

## **Speedboats, Cigarettes, Mafia and Montenegrin Democracy**

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Cigarette smuggling involving the Montenegrin government and the Italian Mafia has been going on for years. Now, however, it has become front page news in Italy, and Belgrade is gloating.

Every evening, at around seven o'clock, powerful, 18-metre speedboats leave the Montenegrin port of Bar. The Italians lovingly call them "bionde" (the blondes). They are loaded with cigarettes - most often Philip Morris and Rothmans - and are bound for the closest landfall on the other side of the Adriatic, the Italian region of Puglia.

Under the cover of dark, the speedboats make the three-hour crossing to the Italian coast and land somewhere between Bari and Brindisi. There, as agreed, a group of youths meet them and hastily unloads the cargo worth 450,000 German marks.

Each youth gets 100 German Marks for his night's work. Reloaded onto the trucks, the cigarette cartons are escorted by half a dozen armoured jeeps along back roads in two directions. Part of the cargo goes south where it is passed on to Sacra Corona the most powerful Mafia organisation in Puglia; part ends up in the hands of Camore - the notorious Neapolitan Mafia group.

About 700 containers of cigarettes are annually transferred through Montenegro to Italy. Each contains 960 packages, and the Montenegrin government makes 45 German marks from each package, or two million German marks a month.

According to Italian sources, Montenegro earns up to 60 per cent of its domestic product from this 'transit business', as the local authorities like to call it. The Italian state loses several billion lira a year in unpaid tax.

The illicit trade has been going on since May 1992 and is common knowledge in Montenegro. Moreover, most Montenegrins believe that the international community is aware of the operations, especially since a special EU team visited the country to investigate two years ago. However, they assume that the West is happy to turn a blind eye, since the smuggling generates additional revenue for Montenegro, which on balance is considered positive.

Montenegrin politicians generally prefer to avoid the subject of smuggling and Mafia links. When forced to justify their actions, they tend to say that the practice went on for decades in the former Yugoslavia, out of Croatia, and that if Montenegro was to clamp down on the trade, another Balkan country would rapidly step in.

Although the trade itself is not new, the attention it is receiving in Italy at present is unprecedented. The Italian government has begun investigating the smuggling operations; the Montenegrin Foreign Minister Branko Perovic has been implicated; and the Italian media have devoted a great deal of time and space to the question.

According to the Italian weekly *Esspresso*, the Office of the Prosecutor in Naples and Bari has put together 4,000 pages of evidence, including recorded conversations and testimonies. As a result, it has the material evidence to charge 46 individuals, among them three Yugoslav citizens - Perovic, and two less prominent Montenegrins, Rados Nedic and Abdzija Kanjik.

The leading names on the long list of Italians are Ciro Mazarella, one of the bosses of the Neapolitan Camore, and four of his sons. Indeed, it was the investigations into the Mazarella family and their trade in heroin and arms, that led prosecutors to the international tobacco smuggling network.

The first hearing of the 46 accused was scheduled for 20 September this year, but many, including Perovic, failed to show up. The Montenegrin Minister's lawyer claimed political immunity.

The indictment against Perovic alleges that before becoming a minister, while a representative of the Yugoslav airline JAT in Rome, he mediated on behalf of the Montenegrin government with Mazarella. According to the charges, Perovic met up with the Mafia boss's lieutenant Antonio Savino on several occasions between October 1992 and October 1993 and many of the conversations were tapped by Italian police.

In an interview with the Montenegrin weekly Monitor, one of the main prosecutors in this trial, Lucano D'Angelo from Naples, said that he doubted whether Perovic would appear in court. He did, however, reveal that Perovic had been charged with managing the smuggling and the payments, which could mean a sentence of up to five years. D'Angelo pointed out that: "We don't know whether he took the commission for himself."

Perovic has already appeared in court in Rome in October 1996 where he testified on this issue explaining that his task was to "contact Italian entrepreneurs intending to invest in Montenegro... among them... individuals like Mazarella and Savino".

In the wake of the scandal, many Italian politicians have demanded an end to humanitarian aid to Montenegro until the Yugoslav republic ends its involvement in smuggling and arrests the Italian citizens on its territory who control the trade.

Meanwhile, the affair has played into the hands of the Belgrade propaganda machine, with pro-Belgrade newspapers in both Serbia and Montenegro reprinting articles from the Italian press on a daily basis.

In response, the Montenegrin authorities chose to interpret what appeared to them a coordinated action by Rome and Belgrade as a political conspiracy put together by Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and Italian Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini. To make this point, Miodrag Vukovic, an aide to President Milo Djukanovic, reported that Dini's wife, Donatella Dini, has a personal stake in Serbia Telecom, 49 per cent of which was sold off in 1997 to an Italian-Greek group for 800 million German marks.

As relations between Rome and Podgorica deteriorated, the Italian ambassador to Belgrade travelled to the Montenegrin capital, paving the way for a series of meetings between a high-level Montenegrin delegation and the Italian police. The result: arrests of a dozen Italian criminals in Bar and their extradition to Italy.

As the Italian police clamp down on smuggling both in Montenegro and at home, the Podgorica leadership will have to find other, legal ways to generate revenue. If they are serious about wishing to be part of western Europe and becoming a democracy, they cannot complain.

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