



Strengthening the integrity and independence of police and prosecution institutions in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

This article examines the integrity and independence of police and prosecution services in the Western Balkans, focusing on structural and operational factors that continue to undermine their capacity to prevent and prosecute corruption and organised crime. Drawing on comparative, multi-country research conducted between 2023 and 2024, the analysis combines normative and institutional review, with case studies and expert interviews across the Western Balkans six. While the region has undertaken extensive legal and institutional reforms to more closely align themselves with the European Union and international standards, the findings indicate that political interference, weak oversight mechanisms, operational constraints and persistent gender imbalances remain significant challenges. By situating national-level dynamics within a broader regional framework, the article identifies common patterns of vulnerability affecting police and prosecutorial independence. The paper concludes by reflecting on the practical limitations of reform implementation and outlining priority areas where institutional safeguards, professional capacity and accountability mechanisms require strengthening to ensure sustainable progress in the rule of law.

Keywords: police integrity, prosecutorial independence, rule of law, corruption, organised crime, Western Balkans, institutional reform.

Introduction

The Western Balkans six (WB6), made up of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, have undergone profound political and legal transformations since the 1990s, moving from totalitarian systems to democratic governance models underpinned by the rule of law. Within this context, police forces were among the first institutions targeted for reform. Shifting from instruments of state power to professional bodies mandated to maintain public order and serve citizens, these reforms aimed to instil principles of accountability,

impartiality and integrity (Zvekic et al., 2024). In recent years and in the context of the EU accession process, additional organisational changes and anti-corruption measures have been introduced to align national legislation with the EU *acquis* and international standards relating to the independence of the police and judiciary.

Despite these efforts, persistent reports from the United Nations (UN), European Commission and prominent civil-society organisations highlight that corruption and weak rule of law remain significant obstacles to democratic consolidation in the region. The inadequate implementation of legislation, combined with external and internal risks to police and prosecutorial independence, continues to undermine the integrity and impartiality of criminal justice institutions. Organised crime and systemic corruption exert influence over state structures and the economy, normalising a degree of tolerance for unethical behaviours, further eroding public trust and contributing to a culture of impunity (Zvekic et al., 2024).

This article draws on recent regional research conducted by the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), with a particular focus on police and prosecution services. While grounded in a broader comparative research effort, the article adopts an analytical perspective that foregrounds systemic vulnerabilities affecting institutional integrity and independence across the Western Balkans. Rather than providing an exhaustive account of national reforms, it examines recurring patterns of political influence, weak accountability mechanisms, operational constraints and gender disparities that shape the functioning of criminal justice institutions. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on the practical limits of institutional reform in environments characterised by entrenched corruption and organised crime.

Methodology

This article draws on research conducted under the anti-corruption portfolio of GI-TOC's Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe, which between 2023 and 2025 focused on the integrity and independence of criminal justice institutions in the WB6. The analysis presented here is derived from a multi-country research programme carried out between June 2023 and January 2024 that centred on police and prosecution services, while selectively foregrounding findings most relevant to institutional independence, integrity risks and governance challenges.

The research design combined qualitative and comparative methods. A common methodological framework was developed at the outset of the study by the regional coordination team to ensure conceptual coherence and cross-country comparability. This framework was informed by international standards on police and prosecutorial independence, integrity and accountability, including relevant European Union *acquis*, Council of Europe instruments and UN norms. It established shared definitions, analytical categories and data-collection protocols to guide national-level research.

Data collection was conducted by national experts in each Western Balkan country, with each component supported by three regional coordinators responsible for quality control and analytical consistency.

The research relied on three primary sources: first, a normative and institutional analysis of legal frameworks governing police and prosecution services; second, qualitative case studies illustrating integrity and independence

challenges in practice; and third, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. Interviewees included serving and former police officers, prosecutors, representatives of oversight bodies, civil-society stakeholders, journalists and independent experts with direct knowledge of the criminal justice system. These interviews were used to contextualise formal rules and identify discrepancies between legal provisions and institutional practice. Draft country-level reports were subsequently reviewed by independent external reviewers with relevant professional or academic expertise. Their feedback was incorporated to strengthen factual accuracy and balance.

The article adopts a comparative regional perspective rather than a comprehensive country-by-country assessment. Its analytical focus lies in identifying recurring patterns and systemic vulnerabilities affecting police and prosecutorial independence across the Western Balkans. While the methodology allows for triangulation across legal analysis, empirical cases and stakeholder perspectives, the findings remain subject to certain limitations. These include uneven access to sensitive institutional data, the reliance on qualitative interviews that may reflect subjective perceptions, and the political sensitivity of corruption-related cases, which can constrain transparency. Acknowledging these constraints, the article nevertheless provides a grounded assessment of structural and operational risks that continue to shape the functioning of criminal justice institutions in the region.

Integrity and independence of the police in the Western Balkans

Political pressure and corruption

Police institutions in the Western Balkans operate in a complex post-transition environment shaped by legacies of centralised state control, incomplete institutional reform and persistent political contestation. Although formal reforms have sought to redefine policing as a professional, service-oriented function aligned with European standards, these efforts continue to be undermined by structural vulnerabilities that expose police institutions to political and criminal influence (Zvekic et al., 2024). Rather than manifesting primarily through overt interference, such influence is often exercised indirectly, through appointment powers, disciplinary mechanisms and informal networks linking political elites, economic players and organised crime groups.

Empirical evidence drawn from publicly available surveys and targeted interviews conducted by GI-TOC consultants indicates that public trust in police institutions remains low across much of the region, driven largely by perceptions of corruption and external interference from both political actors and organised crime groups (Zvekic et al., 2024). While corruption cases and scandals are frequently framed internally as the actions of isolated individuals, this narrative obscures the more systemic nature of the problem. By focusing predominantly on lower-level misconduct, such as cases involving individual officers accepting small bribes, institutions often divert attention away from higher-level wrongdoing that is more difficult to detect and address at an institutional scale (Zvekic et al., 2024). This tendency contributes to a culture of tolerance toward structural corruption and weakens incentives to pursue complex cases involving powerful actors.

The consequences of political pressure are most visible in the handling of sensitive investigations. Interviews and documented cases suggest that charges against individuals with close ties to political elites or criminal networks are sometimes delayed, downgraded or quietly dropped, reinforcing public sentiments of mistrust (Zvekic et al., 2024; Civil Rights Defenders, 2023). Such practices not only undermine the credibility of police institutions but also distort operational priorities, discouraging officers from pursuing politically sensitive or resource-intensive cases.

A prominent example illustrating these dynamics emerged in Albania in July 2023, when footage circulated showing relatives of a governing party member of parliament assaulting two individuals who had reported property damage linked to the member of parliament's family (Erebara, 2023; Doci, 2023). Initial institutional responses, including the dismissal of senior police officials, appeared to signal accountability (Euronews Albania, 2023; A2 CNN, 2023). However, subsequent developments, including the downgrading of charges and the relatively lenient treatment of those involved, raised serious concerns regarding the consistency and independence of law enforcement action (Politiko, 2024).

More broadly, the persistence of such cases highlights the limits of reform processes that prioritise legislative alignment over institutional practice. While legal frameworks governing police independence have improved across the Western Balkans, their implementation remains uneven and vulnerable to informal influence (Zvekic et al., 2024). Without credible safeguards protecting operational autonomy, particularly in relation to appointments, disciplinary proceedings and case management, police institutions remain exposed to political capture. Addressing corruption in policing therefore requires not only stricter enforcement of ethical standards, but also a deeper reconfiguration of governance arrangements that currently allow political and criminal interests to intersect with law enforcement functions.

Oversight, cooperation and stakeholder engagement

Weak and fragmented oversight remains a central challenge to ensuring the integrity and independence of police institutions in the Western Balkans. Although international and European standards – including the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials – envisage independent, transparent and effective accountability mechanisms, national oversight frameworks in the region continue to function unevenly in practice. Responsibility for monitoring police conduct is typically dispersed across multiple bodies, including interior ministries, prosecutors' offices, ombuds institutions and parliamentary committees. In the absence of clear coordination and information-sharing arrangements, this fragmentation often results in diluted accountability rather than mutual oversight (Zvekic et al., 2024).

Internal control units are formally mandated to prevent, detect and address misconduct within police services, yet their effectiveness is frequently constrained by insufficient staffing, limited professional autonomy and inadequate training. These limitations are compounded by weak engagement with external stakeholders such as civil-society organisations and independent media, whose potential role in identifying misconduct and strengthening public accountability remains underutilised (Zvekic et al., 2024). As a result, oversight mechanisms often react to scandals *ex post* rather than functioning as preventive instruments capable of identifying systemic risks.

The experience of North Macedonia following the 2015 wiretapping scandal illustrates both the potential and the limits of accountability mechanisms in the region. The establishment of a special prosecutor's office created a dedicated institutional response to allegations of high-level corruption and abuse of power, leading to indictments against senior political figures, including a former prime minister (Zvekic et al., 2024; Magleshov, 2023). While these developments demonstrated that accountability structures can emerge in response to systemic failures, the subsequent challenges, including political obstruction, concerns over lenient sentencing and ongoing questions regarding judicial integrity, continue to highlight the fragility of such mechanisms once the initial political momentum is gone.

Beyond national oversight structures, cooperation in combating organised crime and corruption remains uneven. Western Balkan police services participate in information exchange with international partners such as the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) and the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol), yet joint investigations are often constrained by practical barriers, including language gaps, outdated information technology systems, limited analytical capacity and persistent political sensitivities that limit the full participation of certain jurisdictions in international policing frameworks. At the domestic level, cooperation between police and prosecution services is frequently undermined by unclear divisions of responsibility, insufficient communication and limited engagement with other relevant authorities, such as customs, financial intelligence units and regulatory bodies (Zvekic et al., 2024).

Strengthening oversight and cooperation therefore requires more than formal institutional redesign. It demands sustained investment in professional capacity, clearer mandates for oversight bodies, and structured mechanisms for interinstitutional collaboration. Without addressing these underlying governance and coordination issues, efforts to enhance police integrity risk remaining procedural rather than substantive, with limited impact on public trust or institutional resilience.

Training and capacity building

Effective safeguards against corruption and undue influence within police institutions depend not only on formal rules and oversight mechanisms, but also on the professional capacities and ethical orientation of individual officers. Training and education therefore play a central role in shaping institutional integrity, particularly in contexts where law enforcement agencies are required to respond to increasingly complex forms of organised crime and corruption while operating under political and operational constraints.

As noted above, strengthening institutional integrity requires sustained investment in human resources through comprehensive training and education. This includes ensuring that police academies responsible for recruiting and training future officers are equipped not only to address established forms of crime, but also to anticipate emerging threats such as cybercrime and increasingly sophisticated financial offences. Although anti-corruption components are formally incorporated into training curricula across the Western Balkans, these efforts often remain fragmented and insufficiently reinforced throughout officers' careers. As a result, ethical standards are frequently treated as abstract principles rather than operational norms guiding day-to-day decision-making.

While officers in the region receive instructions and supplementary training focused on detecting and documenting corruption and organised crime, significant gaps persist. Training programmes tend to place greater emphasis on procedural compliance than on developing the analytical, technological and interdisciplinary skills required to investigate complex cases. In particular, deficits remain in areas such as ethics-based decision-making, foreign-language proficiency, information and communication technology skills, forensic methodologies and awareness of gender equality and discrimination risks. Although equal-opportunity frameworks formally exist, tailored leadership development programmes for female officers remain limited, contributing to persistent gender imbalances in senior positions.

Moreover, the identification of training needs is often slow and reactive, while the quality and consistency of instructors vary significantly across institutions. In the absence of systematic needs assessments and standardised evaluation mechanisms, training risks becoming disconnected from operational realities. This limits its effectiveness

in strengthening institutional resilience against corruption and political pressure, particularly in specialised units tasked with investigating organised crime.

A recent case in Serbia illustrates the consequences of these gaps. A former inspector from a specialised organised crime unit was charged with leaking confidential police information to a criminal network through the encrypted Sky ECC communication platform (Vojinović, 2021). Although international cooperation played a critical role in intercepting the communications, the subsequent prosecution encountered substantial legal and political challenges. Questions regarding the admissibility of intercepted digital evidence, combined with public and political debate surrounding the case, complicated proceedings (Đorđević, 2023). While the inspector was ultimately convicted in 2024, appeals and retrial proceedings exposed persistent weaknesses in the integration of advanced investigative technologies into domestic legal frameworks (Vojinović, 2024).

This case underscores the importance of aligning training, legislation and operational practice. Strengthening officers' technical skills must be accompanied by clearer procedural standards, closer coordination between police and prosecution services and sustained engagement with international partners. Without such alignment, investments in training risk producing limited returns, as institutional weaknesses continue to constrain the effective investigation and prosecution of corruption and organised crime.

Integrity and independence of the prosecution in the Western Balkans

Over recent decades, Western Balkan countries have undertaken extensive legislative and institutional reforms to strengthen their prosecution services, align themselves with EU and international standards and enhance their independence and professionalism. Although these reforms – guided by instruments such as the UN Convention against Corruption, recommendations by the Council of Europe and evaluations by the Group of States against Corruption – have advanced legal frameworks on paper, their implementation remains uneven. Political interference, both direct and indirect, continues to influence senior prosecutorial appointments and prosecutorial decision-making, undermining the impartiality and effectiveness of criminal justice in the region. Internal and external corruption risks persist, weakening prosecutors' integrity and diminishing their capacity to pursue high-level corruption and organised crime cases. While some progress has been noted, the urgent need for robust accountability, clear internal policies and adequate resource allocation to the prosecution offices cannot be overstated. Ensuring genuine political will and implementing meaningful control mechanisms is critical, not only to dismantle entrenched networks of corruption, but also to foster a prosecutorial culture capable of resisting undue pressure and safeguarding the rule of law in the region (Zvekic et al., 2024).

Political interference and case selection

Despite extensive legislative reforms aimed at strengthening prosecutorial independence in the Western Balkans, political interference continues to affect key aspects of prosecutorial decision-making. Rather than operating primarily through direct instructions, such interference is more commonly exercised through structural levers, including appointment procedures, career advancement, disciplinary mechanisms and control over case allocation. These forms of influence are less visible but no less consequential, as they shape incentives within prosecution services and condition prosecutors' willingness to pursue sensitive cases (Zvekic et al., 2024).

One of the most significant manifestations of political interference concerns case selection and prioritisation. In several Western Balkan jurisdictions, discretionary powers over the allocation of cases, particularly those involving corruption, abuse of office or politically exposed individuals, remain weakly regulated or lack transparency. This creates opportunities for selective prosecution, whereby some cases are delayed or deprioritised, while others are fast-tracked or quietly resolved through abbreviated procedures. Such practices not only shield specific individuals from scrutiny but also narrow the scope of public debate by limiting the judicial exposure of systemic corruption risks (Zvekić et al., 2024).

Political influence over senior prosecutorial appointments further exacerbates these vulnerabilities. Non-merit-based selection processes and prolonged vacancies in leadership positions weaken institutional cohesion and delay the development of specialised expertise, particularly within units responsible for complex financial and corruption-related investigations. In this context, prosecutors may face implicit pressure to avoid cases perceived as politically sensitive, especially where institutional support is uncertain or where career prospects depend on discretionary decisions taken by politicised bodies (Zvekić et al., 2024).

The experience of Kosovo illustrates how institutional design can amplify these risks. The re-election of the chair of the Kosovo Prosecutorial Council beyond the legally prescribed term, despite clear statutory limitations, raised concerns regarding the council's commitment to legality and accountability (Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo, 2019). These concerns were reinforced by the Kosovo Prosecutorial Council's limited openness to external scrutiny and its frequent dismissal of input from media and civil society. Subsequent attempts to reform the council were blocked following constitutional review and critical opinions from the Venice Commission, effectively entrenching existing governance arrangements and constraining prospects for reform (Kosovo Constitutional Court, 2023; Venice Commission, 2023).

These institutional dynamics are reinforced by managerial and procedural weaknesses within prosecution services. The limited accountability of leadership, particularly where appointments are politically influenced, contributes to unclear chains of command between police and prosecutors, leading to mismanaged investigations, inconsistent case allocation and prolonged proceedings. The absence of standardised operating procedures further constrains effective decision-making, while limited transparency in handling politically sensitive corruption cases allows discretionary practices to persist. In some instances, expedited legislative procedures have been used to grant immunity or procedural advantages to politically connected individuals, further undermining prosecutorial independence and public confidence in the justice system (Zúñiga, 2020; Magleshov et al., 2023).

Operational constraints

A range of operational shortcomings continues to undermine prosecutorial effectiveness and public confidence in the Western Balkans. The inconsistent enforcement of disciplinary measures and frequent leaks of confidential information erode the fairness of investigations and trials, while lengthy pre-investigations often proceed without anyone taking clear responsibility for delays. These systemic weaknesses are intensified by outdated digital infrastructure and weak case-management practices, making it difficult to process complex cases efficiently. Prosecutors frequently lack both the specialised expertise and the resources needed to investigate financial crimes, recover assets and handle complex cross-border offences. Together, these factors slow the pace of justice, reduce the likelihood of securing convictions in high-level corruption cases and ultimately undermine the rule of law.

For example, the 'tunnel' case uncovered at the High Court in Podgorica, Montenegro, in September 2023 highlights how operational vulnerabilities can be exploited (Zvekic et al., 2024). A 30-metre tunnel, dug from a nearby building directly into the court's evidence depot, went undetected and led to the theft of critical evidence for organised crime trials. Although arrests were made, no indictments were issued. This incident was similar to a 2016 arson case targeting trial documents and underscores how inadequate security and oversight can jeopardise entire proceedings (Kajosevic, 2023).

Gender equality in criminal justice institutions

Gender inequality remains a significant issue within the criminal justice systems of the Western Balkans, particularly within law enforcement and prosecution services. Policing is predominantly a male-dominated profession, influenced by enduring stereotypes that associate policing with traits traditionally attributed to men, such as physical strength and authority (Zvekic et al., 2024). Consequently, women are underrepresented in police services, especially in leadership positions. While some Western Balkan countries, like Serbia and North Macedonia, have achieved female representation levels that exceed the EU average of 18.5 %, others – including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro – remain below that level, with women constituting as little as 9 % of the police force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Zvekic et al., 2024).

This disparity in gender representation not only reflects societal attitudes but also impacts the effectiveness and inclusivity of policing strategies. A gender-balanced police force benefits from diverse perspectives and skills, particularly in communication, conflict resolution and community engagement, which are essential for effective law enforcement and for building public trust (Zvekic et al., 2024). Women also play a crucial role in handling cases involving domestic violence and sexual assault, where their empathy and communication skills significantly support victims. However, women's advancement into leadership roles remains limited, with few female officers occupying high managerial positions across the region, ranging from 18.6 % in Serbia to the absence of woman in top managerial positions in Montenegro (Zvekic et al., 2024).

In prosecution services, gender inequality persists despite women being generally better represented than in law enforcement. Montenegro, for example, boasts high female representation in prosecution, with 62 % of state prosecutors being women, significantly surpassing the EU average of 54 % (Zvekic et al., 2024). North Macedonia also shows promising figures, where 55 % of prosecutors are women, and women occupy 43 % of leadership positions, a notable increase from 15 % in 2012 (Zvekic et al., 2024). However, countries like Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina lag behind, with female representation in prosecution ranging from 47.2 % to 42.6 % (Zvekic et al., 2024). Despite these numbers, women remain markedly underrepresented in senior and leadership roles across the region, limiting their influence on decision-making processes and perpetuating a predominantly male-dominated prosecutorial culture.

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within prosecution services has tangible implications for institutional integrity and effectiveness. Diverse perspectives brought by female prosecutors enhance decision-making, foster inclusive prosecutorial strategies and improve community trust. However, the persistent glass ceiling in many Western Balkan countries restricts women's career advancement, undermining the potential benefits of gender diversity. To address these disparities, it is essential to implement specific recruitment targets for women, especially in leadership roles, and to develop comprehensive mentorship and leadership development programmes. Additionally,

reducing political interference in prosecutorial appointments and promotions is crucial to establishing a merit-based system that genuinely reflects the capabilities and contributions of female prosecutors (Zvekic et al., 2024).

For example, in Serbia, prosecutor B.S., who maintained a 100 % success rate in her cases within the specialised anti-corruption department, was abruptly transferred to the General Prosecution Department in February 2022, just days before conducting major interrogations arising from arrest warrants she had issued against individuals charged with serious abuses of power in a large case. Later, in May 2024, she was moved again to the Juvenile Delinquency Prosecutor's Office without explanation. These transfers suggest political interference aimed at removing a highly effective female prosecutor from sensitive cases, highlighting the absence of a merit-based promotion system and the challenges women face in advancing within prosecutorial ranks (Zvekic et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Despite extensive reform efforts and formal alignment with EU and international standards, police and prosecution services across the Western Balkans continue to face persistent challenges that undermine their integrity and operational independence. These challenges are not confined to isolated incidents or individual misconduct but are rooted in structural vulnerabilities that affect governance, accountability and professional autonomy. Political interference, which is often exercised indirectly through appointments, case allocation and managerial discretion, remains a defining constraint, shaping institutional behaviour and limiting the capacity of criminal justice institutions to address high-level corruption and organised crime effectively.

The findings presented in this article highlight a recurring gap between formal legal frameworks and institutional practice. While legislative reforms have strengthened guarantees of independence on paper, their implementation has been uneven and vulnerable to informal influence. Weak oversight mechanisms, fragmented accountability arrangements and insufficient coordination between police, prosecution and other relevant authorities continue to impede effective enforcement. These deficits are compounded by operational constraints, including limited resources, outdated digital infrastructure and skills gaps in specialised areas such as financial investigations and cross-border cooperation. Together, these factors contribute to selective enforcement, procedural delays and diminished public trust in the criminal justice system.

Gender inequality emerges as both a symptom and a driver of these institutional weaknesses. The underrepresentation of women, particularly in leadership positions within police and prosecution services, reflects broader governance challenges, including politicised appointments and non-merit-based career progression. Beyond questions of representation, gender imbalance has tangible implications for institutional integrity, decision-making quality and, importantly, community engagement. Efforts to strengthen independence and accountability must therefore incorporate gender-sensitive reforms, not as a secondary objective but as an integral component of institutional resilience.

At the same time, the analysis underscores the limits of technocratic reform approaches that prioritise formal compliance over substantive change. Measures such as integrity strategies, training programmes and specialised units are necessary but insufficient in the absence of sustained political commitment and credible enforcement. Reforms aimed at strengthening oversight, protecting operational autonomy and improving cooperation across

institutions inevitably confront entrenched interests and resistance from those who benefit from existing arrangements. In this context, implementation challenges that include reform fatigue, limited administrative capacity and political contestation must be explicitly acknowledged rather than treated as peripheral considerations.

Strengthening the integrity and independence of criminal justice institutions in the Western Balkans therefore requires a shift from *ad hoc* reforms towards a more holistic and sustained approach. This includes reinforcing merit-based appointments and career advancement, clarifying mandates and chains of responsibility, investing in professional capacity and digital infrastructure and ensuring meaningful external oversight by parliaments, independent bodies, the media and civil society. International and regional cooperation through frameworks such as Europol and Interpol remains essential but needs to be complemented by domestic reforms that enable institutions to absorb and act on shared intelligence effectively.

Ultimately, progress in this area will depend less on the adoption of new laws than on the political will to enforce existing ones consistently and impartially. Without credible safeguards against interference and stronger accountability for institutional leadership, efforts to combat corruption and organised crime risk remaining symbolic. Conversely, sustained investment in integrity, independence and professional capacity offers a pathway toward rebuilding public trust, strengthening the rule of law and supporting the region's broader democratic and European integration objectives.

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