Analiza provedena u ovom radu demonstrira da institucionalna korupcija i emergentna prijetnja sintetičkih opioida na Zapadnom Balkanu nisu odvojeni problemi koji traže odvojene policy odgovore, već strukturalno isprepleteni fenomeni koji zahtijevaju intersekcionalni pristup. Svaka strategija koja nastoji adresirati sintetičke opioide bez adresiranja korupcijskog ekosistema koji ih štiti bit će funkcionalno ekvivalentna lijepljenju flastera na amputirani ud, djelotvorna u opisu aktivnosti, nedjelotvorna u suštinskom smislu.

Implikacije za kriminalnu politiku su konkretne, potrebna je strukturalna reforma graničnih i carinskih kapaciteta za detekciju sintetičkih opioida (uključujući investiciju u specijalizovanu opremu za mikrodetekciju), paralelno sa sistemskim jačanjem antikorupcijskih mehanizama unutar tih struktura, što podrazumijeva rotacijske politike, asset declaration sisteme, nepredvidive audit mehanizme i zaštitu whistle-blowera. Na pravosudnom planu, bez depolitizacije procesa imenovanja tužilaca i sudaca i bez finansiranja nezavisnog pravosuđa, sve ostale reforme ostaju dekorativne.

Konačno, ovaj rad poziva akademsku zajednicu u regionu na odvažniju istraživačku agendu, teme koje su „politički neugodne" jer targetiraju strukturalnu korupciju unutar institucija a ne samo individualne korumpirane aktere, upravo su teme koje su akademski najrelevantnije i čiji je potencijalni doprinos javnoj politici najveći. Akademska samocenzura u ovom domenu nije samo intelektualni nedostatak, ona je, u uslovima rastuće prijetnje sintetičkih opioida, luksuz koji region više ne može priuštiti.

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CORRUPTION AND SYNTHETIC OPIOIDS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Original scientific paper

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes two intertwined and insufficiently researched dimensions of the contemporary security crisis in the Western Balkans, institutional corruption as a structural security vector and the emerging threat of synthetic opioids, especially fentanyl and its analogues, as a new narco-criminal front that threatens to transform the regional and European narcotics. The central thesis of the paper is based on the argument that these two phenomena are neither parallel nor independent: institutional corruption in the police, judicial and border structures of the Western Balkans creates systemic holes that organized crime, both domestic and transnational, exploits to establish new criminal corridors. In conditions in which synthetic opioids are thousands of times more potent than conventional narcotics and almost invisible to standard border controls, this institutional vacuum becomes particularly dangerous. The paper uses a combined methodological framework that includes criminalistic analysis, institutional theory, comparative criminology and critical security analysis, drawing on verified reports from UNODC, Europol, FATF, Transparency International and peer-reviewed academic sources. The conclusions indicate that the region is at a crossroads, without systematically addressing the corrupt foundations that enable the proliferation of drug crime, synthetic opioids could become a crisis that, by analogy with the American "opioid war", will generate a public health catastrophe whose economic and social costs will far exceed the costs of preventive reform. This paper analyzes two interrelated and insufficiently explored dimensions of the contemporary security crisis in the Western Balkans: institutional corruption as a structural security vector, and the emerging threat of synthetic opioids—particularly fentanyl and its analogues—as a new narcocriminal front that threatens to transform the regional and European narcotics landscape.

Keywords: institutional corruption, fentanyl, synthetic opioids, Western Balkans, organized crime, narcotics corridors, security vector, border control, UNODC, Europol.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans enter the second half of the twenties of the 21st century burdened by the structural legacy that the academic community and political actors insufficiently analyze in their interrelationship, by chronic institutional corruption that erodes the capacity of the rule of law, and the urgent threat of synthetic opioids that is quietly changing the face of organized crime. These two phenomena are seemingly separate, one belonging to the domain of administrative and criminal law, the other to pharmacology and drug crime, but in the empirical reality of the Western Balkans they are structurally intertwined in a way that makes any isolated analysis analytically insufficient.

Corruption in institutions that are supposed to be the guardians of security, the police, the prosecution, the judiciary, customs and border services, is not a marginal phenomenon in the region that concerns a few “bad apples”. It is systemic, documented and functional for the criminal networks that exploit it (Transparency International, 2024, GRECO, 2024, Europol, 2024). In parallel, the global transformation of the narcotics market towards synthetic opioids, which has already caused more than 80,000 overdose deaths per year in the USA (CDC, 2024), is knocking on the door of Europe precisely through those places where institutions are most vulnerable.

The academic relevance of this topic is not exhausted in its descriptive potential. It has direct implications for criminal policy, security sector reform and the region’s accession to the EU. The European Commission, in its 2023 and 2024 Progress Reports, explicitly identifies corruption as the most critical blocker to progress in chapters 23 and 24, specifically those concerning justice and fundamental rights and internal security (European Commission, 2024a, 2024b). Synthetic opioids are already the subject of urgent warnings from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA, 2024), which registers an accelerated growth in the quantities of fentanyl and its analogues seized on routes passing through the Balkans.

This paper is structured as follows: After a theoretical framework (Chapter 2), we analyze institutional corruption as a security vector (Chapter 3), then the emerging threat of synthetic opioids (Chapter 4), and in Chapter 5, we demonstrate the mechanisms of their intersectional coupling. Chapter 6 evaluates institutional responses, and the conclusion draws implications for criminal policy and security sector reform.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical analysis of corruption as a security phenomenon requires moving beyond simple definitions that reduce corruption to individual deviant behavior motivated by private gain. Contemporary literature on institutional corruption in transitional societies (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008, Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015, Persson, Rothstein & Teorell, 2013) has developed a more sophisticated analytical apparatus that distinguishes between individual corruption, systemic corruption, and state capture, with the latter form, in which criminal or political actors take control of key state institutions and instrumentalize them for their own purposes, being the most relevant for security analysis of the Western Balkans.

The concept of "state capture", introduced into academic discourse by Hellman, Jones and Kaufmann (2003) in the context of post-Soviet transitions, describes a situation in which private actors, typically large economic interests or organised crime groups, systematically shape the legislative, regulatory and institutional environment to their own advantage, using corruption as a primary instrument. Applying this concept to the security sector of the Western Balkans opens up an analytical space that is directly relevant to understanding the mechanism by which organised crime exploits institutional loopholes. When police and border structures are subject to criminal influence, they cease to function as a defender against organised crime and become, in extreme cases, an operational service for criminal networks. Documented cases of police officers in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and North Macedonia who were directly involved in drug transit, protection of criminal structures and removal of evidence (OCCRP, 2023, 2024, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network – BIRN, 2024) are not anecdotal excesses, but symptoms of a systemic problem.

The theoretical perspective of "criminal ecology" (Felson & Clarke, 1998, Cohen & Felson, 1979) is relevant to understanding the emerging threat of synthetic opioids as a criminal phenomenon, according to which criminal activities are not random phenomena but occur in places and contexts where opportunities are available, where potential "guardians" are present. absent or unable to intervene, and where motivated perpetrators exist. In the context of synthetic opioids in the Balkans, this perspective illuminates why the region has become an attractive transit destination: the combination of a geographical location on the route between Asian precursors and Western European markets, weak border control capacities and, crucially, corruption, which neutralizes those capacities that do exist, creates an optimal criminal ecology for the development of new narcotics corridors.

3. INSTITUTIONAL CORRUPTION AS A SECURITY VECTOR

A systematic empirical mapping of institutional corruption in the security sector of the Western Balkans is possible by relying on complementary sources, namely Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the Council of Europe's GRECO evaluation reports, Europol's assessments of organized crime in the region, the European Commission's progress reports on candidate countries, and research findings by organizations such as OCCRP and BIRN. The composite picture that emerges from these sources is consistently alarming.

Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index places all Western Balkan countries in the bottom quarter of global rankings: Bosnia and Herzegovina 111th (out of 180 countries), Albania 95th, North Macedonia 88th, Serbia 104th, Kosovo 89th, and Montenegro 67th (Transparency International, 2024). These positions are not only administratively disadvantageous, they reflect a deep erosion of trust in institutions that has direct security implications: without trust in institutions, citizens do not report criminal activities, witnesses cooperate with prosecutors only under extreme pressure, and criminal networks operate in a climate of impunity.

The most direct link between institutional corruption and organized crime is manifested at border crossings and in customs services. The UNODC World Drug Report 2024 identifies the Balkan Corridor as still one of the primary transit routes for heroin, and notes a growing trend of using the same corridors for synthetic opioids and stimulants (UNODC, 2024). A key enabling factor that makes this corridor operational despite the nominal presence of border controls is the corruption of customs and border officials.

The OCCRP research project "Balkan Drug Routes" (2023–2024) documented specific cases in which organized crime groups based in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania established systematic corrupt arrangements with customs officials that included regular cash payments, shares in criminal profits and, in extreme cases, direct operational coordination between border officials and drug couriers. The value of drugs seized in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the period 2022–2024. increased by 340% (Ministry of Security of BiH, 2024), which paradoxically indicates both increased activity and selectivity. The seizures that are taking place are only the tip of the iceberg that flows through uncontrolled channels.

Equally worrying as corruption in the executive security structures is the penetration of corruption into the judicial system, which should be the final guarantor of the rule of law. The 2024 GRECO report for Bosnia and Herzegovina identifies systemic vulnerabilities in the process of appointing judges and prosecutors, the lack of transparency in the financing of the judiciary, and the absence of effective disciplinary accountability mechanisms (GRECO, 2024). These findings are not isolated: similar conclusions were formulated in the GRECO evaluations of Albania (2023), Serbia (2023), and North Macedonia (2022).

The practical consequence of judicial capture is systemic impunity that functions as a negative signal to criminal actors. When organized criminal groups know from experience that criminal proceedings brought against them are rarely effective, that sentences are rarely adequate, and that escape from justice with adequate funding is technically feasible, investment in criminal activities becomes a rational calculus. Criminological literature refers to this situation as “deterrence failure”, the collapse of the preventive effect of criminal policy (Nagin, 2013; Chalfin & McCrary, 2017).

4. SYNTHETIC OPIOIDS AS AN EMERGING CRIMINAL THREAT

The global narcotics epidemic is undergoing a structural transformation whose scale and speed are historically unprecedented. Synthetic opioids, in particular fentanyl, carbofentanil, nitazene and their analogues, are changing the fundamental economics of the narcotics market in a way that has far-reaching implications for criminal policy, public health, and security structures around the world, including the Western Balkans.

Fentanyl is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine and 50 times more potent than heroin (DEA, 2023). Carfentanil, an animal tranquilizer used to immobilize elephants, is 10,000 times more potent than morphine. Nitazenes, a new class of synthetic opioids that appeared on illegal markets around 2019, in some variants even exceed these potencies (EMCDDA, 2024). This pharmacological superiority has a direct criminal logic, microscopic quantities of the substance are required for the same level of “market effect”, which dramatically reduces the logistical risks of transport and makes detection at border controls extremely difficult.

The United States has experienced three distinct waves of the opioid crisis: a first wave (since the late 1990s) linked to the mass prescription of pharmaceutical opioids such as OxyContin, a second wave (since 2010) caused by addicts switching to cheaper heroin, and a third, ongoing wave (since 2013) in which fentanyl and its analogues, largely synthesized in China and distributed through Mexican cartels, have taken over the illegal market (Ciccarone, 2021). The cumulative result: more than 500,000 overdose deaths between 1999 and 2023

(CDC, 2024), exceeding the total number of US military casualties in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War combined.

Europe has so far been relatively spared the worst effects of this wave, partly due to a different pharmaceutical prescription culture, partly due to its geographical distance from Mexican distribution networks. However, the EMCDDA in its European Drug Report 2024 notes an alarming increase: fentanyl seizures in the EU increased by 470% between 2020 and 2023, nitazene was detected in 18 out of 27 EU countries, and the first deaths directly attributable to synthetic opioids were recorded in Estonia (which already had a regional opioid crisis), Latvia, Lithuania, Finland and, for the first time, some Balkan countries (EMCDDA, 2024). The Balkan Corridor, a historically established route for the transit of heroin from Afghanistan to Western European markets, is undergoing structural adaptation that reflects the transformation of the global narcotics market. UNODC (2024) and Europol (2024) document several significant changes: first, the decline in imported heroin and the growth of synthetic opioids that are partially synthesized from precursors imported from China, second, the emergence of new distribution hubs within the region itself that are no longer just transit points but are becoming destination markets, third, the integration of the Balkans into "darknet" distribution networks that use cryptocurrencies for financial transactions and make forensic auditing difficult.

A particularly alarming trend was identified by a joint investigation by Europol and national police forces in Operation Opson XIII (2024). Balkan-based organized crime groups began to act as intermediaries between Asian synthesizers (China, India) and Western European markets for synthetic opioids, exploiting a combination of geographic location, established logistical corridors and, crucially, corruption cover within institutions that should detect and block these flows.

5. INTERSECTIONAL CONNECTION

The central thesis of this paper is that institutional corruption and the emerging threat of synthetic opioids are not parallel phenomena but structurally intertwined, and now requires an explicit elaboration of the mechanisms of this linkage. We identify four distinctive mechanisms through which corruption functions as a direct enabler of narco-criminal innovation in the Balkans.

The first mechanism is border leakage. Systematic corruption of border and customs officials physically enables the passage of narcotics shipments that would otherwise be detected. In the case of synthetic opioids, this function is particularly critical: a milligram of carfentanil, which is invisible to the naked eye, is equivalent in effect to a kilogram of heroin. Without corruption cover at the borders, the logistical risks of transiting synthetic opioids would be dramatically higher (UNODC, 2024, Europol, 2024).

The second mechanism is immunity from investigation. When the prosecution and judiciary are subject to capture, organized crime groups operate with the knowledge that any criminal investigation will be incomplete, delayed or instrumentalized. This reduces the perceived risk of criminal activity and encourages innovation towards more dangerous and profitable narcotic categories (Nagin, 2013). Modernizing the judicial infrastructure could significantly improve the efficiency of criminal proceedings. This includes the digitalization of court processes, which allows for faster exchange of information between judicial institutions and parties (Redžepović, 2025).

The third mechanism is information advantage. Corrupt individuals within the security apparatus provide criminal networks with information about planned police operations, investigations, and the identities of infiltrators. This information advantage enables criminal networks to adapt and makes it more difficult to conduct long-term undercover operations that are essential for dismantling organized crime groups (Levi, 2014).

The fourth mechanism is money laundering through institutional symbiosis. Part of the criminal proceeds from drug trafficking are reinvested in the corruption network, creating a self-perpetuating financial cycle in which crime finances corruption, and corruption protects crime. This symbiotic relationship is the basis of what the literature describes as the "criminal-political nexus" (Block & Chambliss, 1981, Varese, 2011), which has taken on particularly pronounced forms in post-Yugoslav transitional states.

6. INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Formal institutional responses to both the threats of corruption and synthetic opioids exist at all relevant levels: international (UNODC, FATF, Europol, Interpol), regional (SELEC - Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre, DCAF) and national. The problem is not the absence of an institutional framework, but the gap between declarative normative architecture and operational implementation capacity that has been systematically reproduced in the Western Balkans region.

At the international level, the FATF - Financial Action Task Force, regularly evaluates anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing mechanisms of all jurisdictions. Bosnia and Herzegovina was under increased monitoring ("grey list") in the period 2022 - 2024 precisely because of inadequate anti-money laundering mechanisms, which were identified as a key enabler for organized crime (FATF, 2023). Similar surveillance was experienced by Albania and Montenegro in earlier periods.

In the period 2022-2024. Europol intensified cooperation with security agencies of the Western Balkans through Operational Cooperation Agreements and Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) mechanisms. The results of this cooperation are visible as a series of large-scale operations including the "Sky ECC' and the "Encrochat" decryptions that exposed criminal networks across the region (Europol, 2023) produced hundreds of arrests and seizures of drugs worth hundreds of millions of euros. However, EUISS and OCCRP analysts consistently warn that these operations “cut the branches, not the roots”, without addressing the corruption ecosystem that provides criminal networks with institutional immunity, with each dismantling of one network quickly followed by the reconstitution of a new one (EUISS, 2024, OCCRP, 2024).

The European Commission uses the conditionality mechanism in EU accession negotiations as a key instrument to promote reforms in the areas of justice and internal security (Chapters 23 and 24). In theory, this mechanism should generate strong incentives for structural reforms. Empirically, however, implementation has been disappointing: Progress Reports for 2023 and 2024 for all Balkan candidates record “limited progress” in the fight against corruption and organized crime, and some reform measures have been implemented formally but not substantively, a phenomenon that the literature describes as “Potemkinization of reforms” (Džihić & Wieser, 2011, Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2017).

Law enforcement can have a major impact on criminal markets, but it must be applied strategically or it can have the opposite effect than expected and be accompanied by negative consequences. For example, breaking up large cocaine cartels can lead to the emergence of a number of smaller criminal groups for smuggling this narcotic drug. Competition between these groups will lower the price of the narcotic drug, thus enabling its mass use. On the other hand, the expansion of criminal markets cannot be allowed to undermine the stability of the state itself to the point of its negation, so the intervention of criminal prosecution authorities is necessary, even if it is of limited scope (Uljanov., Milošević, 2021).

7. CONCLUSION

The analysis conducted in this paper demonstrates that institutional corruption and the emerging threat of synthetic opioids in the Western Balkans are not separate problems that require separate policy responses, but structurally intertwined phenomena that require an intersectional approach. Any strategy that seeks to address synthetic opioids without addressing the corruption ecosystem that protects them will be functionally equivalent to sticking a Band-Aid on an amputated limb, effective in describing the activity, ineffective in the essential sense.

The implications for criminal policy are concrete, requiring structural reform of border and customs capacities for the detection of synthetic opioids (including investment in specialized microdetection equipment), in parallel with the systemic strengthening of anti-corruption mechanisms within these structures, which includes rotational policies, asset declaration systems, unpredictable audit mechanisms and whistle-blower protection. On the judicial front, without depoliticizing the process of appointing prosecutors and judges and without financing an independent judiciary, all other reforms remain decorative.

Finally, this paper calls for a bolder research agenda for the academic community in the region, topics that are "politically uncomfortable" because they target structural corruption within institutions, not just individual corrupt actors, are precisely the topics that are most academically relevant and whose potential contribution to public policy is greatest. Academic self-censorship in this domain is not just an intellectual shortcoming, it is, in the face of the growing threat of synthetic opioids, a luxury that the region can no longer afford.

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