

SECURITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

THE KANUN OF NORTHERN ALBANIA: TRADITION, ORGANIZED CRIME AND SALAFI NETWORKS

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Abstract:

The Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini, a medieval corpus of customary law originating in the northern highlands of Albania, has long been considered one of the most enduring and culturally embedded normative systems in the Balkans. For centuries, the Kanun provided a framework of order and governance in spaces where state institutions were absent, fragile or deliberately resisted. In the post-Communist period, however, the Kanun resurfaced in a dramatically altered socio-political environment, where it encountered two powerful and transnational forces: organized crime and Salafi-jihadist religious networks.

This paper explores the historical origins of the Kanun, its reactivation in the post-1991 transition and its role in legitimizing the practices of Albanian organized crime groups. Using a qualitative analysis of existing scholarly literature and policy reports, the study examines how customary law interacts with both criminal networks and Salafi religious movements. It further investigates the complex interactions between this customary system and the rise of Salafi networks in northern Albania. The analysis argues that the Kanun operates as a parallel structure of governance, shaping both criminal practice and religious authority, while complicating state-building and security consolidation. The findings highlight the broader implications of this dynamic for social order, governance and counterterrorism in Albania and the wider Western Balkans.

Keywords: *Kanun, Albania, Organized Crime, Mafia, Salafi Networks, Terrorism*

Introduction

The *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini*, also known as the *Kanun of Northern Albania*, is a traditional legal code that has shaped social conduct, dispute settlement and interpersonal relations in Albanian highland communities

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since the medieval era (Gjeçov, 1989). Attributed to the fifteenth-century nobleman Lekë Dukagjini, the code consists of more than 1,200 articles covering honour, hospitality, kin loyalty and social obligations (Hoxhaj, 2001; Cara and Margjeka, 2015). The *Kanun* integrates pre-Christian tribal traditions with successive cultural and political influences, constructing a form of social regulation that substituted for or resisted formal state authority in periods of political weakness (Voell, 2003; Carlone, 2023). Its best-known and most controversial component remains the regulation of blood feuds (*gjakmarrja*), which articulate strict rules of vengeance and family honour while simultaneously imposing limits on violence by defining legitimate targets (Bilefsky, 2008; Operazione Colomba, 2017). Yet, as anthropological and feminist scholarship has demonstrated, these norms often perpetuated patriarchal hierarchies, relegating women to subordinate roles and restricting their agency within family and community life (Winter, 1986; Sadiku, 2014; Doja, 2024).

Although heavily suppressed during Enver Hoxha's communist regime, the *Kanun* re-emerged in Albania's post-1991 transition, coinciding with the collapse of state structures and the resurgence of traditional forms of self-regulation (Burda, 2012; Hasluck and Hutton, 2015). Its revival reflects broader processes of cultural reassertion and identity negotiation in a period marked by rapid modernization, globalization and weak institutional consolidation (Bardhoshi, 2013; Joireman, 2014). The *Kanun* continues to exert influence over conflict resolution practices in northern Albania, particularly in remote rural communities and remains an object of political and scholarly debate regarding its compatibility with modern legal systems and human rights standards (Gárdos-Orosz and Fekete, 2017). Critics argue that its persistence not only perpetuates cycles of violence but also complicates reconciliation processes and the consolidation of state authority (Bilefsky, 2008; Sadiku, 2014).

The contemporary significance of the *Kanun* lies not solely in its cultural resilience but in its entanglement with emergent social forces. In northern Albania, the code has increasingly intersected with two competing systems of authority: transnational organized crime and Salafi religious networks. Both actors have sought to instrumentalize or challenge the *Kanun*'s legitimacy to consolidate influence over local

communities. Organized crime groups have selectively mobilized the language of honor and loyalty embedded in the *Kanun* to legitimize their operations, while Salafi movements have simultaneously contested its authority as un-Islamic but also strategically accommodated aspects of its communal legitimacy. This convergence illustrates how the *Kanun* has become more than a vestige of premodern custom: it is a living framework of governance that continues to mediate power, morality and authority in a complex and rapidly transforming environment.

This study employs a qualitative analytical approach based primarily on secondary literature, including academic studies, policy reports and historical analyses concerning customary law, organized crime and religious movements in Albania and the wider Balkans. Rather than presenting new empirical fieldwork, the article synthesizes and critically evaluates existing scholarship to examine how the *Kanun* functions as a parallel normative framework interacting with organized crime and Salafi networks. By integrating literature from criminology, anthropology and security studies, the paper seeks to provide a conceptual interpretation of the evolving role of the *Kanun* in contemporary governance and security dynamics.

Moreover, this paper examines this intersection, situating the *Kanun* as a parallel system of governance whose meaning has been transformed by its appropriation into organized crime and its coexistence with competing Salafi networks. The analysis proceeds in four parts: first, by tracing the historical roots of the *Kanun*; second, by examining its contemporary adaptations; third, by analysing the ways in which organized crime mobilizes its principles; and fourth, by exploring the interactions between Salafi actors and customary authority. In doing so, the paper seeks to illuminate the broader implications of customary law for governance, security and counter-extremism in Albania and the wider Balkans.

Historical Background

The *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini* constitutes one of Europe's most enduring and intricate systems of customary law, embodying centuries of normative regulation within the Albanian highlands (Cara and Margjeka, 2015). Attributed to the fifteenth-century nobleman Lekë

Dukagjini, the *Kanun* is widely recognized not merely as a set of prescriptive rules but as a cultural and moral continuum that incorporates tribal customs, pre-Christian traditions and ancestral practices. Some scholars even suggest that elements of its normative framework may trace back to the Bronze Age, reflecting the deep historical layering of customary norms within Albanian society (Aliu, 2021; Enkelejda and Koseni, 2023). Although the *Kanun* was traditionally attributed to the fifteenth-century nobleman Lekë Dukagjini, many of the customary norms later codified in the *Kanun* are believed to reflect much older tribal practices that predated its formal articulation. Scholars therefore argue that elements of these customary traditions persisted through successive periods of foreign domination, including Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman rule, before eventually being consolidated into the legal corpus known today as the *Kanun* (Hasluck and Hutton, 2015; Lugaj, 2018). The region's geography—marked by rugged terrain, isolated valleys, and limited connectivity to political centres—reinforced the persistence of clan-based autonomy and created conditions in which the *Kanun* served as the principal regulator of social, moral and economic life.

Codified in writing only in the early twentieth century by the Franciscan priest Shtjefën Gjeçovi (1989), the *Kanun* was for centuries an oral legal tradition transmitted through communal memory, ritualized practices and the adjudications of village elders. Its authority derived not from any state institution but from collective recognition: it was regarded as the embodiment of justice, social balance and communal honour. Structurally, the code encompasses over 1,200 articles, organized around four interrelated pillars: honour (*nderi*), hospitality (*mikpritja*), kin loyalty and proper conduct. These pillars defined both the moral compass and practical rules of daily life, embedding a normative order that shaped family relations, inter-clan obligations, and mechanisms of conflict resolution (Pula, 2013; Kalo, 2025).

At the core of the *Kanun* lies the principle of honour, articulated through concepts such as *besa* (a sacred pledge of trust) and *nderi* (dignity and reputation). Honour functioned as the fundamental marker of identity, binding individuals to kin and clan. Violations of honour demanded rectification, often through *gjakmarrja* (blood vengeance),

which was codified as a mechanism of social equilibrium. Unlike unregulated vendetta, *gjakmarrja* operated under strict limitations: retaliation was prohibited against women, children, and the elderly and killings were to be carried out according to well-defined procedures (Operazione Colomba, 2017). Although these provisions often perpetuated cycles of violence, they were historically understood as instruments of justice in the absence of state enforcement, embedding a sense of moral responsibility into acts of retribution (Arsovska and Verduyn, 2007; Bilefsky, 2008).

Hospitality formed another cornerstone of the *Kanun*, mandating sacred obligations toward guests irrespective of economic status or social rank. Households were required to provide protection and sustenance to visitors, while failure to uphold these duties brought shame upon the host. Hospitality was deeply connected to honour, and the concept of *besa* extended protection to guests even in times of conflict. This emphasis on mutual respect and ethical obligation underscores the *Kanun's* role in sustaining inter-communal trust and solidarity (Sadiku, 2014).

The *Kanun* also placed kinship and patriarchal authority at the centre of social organization. Extended families operated as collective economic and political units, governed by patriarchs whose authority encompassed land management, inheritance and dispute resolution (Whitaker, 1981; The World Mind, 2023). Marriage arrangements, succession, and property distribution were carefully regulated to preserve alliances, maintain honour and ensure lineage continuity. In subsistence-based mountain economies, land was the primary resource, and rules governing its ownership and transfer were integral to clan survival (Xhaxho, 2018; Kalo, 2025). Collective labour obligations reinforced solidarity and interdependence, ensuring that the *Kanun* was as much a practical system of survival as it was a moral order.

Conflict resolution extended beyond blood feuds, with traditional *Kanun* courts functioning as community-based adjudicatory bodies. These tribunals, operating independently from state legal systems, relied on oral testimony, communal consensus, and the authority of elders to restore balance and prevent escalation (Celik and Shkreli, 2010; Ademi et al., 2013; Kalo, 2025). Emphasising reconciliation over rigid legalism,

the courts derived legitimacy from their social embeddedness rather than codified statutes (Arsovska and Verduyn, 2007; Cara and Margjeka, 2015).

Regional variations highlight the Kanun's adaptability. In northern Albania, the *Kanuni i Lekë Dukagjinit* reinforced patrilineal structures and equal inheritance for male descendants, while other regions such as Kurveleshi developed alternative codes like the *Kanuni i Papa Zhulit* and *Kanuni i Idriz Sulit*. These regional adaptations blended customary norms with evolving socio-political contexts, yet retained core values of honour, kinship, and hospitality (Lugaj, 2018; Xhaxho, 2018).

The *Kanun's* resilience across centuries of political transformation illustrates its capacity to function as a parallel legal order. Ottoman authorities, while formally sovereign, generally tolerated highland autonomy, allowing customary law to persist (İnan, 2008; Balci, 2016). In the twentieth century, Albanian state-building and later communist governance sought to suppress the *Kanun*. Enver Hoxha's regime criminalized blood feuds and sought to replace clan loyalty with ideological allegiance to the Party. Although these efforts temporarily undermined its practice, the *Kanun* endured in cultural memory, resurfacing after 1991 as Albania transitioned into a pluralistic, yet fragile, state (Mattei, 2016; Xhaxho, 2018).

The Post-Communist Revival of the Kanun

The collapse of Albania's communist regime in the early 1990s produced a profound institutional rupture and a deep societal dislocation. For nearly half a century, Enver Hoxha's dictatorship had imposed unprecedented levels of authoritarian control, dismantling traditional social structures, suppressing customary authority and criminalizing the practice of the *Kanun* (Xhaxho, 2018; Papathimiu, 2023). With the sudden disintegration of this centralized apparatus, Albania entered a period marked by political instability, economic collapse and widespread insecurity. The transition to a market economy generated soaring unemployment, mass emigration, and pervasive poverty, while the newly formed democratic institutions proved fragile, under-resourced and incapable of extending effective governance across the national territory (Rama, 2019; Jarvis, 2000).

This institutional weakness was most acute in the northern districts, historically semi-autonomous and geographically resistant to centralized control. State institutions, including courts and police, lacked both legitimacy and material capacity. Judicial systems were viewed with suspicion, police forces were chronically underfunded and distrusted, and the government in Tirana was perceived as remote and ineffectual. Against this backdrop, local communities increasingly turned to the *Kanun* as a familiar and culturally embedded normative system for resolving disputes and regulating social relations. As Jordan (1997) has observed, the *Kanun* did not persist as a folkloric remnant but re-emerged as a functional parallel legal order precisely because the formal legal framework had disintegrated.

The social consequences of this revival were immediate and dramatic. Blood feuds (*gjakmarrja*), which had been aggressively suppressed during the communist period, returned with alarming frequency. Families once again found themselves locked into cycles of retaliatory violence, and many households resorted to *ngujimi* (self-imposed confinement) to protect male members from vengeance killings (Operazione Colomba, 2017). In numerous northern villages, daily life was reordered around the fear of feuds, producing a pervasive atmosphere of insecurity and distrust. For many Albanians, particularly in rural and mountainous areas, reliance on the *Kanun* was less a matter of cultural preference than a practical necessity in conditions of state collapse—an available, if violent, mechanism of ensuring predictability and social regulation in a lawless environment (Smolar, 2011; Hosken and Kasapi, 2017).

The near-total breakdown of state authorities during the 1997 crisis, triggered by the collapse of fraudulent pyramid schemes, further entrenched this dynamic. The implosion of financial institutions provoked mass protests and armed uprisings, leading to the effective disintegration of state authority in large parts of the country (Lawson and Saltmarshe, 2000). The looting of military depots released hundreds of thousands of firearms into civilian hands, transforming Albania into one of the most heavily armed societies in Europe. In this context of near-anarchy, the *Kanun* resurfaced as a crucial organizing principle, providing communities with normative guidance and dispute

resolution mechanisms in the absence of functional state institutions (Xhaxho, 2018).

Yet the post-communist revival of the *Kanun* differed significantly from its earlier incarnations. In the premodern highlands, its authority had been confined largely to insular tribal societies; in the post-1991 period, it operated within a rapidly globalizing environment characterized by porous borders, transnational migration, and expanding Diasporas. The liberalization of Albania's borders facilitated unprecedented outflows of migrants, particularly to Italy, Greece and Western Europe (Mangalakova, 2004; Vullnetari, 2007). Migrant communities carried with them the values and practices of the *Kanun*, transmitting its logics into transnational spaces where they interacted with criminal networks and new cultural dynamics. Blood feuds, once localized to highland communities, became transnational phenomena, extending into the Albanian diaspora and complicating the efforts of European law enforcement to address Albanian-organized crime (Arsovska and Verduyn, 2007; Europol, 2021).

Thus, the *Kanun* in the post-communist era must be understood not as a static survival of tradition but as an adaptive system of governance that reasserted itself in conditions of state collapse and expanded into transnational arenas. Its re-emergence illustrates the resilience of customary law under conditions of weak statehood and its capacity to interact with and shape broader processes of migration, organized crime and globalization.

The Kanun and Albanian Organized Crime

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Albanian organized crime had emerged as a formidable actor within both European and global illicit economies. Albanian criminal networks are implicated in heroin trafficking along the Balkan Route, human smuggling across the Adriatic into Italy and Greece, the proliferation of small arms in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars and more recently, the control of cocaine importation routes from Latin America into Western Europe (Paoli and Reuter, 2008; UNODC, 2020; Europol, 2021). These groups have developed a reputation for adaptability, violence and cohesion, with analysts frequently highlighting the cultural resources of

the *Kanun* as critical to explaining their resilience and transnational reach (Arsovska, 2015; Mattei, 2016). The *Kanun* does not merely function as a folkloric backdrop to crime; rather, it provides a normative vocabulary and binding code of obligations that underpin trust, discipline and legitimacy within illicit organizations (Arsovska, 2006).

At the core of this linkage lies the *Kanun's* emphasis on kinship and clan loyalty. Albanian society, particularly in the northern highlands, has historically been organized into extended family groups (*fis*), whose solidarity is codified and enforced by customary law (Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer, 2002; Plaku et al., 2019). In environments where state institutions were absent or distrusted, kinship provided the primary foundation of survival and trust. In the criminal underworld, this principle translates into recruitment and cooperation strategies that privilege blood ties and extended kinship networks over external partnerships. Criminal enterprises are often structured around close family units, which severely restricts outsider access and creates systems of “bonded trust” that are exceptionally resistant to infiltration. Betrayal within such groups is regarded not only as a criminal violation but as a dishonourable rupture of familial obligations—an act that, in the logic of the *Kanun*, justifies lethal retribution (Arsovska and Craig, 2006).

The *Kanun's* principle of *nderi* (honour) reinforces this dynamic by operating as both a symbolic and practical mechanism of enforcement. In customary contexts, the defence of honour is paramount, and affronts demand retribution lest individuals and their families fall into disgrace. Within organized crime, this moral framework transforms loyalty and obedience into moral imperatives rather than mere strategic necessities (Smolar, 2011). Members who defect or betray obligations jeopardize not only their own lives but also the collective standing of their families. In this way, Albanian organized crime groups harness traditional codes of honour to strengthen internal discipline and to legitimize violence against defectors, rivals, or informants (Mattei, 2016; Arsovska, 2015).

Equally significant is the adaptation of *gjakmarrja* (blood vengeance). Historically codified as a mechanism for restoring balance in stateless societies, blood vengeance required the avenging of a killing by targeting the perpetrator or a male relative. Within criminal organizations, this principle has been repurposed as a rationale for

retributive violence against rivals or those who violate agreements. Violence is not arbitrary but cloaked in the cultural language of honour and obligation, lending it social intelligibility and legitimacy (Operazione Colomba, 2017; Debiais, 2022). This process mirrors the way in which the Sicilian mafia has historically invoked *omertà* and notions of an “honoured society” to imbue criminal violence with moral significance (Paoli, 2003).

The *Kanun*'s emphasis on secrecy and silence also finds resonance in the criminal underworld. In customary highland society, discretion was considered essential to maintaining honour and avoiding public shame. This ethos parallels the mafia principle of *omertà*, where silence in the face of external inquiries is regarded as both a duty and a shield. Members of Albanian organized crime groups are socialized into this culture of discretion, where cooperation with law enforcement is equated with dishonour and carries the certainty of retribution (Plaku et al., 2019). Such deeply internalized prohibitions contribute to the difficulty of penetrating these networks, as informants face not only legal consequences but also the existential risk of clan-sanctioned retaliation.

The interplay between *Kanun* values and organized crime extends far beyond Albania's borders. Following mass emigration during the 1990s and 2000s, Albanian Diasporas established significant communities in Italy, Switzerland, Germany, the United Kingdom, and beyond. Within these enclaves, organized crime flourished by drawing simultaneously on the vulnerabilities of immigrant populations and the cultural codes that fostered internal cohesion (Vullnetari, 2007; Europol, 2021). The *Kanun* thus travelled transnationally, shaping illicit practices in contexts as diverse as Milan, London, and Rotterdam, where Albanian networks invoke honour and kinship loyalty to sustain cohesion while engaging in globalized drug markets and human trafficking (Arsovska, 2015).

Crucially, the *Kanun* enhances the social legitimacy of these groups in the eyes of Albanian communities. Unlike purely profit-driven gangs, mafia-like organizations rooted in customary codes can present themselves as defenders of honour, justice and communal order, even while engaging in narcotics or arms trafficking (Arsovska, 2015). In some northern districts, criminal leaders' fashion themselves as *burrë i dheut* (“men of the land”), simultaneously enacting the values of loyalty and

protection while orchestrating transnational criminal operations. This symbolic positioning cultivates tacit community support—or at least acquiescence—in environments where state institutions are viewed as corrupt or ineffective.

The principle of *mikpritja* (hospitality) has also been reinterpreted in criminal contexts. Traditionally a sacred obligation toward guests, hospitality has been adapted into practices of mutual assistance among criminal allies, facilitating safe houses, fugitive protection, and reciprocal cooperation across networks. This reinforces solidarity and creates bonds of obligation that extend beyond kinship. Finally, the *Kanun*'s adaptability allows it to coexist with other normative frameworks, including religious law and transnational criminal logics. Albanian groups engaged in arms trafficking during the Balkan conflicts, for instance, could frame their actions as simultaneously fulfilling *Kanun* obligations to kin across borders and contributing to broader ethno-nationalist struggles (Arsovska, 2015).

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that the *Kanun* functions as more than a cultural residue: it operates as a living normative framework that furnishes Albanian organized crime with moral legitimacy, internal cohesion, and social embeddedness. In doing so, it contributes significantly to the adaptability and resilience of Albanian criminal networks in both local and transnational contexts.

Salafi Networks in Northern Albania

The post-communist transition not only facilitated the revival of the *Kanun* but also created the conditions for the expansion of Salafi networks across northern Albania (Elbasani, 2020). The fall of Enver Hoxha's regime in 1991 marked the end of nearly five decades of state-enforced atheism, during which religious practice was criminalized, places of worship demolished or repurposed and clergy systematically persecuted (Babuna, 2003). With the abrupt collapse of this apparatus of ideological repression, Albania experienced a profound religious vacuum. For many communities, particularly in the impoverished and marginalized northern highlands, this period was characterized by a search for new moral anchors, identity frameworks, and sources of legitimacy.

It was in this environment that foreign Islamic organizations—often financed by Gulf states, Turkey, and transnational Islamic charities—entered Albania with resources to rebuild religious infrastructures, including mosques, Qur’anic schools and humanitarian institutions (Kanellopoulos, 2023). Among these actors, Salafi-oriented movements were especially active. They promoted a scripturalist, text-centred and Universalist interpretation of Islam that sought to reorient Albanian Muslim practice toward what they presented as “authentic” Islamic orthodoxy (Jordan et al., 2022). Their activities were not merely theological but represented deliberate geopolitical and cultural interventions. Albania offered external sponsors a dual opportunity: as a humanitarian field in a society suffering deep economic dislocation and as a strategic outpost in the Balkans where religious traditions had been disrupted by decades of state repression.

The establishment of Salafi institutions was particularly effective in rural and semi-urban northern districts, where traditional Hanafi Sunni and Bektashi practices had historically dominated but where formal religious education remained minimal (Clayer, 2006; Elbasani, 2020). Salafi initiatives disproportionately targeted youth populations, offering material support, employment opportunities and pathways of belonging within a global community of believers. In this sense, Salafism functioned not only as a religious project but as a vehicle of social mobility and symbolic empowerment in a period of structural poverty and institutional fragility (Maliqi, 1992; Elbasani and Roy, 2017).

The ideological encounter between the *Kanun* and Salafism produced visible tensions. One of the most prominent concerns is the practice of *gjakmarrja* (blood vengeance). While the *Kanun* enshrined retributive justice as a sacred duty of kin groups, Salafi leaders condemned it as un-Islamic, emphasizing Qur’anic injunctions against extrajudicial killing and the primacy of shari’a-based adjudication. Similarly, the *Kanun*’s rigid prioritization of clan solidarity, inheritance rules and kin-based authority was regarded by Salafis as a survival of tribal custom that subordinated divine law to local tradition. Where the *Kanun* affirmed loyalty to kin above all else, Salafism demanded loyalty to the *umma*, the transnational community of believers, thereby undermining the normative foundations of clan authority (Smolar, 2011; Elbasani, 2020).

Yet, the relationship between the two systems was not defined solely by conflict. In practice, it evolved into a complex field of negotiation, accommodation, and pragmatic coexistence. Salafi missionaries understood that outright rejection of the *Kanun* risked alienating communities for whom customary law remained the deepest source of legitimacy. Consequently, many adopted gradualist strategies, reframing rather than erasing local practices. In areas devastated by blood feuds, Salafi preachers invoked Islamic principles of forgiveness and reconciliation, thereby positioning themselves as peacemakers while simultaneously undermining the authority of the *Kanun* (Jordan et al., 2022). In other contexts, rather than denouncing hospitality or kinship directly, Salafi actors reinterpreted them within Islamic terms, linking *mikpritja* (hospitality) to Qur'anic injunctions on generosity and kinship solidarity.

The rise of Salafism in northern Albania also reflected wider geopolitical currents. The 1990s and early 2000s were a period in which the Balkans became a significant arena for transnational jihadist networks, particularly in the wake of the Bosnian and Kosovar wars (Mangalakova, 2004). Albania's porous borders, weak institutions and existing criminal infrastructures made it a strategic corridor for the movement of resources, personnel, and ideologies (Perteshi, 2020; Europol, 2021). While many Salafi organizations focused on humanitarian aid and religious instruction, others provided ideological infrastructures that could be mobilized for political or militant purposes. Although the majority of Albanian Muslims rejected extremist ideologies, segments of northern populations became exposed to narratives that situated Albania not merely as a transitioning post-communist state but as part of a broader Islamic revival on European soil (Elbasani, 2020; Kanellopoulos, 2023).

Intersections of Custom, Crime and Religion

The coexistence of the *Kanun*, organized crime, and Salafi networks in northern Albania exemplifies a broader sociological and political phenomenon: the emergence of overlapping normative orders in environments of weak or contested statehood. Such dynamics are not unique to Albania; they reflect a recurring pattern observable in post-conflict, post-authoritarian and peripheral regions where formal institutions are fragile and the enforcement of the rule of law remains

inconsistent (Migdal, 2001; United Nations, 2019). In these settings, competing sources of authority, criminal, and religious—step into the vacuum created by absent or delegitimized state structures, each articulating its own logic of order, justice and legitimacy (Barfield, 2010; Medda-Windischer et al., 2024).

The interaction among these normative systems generates a complex field characterized simultaneously by competition, negotiation and convergence. Organized crime groups frequently cloak their activities in the symbolic vocabulary of tradition, invoking the *Kanun's* idioms of honor, kinship and retribution to legitimize violence. By framing illicit practices as continuations of ancestral customs, criminal leaders enhance their local legitimacy and cultivate a degree of social tolerance within communities where the *Kanun* still resonates (Arsovska, 2015). In contrast, Salafi leaders often denounce elements of the *Kanun*, particularly *gjakmarrja* (blood vengeance), which they reject as incompatible with Islamic law. By presenting Islam as a higher normative order capable of breaking destructive cycles of retribution, Salafi actors strategically position themselves as moral reformers and peace builders. Yet, this opposition is not absolute: Salafi preachers have, in practice, coexisted with organized crime when illicit networks provided protection, logistical resources, or access to transnational circuits useful for religious expansion (Elbasani, 2020; Perteshi, 2020).

The broader implication of this triangular relationship is a fragmentation of sovereignty in northern Albania. Already weakened by corruption, clientelism and fragile institutions, the Albanian state competes not only with organized crime but also with entrenched customary and religious authorities (Zhillia, 2017). The result is a form of legal and political pluralism in which the state's Weberian monopoly on legitimate violence is dispersed across clans, mafia groups and religious actors. This pluralism complicates efforts at state consolidation, law enforcement, and counter-extremism, since interventions in one normative sphere often reverberate across the others. Campaigns that suppress organized crime without acknowledging the cultural legitimacy of the *Kanun* may inadvertently create openings for Salafi networks to present themselves as alternative moral authorities. Conversely, repressive measures targeting Salafism risk alienating marginalized

youth, pushing them toward the economic opportunities and protective networks offered by criminal structures (Barbalet, 2023).

This entanglement of customary law, criminal economies, and transnational religious movements underscores the importance of adopting holistic approaches to governance and security in northern Albania. Effective policy must recognize the layered nature of authority and legitimacy in these contexts, where state law operates alongside and often in tension with, other normative orders.

Comparative Perspectives

The Albanian case of overlapping customary law, organized crime, and Salafi networks exemplifies a broader socio-political phenomenon observable across weak-state environments, where formal institutions are absent, contested or ineffectual. Comparative analysis reveals that the persistence of customary law, its strategic adaptation by criminal actors and its entanglement with religious movements are not isolated to Albania but recur across diverse cultural and geopolitical settings.

Sicily provides a salient parallel. The Sicilian Mafia has long relied on *omertà*, a cultural code that emphasizes silence, loyalty and secrecy. Like the *Kanun* in northern Albania, *omertà* functions not only as a tool of organized crime but also as a moral framework that legitimizes mafia practices, discourages cooperation with state authorities and frames betrayal as dishonour while normalizing violence as a mechanism of dispute resolution (Paoli, 2003). Both the *Kanun* and *omertà* illustrate what Gambetta (1993) famously terms a “private protection industry,” wherein criminal organizations enforce contracts, adjudicate disputes and provide order in contexts where state enforcement is unreliable. This blending of culture and crime generates resilient, socially embedded structures that are difficult to dismantle and capable of adapting to external pressures.

Chechnya offers another instructive comparison. The *adat* system, like the *Kanun*, is rooted in clan-based norms emphasizing honour, collective responsibility, and retributive justice. During the 1990s, criminal networks and Islamist actors alike drew on *adat* to reinforce their legitimacy, while Salafi-inspired movements simultaneously contested blood revenge yet often accommodated customary law for

pragmatic purposes (Cremer, 2012; Lazarev, 2019). The Chechen mafia's appropriation of *adat* mirrors Albanian dynamics, producing a layered normative system in which customary law, organized crime and religious authority coexisted in competition and cooperation (Jaimoukha, 2012).

Afghanistan provides a further parallel through the Pashtunwali code, which structures social life around concepts of *nang* (honor), hospitality and *badal* (revenge). Like the *Kanun*, Pashtunwali persisted under weak state conditions, coexisting with criminal economies, most notably opium production, as well as Taliban governance structures (Barfield, 2010; Coulson et al., 2014). Here, too, religious and criminal actors alternately challenged, co-opted or cloaked their practices in the language of customary norms, producing a form of legal pluralism in which state law was only one among several competing systems of authority.

Chinese organized crime, particularly the triads, demonstrates the global reach of this phenomenon. Triads rely on ritualized codes, kinship ties and secretive hierarchies to maintain internal cohesion and enforce compliance. These systems, shaped by Confucian traditions of loyalty and secrecy, operate most effectively in contexts where state surveillance is limited, ineffective or corrupt (Chu, 2000; Arsovska and Craig, 2006). Like the *Kanun* or *omertà*, triad codes provide both moral justification and operational discipline, enabling organizational resilience and transnational expansion.

The Balkan region itself further reinforces these patterns. In Kosovo, the collapse of Yugoslav state structures facilitated a resurgence of *Kanun* norms, which interacted with both organized crime and Islamist influence in shaping post-war social order (Mangalakova, 2004; Perteshi, 2020). Similarly, Montenegro's clan-based smuggling networks reveal the intersection of customary codes and illicit economies in sustaining transnational trafficking routes.

Conclusions

The persistence of the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini* into the twenty-first century demonstrates the remarkable resilience of customary law in structuring social life in the absence—or weakness—of centralized authority. Historically, the *Kanun* provided a normative framework that regulated behaviour, mediated disputes, and sustained order in the

stateless highlands of northern Albania. Its survival through successive periods of Ottoman domination, communist repression and the institutional collapse of the 1990s illustrates that customary law can function independently of state structures, deriving its legitimacy from kinship, honor and shared cultural norms. In this respect, the *Kanun* underscores the broader centrality of non-state legal systems in contexts marked by fragile or contested sovereignty.

Contemporary transformations of the *Kanun*, however, reveal its instrumentalization in new social and criminal environments. In the wake of Albania's post-communist instability, organized crime groups appropriated *Kanun* principles to enforce loyalty, justify violence and sustain clandestine networks. Practices such as blood feuds and kinship-based obligations—once mechanisms of communal justice and cohesion—were strategically redeployed as tools of mafia-style discipline and transnational criminal enterprise. This demonstrates how customary law can be selectively reinterpreted to serve objectives that diverge from its original communal function, contributing to the entrenchment of criminal economies that draw strength from cultural legitimacy.

At the same time, the interaction between the *Kanun* and Salafi networks illustrates the dynamics of normative contestation and coexistence. Salafi actors, emphasizing religious law and divine authority, have sought to delegitimize *Kanun*-based practices such as *gjakmarrja*, yet often engage in pragmatic accommodation to maintain local influence. This dual strategy—contesting certain elements while reinterpreting others—demonstrates the adaptability of religious movements in environments governed by overlapping normative systems. It also reflects the broader tension between Universalist frameworks of authority (Islamic law, human rights, or state law) and localized, culturally embedded customs.

The convergence of customary law, organized crime and Salafi authority in northern Albania has profound implications for governance, social stability and security in the Western Balkans. Customary obligations and criminal logic perpetuate cycles of violence, undermine trust in fragile state institutions and complicate law enforcement, particularly where transnational networks exploit cultural norms to reinforce cohesion and legitimacy. Meanwhile, the presence of Salafi

networks introduces new ideological challenges that intersect with, but do not displace, older customary frameworks.

This study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, it brings together discussions that are often treated separately by examining the interaction between customary law, organized crime and Salafi religious networks within a single analytical framework. Second, it conceptualizes the Kanun not merely as a cultural relic but as a dynamic normative system capable of shaping both criminal governance and religious authority. Third, by situating the Albanian case within broader comparative perspectives of legal pluralism, the article highlights how informal institutions continue to structure power and legitimacy in weak-state environments.

The Albanian case thus exemplifies legal pluralism in practice: a landscape in which multiple, overlapping, and competing normative orders—customary, criminal and religious—coexist and coevolve, shaping identity, authority and social behaviour. More broadly, it demonstrates how weak-state environments produce hybrid orders of governance that cannot be fully understood through the prism of state law alone. For policymakers and scholars of security, this case underscores the need for approaches that engage not only formal institutions but also the informal cultural logics and transnational networks that continue to structure social and political life in fragile states.

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