CRIMINAL FRANCHISING: ALBANIANS AND ILLICIT DRUGS IN ITALY

by

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Abstract: *This paper considers how trafficking of marijuana from Albania to Italy interlocks with, other forms of illicit trafficking. While Albanians have tended to occupy only marginal roles in other forms of illicit drug trafficking, they are centrally involved in the production, importation and distribution of marijuana. The paper identifies a number of — probably unintended — benefits that this may bring. It has probably served to disentangle the marijuana market from the distribution of more harmful drugs of dependence such as heroin and cocaine. In providing a relatively cheap and plentiful supply of marijuana, it may have diverted Italian users from the more expensive heroin and cocaine. It may have provided a supply of jobs, although they are in the black economy. Thus against harm-reduction principles the near-monopoly held by Albanian traffickers has much to recommend it. The paper considers the implications of this for drug policy.*

INTRODUCTION

In Italy the number of people charged with drug offences between 1991 and 1997 has shown the following trends. Arrests for trafficking and supply of heroin have increased by around 20%, while for cocaine the increase has been around 50%. The number of individuals charged with trafficking and supply of hashish has slightly declined. Finally, the variation regarding marijuana offences has been outstanding. In 1991, 36 people were charged with international trafficking and 490 for supply, while in 1997, respectively, 1,246 and 5,078 were charged (Ministero dell'Interno, 1998). Trends regarding seizures indicate that the quantities of heroin and cocaine intercepted by the Italian police have declined, that quantities of hashish

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have remained stable, while quantities of marijuana have increased tenfold (European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction [EMCDDA], 1998).

These trends provide the backdrop for this paper. It focuses in particular on Albanian migrants in Italy and the nature of their involvement in illicit economies, including the drugs economy. In part one an overview of the economic relationships between Italy and Albania is provided. In part two, the role of Albanian criminal groups is analysed, with particular attention given to their involvement in the illicit drugs business. Part three briefly relates the activities conducted by Albanian immigrants in Italy to the debate around ethnic minorities and crime. In the conclusion, policies are sketched with a view to minimising the social harm related to drug trafficking, supply and use in Italy. In this respect the notion of criminal franchising, of the production and marketing of marijuana, is discussed.

THE ALBANIAN DREAM

Before the collapse of the financial pyramids in the early months of 1996, there were more than 600 Italian companies operating in Albania.[1] These were middle-range or small firms involved in the building industry and in the manufacture of shoes, clothes and furniture. A large timber industry had established itself in Albania, and the country provided both the raw materials and a lively market for the final products. Overall, these companies employed some 30,000 people.

Italian financial institutions were involved in the largest private bank arrangement in Albania, the Italo-Shqiptare Bank, affiliated to the Bank of Rome. Oil derivatives produced by API (Agenzia Italiana Petroli) were also sold in Albania, supplying both state agencies and private entrepreneurs. Public works contracted to Italian firms included the building of the water-supply system of Tirana and Duress, while the restructuring of the electricity network and telephone lines were also entrusted to Italian firms. Finally, Albania imported from Italy around 40% of the goods purchased abroad.

This flurry of economic entrepreneurship prompted the major newspaper published in southern Italy, *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno* (6 March 1997, which also published an Albanian daily edition), to describe the thriving activities as the "Albanian dream" (Parise, 1997). Moreover, the "Switzerland of the Balkans," as enthusiasts also described Albania, was just 50 miles away from the Italian coast, and offered entrepreneurs very advantageous conditions in terms of taxation and business licensing (Carnimeo, 1997).

Italian business was also engaged in the development of tourism. Work was well on the way in Orikum, in the bay of Valona, and summer 1996 was fully booked up by VIPs from Bari and other towns of southern Italy. When news reports started alerting the world to the social turmoil caused by the collapse of some Albanian financial institutions, Italian entrepreneurs were told "not to panic" and would-be holiday makers advised "not to cancel their bookings": "order will soon be restored" (Mero, 1996).

THE ITALIAN DREAM

While Italian entrepreneurs were pursuing the "Albanian dream," Albanians had already been blinded by the "Italian dream." In 1994, no fewer than 5,000 individuals per month were estimated to cross the Adriatic Sea in small boats directed to Italy. There is a narrow strait separating Albania from the coast of the Italian region of Puglia, and crossing the strait in small boats became the new strategy adopted by migrants after the previous biblical exodus failed. This exodus started immediately after the collapse of the Communist regime, in 1991 and took the form of thousands of Albanians arriving in Italy in dangerously overloaded ships. In their expectation, which was to be disappointed, their departure from Communism deserved to be met with generous hospitality by capitalist countries.

Some data may explain the reasons why Albanians were, and still are, so determined to migrate. In 1995, governmental figures indicated that 80% of Albanians lived below the minimum standards established by the United Nations. More than 70,000 individuals received benefits totalling $31 per month. Pensioners experienced a 50% reduction in their purchasing power between 1991 and 1995 *(Albanian Daily News*, 3 June 1995). The transition from the Communist regime, which replaced state property with private property, "led to a huge increase in unemployment, and within a year 25-30 per cent of the total work force became unemployed" (Hysi, 1998:4). According to a survey conducted in 1996, crime victimisation rates in Tirana were the highest in transitional countries: nearly 60% of the respondents had been victims of one or more crimes in the previous year, half of them of violent crimes (Hysi, 1998:19).

While it is difficult, particularly after the 1997 crisis, to estimate the number of Albanians who escape such social conditions, changes in the social composition of those who arrived in Italy were noticeable. The new arrivals include, not only destitute families and unemployed individuals, but also ministers, army, navy and police officers, troop soldiers, and sentenced offenders who escaped from custody

during the recent civil war.[2] Nearly 90% of these immigrants arrived, and still arrive, without valid identification, and most, shortly after being accommodated in camps or empty schools, disappeared. While some seek to enter Germany and other European countries, others remain as irregular immigrants on Italian territory.

The Italian authorities expel a higher percentage of Albanians than any other groups of migrants, a circumstance which officials justify with their "irregular status." Around 30% of the Albanians, about 26,000 individuals, who arrived in Italy between 1991 and 1995 were deported. As the rate of deportation shows no sign of abating, rejected migrants may try to re-enter Italy by other means. In other words, migrants may be encouraged to turn to the services of traffickers (Ruggiero, 1997; Salt, 1997). Trafficking in irregular and undocumented migrants is one of the activities in which Albanians are engaged, an activity which is intertwined with a number of other organised illicit activities, including drug production and trafficking.

CRIMINAL BUSINESS

Customs police seized 109 inflatable boats in 1998, claiming that half the fleet of the Albanian traffickers based in the town of Valona had been "taken off business." The cost of each such boat is equivalent to about £35,000, and the police claim that the average profits for each trip amount to around £8,000. Between 30 and 40 trips between Albania and Italy are made each night, with traffickers charging about £400 per passenger. Discounts are said to be applicable to families. Some 36,000 irregular migrants were intercepted in 1998, and in January 1999 the figure was already 2,000. On many occasions boats avoid coming too near the Italian coast, and traffickers force migrants to swim to Italy when a few hundred metres separate them from the shore (Mastrogiacomo, 1999).

Interviews with officials of the Italian Ministry of the Interior suggested that traffickers take extra care for the humans they take across the Adriatic only when these are young women destined for prostitution. One such official reported the following incident:

> We intercepted telephone conversations between one trafficker who was having problems in reaching the coast and his accomplices in Italy. As the little boat began to sink, the trafficker said that the "girls" would be taken care of, and when a second boat came to rescue them the girls had priority in boarding it. Five people drowned, and once ashore, the trafficker rang his

> partner again saying that, fortunately, the "valuables" were all safe, [interview]

Trafficking in migrants is therefore only one of the activities carried out by Albanian criminal entrepreneurs. This activity is intertwined with supplying prostitutes to Italy and other European countries. Some young women are forced to become prostitutes when they reach the country of destination and are initially unaware of what and who awaits them there (Géry, 1999).

Research conducted by Lewis (1998) illustrates the complex nature of the illegal businesses carried out by Albanian groups. Activities are diversified but concomitant, with groups shifting from contraband in oil to illicit arms sale, and from drugs trafficking to the trafficking in humans or stolen cars. For example, many Mercedes stolen in Germany are marketed in Albania. The number of cars in Albania has soared since the collapse of communism, growing from 5,000 in the early 1990s to 50,000 in 1998. Yet, in the previous year only three new cars were officially registered *(The Independent,* 18 December 1998).

Albanian large-scale drug dealers have been identified in Germany as well as in Croatia and Slovenia. "The collapse of Albania, and its conversion to market economy have provided ideal conditions for two-way trading in weapons, oil, drugs, tobacco, stolen vehicles and migrant smuggling" (Lewis, 1998:224).

It is important to note that such activities are interwoven and that criminal entrepreneurs are extremely versatile. This circumstance, as we shall see later, should guide policy makers and legislators. In a final account of the entrepreneurial versatility of Albanian groups, it has been suggested that dealing in arms goes hand in hand with smuggling vehicles from Germany, smuggling of humans (including the establishment of prostitution networks), and finally "drugs trafficking with the middle East and with Colombia is accompanied by money laundering with Russia" (Mattera, 1997:98). Let us now focus on the illicit drugs business.

THE COLOMBIA OF EUROPE?

Albanian and Macedonian networks have fully exploited their access to suppliers in Turkey and the republics of the Caucasus, their simultaneous access to the Adriatic, and their established presence in Switzerland, Italy and Germany. Drugs refineries have been discovered in Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania (EMCDDA, 1998). The Albanian port of Durres is said to be the destination of hundreds of ve-

hides for the transportation and bartering of heroin and other products through the Balkans and via the ferry to Italy. Protected warehousing is provided in Albania itself, with consignments earmarked for Italy, Switzerland and Germany (Lewis, 1998).

Investigators suggest that Albania could become the Colombia of Europe. In the testimony of an officer of the Servizio Antidroga of the Ministero dell'Interno:

> Turkish heroin passes through Albania, and is destined for western European markets. Marijuana is cropped in Albania, particularly on the hills surrounding Saranda. The large plantations are well visible in that area. Marijuana cropping was the result of conversion, in the sense that it is grown in the same greenhouses set up by skilled floriculturists from Terlizzi, in the southern region of Puglia. The new plantations, of course, are more remunerative. In 1996, more than 7 tons of Albanian marijuana were seized by Italian customs police, [interview]

Interviews with marijuana suppliers in Rome revealed that drugs may be transported to Italy as a form of service due to migrant traffickers. Each migrant may be given between four and five kilograms. Large bags containing around 30 kilograms may be entrusted to families leaving Albania together. In the testimony of one informant: "Sometimes, the Albanians do not bring the drugs all the way to the Italian coasts, as other boats from Italy meet them a few miles from shore and take the consignments" (interview).

Regarded as physically "rough" but mentally sophisticated by investigators, Albanian drugs entrepreneurs are also thought to be engaged in a permanent search for autonomy. For example, after an initial phase in which drugs were purchased from Turkish intermediaries, Albanian groups are now said to access larger suppliers and producers directly. In this way, key business links with Afghanistan and other heroin producing countries, and also with Colombian cocaine producers, have been established. Large distributors residing in Italy take the consignments and feed middle range suppliers scattered in large cities. Groups that established themselves in the Emilia Romagna region are said to be in charge of the laundering of drugs proceeds by investing them in the tourist industry of Rimini and the surrounding area.

In cities such as Rome and Milan, the Albanian groups are said to have upset the old geography of criminal activity. An investigator reported that:

> In the largest Italian cities, Albanians have networks of rented flats. In Milan, the police found that most of the flats were rented by one person, Peschepia Ritvan. He was an Albanian politician, the son of a diplomat and member of the democratic alliance in his country, who had escaped soon after the collapse of the financial pyramids. He used his regular passport for renting the flats, and was in business with traffickers, who nicknamed him "the falcon." [interview]

The high degree of organisation achieved by Albanian drugs entrepreneurs prompts the hypothesis that they have acquired independence from the more established Italian criminal groups. Do Albanians manage to conduct business without causing the resentment of mafia-type organisations? The little evidence available on this issue is contradictory.

While traffickers from Albania have established themselves in Italy, Italian criminal groups have set up entrepreneurial outposts in Albania. Partnerships have been formed, particularly in the recruitment of illegal migrants, who constitute cheap labour for farmers and other employers in the hidden economy. Albanians, in this area, seem to have acquired the standing to negotiate with Italian Mafia-type organisations on an equal footing. However, anecdotal evidence would indicate that in other areas Italian criminal entrepreneurs are unwilling to establish joint ventures with Albanians and are determined to retain their higher hierarchical position.

On the Romagna coast, two Albanians (Arben Kurani and Agim Lala) were killed on 20 May 1997. After arresting a group of suspects, detectives suggested that the two victims had tried to set up their own business in the heroin trade, and that they had been consequently punished by local members of organised crime. Albanians were said to be confined to the importation of the substance, due to their access to producing countries and their ability to move goods and people into Italy. They were, however, expected to refrain from wholesale and middle-range distribution, let alone independent distribution. The Italian groups were unprepared to share the profits of the heroin economy with the newcomers. Only at the lowest level of retailing, when "running" for Italian distributors who thought it wise to keep away from the street drug scene, was their presence tolerated.

Other episodes illustrate the problematic cohabitation of Albanian criminal groups with their Italian counterparts. The channel separating Albania from the region of Puglia is not only the conduit for migrants and drugs traffickers, but also a crucial conduit for long-established cigarette smuggling controlled by Italian groups. Clashes

between these groups and the new traffickers are frequent. The Italians claim that the Albanians, by contributing to the militarization of the coasts, have made the traditional business of cigarette smuggling too dangerous. In January 1999 a number of blockades were organised by Italian smugglers against migrant traffickers in Puglia. One of leaders of this anti-Albanian protest spoke to a journalist in the following terms: "We have never seen so much control on this coast. The Albanians don't know what they are doing, they don't respect any rule, and they are in our way while we are working" [Buonavolgia, 1999].

However, some local investigators believe that an agreement between Italian and Albanian groups is possible, particularly in Puglia, where cigarette smugglers are endowed with radar for the interception of the customs boats patrolling the coast. If this service is rendered to Albanian traffickers, it is suggested, the two parties may find an easier co-habitation.

There is only one sector in the drugs business that does not show any sign of competition between Italian and Albanian organisations. This is the sector of marijuana, which traditionally has never been of interest to mafia-type groups in Italy. Marijuana is grown in Albania and transferred to Italy in large quantities. In 1995 Albanian marijuana was sold at the equivalent of £700 per kilogram, while after the financial crisis its cost dropped to little more than £70 per kilogram. Very cheap and of good quality, marijuana is widely, and increasingly, available in Italian cities. Due to its low cost at source, marijuana is particularly attractive to small dealers, who can access the market and make a living without causing price increases that would discourage purchasers. In sum, the low market price of marijuana makes for good employment opportunities in its distribution. The involvement of large numbers of intermediaries, each making a profit, is unlikely to produce an increase in retail prices that might keep consumers away.

The peculiarity of the marijuana market in Italy deserves further examination, as it is part of the traditional debate. around immigration and criminal activity.

IMMIGRANTS AS JOB PROVIDERS

In Italy, like elsewhere, analyses of the relationship between immigration and crime offer a variety of explanatory tools ranging from "relative deprivation" to "stereotyping," and from "differential law enforcement" to "cultural difference." Advocates of relative deprivation, for example, posit that the image of Italy in developing countries, an image associated with nice cars and elegant clothes, engenders dis-

appointment among new settlers. They end up pursuing the official goals of consumption and success by illegal means, the legal means being unavailable to most of them (Colombo, 1998). Explanations revolving around stereotyping, instead, focus on the reaction of victims, who are said to be more likely to report crimes committed by immigrants than those committed by their compatriots, which contributes to the statistical anomaly regarding the prevalence of immigrant offenders (Gatti et al., 1997). In their turn, commentators resorting to explanations based on differential law enforcement pinpoint the visibility of immigrants and, consequently, the more intense police activity to which they are subjected in addition to the harsher responses they receive from the judiciary (Melossi, 1998; Palidda, 1997). Finally, cultural adaptation and "ladder step" hypotheses are mobilised by authors claiming that crime committed by immigrants is the result of their marginalisation in the host country and that social improvement will resolve their initial cultural disorientation (Marotta, 1995).

With respect to illicit drugs, contemporary accounts in Italy echo similar accounts prevailing in other countries, where drugs are associated with immigrants and "alien invasion" (Murji, 1998). Research also suggests that drugs economies display a division of labour based on ethnicity so that, for example, import operations are often performed by non-Italians. These poorly paid "expendable mules" provide a service to indigenous wholesalers who are part of established distribution networks and usually are not directly involved in importation (Ruggiero, 1996, 1992; Ruggiero and South, 1995). On the other hand, the presence of ethnic minorities is very visible at street-level distribution, where risks of apprehension are higher and profits lower. Frequently, for example, immigrants are employed by indigenous distributors to deliver doses and to keep street contact with customers. In brief, the illicit drugs economy would appear to broadly mirror the division of roles characterising the official economy, the lower stages of both being mainly occupied by immigrants and ethnic minorities.

The case of the Albanian marijuana business seems to constitute a significant anomaly vis-a-vis this pattern. Albanian groups are involved in the production, importation and finally the distribution of the illicit substance (Barbagli, 1998). In an unusual role reversal, Albanian distributors sell quantities of marijuana to Italian street suppliers who are in closer contact with enclaves of users. In this sense, Albanians create job opportunities for young Italians, which partly resolves the problem of youth unemployment in Italy (Ruggiero, 2000). Moreover, as remarked by one of the police investigators I interviewed: "Albanian marijuana is a blessing for the Italian

younger generation, as it has diverted users from crack, ecstasy, and even from heroin, whose consumption has declined" (interview). The "anomaly" of the Albanian marijuana business is worthy of further analysis aimed at the identification of a specific harm-reduction policy.

FRANCHISING AS HARM REDUCTION

The set of social policies that can be grouped under the rubric "harm reduction" prioritises the aim of decreasing the negative effects of drug use (Newcombe, 1992). These include individual as well as social effects. The most obvious individual effects pertain to the health of users, while the most relevant of the social impacts consists of acquisitive crime. Harm reduction tries to replace interventions inspired by moralism with more pragmatic interventions aimed at minimising both the individual and the social effects of drug use. Advocates of this strategy also stress that the concept of harm reduction should be expanded to include harm produced by law enforcement, criminal justice and the penal system. In other words, harm reduction entails the belief that the damage caused by drug use results, in large measure, from its illegality.

Although its main roots are in the public-health model, harm reduction may impact substantially on law enforcement by releasing police resources. Police attention, in other words, may be diverted from users and street dealers to large traffickers and distributors. In this respect, policies adopted in the Netherlands may be illuminating. Marijuana smokers and small-scale distributors have been removed from the criminal justice system (Jansen, 1991). Informal tolerance has been accompanied by the designation of controlled places where distribution and use may occur, while the police are "free to focus attention on drug traffickers, instead of tracing minor drug users. From an economic point of view, we have to conclude that this is more cost-effective" (Zaal, 1992:92). From the users' perspective, this policy is beneficial because they can obtain "good-quality products for reasonable prices, so they do not need to resort to criminality to be able to buy them" (Zaal, 1992:92).

These benefits relate to a policy I would like to suggest: namely the franchising of the marijuana business to Albanians. Such a policy, of course, cannot be translated into legislation that would "reserve" this specific market solely for Albanian nationals. Instead, it should be understood as a form of harm reduction implemented through a variety of enforcement policies. For example, informal tolerance towards use, possession and supply of marijuana would bring

de facto decriminalisation of the business. More formal legislative intervention, in turn, would aim at legalisation and the consequent control of the market through taxation. It would also consider increasing the divergence in penalties between marijuana-related offences and offences related to other drugs.

Informal tolerance and formal legislation would be accompanied by precise spatial divisions between marijuana and hard drugs at the retail level. Retailers, for example, would be involved in making such divisions clear by displaying agreed "rules" to be observed by clients at designated places where marijuana is sold, and by participating in health campaigns concerning the effects of hard drugs. The beneficial effects of both these informal and formal types of intervention emerge when the analysis moves to the minimisation of harm caused by criminal organisations.

CONTRACTING OUT

This analysis focuses on economic categories such as monopoly and competition. Monopolies, it is argued, allow for the rise of prices at which goods and services can be sold. They also result in the overall reduction of output due to the absence of competing firms. This perspective has led some authors to emphasise the "preferability" of structured, large-scale illicit activities as opposed to dispersed disorganised ones. With the former, it is suggested, external costs become internalised (Schelling, 1967). External costs are those falling on competitors, customers and others outside the firm itself. Violence is one such external cost. If some illicit goods and services were provided by a monopoly, we would witness a reduction of these goods and services (Rubin, 1980). In competitive situations, instead, external costs, such as violence, fall on society at large. This is exemplified by an individual hijacker who might kill a bystander to eliminate a potential witness, even though criminals as an occupational group would suffer from public outrage and increased police activity. In contrast, monopolies in illicit businesses may create a collective interest in restricting violence so as to avoid the disapproval of the public and attention from the police. Society, therefore, might "contract out" some of the regulatory functions to criminals themselves, "encouraging them to stick to less damaging kinds of crime" (Reynolds, 1980:43).

Let us formulate some hypotheses around the beneficial effects of "contracting out" the marijuana business to Albanians. First, the marijuana economy would be disentangled from the other illicit businesses conducted by Albanians that have been described above. It

should be reiterated that heroin and marijuana are smuggled into Italy alongside migrants, weapons, and young women destined for prostitution. Figures provided by the police indicate that almost 19,000 Albanian migrants have been charged with an offence during 1998.[3] Among the complaints voiced by the police is that such figures obscure the fact that ideally most offenders (around 6,000) would limit themselves to violations of the immigration law if precise distinctions were made between the different types of offences and respective legislations. Other migrants would limit themselves to the smuggling of marijuana if legislative distinctions were made between heroin, cocaine and marijuana offences. Attributing an illegal status to all illicit goods and services provided by Albanians may have encouraged the conflation of the respective businesses and markets and produced the multi-entrepreneurial efforts described above. Seizures of heroin and marijuana imported by Albanians have increased. Albanians make up the largest contingent of Europeans charged with drug offences (Maritati, 1998; Colussi, 1998). Isolating marijuana from other illicit goods would establish selective barriers between criminal entrepreneurs and persuade some to devote themselves to less harmful initiatives.

Second, franchising the production and marketing of marijuana to Albanians would, of course, entail forms of decriminalisation or legalisation of marijuana use. However, as remarked by advocates of drug legalisation in other contexts, legalisation would produce benefits in terms of employment and profits (Ruggiero, 1998; Karel, 1991). Marijuana crops in Albania would provide job opportunities for farmers and unskilled labourers, as well as pharmacists, chemists and retailers. Italian young people, some of whom are already employed in the business, would also benefit from the consequent expansion of job opportunities in retail distribution. Legalisation would also be consistent with the views of the majority of Italian people, particularly youth, most of whom regard cannabis consumption as a "right" (Pizzo, 1999; Gruppo Abele, 1997).

Third, in response to objections that franchising would create a monopolistic condition and consequently an increase in prices one could argue that the marijuana business is already virtually monopolised by Albanian producers and distributors. This monopoly has not caused a substantial increase in prices due to low production costs. Franchising the marijuana business to Albanian entrepreneurs would in fact produce benefits in terms of decline of violence. This is because monopolies tend to make external costs such as violence internalised in the very groups holding monopolistic positions. Frictions with Italian organised groups would also decrease as a conse-

quence of Albanians being diverted from activities traditionally performed by the indigenous groups.

Finally, franchising would be an ideal policy considering the recent evolution of criminal enterprises in Italy. It should be noted the recent success of the Italian judiciary against organised crime caused an unpredictable situation that could be described as follows. The possibilities for organised crime to enter the legitimate arena of business were reduced dramatically. Rules regulating public contracts were redrawn in every sector of the national and local economy. As a consequence, the most successful "families" who had accumulated large amounts of finances, shifted into some licit sector of the official economy. Their crime, now, falls in the domain of white collar or corporate crime. The unsuccessful families were pushed into conventional criminal activity, particularly the cocaine and heroin business and protection rackets. It is in these sectors of the criminal economy that most homicides take place. The criminal markets, as a result of legal options being increasingly inaccessible to organised crime, are now extremely crowded. Devising strategies that confine the activities of Albanian drug entrepreneurs to the marijuana market would partly avoid adding to such overcrowding and the consequent degree of violence associated with it.

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NOTES

1. The pyramid schemes, which promised high returns to masses of Albanian savers, are forms of financial investments in which new liabilities are issued to finance existing liabilities. In other words, money is borrowed for the single purpose of paying interests on previous loans. In this way, an increasing number of new lenders is required to pay the high return promised to the old lenders. The inherent fragility of these schemes manifested itself most dramatically in Albania, triggering violent protest by savers.

2. The civil war was caused by the collapse of the financial institutions known as "pyramids" in 1996. Adventurous financiers, including large foreign investors, who had committed themselves to the payment of interest rates as high as 40%, were suddenly forced to declare bankruptcy. Smaller investors rose against the government to claim their money back.

3. Figures were provided by the Servizio Centrale Operativo della Polizia di Stato in Rome.