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The Evolution of Albania's Strategy Against Organized Crime: From a Police-Based to a Multi-Agency Model

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Abstract

Organized crime in Albania has evolved into a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing drug trafficking, money laundering, cyber-enabled offenses, and environmental crime. While cannabis cultivation remains largely domestic, Albania continues to function as a key transit route for heroin and cocaine destined for European Union markets. The growing use of cryptocurrencies and the Dark Web has further facilitated financial concealment and cross-border transactions, intensifying challenges for law enforcement and regulatory authorities. International assessments consistently indicate elevated levels of criminal activity, with illicit financial flows and high-risk criminal markets—particularly narcotics trafficking, financial crime, cybercrime, and human smuggling—remaining significant concerns.

Against this backdrop, Albania has undertaken a substantial transformation in its approach to combating organized crime, shifting from a predominantly police-centered model toward a comprehensive, multi-institutional framework that emphasizes prevention, interagency coordination, and the reuse of confiscated criminal assets for public benefit. This paper examines the evolution of national strategies, institutional architecture, and operational capacities, with particular attention to newly established and strengthened bodies such as the Special Prosecution Office Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK), the National Bureau of Investigation, and asset recovery and financial intelligence mechanisms. Drawing on international academic literature, European Commission progress reports, and institutional assessments, the study evaluates Albania's adaptive capacity to respond to evolving criminal dynamics and its efforts to align domestic policies and practices with European Union standards.

Keywords: organized crime; drug trafficking; institutional capacity; money laundering; Albania.

1. Introduction

Money laundering is fueled by proceeds derived from tax crimes, fraud, and human trafficking, exploiting sectors such as real estate, construction, consultancy, and notary

services, as well as formal financial channels (Council of Europe, 2023). In addition, cyber-enabled offenses and the illegal exploitation of natural resources—including large-scale deforestation—highlight the growing complexity and diversification of criminal activity, posing significant challenges for law enforcement and regulatory institutions (Europol, 2022; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2019).

According to the *Global Organized Crime Index 2023* published by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), Albania's overall criminality score is 5.17 on a scale from 1 to 10. Although this represents a modest improvement compared with 2021, it continues to indicate persistently high levels of activity in criminal markets (GI-TOC, 2023). The index identifies cocaine and heroin trafficking, cannabis production, financial and cybercrime, and human smuggling as particularly high-risk criminal markets in Albania. Illicit financial flows (IFFs) remain significant: illicit outflows are estimated at approximately 2.16% of gross domestic product (GDP), while illicit inflows account for roughly 0.84% of GDP (UNODC, 2019).

Over the past decade, Albania's approach to combating organized crime has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from a predominantly police-centered model to a comprehensive, multi-institutional strategy grounded in prevention and inter-institutional coordination (Ministry of Interior, 2021). This new approach places particular emphasis on strengthening preventive mechanisms and on the reuse of seized and confiscated assets for social projects, thereby supporting both the institutions involved in combating organized crime and local government structures. This paper examines the evolution of Albania's national strategy against organized crime, focusing on changes in the institutional architecture, the establishment of new institutions and specialized capacities, and the improvement and restructuring of operational processes in key sectors. It also analyzes the development of inter-institutional infrastructure for data collection and statistical analysis. Particular attention is devoted to European Union recommendations and the measures undertaken to implement them in this field.

Among the key institutions introduced or strengthened within the new institutional framework are the Special Structure Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK), the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), the Asset Recovery Office (ARO), as well as the enhanced role of the Financial Intelligence Agency and the Agency for the Administration of Seized and Confiscated Assets (AAPSK).

This paper is based on an assessment and analysis of the institutions responsible for combating organized crime and their respective mandates, as well as a comparative evaluation of their evolution and adaptive capacity in response to changing forms of criminality and the broader operational context. The study draws on international literature, the European Commission's Progress Reports for Albania (2023–2025), and analyses of the role of civil society in promoting prevention as a central pillar of policies against organized crime.

2. Evolution of organized crime in Albania

Historically, Albania approached organized crime primarily as a challenge for the police, relying on arrests, localized operations, and repressive measures. However, international research has demonstrated that Albanian criminal groups operate transnationally (Arsovska, 2015; Morselli, 2009) and are closely intertwined with socioeconomic conditions, migration patterns, and political corruption. As a result, a purely police-centered approach proved insufficient and ineffective (Arsovska, 2015; Morselli, 2009).

In the early 2000s, Albania faced the consolidation of criminal groups that had emerged during the post-communist transition, with a primary focus on heroin trafficking toward European markets (Open Society Foundations–Western Balkans [OSFWB], 2021). Initial sectoral strategies to combat organized crime prioritized police and prosecutorial action, while interinstitutional coordination remained limited (OCINDEX, 2021). Over time, these criminal networks became increasingly sophisticated, strengthening their links to international markets and diversifying into money laundering and cybercrime.

Between 2006 and 2010, criminal networks became more structured and increasingly involved in smuggling and corruption. Despite these developments, Albania's national response remained sectoral, and interinstitutional coordination continued to be fragmented (Cross-cutting Strategy for the Fight against Organized Crime, Illegal Trafficking, and Terrorism, 2013–2020).

During the 2011–2015 period, organized crime expanded further by integrating transnational networks and financial criminal activities, thereby increasing its overall complexity. The adoption of the 2013–2020 Cross-cutting Strategy aimed to harmonize interinstitutional coordination and address organized crime, trafficking, financial crime, and terrorism within a single policy framework. Nevertheless, implementation remained uneven, and the impact of adopted measures was limited (Cross-cutting Strategy for the Fight against Organized Crime, Illegal Trafficking, and Terrorism, 2013–2020).

From 2016 to 2020, organized crime in Albania continued to modernize, intensifying cocaine and synthetic drug trafficking and increasingly exploiting financial channels for money laundering (Cluster 1 Albania, 2020). Despite these evolving threats, coordination mechanisms and operational capacities under the 2013–2020 strategy remained fragmented (European Commission, 2020).

A significant shift occurred with the adoption of the *Strategy against Organized and Serious Crime 2021–2025* (Government of Albania, 2020). This strategy introduced clear objectives, including the strengthening of financial investigation capacities, increased confiscation of criminal assets, and the establishment of the Asset Recovery Office. It also enhanced interinstitutional cooperation among SPAK, the State Police, Customs, and financial authorities, while expanding international cooperation with Europol, Eurojust, and Interpol to address transnational crime and illicit trafficking. Furthermore, the strategy emphasized the enhancement of operational and technical

capacities across law enforcement institutions (Government of Albania, 2020). During this period, organized crime was increasingly characterized by transnational networks, money laundering, financial criminal activity, and cybercrime, necessitating multisectoral approaches and effective interinstitutional coordination. The 2023 and 2024 reports of the European Commission and the European External Action Service highlight measurable progress in this regard. These reports note improved coordination between SPAK and Albania's financial institutions, including joint financial investigations, asset confiscation, and cooperation with European agencies (European Commission, 2024; European External Action Service [EEAS], 2023). The 2023 report concludes that Albania demonstrates "a certain level of preparation in the fight against organized crime, with good and consistent cooperation with EU Member States and EU agencies" (EEAS, 2023). Similarly, the 2024 report emphasizes that SPAK's structured work has produced concrete results, including cases involving high-level officials, alongside intensified financial investigations and strengthened interinstitutional coordination (European Commission, 2024). As part of broader domestic reforms, Albania has reinforced interinstitutional coordination by adapting traditional institutions and integrating newly created structures with international cooperation platforms. The country has joined or obtained observer status in key European networks, including the Camden Asset Recovery Inter-Agency Network (CARIN), the European Network of Fugitive Active Search Teams (ENFAST), and the European Network of Forensic Science Institutes (ENFSI). Participation in these networks facilitates intelligence exchange, capacity building, and improved tracing of criminal assets and cross-border financial investigations, contributing to a more coordinated and effective response to organized crime (EEAS, 2023; European Commission, 2024). This increased integration with international organizations, combined with enhanced national interinstitutional cooperation through specialized units addressing financial crime, cybercrime, and trafficking, illustrates a clear shift from fragmented interventions toward a strategic, multi-agency paradigm. The implementation of the 2021–2025 strategy represents a critical step in operationalizing this transformation, moving away from isolated actions toward a coordinated and institutionalized approach. Recent developments during 2023–2024 indicate a progressively successful transition, particularly in financial investigative capacities, asset confiscation, and cooperation with European agencies.

3. Evolution of the strategy against organized crime

In earlier periods, Albania's national strategies relied predominantly on policing, with responses that were largely reactive and operationally fragmented. As a result, these measures had a limited impact on dismantling organized criminal networks operating at higher and transnational levels. As noted by Arsovska (2015), this model failed to address the complexity, adaptability, and resilience of Albanian criminal groups, which relied on diaspora networks and increasingly sophisticated financial

channels.

The emergence of new forms of crime, together with the requirements of effective crime control and Albania's European Union integration process, necessitated a shift beyond traditional criminal justice responses. This shift required the adoption of a systematic and interinstitutional approach encompassing prevention, preparation, prosecution, and protection (the "4Ps") in addressing organized crime. Within this framework, particular emphasis is placed on the management of criminal assets and the involvement of civil society as integral components of comprehensive crime prevention and response strategies.

Over the past 25 years, Albania has experienced profound political, institutional, and social transformations that have significantly influenced the state's understanding and governance of organized crime. In the absence of an established policymaking tradition, early responses lacked an integrated strategic framework, despite the proliferation of diverse criminal activities, including human trafficking, cannabis cultivation, drug trafficking, money laundering, economic and financial crimes, and, more recently, cybercrime. Domestic pressures to modernize state institutions and capacities, combined with the expectations of international partners and obligations arising from the European Union integration process, created the conditions for gradual reform. Initially conceived as a largely technical exercise, this process progressively evolved into a central political priority.

2000–2008: Police-Based Approach and the Absence of an Integrated Multi-Agency Strategy

In the early 2000s, Albania confronted a situation in which organized crime had developed more rapidly than state institutions. This period was characterized by scattered operations and ad hoc initiatives, undertaken in the absence of a unified national strategy. State institutions operated in a fragmented manner: the police largely reacted to criminal incidents, the prosecution concentrated on individual criminal investigations, and financial, customs, and tax authorities rarely engaged in systematic cooperation with security and investigative bodies. This lack of coordination created a significant gap between the operational requirements of combating organized crime and the institutional capacities available at the time.

Criminal activity during this period was closely linked to Albania's political and economic transition, enabling organized crime to establish connections with the informal economy, political structures, and international networks. At the same time, limited investigative capacity, weak technological infrastructure, the absence of integrated databases, and persistent institutional corruption constrained the potential for effective inter-agency collaboration. As Albania was still in the process of consolidating its state institutions, responses to organized crime were often driven more by international pressure than by domestically developed capacities.

Despite these structural limitations, responsibility for addressing organized crime was largely placed on the Albanian State Police. Solutions were frequently sought through policing alone, without adequate consideration of legal constraints, limited

specialized expertise in complex criminal phenomena, restricted access to critical databases, and broader institutional weaknesses. As a result, the police-centered approach proved insufficient to address the scale, sophistication, and transnational dimensions of organized crime during this period.

2008–2013: The First Cross-Sectoral Strategy and the Emergence of the Multi-Agency Concept (Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 1140, July 30, 2008)

The adoption of the *Inter-Sectoral Strategy for Combating Organized Crime, Illegal Trafficking, and Terrorism 2008–2013* marked the first major turning point in Albania's conceptualization of the fight against organized crime and in the structuring of its public security architecture. For the first time, a comprehensive strategic document brought together multiple institutions within a single framework, establishing objectives, defining measures, and allocating tasks and responsibilities.

Although the strategy was adopted in response to European Union requirements, it also reflected domestic needs arising from Albania's evolving security context. Notably, the document initiated the integration of the roles of the police, prosecution, financial agencies, border institutions, and intelligence services. Despite this conceptual progress, the strategy exhibited two significant shortcomings. First, at the conceptual level, it addressed several complex and distinct policy areas—organized crime, terrorism, and illegal trafficking—within a single framework and through largely uniform mechanisms. This approach complicated both strategic design and implementation, given the differing objectives, methods, and institutional tools required to address each phenomenon.

Second, at the implementation level, the interinstitutional approach remained limited due to the absence of a consolidated culture of cooperation, the lack of standardized reporting procedures, and the absence of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Moreover, the number of institutions formally involved was relatively limited compared to later strategies, and many forms of cooperation remained largely formal, without permanent technical or operational structures to support them. Nevertheless, the 2008–2013 strategy marked the beginning of a new phase in the institutionalization of the multi-agency approach to combating organized crime in Albania.

2013–2020: Expansion of the Institutional Spectrum and Increased Intersectoral Interaction at the Operational Level (Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 663, July 17, 2013, as amended in 2014 and 2016)

The period from 2013 to 2020 represents a phase of deepening interinstitutional expansion. The revised strategy significantly broadened the range of participating institutions, incorporating additional ministries, fiscal authorities, intelligence structures, customs and tax services, as well as bodies specialized in the prevention of money laundering and asset confiscation.

During this phase, organized crime was increasingly conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon requiring coordinated interventions across multiple

domains, including security, justice, economic governance, fiscal policy, social protection, and international cooperation. This expansion was accompanied by Albania's gradual adoption of European Union practices related to risk assessment, legislative harmonization, and technical capacity building.

Despite these advancements, the 2013–2020 strategy was affected by several structural weaknesses. These included the absence of clearly defined and measurable performance indicators, limited public reporting and transparency, and overlapping institutional mandates. Furthermore, the lack of mandatory monitoring and evaluation mechanisms meant that implementation was often inconsistent, and systematic impact assessments were largely absent.

2021–2025: Consolidation of the Institutional Approach Through Integrated Processes and Information Management (Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 1140, December 24, 2020, as amended in 2021, 2023, and 2024)

The most significant evolution in Albania's strategic approach occurred with the adoption of the *Strategy Against Organized Crime and Serious Crime 2021–2025*, which represents the most comprehensive and detailed policy framework developed to date. The strategy assigns implementation responsibilities to 18 institutions, thereby establishing the most advanced and formalized structure of interinstitutional cooperation in Albania's history.

This period introduced several key innovations, including the establishment of integrated political-level management mechanisms, the introduction of regular and structured reporting obligations, the formal clarification of roles for both law enforcement and supporting institutions, and the systematic inclusion of financial and intelligence analysis bodies. In addition, the strategy strengthened victim protection approaches and enhanced cooperation with European Union partners and agencies. A central objective of the 2021–2025 strategy is to shift the focus from reactive responses to strategic prevention, emphasizing risk identification, criminal market analysis, and proactive intervention. While the involvement of a large number of institutions enhances the potential for comprehensive cooperation, it also increases the need for sophisticated coordination mechanisms, advanced information-sharing systems, and robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks to ensure effective implementation.

2022–2025: Integration of the Social Dimension and the Development of Victim-Protection Strategies

In recent years, Albania has witnessed a notable expansion of the interinstitutional approach to combating organized crime, with increased emphasis on its social dimension. The adoption of the *Cross-Sectoral Strategy for Victim Protection 2024–2030* (Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 729, December 13, 2023) represents a significant conceptual shift, reframing organized crime not solely as a security challenge but as a phenomenon that causes profound harm to individuals, communities, and social structures.

For the first time, a single strategic document brings together law enforcement

bodies, the prosecution, social services, legal aid institutions, psychosocial support providers, and both public and non-public organizations involved in protection and rehabilitation. In earlier strategies addressing organized crime, the fourth pillar of the 4P model—protection—was treated primarily as a complementary component alongside prevention, prosecution, and partnership. During the 2022–2025 period, however, protection is addressed in a more comprehensive and structured manner within a unified policy framework, reflecting a deeper integration of victim-centered approaches into the broader strategy for preventing and mitigating organized crime. This expansion introduces a human-centered perspective into Albania’s anti-crime policies and aligns national practices more closely with European Union standards on victims’ rights, restorative justice, and social reintegration.

At the institutional level, the justice reform initiated in 2016 further reshaped Albania’s strategic landscape through the establishment of specialized bodies, including the Special Structure Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK), the National Bureau of Investigation, and the Special Courts. These institutions are designed to conduct complex investigations and prosecutions related to corruption and organized crime and operate in close coordination with financial authorities, customs, and other relevant bodies, thereby reinforcing an interinstitutional model that extends beyond traditional policing approaches (New Lines Institute, 2025; Wahl, 2023).

Strategic priorities have also increasingly shifted toward prevention. For the first time, systematic mechanisms for the reuse of seized and confiscated criminal assets for social and community-based projects are being implemented. This approach transforms illicit proceeds into resources for public benefit and social reintegration. As highlighted in the European Commission’s Progress Reports (2023–2025), this policy orientation seeks not only to strengthen prosecutorial outcomes but also to address underlying drivers of criminality, thereby enhancing the long-term social impact and sustainability of Albania’s anti-organized crime framework.

4. Institutional Architecture and the Interagency Approach

Constitutional reforms and the establishment of specialized institutions targeting organized crime and corruption represent a fundamental transformation of Albania’s institutional architecture. The Special Structure Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) operates with a high degree of functional and institutional independence and holds exclusive competencies for the investigation and prosecution of high-level corruption and organized crime. The National Bureau of Investigation (NBI, or BKH) supports SPAK through complex financial, cyber, and technological investigations, drawing on international models such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Italy’s anti-mafia structures. In parallel, the establishment of specialized courts has enhanced judicial expertise while reducing exposure to political influence (New Lines Institute, 2025; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024).

The interagency approach has evolved from basic coordination mechanisms

toward a more integrated system in which cooperation among SPAK, the general prosecution, the State Police, customs and tax authorities, financial intelligence units, and social institutions is essential to dismantling complex criminal networks. This model increasingly relies on structured information-sharing, joint investigations, and coordinated operational planning. Cooperation with European institutions—particularly the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO), Europol, and Eurojust—further illustrates an approach that extends beyond national borders and addresses the transnational nature of organized crime (European Commission, 2025; Wahl, 2023).

A central component of the contemporary strategy is the integration of crime prevention and social reintegration measures. Albania has begun systematically reusing seized and confiscated criminal assets for social and community-based projects, producing a dual effect: weakening criminal structures while generating tangible public benefits (European Commission, 2024). This model has been supported by civil society organizations, which play a critical role in monitoring asset use, promoting transparency, and implementing preventive initiatives in schools, local communities, and public institutions.

Civil society actors have also contributed to a broader shift in policy orientation, advocating for a balance between criminal prosecution and preventive measures. Through policy proposals, public awareness campaigns, and social projects, these actors have helped promote legal reforms and foster a more inclusive and preventive approach to combating organized crime.

European Union progress reports for the period 2023–2025 have acted as key catalysts for institutional and strategic reform. These reports consistently emphasize the need to safeguard the independence of SPAK and specialized courts, strengthen interagency cooperation, enhance the use of financial intelligence, promote the social reuse of confiscated assets, and further integrate preventive and social dimensions into anti-crime policies.

Recent strategies have produced measurable improvements, including more advanced and complex investigations, increased asset confiscations, stronger interinstitutional and international cooperation, and the social reintegration of confiscated assets. Nevertheless, persistent challenges remain, including judicial backlogs, delays in proceedings, the need to protect institutional independence, inconsistencies in interagency cooperation in practice, and the necessity to expand preventive mechanisms, particularly at the local level.

5. The Impact of European Union Recommendations on Albania’s Policies and Strategic Framework for Preventing and Combating Organized and Serious Crime

Between 2021 and 2024, European Union progress reports highlighted moderate but consistent improvements in Albania’s fight against organized crime, particularly in terms of institutional activity, interagency cooperation, and increased focus on transnational and financial investigations. At the same time, these reports

emphasized the need for further progress in asset confiscation, anti-money laundering investigations, cybercrime, and the fight against human trafficking, indicating that significant structural and operational challenges persist.

According to the 2024 General Prosecutor's Report, Albanian authorities processed 61,167 criminal files, representing a 10.5% increase compared with 2023, and initiated 47,576 criminal proceedings, an increase of 4.79%. These figures reflect strengthened investigative and prosecutorial capacities and demonstrate Albania's efforts to respond to EU recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of law enforcement institutions.

Notably, anti-money laundering cases increased by 59%, while financial and banking-related crimes rose by 33%, indicating intensified enforcement in the economic and financial dimensions of organized crime. Asset confiscations also showed substantial growth, rising from approximately €5.8 million in 2022 to €11 million in 2023. Preliminary data for the first nine months of 2024 indicate approximately €16 million in seized assets and €4 million confiscated, illustrating ongoing efforts to disrupt criminal financial structures.

EU reporting plays a critical guiding role in shaping Albania's national strategies against organized crime. Recommendations to strengthen financial investigative capacities, expand SPAK's operational scope, and increase asset confiscations are directly reflected in the *Strategy Against Organized and Serious Crime 2021–2025*. Enhanced cooperation with Europol and Eurojust further demonstrates the practical implementation of EU guidance and the adoption of a coordinated, transnational approach. This consolidated interinstitutional framework—bringing together the police, SPAK, the prosecution, customs, and the Ministry of Finance—has contributed to an increase in criminal proceedings and the development of more structured financial investigations.

Asset recovery represents a particularly prominent area of EU-driven reform. While increased confiscation values indicate tangible progress in disrupting criminal financial flows, EU reports continue to highlight inconsistencies in implementation and the need to improve the tracing and recovery of overseas and concealed assets. Addressing these challenges requires advanced investigative capacities, enhanced financial intelligence, and deeper international cooperation.

International collaboration and transnational proceedings are further areas where EU influence is evident. The growth in active cases handled through Eurojust and increased cooperation with EU Member State authorities demonstrate concrete implementation of EU requirements for cross-border coordination. The expansion of national strategies to address financial crime, trafficking, cybercrime, and other transnational offenses directly reflects EU assessments and the need for specialized, integrated interagency capacities.

Despite these advances, challenges remain. Conviction rates—particularly in cases involving high-level corruption and organized criminal networks—remain relatively low compared with investigative activity. Financial investigations are not always accompanied by effective confiscation, especially in cases involving assets located

abroad, underscoring gaps in international coordination and technical expertise. The evolving complexity of organized crime, particularly in financial and transnational dimensions, continues to demand advanced capacities, sustained international cooperation, and continuous oversight, making the transition from strategic frameworks to durable results an ongoing challenge.

Based on EU data and recommendations, several conclusions can be drawn. Albania has made clear progress in implementing key EU priorities, particularly in strengthening investigative capacities, increasing asset confiscations, and enhancing international cooperation. National strategies and institutional arrangements—especially the central role of SPAK in financial investigations and organized crime cases—are broadly aligned with EU standards. However, ensuring sustainable effectiveness requires further consolidation of institutional capacities, improved transparency and public reporting, and consistent implementation across all agencies. Accordingly, it is recommended that Albania further institutionalize and strengthen the Asset Recovery Office, integrate financial investigations as a standard component of all organized crime cases, enhance international cooperation and real-time information exchange, establish measurable indicators accompanied by annual public reporting, and expand targeted measures for victim protection, cybercrime, and human trafficking. This comprehensive approach—combining preventive, protective, and repressive measures—provides a solid foundation for strengthening Albania’s fight against organized crime and aligning national practices more closely with European Union standards and recommendations.

6. Conclusion

Organized crime is a complex, multidimensional, and transnational phenomenon that necessitates integrated interinstitutional and international responses. Contemporary research conceptualizes criminal networks as “small-world networks,” in which relationships among key actors and groups are more significant than rigid hierarchical structures (D’Orsogna et al., 2022; Trotta & Alfares, 2022). This perspective underscores that effective strategies against organized crime cannot rely solely on ad hoc prosecutions but must encompass intelligence-led policing, financial investigations, asset confiscation, victim protection, and structured interagency coordination.

In the Albanian context, the approach to combating organized crime has evolved substantially between 2000 and 2025. Early strategies, particularly during the 2008–2013 period, focused on initiating interinstitutional coordination but involved a limited number of institutions and were constrained by insufficient capacities, weak data infrastructure, and fragmented cooperation (Ministry of Interior, 2008). While these efforts were foundational, their effectiveness remained limited.

Between 2013 and 2020, revised strategies increasingly conceptualized organized crime as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing trafficking, money laundering, corruption, and economic infiltration (Ministry of Interior, 2013). This period marked a significant expansion in institutional participation, including the

Ministries of Interior, Justice, and Finance, the prosecution, customs authorities, intelligence services, and law enforcement bodies. Nevertheless, independent assessments highlighted persistent shortcomings, particularly the absence of measurable performance indicators and limited transparency in reporting, which hindered effective monitoring and evaluation (European Commission, 2021).

The most recent phase, covering 2021–2025, represents a qualitative shift toward a consolidated interinstitutional framework. The *Strategy Against Organized and Serious Crime 2021–2025* formalized responsibilities across 18 institutions and strengthened cooperation with European partners, including Europol, Eurojust, and the Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA) (Ministry of Interior, 2021). This strategy places strong emphasis on parallel financial investigations, asset recovery and confiscation, and victim protection as core elements of a comprehensive and preventive approach.

European Union progress reports over the past five years acknowledge significant progress while also identifying persistent challenges. The 2023 report highlights increased operational capacity within SPAK, alongside concerns related to judicial delays and heavy caseloads (European Commission, 2023). The 2024 report notes improvements in financial investigations, asset confiscation, and interagency cooperation, while recommending further strengthening of proactive investigations and asset recovery mechanisms (European Commission, 2024). These findings are consistent with academic literature demonstrating that disrupting the financial and social capital of criminal networks is more effective than isolated enforcement actions (Calderoni, 2014; Morselli, 2009).

An additional critical dimension of Albania's evolving strategy is the integration of social policies and victim protection. Recent strategies emphasize victim safety, rights protection, and social reintegration, in line with European standards on prevention, protection, disruption, and promotion (Council of Europe, 2023; MONEYVAL, 2021; Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, 2024). This approach reinforces the understanding of organized crime as a phenomenon with profound social consequences, requiring multisectoral and multidisciplinary responses.

From an international perspective, initiatives such as EU4FOCAL have strengthened training, operational cooperation, and intelligence exchange between Albanian institutions and European agencies, particularly in the fields of financial investigations and transnational crime (EU Delegation to Albania, 2023). This development aligns closely with international scholarship emphasizing the central role of international cooperation and intelligence analysis in neutralizing organized criminal networks (Galeotti, 2018; Nelen & Siegel, 2017).

Based on the analysis, several strategic priorities emerge for the consolidation of Albania's future approach:

- Institutionalization of parallel financial investigations through SPAK, the Financial Intelligence Unit, and international cooperation mechanisms.
- Strengthening asset recovery frameworks to ensure timely and effective confiscation and enforcement (Council of the European Union, 2024).

- Development of advanced analytical and technological capacities, including integrated national databases, network analysis, and social network analysis (SNA), to identify key actors and criminal structures.
- Enhancement of transparency and accountability through measurable indicators and annual public reporting on strategic implementation (Open Society Foundation, 2019).
- Integration of social dimensions and victim protection, including legal aid, psychosocial support, and reintegration mechanisms (Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, 2024).
- Expansion of international cooperation and real-time information exchange through SIENA and partnerships with Europol, Eurojust, and other relevant agencies (European Commission, 2022).

Overall, the analysis confirms that Albania's strategic transition reflects contemporary academic and policy consensus: effective responses to organized crime require integrated institutional frameworks, financial disruption strategies, social prevention mechanisms, and sustained international cooperation. Continued progress will depend on consolidating institutional independence, strengthening analytical and investigative capacities, and embedding systematic evaluation and monitoring mechanisms to ensure long-term effectiveness (Campana & Varese, 2012; European Commission, 2024).

In conclusion, Albania's approach to organized crime has evolved from a fragmented, sectoral model into a consolidated interinstitutional architecture increasingly aligned with European Union standards. Achieving sustainable results will require the consistent and systematic implementation of the identified priorities, recognizing organized crime as an economic, social, and political phenomenon rather than solely a criminal one. This integrated interinstitutional and international model provides a robust foundation for future policy development, strengthening the rule of law and supporting Albania's continued progress toward European integration.

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