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Title: "Culture, Migration and Transnational Crime: Ethnic Albanian Organized Crime in New York City"
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Abstract

The main aim of this research is to study the emergence and mobility of organized crime groups in the United States. Focusing on ethnic Albanian organized crime in New York City, it investigates whether organized crime groups take advantage of globalization and move abroad easily in order to reproduce their territorial control in a foreign country and increase profits (transplantation/importation model), or whether these groups form in the host country, potentially as a result of social exclusion, economic deprivation, and alienation of Albanian communities in the United States (deprivation model). It also studies the culture, structure, activities, and politics of Albanian organized crime in the United States.

The study utilizes a mixed-methods approach. Findings are based on analysis of court documents (*N*=254 offenders), and in-depth interviews with law enforcement officials (*N*=8) and Albanian immigrants (*N*=88), including Albanian offenders (*N*=30). Nine of the offender interviews were conducted in U.S. federal prisons.

The study did not find strong support for either the transplantation or the deprivation model of organized crime. In summary, the research results show that (1) Albanian organized crime groups are relatively local in nature and emerge within the United States; these groups are

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not transplanted strategically from the Balkans region and are not ethnically homogeneous; and, (2) negative media labels, alienation, and social exclusion are not necessarily motivating ethnic Albanians in New York City to join organized crime groups, as Albanian migrants feel well integrated into U.S. society. The findings suggest that the mobility of organized crime groups is functional and varies across criminal markets, and that not only economic foundations of international migration but also social forces such as social ties need to be examined meticulously in order to better understand criminal mobility.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between migration and crime is a highly controversial issue, but many areas remain understudied, including the complex relationships among international migration, criminal mobility, and transnational organized crime.[1] The aim of this project is to examine the migration patterns of ethnic Albanian organized crime groups operating in New York City.

In the academic literature on criminal mobility there are two major schools of thought. On one hand, renowned scholars such as Shelley (1999; 2006) and Castells (2000) argue that organized crime groups – similar to corporations – are strategic, rational, and mobile. According to this view, criminal groups easily move to advanced market economies, where they create long-lasting outposts and form criminal alliances. Rational actors decide to migrate because a cost-benefit calculation leads them to expect a positive net return, usually monetary. Thus, the mobility of organized crime groups is a natural consequence of economic globalization.

The importation theory has been used to explain the Italian Mafia phenomenon, which argues that the structure, membership, and ideology of the Sicilian Mafia in America were

[1] For the purpose of this project the UN Definition of Organized Crime (Art. 2 of the Convention) is used: '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

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imported by Italians who were already in the business of organized crime in Sicily before they emigrated to the United States (McWeeney 1987).

On the other hand, scholars such as Reuter (1985), Gambetta (1996), and Ubah (2007) argue that mafias, and organized crime groups in general, have great difficulty establishing themselves outside their territory of origin because they do not know who to trust in the new location. Gambetta writes that the Sicilian Mafia "is heavily dependent on the local environment" (Gambetta 1993: 249). The difficulty faced by established organized crime groups in relocating or expanding their businesses reflects the high cost of monitoring agents that such transplants entail, as well as the difficulties of building a reputation in a foreign country (Varese 2011).

This view is more in line with the deprivation theory, which runs counter to the importation/transplantation model. Proponents of the deprivation theory argue, for example, that the Sicilian Mafia is an American creation and was not brought from Italy. Instead, the Sicilian Mafia emerged as a form of adaptation by some of the early Sicilian immigrants in America who wanted to integrate into the American social system but found it antagonistic and alienating (Lombardo 2002; Ubah 2007). Simply put, deprivation theory focuses on factors such as social exclusion, alienation, and economic strain to explain the emergence of organized crime. It also maintains that organized crime is not the exclusive domain of any one ethnic group (Bell 1960; Ianni 1974; Finckenauer and Waring 1998; Albanese 2004).

2. Aims and Objectives

The case study selected for this project is ethnic Albanian organized crime[2] in the New York City area. Albanians began arriving in New York in large numbers in the 1960s, settling in Belmont, a mostly Italian neighborhood in the Bronx. However, following Albania's near

[2] Due to the high levels of ethnic homogeneity of Albanian criminal groups, the word "ethnic" is very often used in relation to ethnic Albanian organized crime (Europol 2011).

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financial collapse in 1997 and the conflict in Kosovo (1998-1999), Albanian crime groups rapidly expanded their operations to Western Europe and the United States. From the late 1990s onward, depictions of the "Albanian Mafia" as a secretive, clan-based organization – resembling the Sicilian Mafia – have become common (Xhudo 1997; Raufer and Quéré 2006).

Over the years, Europol, the U.S. State Department, the FBI, and INTERPOL have stated that Albanian criminal groups constitute a major threat to the Western world because of their extreme violence, high levels of secrecy, and the fact that they have quickly graduated from simple criminal service providers (e.g. drug mules, hit men) to working within the highest echelons of international organized crime (Xhudo 1996; Europol 2011). In 2004, the ethnic Albanian "Rudaj" organization (or the "Corporation"), involved mainly in racketeering, extortion, and illegal gambling, was labeled the sixth crime family in New York City, in addition to the five traditional Italian families (Fahim 2006).

Today, ethnic Albanian organized crime groups are considered to be significant global players. It is the nature of this "presence abroad" that remains unspecified. The main aim of this project is to evaluate empirically whether Albanian organized crime groups are able to reproduce their territorial control in a foreign country, or whether these groups start a life of crime after their arrival in the new territories. This study also addresses other related questions: Why do Albanian offenders leave their country of origin? How do they select their new territory? Is their migration a product of unintended consequences, such as conflicts among crime leaders?

3. Project Design and Analytical Dimensions

This study will help in understanding whether Albanian offenders (1) rationally select their new countries of operation and possibly continue to work for "bosses" who remain in the countries of origin (strategic expansion or relocation); (2) are forced to migrate for reasons such as criminal

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prosecution (forced migration); (3) establish or join organized crime groups upon arrival on the new territory, because of exclusion and economic strain (deprivation); or (4) migrate because of other reasons. The study acknowledges that criminal mobility may vary across groups.

This project also seeks to understand other analytical dimensions related to Albanian organized crime: (1) level of support from ethnic constituencies in the new territories; (2) the importance of traditional cultural codes; (3) organizational structure at the new territory; (4) selection of criminal activities; and (5) economic incentives and political infiltration.

4. Data, Sample, and Methods

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach with a sequential exploratory design. Findings are based on analysis of court documents (*N*=254 offenders), and interviews with law enforcement officials (*N*=8), as well as documented and undocumented Albanian immigrants (*N*=88), including offenders. Nine of the offender interviews were conducted in U.S. federal prisons.

PHASE 1: Analysis of court documents

During the first year of this research we identified major ethnic Albanian organized crime groups that had been operating in the northeastern part of the United States between 1975 and 2014. Most of the identified members of these groups have served, or currently are serving, prison sentences in U.S. federal prisons, primarily, but not exclusively, for drug trafficking, extortion, racketeering, people smuggling, money laundering, organized burglaries, and bank fraud.

We collected 84 court documents, including indictments and court transcripts, using research engines such as Westlaw and contacts with attorneys working on some of these cases. We identified a total of 29 criminal groups composed mainly but not exclusively of ethnic Albanian offenders (foreign born and first generation) who were prosecuted for various organized crime-related activities. Based on these documents, a database with 254 offenders and

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36 variables (e.g., level of violence, structure, ethnic composition, corruption) was developed. Court transcripts and other similar documents were used as qualitative data to provide contextual understanding of group-level and individual activities, mobility, culture, and decision-making.

PHASE 2: Interviews with experts

We conducted eight in-depth interviews with law enforcement agents (active and retired), asylum officers, and private security experts working in New York or New Jersey. We tried to identify the main areas of concern for these practitioners with regard to Balkan/Albanian organized crime, and to discuss some noteworthy points. Each discussion took about 90 minutes.

PHASE 3: Interviews with members of the Albanian diaspora and field observations

The first round of "diaspora interviews" was conducted with 10 ethnic Albanian immigrants who have been living in New York for at least several years. We used purposive and snowball sampling to identify these experts. Some of the participants were NGO representatives or community leaders, some were undocumented migrants, and some had knowledge of the organized crime situation in New York. The idea was to discuss issues related to "stereotypes," "mobility," "economic strain," and "labeling." These interviews lasted 90-120 minutes each.

We then conducted an additional 69 interviews with ethnic Albanian immigrants in New York, including ordinary people, undocumented migrants, offenders, and people with good knowledge of Albanian organized crime. The self-reported criteria for recruitment were: (1) age 18 or older; (2) of ethnic Albanian origin (foreign-born or first/second generation)[3]; and (3) living in the New York City area for at least one year. The interviews took 45-70 minutes each.

According to a New York Police Department report (2005), Belmont, the Bronx area known as "Arthur Avenue," and the Pelham Parkway area have the highest number of Albanian

[3] The term migrant may be operationalized as foreign-born (counting naturalized citizens as migrants) or noncitizens (counting native born noncitizens as migrants). Although most of our interviews were with foreign-born Albanian immigrants we did conduct several interviewed with native-born people (U.S. citizens) of ethnic Albanian descent.

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commercial establishments. Another area populated with ethnic Albanians is Ridgewood, Queens. During 2013 and 2014 we visited these neighborhoods, as well as some Albanian neighborhoods in Paterson, Elmwood Park, and Fair Lawn, New Jersey. Structured observations helped to organize research activities to achieve recruitment and data collection goals.

We spoke to owners of local shops and restaurants as we tried to recruit suitable research subjects. We introduced our study, and then we utilized snowball and respondent-driven (RDS) recruitment methods. The members of the study team recruited four or five "seeds" at each site to begin the RDS chains. These seeds were identified either via referrals from the experts/cultural advisors or were recruited directly by the researchers at the venues identified though observation of sites. The seeds and subsequent waves of study participants were given coupons they could pass along to males and females whom they knew to be of Albanian descent.

PHASE 4: Cultural advisors

In this project we identified four advisors who were able to assist us throughout various stages of the project. The advisors were able to put the PI in contact with knowledgeable experts and Albanian immigrants and to provide the PI with useful documents and feedback.

PHASE 5: Interviews with offenders

We interviewed a total of 30 ethnic Albanians with direct knowledge of organized crime (mainly offenders), outside and inside of prison. Snowball sampling ("chain referral"), as well as purposive sampling, was used as the informal method to reach such hidden populations. Most of these individuals (21) were interviewed outside of a prison setting, and these interviews were part of the second wave of diaspora interviews described above.

We also approached about 25 organized crime figures who currently are serving prison sentences in the northeastern United States. We identified these offenders while analyzing court documents. The selected individuals held either peripheral or central positions in criminal

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groups, as determined by law enforcement officials/prosecutors. We managed to conduct nine in-depth interviews (120-150 minutes each) with major organized crime figures. More than half of the potential research subjects we approached denied our interview request.

6. Data Analysis Plan

The researchers created three types of questionnaires: one for the Albanian diaspora interviews, one for the interviews with inmates, and one for the expert interviews. As we were able to interview only nine inmates, we included the results from our prison interviews in the Albanian diaspora data. The basic demographic information was the same, and the same topics were covered over the course of the interviews. These were semi-structured interviews, and most of the questions in the diaspora questionnaire were also present in the prison study questionnaire. If the topic was not covered, we coded those answers as N/A. Also, if there was additional information provided by the inmates, we kept that data for qualitative and contextual analysis.

We have developed two comprehensive databases. The first is based primarily on official information provided in court documents and government press releases, as well as on additional information provided by law enforcement agents and offenders. This database provides information on the origin, evolution, and type of activities of Albanian criminal organizations in the United States. It contains information on 29 criminal groups (254 offenders in all), most of whom are of ethnic Albanian origin. The original version, which in some ways was similar to the ACPO risk assessment tool (see, Hamilton-Smith and Mackenzie 2010), included 65 criteria. The updated (clean) version includes 36 variables.

The second and most important database contains information from the diaspora, as well as offenders' interviews. It has a total of 49 original variables. When the various re-codings of the variables are included, the grand total comes to 136 variables, both nominal and ordinal in nature. We also have created variables with definitive categories drawn from the open-ended

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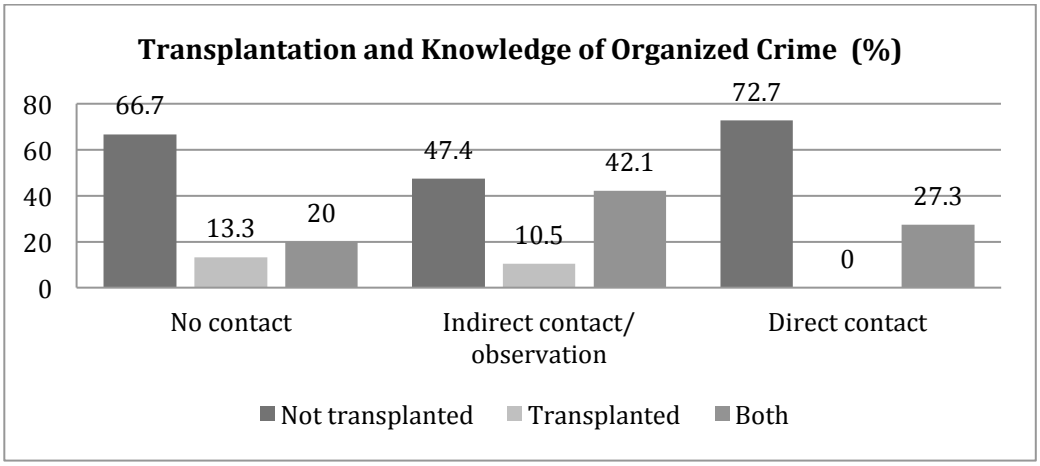
portions of the interview. These are as follows: Do Albanian crime groups emerge in the new country, or are they transplanted? What seems to be the respondent's level of knowledge about organized crime? What seems to be the biggest push for the respondent and/or his/her family to leave Albania? What seems to be the biggest pull for the respondent to come to New York? How did the respondent arrive/stay in New York?

We ran the following tests: Spearman's rank order coefficient, Chi-Square, and Pearson's r. The Chi-Square test did not yield significant results when the original coding was in place, as we did not have a large sample size, so we ran the tests with the re-coded versions of the same variables. Our qualitative analysis employed the use of Atlas.ti, an organizational software tool for qualitative research. The focus was on the rich details of the narratives.

7. Findings

One important finding is that the more direct knowledge of organized crime respondents had, the less they supported the idea that Albanian organized crime is transplanted strategically. In fact, no respondent who acknowledged direct contact with organized crime groups supported the idea of transplantation/importation, and only 10.5% of respondents who knew about organized crime through observation/indirect contact supported the transplantation model (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Transplantation and Knowledge of Organized Crime (%)



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In our study, we also looked at how foreign-born subjects arrived in the United States, and we grouped their answers accordingly. We wanted to see whether Albanian subjects who arrived via illegal means, or with the help of organized crime (i.e. smuggling or trafficking organizations), were more or less likely to support the idea of transplantation. The results were similar to those previously discussed. If the subjects used illegal means to reach the United States they were less likely to support the transplantation theory.

For example, none of the subjects who used the help of organized crime groups to reach the United States supported the transplantation theory, and only 8.3% of the subjects who arrived illegally (although not necessarily with the help of organized crime groups) supported it.

Finally, by analyzing court cases we examined how many of the 29 ethnic Albanian organized crime groups we identified: (1) appear to have been transplanted/imported to the United States; (2) emerged upon their arrival; or (3) have moved across territories for reasons that appear to be project-based.

The results indicate that none of the groups was the subject of a strategic and well-planned transplantation from the Balkans region to the United States. The migration of most groups was functional, meaning that members moved across borders and traveled abroad mainly when they had "projects" or "deals" to make with other groups, or when they were running from prosecution in the host country. Sometimes their travels to the countries of origin were recreational, or members occasionally invested in real estate in their homelands. This, however, does not mean that there was a dependent relationship between Albanian criminal groups situated in the United States and those in the Balkans or elsewhere. Overall, the operations of most groups were local in nature, with only some indications of international cooperation.

Then we studied further the relationship between social exclusion and alienation, and organized crime. Since many scholars have argued that new immigrant groups in the United

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States experience a profound degree of marginality and alienation, particularly in their attempts to acculturate into the mainstream of American society (Ubah 2007), we tried to further explore the "deprivation" model in relation to the expansion of Albanian organized crime in New York City. We asked the 88 ethnic Albanian respondents (offenders and non-offenders) if they felt excluded from American society, and whether they think Americans unjustifiably label Albanians as criminals, thus limiting the Albanians' opportunities and precluding them from finding good quality jobs. Most of the 88 respondents (87.5%) argued that Albanians are treated equally in the United States, and 91% claimed that it was easy for them to find housing. Also, 59.7% stated that it was easy for them to find employment in the United States.

We then selected the respondents who had direct knowledge of or contact with organized crime (mainly offenders), and we analyzed their responses to the social exclusion question. The answers of these respondents were very similar to the answers given by the general sample; 88.5% of the direct contact sample argued that Albanians are treated equally in the United States; 96.2% noted that it was easy to find housing; and 56.5% said it was easy to find employment.

Most of the respondents, including those with direct contact with organized crime, stated that there are negative stereotypes about Albanians, and Western media tends to associate Albanians with crime. Yet they also mentioned positive stereotypes linking Albanians to hard work, ambition, and loyalty. In fact, 95.5% of these respondents stated that people in the United States have a positive image of Albanians. They also stated that U.S. media reports do not necessarily affect their employment opportunities or quality of life.

Although we did not find much support for strategic transplantation of organized crime or for the deprivation model of organized crime, we did notice that Albanian criminal mobility has strong social foundations, and that emotions also play an important part in explaining it. Most of the respondents we interviewed, both offenders and non-offenders, had a network of people in

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the host country before they made a decision to migrate. Aspects of the social ties theory were introduced by Messey et al. (1993), who argued that international immigration is far more dynamic than standard economic analyses suggest, and it has become independent of the economic conditions that originally caused it, tending to feed back on itself through social channels. For example, every new migrant reduces the costs of subsequent migration for a set of friends and relatives, and some of these people are thereby induced to migrate. We found this to be valid in the context of organized crime, as well. The criminal network that recruits friends and relatives in the country of origin promises the potential recruits easy money and glamorizes the position within the criminal network while underestimating the risks and costs linked to the migration process and the criminal job itself. Consequently, in addition to social ties and opportunity, the desire for glory, and subsequently shame and pride, play an important role in the motivation for migration and involvement in crime.

In several instances we observed elements of forced migration, meaning that members of the group relocated to Albania or Kosovo in order to avoid prosecution in the United States or Canada; also, some offenders from Albania and Kosovo moved to the United States to avoid retaliation or prosecution in their country of origin. Also, our research findings illustrate that there is not a "one size fits all" model to explain criminal mobility.

7. Impact on Criminal Justice System

It is important for the U.S. government to develop comprehensive and politically acceptable solutions to issues related to transnational organized crime. The administrators of justice must be aware of the invisible lines that separate legitimate anger and ignorance-inspired bitterness. This research challenges the importation/transplantation explanation of the emergence of organized crime, which is much encouraged by a climate of belief that the social problem emanates from outside, as opposed to emerging from within. While ethnicity may be relevant in some instances,

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there are reasons to doubt that organized crime is dominated by culturally distinct groups, or imported from foreign countries. Policy makers should be aware of the "ethnicity trap" (see Albanese 2011) and its negative effects on law enforcement responses to organized crime.

Criminological analysis regularly has shown that criminal justice systems are skewed against those on the fringes of society (Lombardo 2002; Ubah 2007; Paoli and Reuter 2008). In reality, although host nations seem to lay blame on a long list of foreigners, organized crime is relatively local in nature, with members being "functionally mobile." However, xenophobic feelings may lead to increased focus on certain ethnic groups and thus to the unintended empowerment of ethnic-based criminal networks. This research will help practitioners to understand, for example, why immigrant ethnic minorities who live in a relatively closed community may be prone to developing unique criminal structures after their arrival in the host country. It will explain if and how so-called mafia-like structures provide an alternative governance mechanism for a population unfamiliar with the formal criminal justice system.

Although our research indicates that social exclusion, stereotypes, and media labels in New York City did not have a strong effect on the motivation of Albanians to join criminal organizations, ethnic Albanians in New York nevertheless remain relatively connected, and those social ties provide Albanian people with access to profitable legal and illegal activities. Consequently, this social opportunity structure allows criminal networks to recruit and flourish. This study shows that by viewing immigration in general, and criminal mobility in particular, as an economic phenomenon, governments simply assume that the flow of immigrants, or organized crime offenders, can be managed and regulated like other economic processes — for example, by increasing the cost of immigration. Scholars have implied, however, that once immigration has begun, the social foundations of migration build a self-perpetuating momentum into the process. Similar rules seems to apply to organized crime networks that continue to

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recruit from local communities in the host country, and sometimes from communities in the sending country, often by fostering unrealistic expectations and spreading the desire for glory.

The reality is that the costs of migration are substantially lower for the offenders' friends, who still may be living in the community of origin. Those friends may decide to migrate for the experience, and because of a genuine desire to make their family proud by making fast money. Therefore, it is possible that once a particular stage of mass migration has been reached, migration will continue regardless of changes in employment opportunities or government immigration policies, because human appetites are unlimited and the social ties that provide access to profitable criminal opportunities are highly important, even for people with no appreciable criminal history.

For this reason policies should focus more on controlling the power of the social networks that provide such criminal opportunities, stimulate involvement in organized crime and make resistance less attractive. The emphasis should be on finding ways to use social networks to reverse the faulty message that organized crime is exciting, profitable, easy, and glamorous.

A social scientist thus might recommend that policymakers regulate criminal mobility by adjusting wages in destination countries; by promoting economic development in origin countries; by reducing income inequality and social exclusion; by improving futures or capital markets in developing regions; by strengthening border controls and immigration laws; or by some combination of these actions. Or one might suggest that all of these programs are ineffective given that human appetites are unlimited and social ties are powerful tools that can play on universal human traits, such as the desire for power and glory, to recruit new members.

In conclusion, there is certainly a need for more inclusive and multidisciplinary research in the field of criminal mobility. We are skeptical both of theories that deny the importance of structural constraints on individual decisions, and of structural theories that deny agency to

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individuals and families. This study points to the need for flexible explanations of human nature and social problems that, although more difficult to test empirically, are more accurate. It also calls for future research to assess whether the same findings apply to other types of criminal organizations, terrorist groups, or organizations from other regions of the world.

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Book

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Peer-reviewed journal articles

Forthcoming works:

Arsovska, J. & Paradis, L. (in progress). Migration, people smuggling, and the "American Dream": How did we all get here? (to be submitted to *Crime and Delinquency).*

Arsovska, J. & Armand, A. (in progress). Secrecy, revenge, and violence: The importance of Kanun laws and traditional culture among Albanian offenders and non-offenders in New York City. (to be submitted to *International Criminal Justice Review).*

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