

How is the Albanian Mafia setting up : locally, nationally and in Europe

François Farcy, december 2002

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This paper is the result of a plan elaborated during 18 months by the Judiciary Service, part of the Belgian Federal Police in the District of Verviers.

It has no grudge against the Albanian people which are the first victim of their own mafia. Remember Mother Teresa was Albanian: So one can understand that this people is capable of great feats.

This project was mostly a human venture rallying investigators and responsible men seeing the Albanian criminality infiltrate their district.

It is an adventure because the plan could only develop in a sound atmosphere of work and comradeship, sine qua non requirement for everyone's motivation and for eliminating the numerous encountered obstacles.

It is also a challenge, the district environment being not fated for such a plan: this sort of plans are mostly tackled by bigger services which possess a richest human and material potential, with the back up of pre-existing investigative material.

It is still a challenge for the legislation and the available means in Belgium are far from sufficient for an effectively fight against the organized crime.

- The Verviers District

East of Belgium it borders on Germany and The Netherlands (three borders zone); the District of Verviers reaches on the West to the urban area of Liège and on the East to the German community area (Eupen – St Vith).

Its territory spread over 1162 Km² for a population of +/- 200 000 souls. The county town (Verviers-Pepinster-Dison) with 70 000 inhabitants, is head of that semi-rural District. Besides the cities of Verviers, Spa, Stavelot and Malmedy, it encompasses also fourteen villages, more rural and touristic.

The lines of communications (roads, highways, rail) are numerous and favour the mobility across the District.

Foreigners are mostly present in Verviers with over 10 % of the population: they are predominantly Turks and Moroccans.

Verviers is an ancient wool-producing city where the expert manpower (be Belgian or foreigner) has had difficulty retraining which resulted in an under-privileged circle: some remnants of the wool-industry still exist in the Vesdre valley.

- The Albanian criminality's surge in Europe and Belgium

The first Albanian groups come to Western Europe, also in Belgium, after the fall of Enver Hoxha's regime. During the nineties, an Albanian criminal circle expands discreetly in the Belgian big cities (Brussels and Antwerp) as it did in the European big cities of Italy, Switzerland and Germany notably.

With the war in Ex-Yugoslavia, the fall of the financial system in Albania, the uncontrolled migration of Albanians (from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia) surges to a maximum in 1998-1999 during the war in Kosovo. Aware of the situation the Albanian organized criminality infiltrates Europe and Belgium in a more perceptible manner.

As reported by the national and specialized media its primary activities are the trade of human beings (THB), the prostitution and the drug smuggling toward Western Europe, with Great Britain being frequently the end destination.

In Belgium, the Albanian mafia sets up business first in the big cities (Brussels, Antwerp and Liège) where it takes control of the prostitution, sometimes in a brutal and violent way.

These last years, particularly since 1999-2000 following the afflux of immigrants during the Kosovo war, this mafia diversifies its activities towards organized hold-ups, drug and firearms smuggling and racket.

Henceforth present in the Belgian big cities, the Albanian mafia in full development and to quote Karl Marx "in full primary accumulation of capital" extends its hold over new territories infiltrating other regions of the state.

- The local setting

It was therefore evident that the Albanian mafia ends setting up in the Verviers zone.

Our aim is to explain by what means this organized crime sets up shop, and how this installation presents, if not a model, at least a whole set of stereotyped operations that can be transposable and already transposed into other urban centres.

1° Arrival of the Albanian mafiosi

The first phase establishes a bridge between the nearest big city (in this case Liège) and the zone to be conquered.

So we see arriving from Liège, or directly to Verviers, a few candidates for political asile, supposedly Kosovares in 1998-1999.

These people, of which nobody has yet any knowledge, set up in overpopulated furnished accommodations in the under-privileged sectors of Verviers, let by unscrupulous landlords (often Turks).

Some of those guys set up also with compatriots already settled (at the start of the nineties).

Early year 2000, those Albanian gangsters are spotted for robberies committed across the whole of the District: mostly homejacking following the Romanian modus operandi. The bounty is made of by the mob's easily traded goods: money, bank checks, credit cards and also cars (using the keys found in the visited homes).

Early year 2001, the first suspects are condemned for over 120 thefts. At that time, one can see that the local Albanian criminals are directed by bosses coming from Liège; Antwerp and Namur. It is evident that most of them have "worked" to pay an immigration debt to the organized mob.

2° Setting up

Rapidly released from jail, most of them, especially those selected by the organization, look for better settlement.

It consists to find a way, legal or not, to stay in Belgium. Some find work (to cover other activities) and settle with their family. Others, bachelors, prospect the dancing halls of the region, searching for women (middle aged or divorcees) seducing them and ending cohabitating with them.

Not having a priori the same community spirit as the other migrants, willing to live in the middle of the locals, the Albanians don't form a "ghetto" easily located. They live dispersed in the city of Verviers, some in the District or in the German's speaking region nearby.

Those Mafiosi have a need for a meeting place, with some cultural excuses, but mostly permitting the criminal cell to have a structure and a place to prepare their criminal actions.

In Verviers, two Albanians, already known by the Justice, set up, end 2001, a bar in the centre of the city. This bar becomes rapidly the headquarters of all the identified suspects who visit almost daily this location.

To be noted in other Districts, such a headquarters is set up behind a cultural, Albanian or Kosovar, association.

3° Penetration of the local mob and partnerships

As any criminal entity which seeks structure and installation, the group, still blurred, must be recognized by the local criminals. To this end, it seeks and utilizes the small local thugs who punctually patronize the Albanian cafe.

These local thugs commit a number of small petty crimes (thefts, receiving stolen goods) or also create incidents in the establishment racketeered by our Albanian suspects. As in a "Billard Club" in the city centre Albanian thugs police the place, the owner loosing its choice of staff and patrons.

Facing more sophisticated local criminals, our suspects prefer partnerships ensuring them the calm needed for their development. Those local partnerships concern the mafias of "Maghreb" or "Greece". The activities of these partnerships are drug trafficking, the THB, the co-management of establishments, notably in July 2002 a Greek trafficker bought back the Albanian HQ-cafe.

Common also between the Albanian and the local mafia is the game (known as “Barboute”) in which they invest the most part of their criminal revenues. Many contacts are made thru this activity and a number of crimes seem to be the consequence of game debts that are reimbursed by the resulting profits.

4° Development and diversification of the criminal activities

Initially homejacking was the primary activity of our group of Albanians. This activity along with the activities related to the setting up (racket, clandestine games) will diversify.

Real criminal organization in being, its members will revert to the classical Albanian mafia activities. Therefore the central core of the group, benefiting (as seen later on) from numerous connections in their country in Belgium and other countries, develops its business in prostitution, THB, arms and stolen cars trafficking.

5° The criminal organization, a natural finality

Ingrained in the District, benefiting of a range of profitable criminal activities, the group slowly and quasi fatally must structure to make pay and also endure.

. The structure and its workings

With little hierarchy and a horizontal system, the structure seems to function with easy efficacy according to its needs and activities.

Bosses appear without us knowing if they are originally so or designated among their friends or even self-imposed. In this case, two brothers (call them Sami and Zakim) are at present the bosses of the criminal Albanian core in Verviers, also established in the Mons city and the Hainaut province.

Sami becomes the big boss in Verviers while his brother Zakim settles in the Mons region before his arrest.

Some members of the central core become fellow accomplices to Sami. While benefiting of the organization activities they act as a sort of bodyguards.

Others from the “second circle” are used as cover for addresses, payments, buying or licensing of vehicles; often as in most criminal organizations, the concubine girls are covering for numerous deals.

The burglaries, requiring a lot of hands, others from the “second circle” are used as soldiers. Those suspects are often candidate refugees, recently arrived, paying in this way the organized clandestine immigration.

Non-Albanians are accepted or at least collaborate mostly for activities related to the finding of housing, the transfer of prostitutes, the drug trafficking, the illegal games and the management of the thugs local bars.

The organization, one can say classically, evolves and adapts permanently according to the opportunities and the external constrains.

To insure anonymity and confuse the trails, the organization uses a large number of fraudulent means and manoeuvres.

So, the cars of the members and mostly those of the bosses are permanently licensed with plates under false names or unregistered or camouflaged. This creates a vast turnaround of vehicles.

Certain types of cars are reserved for the bosses notably the OPEL Calibra (this was confirmed by our Scandinavian colleagues).

As for its connections, the Albanian criminal core relies profusely over handy-phones working only with pre-paid cards: those are renewed once a month or exchanged between thugs making difficult the follow-up of one suspect's activities. Security measures are drastically increased if the handies are used during an actual crime.

- . Profile and origin of the members

The first constant seems to be the age of the suspects: almost all are between age 25 and 30.

Most difficult to present is their origin: they all have an impressive serie of false identities, which complicates the enquiries. As an example for the identification of Sami and Zakim, the enquiry had to retrace their itinerary since their arrival in Belgium. The two brothers arrive at the Foreigners Office the same day but are registered under two different family names.

Due to the decay of the administrative structure in the state of origin and the inexistent national register in Albania and Kosovo, any formal verification of identities is impossible. Nonetheless one can be assured that the majority members of the Verviers group are from Kosovo and North of Albania.

For the same reasons, the family bounds or the belonging to a clan are difficult to ascertain. This information is important because some members of the Sami and Zakim's clan live in Albania and Greece and benefit from the criminal activities pursued in Belgium.

- . The criminal activities

In Verviers, it is not different from the general activities of the Albanian mafia.

Principal activity is the organized burglary. Apparently Zakim is the leader, and employs thugs already in Verviers in the year 2000 who were concerned by the first wave of burglaries.

Between end of 2001 and April 2002 one can estimate at least at 500 the number of committed burglaries. It is enormous in term of damages for the victims and profitability for the criminals. Those use different simple methods for entering thru doors and windows.

To limit the risk of arrest, the actions are mostly committed near highways. Also noticeable is the geographic alternation, from day to day, between the provinces of Liège and Hainaut.

The bounty is first money, then all easily negotiable goods: jewels, electric or electronic appliances, PC's and surely the car of the victim, the keys being found in the homes.

Thus comes naturally the other activities of these criminals ie car trafficking. The Albanians don't seem to have a network for sending the cars to other countries except a network for sending cars to Albania or Kosovo.

To be noted the Albanians drive the stolen cars for their own use during a few days or sell these, frequently for next to nothing, to traffickers (mostly from Maghreb) who, after make-up, send these to France and the South. Sometimes those traffickers make advance orders for cars to the Albanians.

It is still the same song: quick benefits, easy cash- the volume of the thefts making the turnover.

Receiving stolen goods is an activity of the Zakim's group with the related benefits for the organization. In the Verviers case, it seems that the bounty is put in storage before sending it to their homeland. Accounting for the enormous number of thefts one can assume the existence of clandestine storages, sort of "Ali Baba's cavern" from where the bounty leaves by trucks toward Albania and Kosovo. In one of these storages in a duplex rented by an Albanian girl we found more than 500 different goods forthcoming from the organization's thefts.

Prostitution and THB are the principal activity of the other brother Sami. In this activity he works first with Albanians but also with the local Moroccan mob who escorts the girls.

Sami owns several girls located in Liège region and the Flemish Limburg. They originate mainly from the East countries notably Lithuania and Belarus. Following recent police interventions conducted in Liège our Albanian

procurers transfer now their girls in the bars of the Namur and Charleroi region. This confirms, once more, the fast adaptation's faculty of the Albanian mafia.

The Lithuanian girls are escorted by an Albanian accomplice whose wife is from that country while the Belarus girls are bought by recruiting in the country or through a Russian network passing to Germany where there are real slave's markets organized.

Worth of notice is the fact that the Belarus girls use real Lithuanian passports whose market is concealed thru false loss or theft's declarations, flourishing while Lithuania prepares its entry into the EC.

The girls become then a real market's object and, following the wishes or the interests of Sami and accomplices are resold to a fellow Albanian procurer. The handling of the girls varies from one girl to another and from procurer to another.

Worth noticing is that the girls are seduced by their procurers and some are ready to sacrifice a lot for them. Also comparing the past and actual live's condition in their homeland, the girls see often the prostitution as a lesser of two evils that gives them revenues, meager by comparison to those of the procurers but

unexpected if they were in their homeland. In some cases violence and humiliations are the daily lot of the girls who rebel against their exploitation.

Arms - trafficking is in no way negligible. In the Albanian culture, the possession of a weapon is the fashionable tool of one man's statute and machismo.

The collapse of Albania in the nineties and the war in Ex-Yugoslavia have resulted in thousands of arms being available in every place, coming from the militia, the pillaging of barracks, police offices and even from arms factories. In full expansion, Albanian mafia could not ignore this important source of revenues.

Our Verviers criminal core follows the game and the selling of all types of weapons (Kalaschnikov, Makarov, Astra 6,35 mm, ... often manufactured under license in Yugoslavia) seems to make part of their main business. It is known in the mob that weapons are always available thru the Albanians.

Drugs – trafficking is not well documented but it exists: simply it seems that the business is divided up between the Albanians and local Maghreb and Greeks dealers, cocaine being mainly concerned.

Although this criminal activity is not directly managed by Sami and his partners, they benefit from it and of the products

Another necessary activity for a mafia: Money laundering.

This activity is still undocumented, our criminal core being too new to require a permanent laundering structure. To this day, the unveiled operations seem to indicate that a small amount of criminal money is laundered or sent back to Albania or Kosovo, thru among others the Western Union society.

A very simple technique is used for those transfers: money is transferred to the homeland or some is laundered thru a Belgium-Albania-Belgium there and back. To be laundered the money is transferred by a figure - head to Albania or Kosovo, then it is sent back to the criminal thru a payment by a family member. If questioned the suspected criminal certifies that the money comes from his family: needless to say that any check of patrimony in Albania or Kosovo is next to impossible.

Part of the gains is also reinvested either into clandestine games or in cash purchased goods: this is a marked attitude among the bosses of the Verviers organization.

According to our information, a large part of the goods and some money are sent to Albania or Kosovo by couriers from the organization or recruited by it.

- The setting up in Belgium

Following our findings over the Verviers criminal organization and information gathered by other federal police services, we found that the Albanian mafia covers the whole of the country and continues its development.

From our criminal core we have found that thru telephone or physical contacts other similar cores are settled elsewhere in the country. An analysis of those

various contacts makes clearly appear a network, forming the frame of a criminal organization at an upper level. The phone-tapping reveals existing contacts between our Verviers and Mons group with:

- Albanian groups from Liège, working in organized car – jacking and prostitution;
- Albanian groups from Brussels involved in prostitution, THB and organized goods- jacking in the trucks on the highway's parking (a real plague over the highway network of our country and the neighbouring countries);
- Albanian groups from Antwerp and Limburg, working in prostitution, THB and organized thefts;
- An Albanian group from Namur specialized in organized thefts and stolen goods keeping.

Investigation reveals a partnership between Albanian girls procurer from Limburg and Sami who resell girls acquired in Germany.

For this expending operation Sami has bought an establishment (a pseudo Albanian-Kosovar cultural association) located in Huy and managed by an Albanian from Liège.

Another feature of our investigation has been the appearance of core – persons, found in almost all the files. These persons are still actually camouflaged behind non-identified handy numbers but there is no doubt about their role in the structure of an expanding mafia.

The planning of the criminal activities of this mafia is also confirmed. The following through of the burglary phenomenon reveals that the dividing up of territory between the various criminal groups is planned or reached by tacit agreements. Two groups seldom operate at the same time, in the same branch, on the same territory. When a group is caught by the cops, it is replaced a few weeks later by an other group to take over this territory's activities.

This dividing up of activities and territories is not always made gently: as usual and classically for a mafia, violent settlements between Albanians in the big cities of Brussels, Antwerp and Liège show a conflicting repartition of the action's zones or the businesses.

More important is information about meetings of the criminal core's bosses at which the territories are not only divided up but also often sold.

The whole of the here accounted information indicates that the Albanian mafia is well and good settled in Belgium: little organized at the beginning, all the pieces of information show that it is structuring always more to insure a settlement and an increased power over the organized criminality in Belgium.

- At the international level

If contacts between the studied criminal core and others over the Belgian territory are well established, so are exchanges and ramifications at the international level.

- . Maintaining connections with the base

First, the bounds with the homeland either in Albania or in Kosovo appear thru the numerous phone calls between the various clans and between the various criminal cores.

Concerning Sami and Zakim, it is obvious that members of their family are settled in Greece – no wonder with the number of Albanians in that country. Forming a clannish society the members of our criminal organization are thus closely related to their family – the management of criminal activities included. The “brothers” left in the Balkans seems to be the direct beneficiaries of the in Belgium accumulated bounty. The two brothers have also family acquaintances in the Bronx (USA).

- . Contacts throughout Europe

The phone – tapping shows us also that the organization has members or allies in Italy just as well with Albanian and Italian thugs. The localization of them follows an itinerary conducting to France along what it seems to be the ways of clandestine immigration, going thru Bari, Rome, Milan, Savone, Vintimiglia.

In France, the localized contacts are situated in Nice, Valence and Paris along the ways used for the THB. Ideal point of this immigration end destination, Great Britain appears also thru the analysis of our suspected criminal’s connections. Those are limited to Albanians in London or Kent.

Germany is also involved by frequent contacts of Sami and his cronies: they not only phone to Germany but they also go there for business ...

- . Connections with prostitution networks from the East

In Aachen, the Verviers criminal core has some stakes in the prostitution business, Sami providing girls in the bars of this border region.

However it is in northern Germany, Herford and Hannover areas, where members of the criminal core go to buy, from the Russian or Polish mafia, girls coming from Ukraine and Belarus.

Sometimes, Sami himself organises their trip by rail from Belarus to Germany where they are taken over by one of his cronies and brought back to Belgium.

The organization uses also, in no small amount, the services of Lithuanian girls. It is one of the criminal core, himself married with a Lithuanian girl, who gets the girls back from Lithuania to Belgium under cover of visits to his in laws.

- . And further still ...

As mentioned earlier, some phone calls are noted to the USA where Sami, Zakim and one crony have relatives: this is proof that the Albanian mafia doesn’t limit itself to our continent.

Confirming these connections, recently questionings and searches have discovered, in the PC’s memory of one Albanian, scanned documents from the US

Immigration Service which implies that the clandestine immigration to the USA, thru false documents is also part of the organization's business.

To conclude, this account of the Verviers project shreds light on a form for the settlements of the Albanian mafia and its implantation, so much at the local, national as at the international level. A "modus operandi" that can be duplicated, with some variations, everywhere and no doubt, further afar.

More so, the dense activity of this Albanian criminal core federated into real mafias, their violence and their mobility, make them very disturbing and must push us to act rapidly.

But, busy with the fight against terrorism, the European world of the polices and the Justice doesn't really seem to worry about this threat while the evidence is there of its accruing seriousness.

All the components of an explosive cocktail are so gathered. But nobody seems ready to stop the barman from shaking it.

While ending the present paper, the conducted interventions resulted in the arrest and inculpation of 14 members of the organization including Sami and Zakim. ■