Interviewing serious offenders: Ms. Egghead meets Mr. Gumshoe

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Abstract Organised crime, due to its intricate nature, is a very challenging as well as less accessible research field. Although difficult to conduct a methodical research on this topic, organised crime, nevertheless, offers a unique opportunity to utilise an interdisciplinary research methodology. This paper describes (multiple) triangulation as an appropriate method for researching the role of culture in the advancement of ethnic Albanian organised crime groups in Europe. Triangulation, for the purpose of the described project, has been used to obtain confirmation of findings through convergence of different perspectives. Interviewing offenders is one of the research methods more thoroughly explained in this paper. The paper too explores some advantages of snowball technique used for interviewing less accessible research subjects. It also discusses various dilemmas, security-related or not, researchers are faced with when intending to interview serious offenders.

Keywords Organised crime group · Research methods · Multiple triangulation · Mafia · Albanian organised crime · Law enforcement · European crime group

In recent years the concept of organised crime has generated considerable interest in academia, the media, politics and law enforcement. Nevertheless many have argued that it is a very irksome topic beyond objective measure. The reason for this ambiguity lies above all in the problems of doing sound and reliable empirical research on an ‘entity’ concealed in the sinister criminal underworld. It is not easy for law enforcement officers and researchers to investigate organised crime groups properly (Standing 2003; Fijnaut and Paoli 2005; Albanese 1994; Reuter 1994; Passas 1995). Only rarely and with great difficulties can those people observe the activities of a criminal group directly (Pistone and Woodley 1987; Ianni and Reuss-Ianni 1972; Chambliss 1988; Mieczkowski 1986). And even if there is a possibility to observe groups and interview offenders, one should take with great caution the
reliability and validity of the collected data. As it is almost impossible to gain direct access to the internal dynamics of a ‘Mafia’ family or a criminal organisation and to carry out field work, social scientists are often forced to rely mainly on accounts given by police, judicial authorities, and the media and on reports of key witnesses (Paoli 2003, p. 20; Galliher and Cain 1974).

However, the reliance on police sources and the media has also a number of disadvantages and it is not unconditional. As Galliher and Cain (1974) explain, ‘scholarly literature on organised crime relies too heavily on journalistic sources, which tend towards the sensational, or government documents which politicise the facts since they are not bound by the canons of scientific investigations as the social scientists.’ Block (1978) further argues that the literature on organised crime suffers from its reliance on the unsubstantiated accounts of informers and the ideological preconceptions of law enforcement agencies. In general, some authors have stated that accounts of informers are often self-glorifying fantasies and the reliability of these accounts has been challenged on the basis of frequent contradictions (Potter and Jenkins 1985; Potter 1994; Salerno and Tompkins 1969). In the case of the Italian Mafia, it is repeatedly argued that pentiti tend to idealise the group's traditional principles and contrast them to its current priorities, in order to justify their own actions. Also as collaborators of justice, informants are often entitled to police protection, living allowances and a reduction in their prison terms which might affect the reliability of their testimonies. Furthermore, collecting scientific data on organised crime in a variety of jurisdictions and from different countries is difficult because of definitional problems and language barriers. As Paoli (2003, p. 21) explains, ‘the legal view necessarily tends to privilege those aspects of real phenomena which assume a greater relevance under the judicial-formal profile, so the facts reported in the trial papers are not truly such in their factual totality, but are selected and ordered in functions of their normative importance.’ Moreover, Albini (1971) and Passas (1995) argue that there is also no guarantee that official agencies concentrate on the most serious organised crime problems nor that they are bias-free.

Hence, it is obvious that the ‘reality of organised crime’ is not easy to discover because of the impediments to conduct methodical and reliable research. The situation is made even worse by the fact that writers looking to sell newspapers, books and lightweight academic publications unquestioningly accept poor empirical data. Sensationalist reporting has also helped generate a vast fascination with organised crime that has led to fantasy depictions of ‘the Mafia.’ This has affected serious research still further (Block 1978; Nelli 1976; Passas 1995; Schatzberg 1993; Standing 2003). Nevertheless, besides the fact that it is a less accessible criminological field, organised crime as a research topic offers a rare opportunity to construct and utilise a truly interdisciplinary research methodology. In my Ph.D. research on the role of cultural codes and social mechanisms in the evolution of ethnic Albanian organised crime groups in Europe I have used the method of (multiple) triangulation—the application and combination of several research methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon. Interviewing offenders is one of the complementary research methods used for this study. Often the purpose of triangulation is to obtain confirmation of findings through convergence of different perspectives. The point at which the perspectives converge is seen to represent ‘reality.’
The ‘evolution’ of Albanian organised crime groups: myth or reality?

Nowadays it is frequently accepted that globalisation has enabled organised crime groups to flourish, expand operations globally and cross national borders with impunity—thus the notion of transnational organised crime (Andelman 1994; Arlacchi 1987; Pearce and Woodiwiss 1992; van Duyne 1993; Williams 1994). Due to the perceived development, a growing number of countries have identified organised crime as a national security threat. This in turn has led to new regulations such as the United Nations (UN) Convention on Transnational Organised Crime\(^1\) (Palermo Convention, 2000) resulting in a broad UN definition of organised crime.\(^2\) At present times, it seems as if the Americanised definitions of organised crime are left behind, although in reality the majority of those who favour the UN definition still remain captivated by the notion of organised crime as a unique and ominous criminal entity. This ‘unconscious’ obsession with ‘the Mafia’ has lead to the application of this Italian term to criminal groups in as historically and culturally diverse countries as Columbia, Japan and Russia and has helped to externalised the causes of organised crime (Passas 1995). Trying to depict the enduring belief—often present in public statements—that organised crime is a sort of criminal conspiracy, Standing (2003) explains ‘[…] these descriptions do not seem intended for any criminal conspiracy that involves two or three people—they are intended for something specific and intangible; a thing with an essence that makes it organised crime.’ This disposition to externalise and isolate organised crime from other structures is closely related to the widespread tendency of defining it as culturally homogeneous and foreign.

Already for some years the European Union (EU) has put its focus on the Western Balkan countries\(^3\) and their connection to organised crime. The Council of the EU repeatedly claimed that organised crime ‘is a real obstacle to stability, sound and accountable institutions, rule of law and economic development in the Western Balkans and a source of grave concern to the EU (Council of the European Union 2003). The EU Security Strategy (2003) notes that Europe is a prime target for organised crime, mainly from the Balkans, and Europol adds that these groups—particularly violent ethnic Albanian criminals—have profoundly affected most of the member states (see Europol 2002, 2003, p. 14, 2004, p. 8, 2006; Xenakis 2001; Arsovska and Craig 2006; Arsovska 2006a).

The Council of Europe (2004) and Europol pointed out that ethnic Albanian organised crime groups constituted the main threat to the EU in particular because of their extreme use of violence and for the fact that they have graduated from simple criminal service providers to reaching the highest echelons of international organised crime (Europol 2004, p. 40, 2005). The US Department of Justice (2005) in their Intelligence report quoted Grant D. Ashley, assistant director of the criminal

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\(^1\) Over 120 countries ratified a United Nations’ Convention on Transnational Organised Crime (Palermo 2000).

\(^2\) UN definition: Organised criminal group shall mean a structured group of three or more persons existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established pursuant to this Convention, in order to obtain, directly, or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.

\(^3\) Western Balkan countries for the purpose of this paper are: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia and Croatia.
investigative division of the FBI who before the subcommittee on European affairs in October 2003 stated: ‘Balkan organised crime groups, particularly those composed of ethnic Albanians, have expanded rapidly over the last decade to Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, and the Scandinavian countries, and are beginning to gain a foothold in the US.’ The report further argues: ‘Over the years, the illegal operations of the Albanian criminal cells have rapidly evolved and increased at an alarming rate’ (US Department of Justice 2005).

The image of fierce Albanian criminals taking swiftly over criminal markets attracted also the attention of the press from several countries (Galleoti 2001; Arsovska 2006a, 2007a, 2007b; Mendenhall 2001; Binder and Mendenhall 2003; Viviano 1999; Repa 2000; Lallemand 2007). According to a CNN report ‘FBI officials said ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro make up the emerging American criminal cartel and represent a major challenge to federal agents because of their propensity for violence and brutality’ (Bozinovich 2005). The Independent (Bennetto 2002) has reported that the Albanian ‘Mafia’s’ establishment and fast infiltration in Britain is of deep concern to law enforcement agencies (Bennetto 2002). BBC News (2000) quoted one of Italy’s top prosecutors, Cataldo Motta, who has identified Albania’s most dangerous mobsters, explaining that they are a threat to Western society. ‘Albanian organised crime has become a point of reference for all criminal activity today [...] Everything passes via the Albanians. The road for drugs and arms and people, meaning illegal immigrants destined for Europe, is in Albanian hands’ (Barron 2000).

In light of the general development and expansion of Albanian organised crime, many perceive it as an evolving and dangerous phenomenon. Unfortunately there has been very limited scientific research to explain systematically this trend. Only a very limited number of studies have tried to tackle methodically the concept of Albanian criminal evolution (Xhudo 1996; Raufer and Quéré 2000; Arsovska and Craig 2006; Leman and Janssens 2006). In general scholarly research on the topic appears to be sensationalistic, fragmented and outdated. One of the most quoted academic article on Albanian organised crime dates back to 1996. Gus Xhudo (1996) argues:

Once scattered and disorganised, and working for others, the Albanians have, in the past five to ten years, moved into independent operations, established a vast network of mules and trouble-shooters throughout Western Europe, coordinated activity with supportive émigré communities, and managed to consolidate their operations on both sides of the Atlantic. Indeed, they appear to be growing and expanding their operations at an alarming rate.

Years later, researchers have been extensively referring to this article. Similar arguments regarding the growth of the Albanian organised crime groups (i.e., the ‘Albanian Mafia’) are put forward by Xavier Raufer and Stéphane Quéré (2000). Raufer (2002) explains that the Albanian society has a potential to produce Mafia-like structures because of the clan-based society, secrecy and the fascination by firearms, but also because of environmental factors such as the wars in Kosovo and

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4 Translated in Macedonian, expanded and updated in 2006 with a new name The code of evil: Albanian Mafia (Kodot na złoto: Albanska Mafia).
Yugoslavia: “Today we can speak of a true Albanian mafia in a state of permanent evolution; it is developing in a criminal context capable of making remarkable qualitative leaps [...] The actual criminal level of the Albanian mafia has no equal in any country in the Mediterranean basin, not even in Turkey.”

After this brief literature review one can quickly ‘conclude’ that Albanian organised crime groups—often confusingly described as Mafia—have ‘evolved’ rapidly since the early 1990s and they pose a very serious threat to Western societies. The analysis points out that these groups are extremely violent and secretive and these characteristics closely link to the so-called Albanian ‘culture of honour and violence.’ In general such superficial depiction of Albanian organised crime groups supports the mainstream Americanised definition which tends to depict organised crime as a culturally homogeneous external threat. The question is to which extent these perplexing statements hold any truth. In my view the formerly isolated Albanian criminal ‘subcultures’ have greatly attracted international attention because they have expanded to countries with very different socio-cultural systems than their own and have naturally come into conflict with these new external environments. According to Hegelian assumption, an organisational entity exists in a pluralistic world of colliding events and contradictory values that compete with each other for domination. Nonetheless, culture is a changing phenomenon, and through cultural and organisational learning and adaptation to new socio-cultural contexts the groups will become less visible to the outside world (reaching a synthesis). Organised crime is not an alien conspiracy but an internal problem created by contradictions in civil society and laws and it exists in every country just on a different organisational level. As many academics claim, organised crime is not necessarily a conspiracy against the fabric of society, but it is most often part of that fabric. In some countries it is more visible than in others, depending on the particular value system. The above mentioned articles do not explain accurately what evolution of Albanian organised crime groups means in various contexts, nor do they explain systematically the role of culture, social mechanisms and social institutions in understanding this phenomenon.

Summary of the research project

This Ph.D. research (2004–2008) endeavours to elucidate the confusion caused by existing literatures describing Albanian organised crime. It first examines theories of development, change and organisational learning (Kenny 1999; Levitt and March 1988; March and Olsen 1976; Neal and Northcraft 1991; Argyris and Schon 1996; Aldrich 1979; Burgelman 1991; Boyd and Richerson 1985; Baum and Sigh 1994) and then systematically and chronologically analyses the ‘evolution’ of Albanian organised crime groups in two settings—Western Europe and the Balkans—in the period between 1991 and 2007. The research argues that evolution (organisational

5 Types of triangulations: (a) data triangulation, involving time, space, and persons; (b) investigator triangulation, which consist of the use of multiple, rather than single observers; (c) theory triangulation, which consists of using more than one theoretical scheme in the interpretation of the phenomenon; (d) methodological triangulation, which involves using more than one method and may consist of within-method or between-method strategies; (e) multiple triangulation, when the researcher combines in one investigation multiple observers, theoretical perspectives, sources of data, and methodologies.
and cultural) is not always progressive, nor does it take same direction in different social contexts. The social construction of right and wrong that varies across social and cultural space is highly important for understanding the different developments (Black 1993; Arsovksa 2006b; Prato 2004).

Hence the research draws attention to the role of culture, moral values, social capital, trust, behavioural constraints and social environment in the Albanian criminal ‘evolution’ (see Karstedt 2001 on culture; see Thoumi 1999; Woolcock 2000; Putnam et al. 1993 on social capital; see von Lampe and Johansen 2003; Lupsha 1983; Bovenkerk 1998; Paoli 2003; Fukuyama 1995; Misztal 1996 on trust). It examines the role of unofficial (culture) and official (state) normative systems on the behaviour and motivations of Albanian criminals, and even more importantly on the criminal groups’ activities, structures, co-ordinating mechanisms, level of violence/corruption and operational methods. Making use of Albanese’s model, it also studies the broader external environment, focusing on opportunity factors and pre-existing criminal markets in the two settings (Albanese 2000). The study explores the dynamic relation between culture, internalised constraints and external environment by analysing the changing nature of Albanian criminal groups in various social contexts.

Following the approach of Paoli (2003), the research argues that Albanian organised crime should be seen both as a cultural attitude and enterprise; hence, the ethnic/clan-based model and the enterprise/network model are equally important for understanding the groups. However, the strength of each model depends on the social context in which groups operate. The research starts with one of Wolfgang’s postulations that no subculture can be totally different from or in conflict with the society of which it is a part (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). The analysis of Albanian organised crime groups is drawing important conclusions by studying the Albanian socio-cultural value system. Simultaneously it compares it with the Albanian criminal ‘subcultures’ that operate in the Balkans and in Western Europe. In contrast, it depicts some characteristics of the Western value system, in order to explain the recent changes in Albanian criminal ‘subcultures’ as a result of adaptation to new environments. Accordingly, the research explains how and why Albanian criminal groups have moved from violent homogeneous clan-based ‘brotherhoods’ based on loyalty, to being part of more flexible heterogeneous networks based on reputation that operate as business units. The research describes criminal adaptation to social contexts as a matter of survival.

Methods used

The general theoretical framework adopted for this multidisciplinary research is based on the premise that there are a number of crucial conceptual areas that need to be taken into consideration when studying organised crime, violence and honour in the ethnic Albanian context. Since organised crime is a very complex and obscure topic, diversified methods have to be used in order to better understand the phenomenon. For this research I have used the method of triangulation—the application of several research methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon (Baulch and Scott 2006; Booth et al. 1998; Marsland et al. 2000; Jakob 2001). Triangulation can be employed in both quantitative (validation) and qualitative
(inquiry) studies and it is often considered as an alternative to traditional criteria like reliability and validity. By combining multiple observers, theories, methods, and empirical materials, criminologists can hope to overcome the intrinsic biases and problems linked to single method studies particularly in a research field such as organised crime. As noted before, often the purpose of triangulation in specific contexts is to obtain confirmation of findings through convergence of different perspectives. There are four basic types of triangulation. In my research, I basically use multiple triangulation, i.e., the combination of multiple observers, theoretical perspectives, sources of data, and methodologies. The research combines different qualitative and quantitative approaches to exploit the strengths of each. This multifaceted methodology is necessary since there is very limited literature and only few scientific writings systematically describing Albanian organised crime.

Besides extensive literature and newspaper reviews, I have conducted 50 in depth interviews with law enforcement officials (prosecutors, judges and police) from several European countries: Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Italy, UK, Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. Purposive sampling was used and the interviewees were selected according to their expertise on the subject. I have prepared a semi-structured ‘law enforcement’ questionnaire divided in two main parts. The first required the respondent to have a very good overview of the organised crime situation in his/her country, as well as a solid knowledge of Albanian-speaking criminal groups operating in it. The second part targeted law enforcement officials that have been actively involved in the arrests of ethnic Albanian criminals in their own country. Detailed examinations of specific case studies have been conducted.

Moreover, I have investigated 60 police files (also court cases) from Belgium involving ethnic Albanian criminals active mainly in trafficking of and smuggling in human beings, prostitution, but also in drug and arms trafficking, extortions and organised theft in the period 1991–2006. Based on the files, a comprehensive database with 260 criminal profiles categorised by several criteria was created in order to observe how some of the groups’ characteristics and methods have changed over time. Also a brief analysis of statements by victims of Albanian organised crime has been conducted in Belgium in order to assess change in behaviour and methods of Albanian criminals. For this purpose, non-governmental organization representatives and representatives from victim shelters have been interviewed.

With the partial support of a Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education and the Economics Institute: Global Development Network Grant and two research institutes from Albania and Kosovo, I have prepared a questionnaire to be used in a public survey (structured interviews including vignettes) aiming to assess

6 Types of triangulations: (a) data triangulation, involving time, space, and persons; (b) investigator triangulation, which consist of the use of multiple, rather than single observers; (c) theory triangulation, which consists of using more than one theoretical scheme in the interpretation of the phenomenon; (d) methodological triangulation, which involves using more than one method and may consist of within-method or between-method strategies; (e) multiple triangulation, when the researcher combines in one investigation multiple observers, theoretical perspectives, sources of data, and methodologies.

7 This database was created together with Stef Janssens, analyst on human trafficking from the center for equal opportunities and combating racism in Belgium (2006–2007).

8 Short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond.
the importance of the customary Kanun laws (foundation of the traditional Albanian culture) among ‘ordinary’ Albanians, their genuine knowledge about the laws and to examine perceptions of crime, honour and violence in ethnic Albanian context. It has been argued that one of the most effective methods of capturing immediate impressions of people and behaviours is the person perception method⁹ which when used as a complementary technique alongside other data collection methods is proven to be highly effective (Hazel 1995; Hughes 1998; Hastorf et al. 1970; Finch 1987). In this study, vignettes have been used to elicit cultural norms derived from respondents’ attitudes and beliefs about a specific situation, as well as to explore participants’ ethical frameworks and moral codes. Vignettes are especially useful for sensitive areas of inquiry (Neale 1999; Wade 1999; Rahman 1996).

The criteria for selection of the research sample were based on previously identified hypotheses. The research sample—composed of 882 ethnic Albanians—(cluster sampling) was selected from three countries with large ethnic Albanian population: Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo/United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo.¹⁰ Before proceeding with the main research (August 2006–January 2007), a pilot testing of the questionnaire was conducted (June–July 2006). The key variables—representative of the broader sample—were: sub-culture (Geg/Tosk), area (rural/urban), age, gender and education. The people were randomly selected until they met the previously specified quota. The questionnaire was available in Albanian and English and it was slightly adjusted to each country. This was a very detailed and comprehensive questionnaire; hence, the average length of an interview was approximately 40 min. Currently all questionnaires have been collected and the data have been analysed (see Arsovska and Verduyn 2008).

**Interviewing offenders: snowball sampling and inner narratives**

This project also makes use of some specific qualitative research methods in order to broaden the knowledge on the topic. Semi-structured interviews are made with less accessible research subjects—the actual criminals. If we want to look at culture, values, perceptions and neutralisation mechanisms used by criminals, interviewing offenders is certainly an asset. In order to understand the actions of criminals it is useful to consider the self-created narratives that help to give form and significance to their actions. As Canter and Alison (1999, p. 8) explains, it is not only terrorists who structure their lives around main episodes and particular patterns of transaction with others. This process of embedding the vision of the self in an unfolding personal story is called by Canter (1995) an ‘inner narrative’ and it helps to clarify various aspects of criminal activity. The roles that are drawn on to give meaning to offenders’ lives are embedded in a social matrix. As Kleemans and van de Bunt

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⁹ In the typical person perception study, participants read a vignette. Then, participants’ immediate impressions are assessed by having them rate people (in our case mainly the offenders) in the story on bipolar adjective scales.

¹⁰ In Albania a total of 412 Albanians were interviewed. They are representative of the broader sample according to sub-culture (Geg/Tosk), area (rural/urban), age, gender and education. In Kosovo 206 ethnic Albanians were interviewed and in Macedonia—264. The results will be published in June–July 2007.
elucidate ‘organised crime does not operate in a social vacuum; it interacts, however, with its social environment. Consequently, social relations are crucial for understanding the phenomenon of organised crime’. The criminal roles are supported and refined in the contacts the criminal has with other criminals. They are also connected with the notions of antagonist and protagonist that are present in the larger culture of which the criminal partakes. This enables the criminal to legitimise, in his/her own eyes the acts he/she performs and to neutralise in his/her mind their destructive consequences (Canter and Alison 1999, p. 9; Sykes and Matza 1957). In the Balkans the neutralisation mechanisms are closely linked to the culture of the ethnic Albanians, hence, Albanian criminals often use elements, for example, from their ancient Kanun laws—but in exaggerated ‘modern’ form—to justify their criminal acts (Arsovska and Craig 2006; Arsovska and Verduyn 2008).

For this qualitative part of the research I used snowball sampling as a special non-probability method used when the desired sample characteristics are rare. Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects (Vogt 1999). This strategy can be viewed as a response to overcoming the problems associated with sampling concealed populations such as the criminals (Faugier and Sargeant 1997). Snowball sampling can be placed within a wider set of link-tracing methodologies which seek to take advantage of the social networks of identified respondents to provide a researcher with an ever-expanding set of potential contacts (Spreen 1992; Thomson 1997). This process is based on the assumption that a ‘bond’ or ‘link’ exists between the initial sample and others in the same target population, allowing a series of referrals to be made within a circle of acquaintance (Berg 1988).

Snowball sampling—which offers a lot of practical advantages—can be applied as an ‘informal’ method to reach previously hidden populations (Hendricks et al. 1992). Techniques of ‘chain referral’ may imbue the researcher with characteristics associated with being an insider or group member and this can aid entry to settings where conventional approaches find it difficult to succeed. Snowball sampling has been found to be economical, efficient and effective in various studies.11 Perhaps one of the strongest recommendations for the snowball strategy stems from a distinction between descending and ascending methodologies (van Meter 1990). I complemented the public survey (‘descending’ strategy) and the interviews with law enforcement officials, with a qualitative methodology such as this in order to see the various perspectives on similar issues. In this sense snowball sampling can be considered as a complementary strategy for attaining more comprehensive data on a particular research question.

11 For example, it has been shown to be capable of producing internationally comparable data in Avico et al.’s 1988 study of cocaine users in three European cities. It may be used to examine changes over time.
Ms. Egghead meets Mr. Gumshoe

While reading an important Belgian police file on Albanian-speaking criminal groups, I came across an ‘interesting’ and very significant criminal character from the Belgian organised crime scene. ‘Mr. Gumshoe’, was considered to be one of the bosses of the ‘Albanian Mafia’ in Belgium during the 1990s. When arrested, he was given a prison sentence on the basis of multiple charges such as membership in a criminal organisation, prostitution, women trafficking, kidnapping, racketeering, extortions, possession of weapons and fights. He was also suspected of drug and arms trafficking, financing of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), controlling his gang from prison, and even a murder. I found out that he was recently released from prison on the condition that he returned to his place of birth—Kosovo—and never come back to Belgium. If arrested in Belgium he would serve the rest of his sentence. Some months ago there was a rumour that shook the Belgian political scene—‘Mr Gumshoe’ was supposedly seen in Belgium and he was let to walk free. The media were writing about ‘the visit’ of the ‘Albanian Mafia boss,’ the alerts sent by the Antwerp police to the Ministry of Justice, and the refusal of the Belgian Minister of Justice to arrest him. However, real hard evidence of these speculations never materialised. At that time, I interviewed some law enforcement officials on the ‘Gumshoe’ case and his recent visit and many were assuming that he was indeed in Belgium, trying to re-establish his criminal empire.

Since I was actively following the case for several months and often travelled to Kosovo for my research I thought of trying to arrange an interview with him directly. I got approval from my supervising team and decided to use my Kosovo police contacts in order to get the offender’s contact details. Unfortunately this approach did not work out. I was waiting for more than 2 months to get some specific information on the way I could get in touch with the released offender. At the end the police did not want to get involved and my attempt failed. Yet I wanted to give it another try.

During one stay in Kosovo, I met a person who indirectly knew ‘Mr. Gumshoe’ and offered his help in providing contacts. He knew some people from the KLA who were very close friends with the offender. Through my contact, I met two of them and we had extensive discussions. They wanted to make sure that I am not linked to the police before they put me in contact with ‘Mr. Gumshoe’. Once we had several hours of talk we arranged a date for the actual interview. A few days later, I met the offender in a very informal setting—a coffee bar in Pristina. His two friends were present during our meeting, as well as my initial contact. My first ideas were that if I get to him via the police I will conduct the interview in a more formal setting, i.e., in the offices of one law centre in Kosovo. However, the results showed that only through close friends I could gain access to the offender; hence the whole setting was very informal. At the beginning he did not talk much, but once we started a very general conversation about the quality of life in Belgium the atmosphere became less...
tense and more ‘friendly.’ We proceeded with the interview in a separate corner of the same coffee bar.

I had several pages with questions that I had prepared for him. The questions were not very specific and their aim was to assess the offender’s perceptions and opinions on various issues such crime, honour, motives, gender, politics, institutionalised justice, revenge, life, values, ambitions, etc. To my surprise ‘Mr. Gumshoe’ responded to all my questions with great care. He tried to provide detailed answer to each question, although my questions were formulated in a quite general way. The actual interview took approximately 3 hours during which no recording device was used, only notes were taken. As one (anonymous) Belgian law enforcement official working on Balkan organised crime correctly points out, ‘it is interesting to note, that despite the fact that criminals tend to make things “slightly” more beautiful than reality, (in general) they never completely lie. This must be why at our level, we are inclined to corroborate information from different sources and try to look at things from different perspectives to get a clearer global image’ (Anonymous 2007). Matching criminal stories with court cases, police files, victim statements and journalistic accounts is what brings us closer to the actual ‘truth’.

After the interview, ‘Mr. Gumshoe’ offered that I follow his activities during the day and stay over for the night to meet possibly some other ex-convicts (in a discotheque) I was particularly interested in. At some point I though that I had gained his trust, because he was willing to connect me with two other important ethnic Albanian criminals that have been operating internationally, ‘Mr. B’ and ‘Mr. C’. ‘Mr. B’ was one of the most important Albanian drug and arms traffickers from Kosovo who was regulating the heroin trafficking via the Balkan route and the Czech Republic into the Scandinavian countries. After his arrest, he managed to escape from prison by bribing a prison guard; underwent plastic surgery; and, relocate his base of operation to the Czech Republic. He was later arrested and in his apartment police found documents showing that he was buying weapons on behalf of the KLA. He served part of his sentence and was recently deported back to Kosovo. ‘Mr. C’, ethnic Albanian from Macedonia—‘acquaintance’ of ‘Mr. Gumshoe’—was another very important figure in the Albanian criminal underworld but from earlier years. He was active in Western Europe mainly during the 1980s and was one of the people involved in the kidnapping of a very important political figure. ‘Mr. C’ had also managed a sensational escape from prison, during which he kidnapped high-ranking prison officials.

Besides his willingness to link me up with other criminal figures, ‘Mr. Gumshoe’ was also eager to invite me to visit his home, the place where he is giving boxing classes, and to meet some of his girlfriends in order to learn more about his personality. However, at this first stage, I was not prepared for such activities. Although very curious by nature researchers should draw a clear line when interviewing offenders and always remind themselves that no matter how ‘friendly’ criminals might seem we are still dealing with serious offenders. Hence after I met ‘Mr. Gumshoe’ on two separate occasions, I returned to Belgium. The question to my doctoral committee was whether I should extend these contacts via snowball sampling and proceed with a few more interviews. The general feeling was that offenders are indeed a valuable source of information—particularly when studying
culture, honour and perceptions—and that I could possibly do a second round of interviews in the Balkan region. I waited 2 months in order to keep a slight distance from my contacts.

My new interviews in Kosovo were scheduled for April 2007 via my initial contact and ‘Mr. Gumshoe’. However, this time, I met ‘Mr. Gumshoe’—who had been shot in the arm a few days before in a discotheque—alone, after I instructed a local ‘friend’ familiar with the situation to give me occasional phone calls in order to check if all is going well. I met the offender in the same coffee bar in Pristina and he introduced me to two of his friends. We talked informally for about 2 h about the crime situation in Kosovo and other issues and then we left the bar. ‘Mr. Gumshoe’ drove me to his house so I could see documentaries of his trials, video clips from local weddings and other gatherings, photos of family, friends and associates and meet some of his family members. We spent about two additional hours in his house, having numerous discussions on a variety of topics and he remained relatively open and patient throughout the whole conversation. Then we left for dinner in a famous restaurant in Pristina where he introduced me to several other people—including the owner and some ex-prisoners—with whom I had a brief discussion. I found this second round of interviews extremely beneficial for my research and the fact that this time the offender was more comfortable with me ensured high quality answers to my questions. This time the interview was unstructured and again no recording device was used. However, I was allowed to take a series of pictures from him and his home. My trip to Kosovo was a very successful one, so I left for Macedonia.

In Macedonia—for already some time—I had been preparing the grounds for an interview with one of the most infamous and brutal pimps and traffickers of women, a convicted ethnic Albanian I will call ‘Mr. D.’ ‘Mr. D’ was arrested in Macedonia for forced prostitution (sexual slavery) and trafficking of women for sexual exploitation. One hundred sixty Moldovan women were locked in his bars/brothels in a Macedonian village and forced to have sexual intercourse with up to ten men per day. He remained in prison after being sentenced for ‘mediation in prostitution.’ ‘Mr. D’ was very recently released from prison and he is currently living in his home town in Macedonia. A few days after his release a journalist tried to approach ‘Mr. D’s’ house to take some pictures, but he was seriously beaten up by the ‘Mr. D’s’ brothers. As of this writing, as was the case in Kosovo, I am arranging this interview via close friend of ‘Mr. D’, because this seems to be the only way to get in contact with criminals in the Balkans. However, because of the enormous attention currently put on ‘Mr. D’, my contact advised me to wait few months until the situation has calmed down so I can do a more proper interview. I took his advice and re-scheduled the interview for the autumn of 2007. This interview could possibly provide me with valuable information on gender-related issues, such as gender subordination and the role of women in the Albanian society (Arsovska 2006c).

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13 Possibly second level ‘warning’ towards him coming from a syndicate. Use of 1-2-3 system: first they ask you to pay a big money fine, if you do not understand this message they break or shoot your legs and/or arms, the final gradual step being getting murdered.
To do or not to do: information vs. safety

The most important thing that researchers should remember is that no information is worth seriously endangering our lives. In general, researchers should bear in mind at all times that offenders are often very manipulative and sometimes unpredictable and although they might seem open and friendly at certain moments, a minimum distance and level of professionalism should be kept at all times. ‘Mr. Gumshoe’ gave me his phone number and said that I can call him any time I plan to visit Kosovo. Some researchers—in order to gain more information—tend to use such contacts to a great extent and get in regular contact with offenders. In my view this should be avoided at any cost because once the relationship becomes too friendly the researcher enters into a vicious circle. Once the offender becomes comfortable with the researcher he/she could easily ask counter-favours. This can greatly endanger the position of the researcher and could leave him/her in a very uncomfortable situation.

To illustrate more vividly my point, in 2001, I was a co-owner of a coffee bar in Macedonia and I was the victim of extortion. One night a group of men visited my bar. They had a few drinks and towards the end of the night they asked for the bill. I and my partner knew the gang well and we were aware of their activities. Therefore, we told the waiter not to charge them anything. However, they were insisting on getting the bill. After they paid, they called my partner outside the bar saying that the bill was too high. They asked for 4,000 euros for this ‘dishonour.’ The next few days they were visiting the bar frequently looking for my partner and were driving around his apartment continuously. To keep the story short, our solution was not the police because the gangsters made clear that going to the police could only bring more troubles for us. I thought that the best way to solve this problem was to try to use my position as a woman. I demanded to meet the people via a common ‘friend’ and I presented the bar as only my own so to ensure that they will not hurt my business partner. While we were driving in a car in the outskirts of the city, I promised to pay the ‘debt’ personally but over a period of time since the amount was too high. The criminals accepted this offer—most likely because I am a woman—and assured me that there will be no troubles. However, regular contacts with the gang members—supposedly due to the payment—made our relationship ‘friendlier.’ They were not concerned anymore with the money and they were ‘ashamed’ to get money from a woman. One of them told me that as long as I do not brag around that the money was not paid, I do not have to give them anything. The money was no longer an issue and I thought the problem was solved. However, the cost of getting ‘friendly’ was much higher than paying the money. Considering that they had done me a ‘favour’ they were visiting the bar regularly. Soon afterwards we closed the bar because no other costumers would like to sit around people known as unpredictable criminals who openly carried guns. The point of the story is that a researcher should always keep his integrity and independence, and should not aim to become friendly with criminals in order to obtain information because this can be costly. Another great danger is that the researcher could be perceived as an accomplice by the police if he/she remains to close to criminals.

Moreover, prior to the interviews, the researcher should study the cases carefully in order to know precisely what kind of questions to ask. However, the questions should never be very specific, implying that the researcher has very strong
connections with police. More general questions should be put forward, letting the
offender gradually get to the details. In interviewing offenders the researchers should
not try to show how much they know on the topic, but should let the offender tell
his/her story. In my view, the role of the interviewer is to be ‘agreeable’ and
somewhat naïve but still an active listener. In general offenders like when the
interviewer agrees with their points of view or at least accepts their arguments
without being very judgmental. Albanian offenders in particular—coming from a
culture placing high value on pride, shame and honour—do want recognition and are
extremely sensitive to judgmental behaviour. Yet on another side, critics might argue
that empowering criminals is completely wrong and interviewing offenders is not the
right method to conduct research precisely because of such susceptible issues.
Hence, if a researcher acts as if he/she does not know much about the case then
he/she does not really need to take a side and can only listen to what the offender has
to say. Once again, these inner narratives are a great source of information,
particularly when they can be compared to other sources of information.

One aspect that should be taken into great consideration is the degree to which the
information gathered during the interview can be made public. The interviewer
should make this very clear when discussing the interview conditions with the
offender and should try to stay as transparent as possible. After my interview, this
was precisely one of the great dilemmas I was confronted with. Recently I was
contacted by a law enforcement officer in order to discuss some general impressions
about my interviews with ‘Mr. Gumshoe’. The police with whom I have been
cooperating greatly and that have been very helpful in providing me with contextual
information on various cases, wanted to discuss the particular case with me. The
question is to which extent this is ethical and how should one approach such request.
For this reason the conditions for the interview should be stated clearly at the very
beginning and the researcher should be absolutely clear about the terms put forward.
The interviewer should ask the offender which things should be kept strictly
confidential and which might be used for publication or other use. Although it
sounds too technical, such transparency can only gain the trust of the offender and
the law enforcement community.

Finally, if the interview—for one reason or another—can not be conducted in a
public setting but in private places (i.e., apartments, cars), the interviewer should be
exceptionally careful and should take some prearranged security measures. At least
some close people and/or common ‘friends’ should be informed about the activities of
the interviewer and the interviewer should have access to a phone at all times.
Interviews with serious offenders in private settings in general are not recommendable.

Conclusion

Interviewing offenders and writing narratives—if done sporadically—can be a great
source of information for certain types of research. Therefore, the need to interview
offenders is closely linked to the nature of the research. This category of sources
should be used only if it adds significant value to the research itself, and usually
should be used in combination with other sources of information and data collection
methods (multi-method approach). Using snowball sampling is a very appropriate
sampling method in this particular context. However, interviewing offenders has a lot of limitations and it can be very dangerous. To ensure their safety, researchers should remain professional and somewhat distant (but polite) at all times. Also the rules and conditions of the interview should be clarified before the actual interview takes place. Transparency is very important when interviewing offenders. Finally, the interviewer should insist that the interview takes place in a public space—preferably at day time.

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