

Rivers of Narcotics flowing through Albania Igli Toska [is made to] sweats at “Voice of America”

By Xhavit Shala

Aside from the production of cannabis¹, the trafficking of hard drugs from Albania has also become a permanent concern of the international community. In a VOA broadcast, we made efforts to inform public opinion about the large quantities of drugs passing through our country insisting on the necessary to take immediate action against these international trafficking networks. While the interview was broadcast, the then Minister of Public Order, Toska, was sweating in the offices of VOA in Washington trying to dodge the questions of the journalist.

“Voice of America” – May 13, 2005, at 18.00:

“The UN with funding from the Italian government initiated in the eastern border crossings of Albania a project to improve border control and management in an effort to stop the entry of heroine and other narcotic substances that are trafficked.”

Ilirian Agolli prepared the following material: The UN and the Albanian authorities are pushing forward the efforts to stamp out the trafficking of narcotics through Albania and the Balkan countries. The Office for the Control of Drugs and Crime Prevention (UNODCCP) has just begun a new project on border control and fight against trafficking in the eastern border crossings of Albania.

Albania is now a regular route of narcotics trafficking from the east towards the western countries. It is easily recognized as a route in all the maps and observations of agencies that fight narcotics in the world. The Director of the UN Narcotics Office for Europe, Central and Eastern Asia, Vladimir Fenopetov, said during a press conference in Tirana that the project underway to strengthen control in the eastern borders of Albania, in Korça, Pogradec, Dibër and Kukës is of a very high priority. “Albania has time and again benefited from the international technical assistance to fight the illegal trafficking of drugs but Albania should also undertake greater efforts in order to achieve better results in this field, Mr. Fenopetov said. He also said that there are dramatic statistics on the victims of narcotics and the large amount of money generated from these illegal trafficking that corrupt officials and plague millions of people. He called for greater actions to stop the flow of drugs. The fight against narcotics, against cultivation and trafficking, has turned a significant corner in Albania in recent years.

The Director of the independent Security Studies Center, Xhavit Shala, a well known former police director, says that recently there has been a noted increase in the

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quantity of narcotics seized by the Italian and Albanian police, but at the same time this also indicates that the flow is significant. "There is a large flow of narcotics. This calls for a swift reaction to give a blow to these international networks. A close international cooperation is required," he said. Mr. Shala says that the narcotics before entering Albania, it passes through the borders of several states. Without a close cooperation between these countries, a one sided effort by one country can not be effective.

Whereas, the General Director of Police, Bajram Ibraj, says that Albania has now in place a long term strategy (2004-2010) on the fights against narcotics. According to the director the results are improving daily." The initiation of this project coincides with the other steps that are being taken to strengthen institutional operation in the fight against organized crime, steps that are reflected in our objectives and programs, that consist on increasing cooperation between the structures of the state police, customs and prosecutor's office in the fight against narcotics trafficking and other activities of organized crime," Mr. Ibraj said.

Besides having around 40 thousand drug users, Albania is often mentioned for the interception of large quantities of narcotics by the Italian police that have originated from Albanian ports"²

"Voice of America" – Minister of Public Order, Igli Toska:

Voice of America: Mr. Minister, do you agree with the opinion that Albania is now regular route of trafficking from the East to the West? There is no doubt that there is an increase in the quantities of narcotics seized in Albania, keeping in mind that this is also an indicator of a growth in the flux of narcotics that enter into the country.

Igli Toska: I would not say that but I would like to emphasize that issues of narcotics trafficking are issues of great concern for all the region and not only for Albania. Naturally, Albania as part of the region faces its own issues in its fight against the trafficking but in my opinion this is a regional phenomenon. As an illustration, I would like to mention a concrete example of what Albania has done in the fight against this trafficking. Alongside the government strategies and action plans, during last year the Albanian police alone was able to seize a quantity of narcotics that is larger than the quantity of the last 15 years taken together. Understandably, one may raise the question that you brought up, about whether this means that there is an increase in the quantity of narcotics being trafficked through Albania. This may well be the case, but one thing is certain: that when police are able to achieve such seizure, to archive such successes in this fight, which is really difficult type of trafficking to uncover, due to the particular characteristics of this trafficking, traffickers that attempt to traffic it, when they see that the police is reacting will without doubt retreat.

I do not think that it stands to reason that just because we have been able to seize during 2004 a quantity that is larger than that seized in the last 15 years it doesn't mean that the narcotics being trafficked through the Balkan routes have increased.

² The comment was prepared by the VOA correspondent in Tirana, Ilirian Agolli.

“Voice of America”: I understand Mr. Minister, but how do you explain the fact that most the narcotic shipments seized in Italy take place in the Adriatic coast and that Italy carries out more arrests of traffickers than Albania?

Igli Toska: I tend to disagree with you on this, because during 2004 for the first time we have conducted joint operations with the Italian police and judiciary structures and thanks to the combination of the human resources that we have with the logistic and technical equipments that they have we have been able to collect evidence and prosecute three organized criminal groups. It is true that there are Albanian elements in the organized criminal groups that run the narco-trafficking in Italy but it self-understood that Italian citizens are also part of this trafficking. The fight against trafficking is a long one because as a phenomenon this did not start today, it did not begin in 2004. This issue drew attention only because of the fact that this year we were able to seize such quantities. To get to this level of trafficking it took many years and it has all started with much lower quantities.

“Voice of America”: Mr. Minister, how would you explain the closure of the regional anti-trafficking center in Vlora? Was this a failure or is it that Albania became a very clean country in this respect?

Igli Toska: The Vlora Anti-Trafficking Center has not been closed. It has fully accomplished the mission for which it was created. It was set up at a moment when clandestine trafficking was a problem not just for the order but for the Albanian government also. With the complete end to clandestine trafficking from Albania I would say that we are the first and only country in the region that according to statements by senior Italian state officials have pushed down to zero the cases of illegal crossing of the border. We are the only country in the region that presently has at a minimum level the trafficking of human beings. I said that this center has not been closed but the option is being considered to expand its activity and add other components in order to make it operational again and of service in the fight against other illegal type of trafficking, such as the trafficking of narcotics, smuggling, etc.

“Voice of America”: Mr. Minister, in recent days in the Albanian media there is talk about an open collusion between the police and the crime world. As you said, there are no more clandestine, but the speed boats with narcotics continue to cross to Italy.

Igli Toska: I would say that intercepting speed boats is a significant thing in Albania. During 2004 you have been able to follow many police operation that have lead to interception of sped boats that were attempting to leave the Albanian coast, or cases when these boats were seized deep inside the Albanian territory. We have identified and given a blow to organized trafficking groups that were attempting to carry out an illegal border crossing of human beings. There have been a very large number of operations that have been performed. Only for 2004 there are more than 15 such operations. There have been speed boats and clandestines that have been stopped in the attempt to cross the border and also targeting of the perpetrators who lured these people who in hope of a

better life were attempting to cross the border. We have come to such a level when the Albanian police is able to prevent the phenomenon of clandestine border crossings.

