



It Is Not against the Law, if No-One Can See You: Online Social Organisation of Artefact-Hunting in Former Yugoslavia

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ABSTRACT

This study uses open-source intelligence to analyse the illicit excavation and illicit trafficking of archaeological goods (and forgeries) across the Balkan-Eastern Mediterranean region(s) of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia. It draws on texts and images that have been published by hundreds of artefact-hunters across tens of online communities and other online platforms. These include online forums; social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram; social media, such as Pinterest and YouTube; generic trading platforms, such as eBay, Etsy and olx.ba; and specialist trading platforms, such as VCoins.

It shows how artefact-hunters target sites, features and objects; reveal the objects that are collectible and/or marketable; acquire equipment; form patron-client relationships, peer-to-peer partnerships and other cooperative groups; engage in transnational activity; crowdsource techniques for smuggling; crowdsource ways to avoid being caught or punished; and respond to policing. Often, they give identifying details or leave an electronic paper trail that enables their identification. Such information also reveals the destructiveness of processes of extraction and consumption; the economics of the low-end market in cultural goods from poor countries; the gender dimension in cultural property crime and cyber-enabled crime; and the interaction between political allegiance and criminal activity. Thereby, this study shows how netnography and social network analysis can support intelligence-led policing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As elsewhere in the Balkan-Eastern Mediterranean region(s) (Novinite 2008; Hardy 2020b), so in former Yugoslavia, archaeologists are threatened by looters and there have been ‘physical clashes’ between looters and archaeologists (according to Filipović and Vasić 2017: 336). At least since the 1990s, some organised looting has been undertaken with ‘*naoružanim obezbeđenjem* [armed security]’ (according to archaeologist Miomir Korać, cited by Informer 2017).

Likewise, as elsewhere in the region (Hardy 2021b), ‘*organizirane skupine* [organised [crime] groups]’ (Sedej 1977: 133), who also handle drugs and arms (according to Živković and Todović 1995, paraphrased by Radović, Samardžić and Đurević 2016: 52), have been involved in cultural property crime in former Yugoslavia for decades. Their involvement has increased, as other countries have increased regulation of the supply chain (Sedej 1977: 134), while the region has endured war, economic underdevelopment, the ‘*tranzicije* [transition]’ towards democracy and the ‘*globalizacije* [globalisation]’ of the economy (Korać and Amidžić 2014: 134).

Police officers are notorious as collectors of antiquities and protectors of ‘*nedodirljivi* [untouchable]’ dealers and looters (according to archaeologist Milan Pindić, quoted and paraphrased by Ćirić *et al* 2005; according to a Serbian cultural heritage worker, 3rd December 2019). Indeed, international police officers in Kosovo (as reported by Lama 2005) and peacekeepers in North Macedonia (as reported by Deliso 2005b) have engaged in looting yet escaped punishment.

Meanwhile, politicians, politically-exposed persons and other members of the political/business elite are notorious for assembling private collections of looted antiquities, to launder dirty assets and to accumulate social capital (e.g. in North Macedonia, according to cultural property police inspector Dragi Nestorovski, cited by Tochi 2013; in Serbia, according to art historian Renata Samardžić 2007), and for protecting their criminal supply chains (according to a Serbian cultural heritage worker, 26th July 2018). Macedonian artefact-hunter MKAH002 named a former senior nationalist politician who has been convicted of corruption, a former senior socialist politician and a former senior archaeologist as influential participants in the illicit trade, as well as listing elements within NATO forces, a nationalist network within the police, senior police officers, priests and muftis as major players in the looting process.

Moreover, there is evidence of participation of members or former members of armed forces and paramilitary organisations in theft and looting and members or former members of security agencies and political parties in trafficking of cultural goods during and after the wars in former Yugoslavia (Deliso 2005a; Drnić 2016; Maniscalco 2006: 37–39; Walasek *et al* 2015:

74–75). Furthermore, there is evidence of participation of foreign fighters from former Yugoslavia in pillaging and trafficking of cultural goods during the war in Ukraine (Chraibi 2020).

Yet, despite the evidence of interactions of trafficking of art and antiquities with trafficking of drugs and arms, criminal violence, organised crime and political violence, as well as the undermining of the rule of law through corruption and impunity, there has still been ‘*jako malo istraživanja* [very little [empirical] research]’ (Korać and Amidžić 2014: 134). This study draws on informative publications of texts and images by hundreds of artefact-hunters across tens of online communities for artefact-hunters, as well as tens of online communities for other communities and wider society, in order to analyse the illicit trade across the Balkan-Eastern Mediterranean region(s) of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

2. LAW

As in the flanking regions of Eastern Europe (Hardy 2016) and the Eastern Mediterranean (Hardy 2020b), so in former Yugoslavia, foundational laws, significant reforms, the technicalities of laws and the idiosyncracies of their implementation range across the region. Nonetheless, the letter as well as the spirit of the law has been similar and clear across the region since 1948 at the latest (Miškec 2011: 12n2).

Archaeological objects are public property or state property and unlicensed excavation is prohibited (Assembly of Montenegro 2010: 37; Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2003: Art. 322; Republic of Croatia 1999: Art. 47; Republic of Kosovo 2006: Art. Art. 7.9; Republic of North Macedonia 2004: Art. 10; Republic of Serbia 1994: Ch. 11, Art. 134; Republic of Slovenia 2008: Art. 32). Indeed, North Macedonia is cited as a model of ‘[a]bsolute [legislative] prohibition’ (UNESCO 2016: 2).

Regardless of the wording of any legislation, the law is understood by law-breakers across the region. Indeed, it is the understanding of the law that enables bending of the law – to breaking point – by artefact-hunters and antiquities-traders.

3. METHODS

Following a series of analyses of open-source research methodology (Hardy 2017b; Hardy 2018) and open-source evidence for cultural property crime in Western Europe (Hardy 2017a), Eastern Europe (Hardy 2016), South Asia (Hardy 2019b), South-East Asia (Hardy 2020a) and East Asia (Hardy 2019a), this study sought to amass data that related to South-Eastern Europe, specifically

former Yugoslavia. Adapting sets of queries that had been refined through those analyses, using terms that were drawn from the activity and its participants, this study sought to answer a range of questions that would inform academic understanding and intelligence-led policing.

These questions included: how do artefact-hunters acquire equipment, target sites, features and objects, and engage in transnational activity? How do artefact-hunters avoid being caught in the act of stealing and/or smuggling, or being punished when caught? How do artefact-hunters and associated criminals form groups and networks that specialise in one stage of the process or span the supply chain from source to market? Which objects are perceived as collectible for artefact-hunters and/or marketable to other collectors? How does the online trade in cultural goods function? How does the low-end market in cultural goods function? Is it possible to identify demographic trends among cultural property criminals? And is it possible to identify interactions between criminal activity and political allegiance among cultural property criminals?

To gather established academic evidence of cultural property crime across the region, it reviewed relevant sources among the first 100 results on Google Scholar from searches for:

- antiquities+looting+territory in English
- illegal+archaeological+excavation+territory in local languages and English
- online+trafficking+cultural+goods in local languages

To explore online forums and their discussions, it reviewed relevant sources among the first 100 results on Google Web from searches for:

- metal+detecting+forum+territory in local languages and English
- treasure+hunters+forum+territory in local languages and English

To explore social networks and their discussions, it reviewed relevant pages and groups on Facebook and accounts on Instagram among all of the results from searches for:

- metal+detector+territory in local languages and English
- treasure+hunters+territory in local languages and English
- treasure+hunting+territory in local languages and English

To examine online trading in the region that supplies international markets, it reviewed relevant sources

among the first 100 results on eBay.co.uk, eBay.com and Google Shopping from searches for:

- metal+detector+find+territory in English

Furthermore, it reviewed relevant sources among all results on eBay.co.uk and eBay.com from advanced searches for:

- metal+detector+find, located in territory, in English

This study draws on specific texts and images from 243 artefact-hunters within the region and 41 artefact-hunters outside the region, plus content and statistics from 84 artefact-hunting online communities within the region, as well as generic intelligence from an even wider range of sources. Artefact-hunters ([Table 1](#)) and online communities for artefact-hunters ([Table 2](#)) were anonymised. They were coded by location and status (e.g. UKAH001 for the earliest cited, UK-based artefact-

LOCATION	CODE	NUMBER
Bosnia and Herzegovina	BAAH	10
Croatia	HRAH	38
Kosovo	KSAH	11
Montenegro	MEAH	3
North Macedonia	MKAH	15
Serbia	RSAH	107
Slovenia	SIAH	45
Unidentifiable	NNAH	14
Austria	ATAH	1
Bulgaria	BGAH	1
Canada	CAAH	1
Cyprus	CYAH	1
Czech Republic	CZAH	1
Germany	DEAH	6
Spain	ESAH	1
Greece	GRAH	1
Hungary	HUAH	2
Italy	ITAH	12
Netherlands	NLAH	1
Norway	NOAH	1
Turkey	TRAH	1
United Kingdom	UKAH	3
United States	USAH	8

Table 1 Locations and numbers of artefact-hunters, whose texts and images constituted evidence in this study.

LOCATION	CODE	NUMBER
Bosnia and Herzegovina	BAOC	3
Croatia	HROC	10
Kosovo	KSOC	0
Montenegro	MEOC	1
North Macedonia	MKOC	1
Serbia	RSOC	26
Slovenia	SIOC	20
Regional	YUOC	23

Table 2 Locations and numbers of online communities within the region, whose content and statistics constituted evidence in this study.

hunter and UKOC001 for the largest cited, UK-focused online community). Other observers and communities were identified as appropriate.

As potential intelligence that may inform understanding of illegal excavation and online trafficking, key images have been adapted from photographs that have been published by artefact-hunters. Although the original images are displayed publicly by their creators or with the permission of their creators, these adaptations have been edited to obscure the identities of the people who were documented in them, the people who created them and the people who published them, thereby to enable open discussion of potential criminality and to avoid the association of innocent people with criminal activity. They are sufficiently transformed to prevent viewers from tracing the original sources by reverse image-searching, whether they are crime-fighters who wish to identify a potential suspect or criminals who wish to find a potential partner-in-crime.

4. RESULTS

4.1. ACTIVITY

4.1.1. Types of activity

Artefact-hunters planned the targeting of sites, features and objects, which included riverine and maritime underwater targets, as well as underground targets. Discussions included identification of specific protected sites where they would not be checked; reassurances that, if they were checked, they would not be stopped, as long as they claimed to be looking for modern militaria; and warnings that territorially-protective local rivals would report foreign cars to the police for fabricated offences and/or slash the tires of foreign cars, along with reassurances that extrajudicial interference could be prevented by working in transnational partnerships.

There was practically no public discussion of the acquisition of dynamite and other explosives (compared to Turkey, where there are dedicated social networks for explosive artefact-hunting, as documented by Hardy

2020b). Nonetheless, they recognised that explosives were used – indeed, NATO’s bombings in Serbia had been used as cover for looters’ blasting of a site (according to Filipović and Petrović 2012: 50) – and had killed some users. While some rejected (e.g. RSAH087), doubted (e.g. RSAH086) or ridiculed (e.g. RSAH098) these dangerous and destructive methods, others publicly discussed and specifically arranged the acquisition of other very dangerous, very destructive equipment, to be used where explosives could not or should not, which implicitly admitted the use of explosives in other circumstances. These included (personally and environmentally toxic) acids and pneumatic drills; chemical heating agents; and hydraulic lifting/spreading wedges (plus expanding cement, which would actually reinforce rather than remove an obstacle).

They very frequently sought and frequently visibly formed patron-client relationships with other artefact-hunters, metal-detector dealers and antiquities dealers. This sometimes connects petty criminals with organised criminals. Reportedly, the footsoldiers of a notorious spy-turned-oligarch-and-mafioso in Bulgaria sell and rent metal-detectors in Serbia (Subašić 2019).

They formed peer-to-peer partnerships of cost-sharing, labour-sharing, finds-sharing and/or profit-sharing. They arranged the manufacture of homemade, hand-built metal-detectors; arranged the sale-purchase, exchange, rental, borrowing and repair of industrially-produced metal-detectors; and analysed the technicalities of the laws on the use of devices and the act of searching.

They also arranged communal and intercommunal cooperation for national and transnational events and projects. Some transnational looting was characterised as metal-detecting tourism, which encompassed international movement within the region, within the continent and around the world – and this included tourism outside the region by metal-detectorists from the region (see *Figure 1*). These relationships, partnerships and cooperations were maintained over timespans that ranged from days to years.

Once they reached the stage of trafficking their loot, they shared techniques, by e-mail or private message, for smuggling illicit cultural goods across borders. They also crowdsourced information on customs procedures and their circumvention, such as postage of parcels under the value threshold for duties checks and use of shipping services that are checked on dispatch (by non-experts) and therefore (mistakenly) trusted by customs.

Some artefact-hunters had “digging seasons” as they paused (more frequently) in the depths of winter and/or (occasionally) at the height of summer, yet others did not. HROC001 and MEAH003 preferred to operate in the cold, to avoid snakebites and heat stroke.

SIAH028 persisted in metal-detecting throughout the year, continuing in temperatures around -8°C , but only targeting fields while the earth was frozen. He found

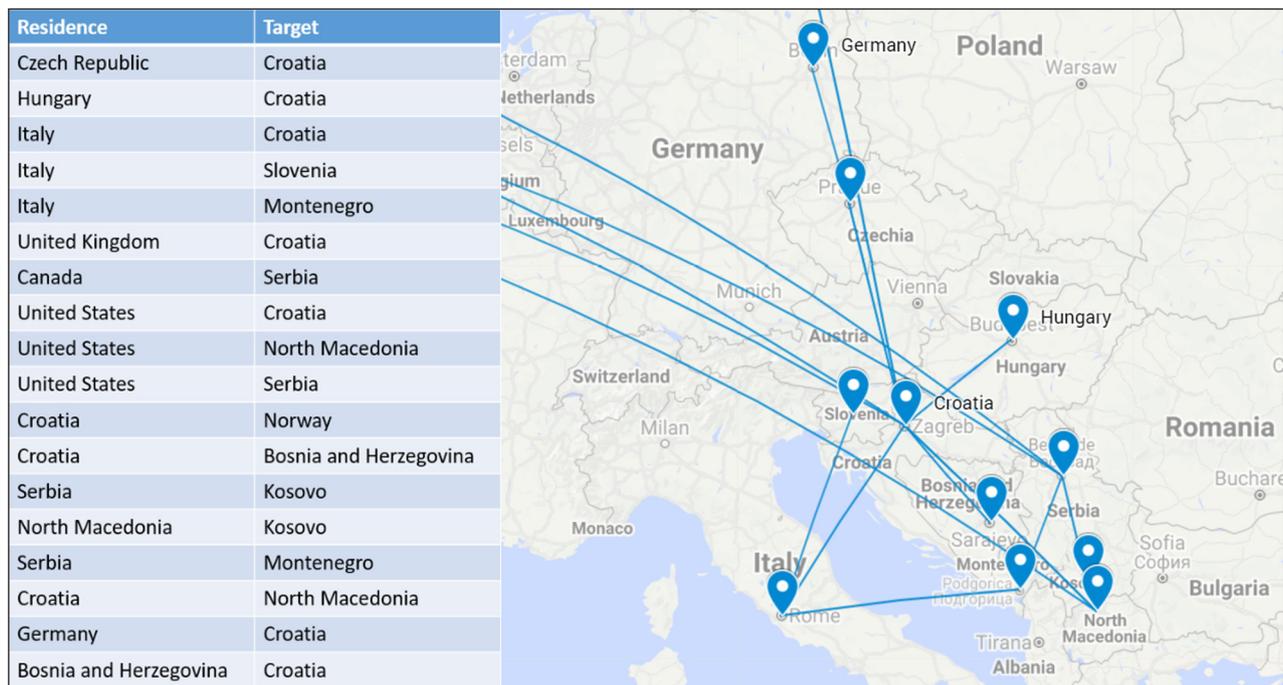


Figure 1 Countries of origin and destination for transnational artefact-hunting in former Yugoslavia and by artefact-hunters from former Yugoslavia.



Figure 2 HROC001 encouraged others to stay home while he did not.

a Roman coin, an iron cloak pin and two bronze cross pendants in such conditions.

More widely, texts and images on personal accounts, online forums and social networks reaffirmed that some continued throughout winter. Indeed, some continued throughout the Covid-19 pandemic (see [Figure 2](#)). According to RSAH095, an artefact-hunter was caught when he violated the curfew in order to metal-detect.

4.1.2. Collectible/marketable objects

Artefact-hunters presented finds, displayed pieces of private collections and sold-bought/exchanged

objects across social media, online forums and social networks (see [Figures 3–6](#)). Thereby, they gave insights into the components of the archaeological record that were collectible for the finders or marketable to other collectors. These included Neolithic obsidian axes and other polished stone tools; Bronze Age axes; Iron Age spearheads; Greek coins; Roman coins; Roman weapons such as swords, arrowheads and spearheads; Roman tools; Roman adornments, such as brooches, belt buckles and clothes-pins or fasteners (fibulas); Byzantine rings; Byzantine coins; medieval coins; Venetian coins; Ottoman coins; uncleaned coins; any coins, as long as they had

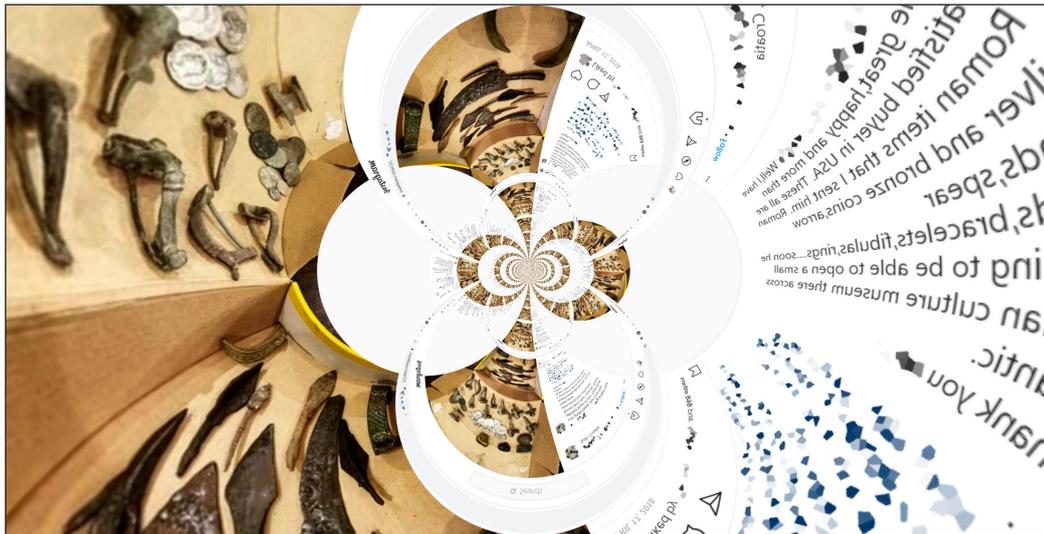


Figure 3 56 Roman antiquities that were partly auctioned and partly sold to an antiquities collector in the United States by HROC001 through private messages on Instagram.



Figure 4 14 Roman and medieval antiquities that were auctioned by HROC001 through private messages on Instagram; public offers included USD 30 by NLOC001, USD 50 by an antiquities collector in the United States and USD 60 by an antiquities buyer (collector and/or dealer) in Iran.

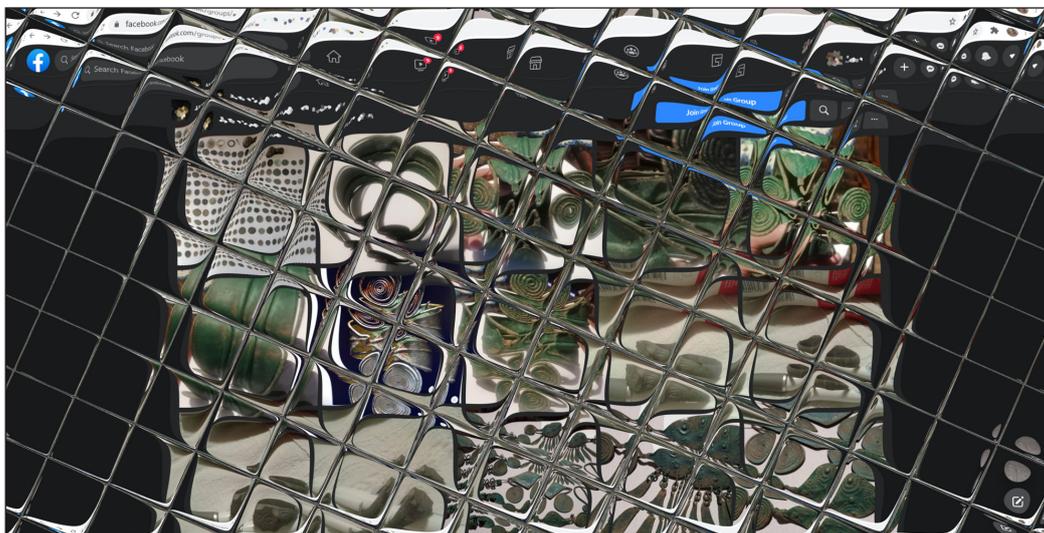


Figure 5 Some of the antiquities that were displayed through YUOC005.



Figure 6 A lot of 677 ancient coins, which were advertised through RSOC003, with a German-and-Turkish-language note.

been removed from underground or underwater; icons and other artworks; broad mixes of religious jewellery; modern militaria, particularly Nazi artefacts; and Yugoslav coins, other modern coins and other modern objects, though these were often presented or recognised as literal and metaphorical “rubbish” finds that interfered with the search for *valuable* finds.

4.1.3. Flows of knowledge, equipment and commodities

They undertook these endeavours across generic national media platforms; generic national online forums; unrelated niche online forums; national electronics online forums; international and national militaria online forums; international, non-regional national, regional and national artefact-hunting online forums; and international, non-regional national, regional and national artefact-hunting social networks. Discussions were held over timespans that ranged from hours to years.

The artefact-hunting economy elsewhere in the Balkan-Eastern Mediterranean region(s) has influenced the artefact-hunting economy (if not the artefact-hunting community) across former Yugoslavia. Based on the locations of the manufacturers and the brand names that have become generic names (proprietary eponyms) for these products among their users, there are significant connections with Turkey.

Likewise, artefact-hunters from outside the region have played a significant role not only in the activity itself, but also in the training of artefact-hunters within the region. For instance, previously, HRAH002 had told local artefact-hunters that they should consult forums in Western Europe and North America, to prepare themselves for underwater artefact-hunting. Now, having imported that knowledge through transnational peer-to-peer learning and having developed local

expertise, there is dedicated discussion of underwater metal-detectors in online communities within the region.

4.1.4. Committing crime and avoiding punishment

Many artefact-hunters were conscious of and open about their participation in criminal activity (e.g. HROC001, who blurred the faces of participants in photos). They encouraged one another to target archaeological features yet not to get caught, or jokingly stated that it was legal as long as they were not seen by the landowner or caught by the police.

They also demonstrated the impact of effective law enforcement. For instance, MKAH005 complained that it was difficult to artefact-hunt at certain locations in Kosovo, due to the non-stop patrols of police and KFOR. Meanwhile, USAH003 targeted Serbia because the activity was prohibited – or, rather, because artefact-hunters only perceived the prohibition to be enforced – in Slovakia. However, recently, Facebook group RSOC003’s administrator RSAH095 warned his group that the prohibition on artefact-hunting was being enforced and that police had started investigating people for metal-detecting, even if they claimed to be targeting modern militaria.

When RSAH095 revealed that he was being investigated, Facebook group YUOC004’s co-administrator HRAH037 noted that two members of his group had been searched in the previous six months. RSAH095 stated that he would not artefact-hunt again until the case had been concluded. When he was convicted, he stated that he had stopped permanently. (At least, he publicly stopped publicly documenting his participation.) RSAH095 concluded that Serbian artefact-hunters needed to follow the example of Croatian artefact-hunters and form a citizens’ association in order to problematise policing.

Obviously, their simplest way not to be punished was not to get caught in the first place, by targeting a locality or a country as far as possible from the law and by not provoking the police into intervention with visible criminality or obnoxious behaviour. Some advised to ask about finds in online forums, rather than to report them to the authorities. Others advised not to discuss illegal collections and/or criminal profit in public online forums or public social networks.

Otherwise, artefact-hunters prepared excuses that would exploit technicalities in the law or difficulties in enforcing the law. They claimed that ancient coins were accidental finds. They claimed to be looking for lost property – such as watches, keys and engagement/wedding rings – or underground pipes. They presented a fake archaeologist’s identity card (e.g. HRAH002; SIAH018). They claimed to be on their way to the museum to report their finds (e.g. RSAH005). They also reassured one another that law enforcement agents do not know what the law is or how to enforce it (e.g. HRAH012).

Moreover, excuses and pretences are often not necessary, due to the economic vulnerability of the region. HRAH027 (15th January 2020) observed that Croatia remained dependent on its tourist economy, so some metal-detecting was prohibited yet tolerated.

4.2. ONLINE SOCIAL ORGANISATION

4.2.1. Scale of activity

Some artefact-hunters who engage in cross-border crime, and particularly artefact-hunters in smaller countries who wish to access larger communities of knowledge, collaboration and trading, may choose to participate in other countries’ national communities or in regional communities (as exemplified by [Figure 7](#); see also South-East Asia in Hardy 2020a). So, the sizes

of online communities may not adequately reflect the proportions of artefact-hunters among the territories.

For instance, although looting is ‘particularly thriving’ in Kosovo (Maniscalco 2006: 39), there was no identifiable community for Kosovo, not even one for dealing, since looters sell directly and ‘almost exclusively’ to ‘foreign dealers’ (Maniscalco 2006: 39), to supply markets such as Germany (Hardy 2013). Rather, Kosovan artefact-hunters appear to participate in ostensibly Albanian national (Albanian-language) communities (e.g. KSAH005, KSAH006, KSAH007, KSAH008 and KSAH009), ostensibly Serbian national (Serbian-language) communities and regional communities (e.g. KSAH001, KSAH002, KSAH003, KSAH004, KSAH010 and KSAH011).

Nonetheless, discounting perhaps 6.58 per cent of online artefact-hunters as inactive artefact-hunters (see Hardy 2018), the existence of 9,116 accounts in national communities suggests the existence of at least 8,516 active artefact-hunters across former Yugoslavia (see [Figure 8](#)). While this number inevitably double-counts some who participate in two countries’ largest communities, it also excludes all who do not participate in any online community, who do not participate in any national community or who do not participate in any country’s largest community, such as permanent foreign residents who do not speak the local language (e.g. BAAH003; MEAH003), plus temporary foreign residents (e.g. UNMIK police officers in Kosovo and peacekeepers in North Macedonia). So, it is a secure indicator of the scale of activity in the region. Indeed, online communities appear to be particularly distinct from one another and particularly large numbers of artefact-hunters may not participate in any country’s largest community, so it may be a significant underestimation of the scale of the activity.

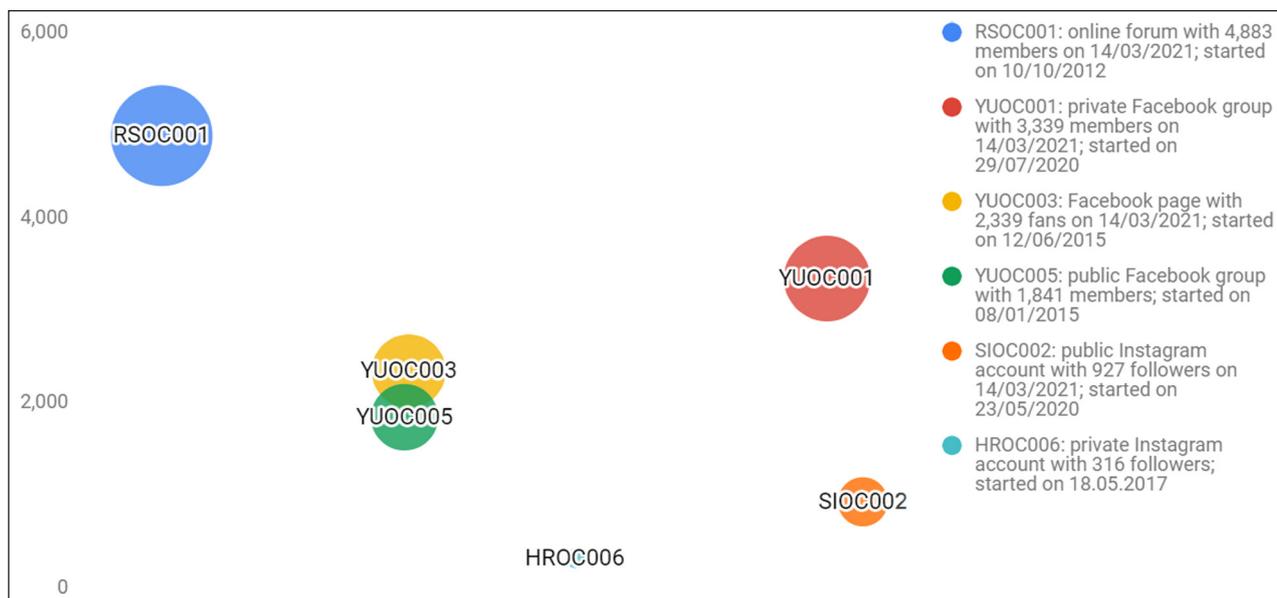


Figure 7 The largest online communities of each type for artefact-hunters in former Yugoslavia, by approximate date of establishment and size.

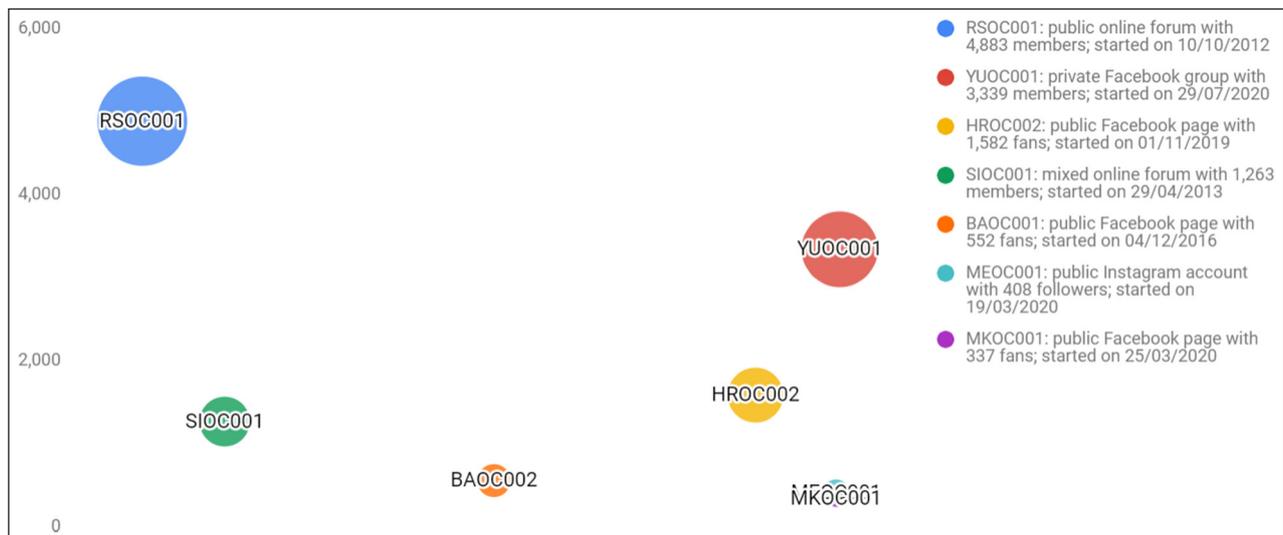


Figure 8 The largest online communities for artefact-hunters for each of the countries in, and for the region of, former Yugoslavia, by approximate date of establishment and size.

4.2.2. Organisation of activity

The first online community for artefact-hunters in former Yugoslavia was probably an online forum that was established in 2004. Yet the number of communities first increased significantly only in early 2011–early 2013 (see [Figure 9](#)). Once the Facebook pages and Instagram accounts of industrial companies and industrial scams (both of which have seemingly found growing markets in the region) and individual artefact-hunters (whose platforms enabled community engagement yet did not constitute practical communities) have been excluded, there (still) appears to have been a second rapid increase in the number of communities since early 2019 (see [Figure 10](#); with regard to community responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, see also [Figure 9](#), as Instagram accounts have grown in number throughout 2020).

There has been a shift from online forums towards social networks and from public communities towards private communities. This is partly natural. Some, such as HRAH012, continue to be members of online forums as well as social networks. Others use online forums like social encyclopaedias, yet organise through social networks. Yet the shift is partly cultivated. HRAH013 began participating online in an international technology online forum (29th March 2015), then joined social network HROC003 as well, then channeled people from the public forum to the private group (8th January 2020). And the shift is occasionally resisted. When the few remaining members of YUOC020 were polled, 82.61 per cent did not want the forum to have a Facebook page.

4.2.3. Active management of online participation

Between February 2021 and March 2021, YUOC005 lost 0.16 per cent of its members; RSOC016 lost 0.31 per cent of its followers; YUOC014 lost 0.33 per cent of its followers; YUOC018 lost 0.56 per cent of its members; RSOC018 lost 0.60 per cent of its followers; RSOC019 lost

0.79 per cent of its followers; YUOC021 lost 0.94 per cent of its followers; SIOC008 lost 1.04 per cent of its followers; and RSOC013 lost 1.13 per cent of its followers. Between October 2016 and March 2021, YUOC009 lost 5.46 per cent of its fans. Between February 2021 and March 2021, RSOC010 lost 6.33 per cent of its members. Between July 2019 and March 2021, SIOC014 lost 7.14 per cent of its members.

Over the course of its existence from 11th May 2004, YUOC020 had had 2,253 members, yet only 109 remained on 14th March 2021. In other words, 95.16 per cent of its community had left or had been expelled. These developments reaffirm that artefact-hunters and online communities actively manage their memberships; and that, although local factors may complicate the relationship and the evidence of the relationship, online activity may correlate with offline activity (see also Hardy 2020a, on South-East Asia and Hardy 2020b, on the Eastern Mediterranean).

It should also be borne in mind that changes in the sizes of online communities may reflect changes in the online activity of already/still-active artefact-hunters, rather than changes in the scale of offline activity. For instance, HROC001 had been artefact-hunting for three years before he began displaying and selling finds on Instagram; KSAH11 had been artefact-hunting for two years before he joined online forum YUOC008. Instagram accounts proliferated during the Covid-19 pandemic (see chart 3), which is more likely to be a result of reduced offline activity among existing artefact-hunters than increased participation in artefact-hunting.

4.2.4. Administration of communities

Another study found that, in Facebook groups for North Africa and West Asia, there were 5.14 administrators per group and 4.71 per cent of administrators were involved in the administration of more than three groups (al-Azm

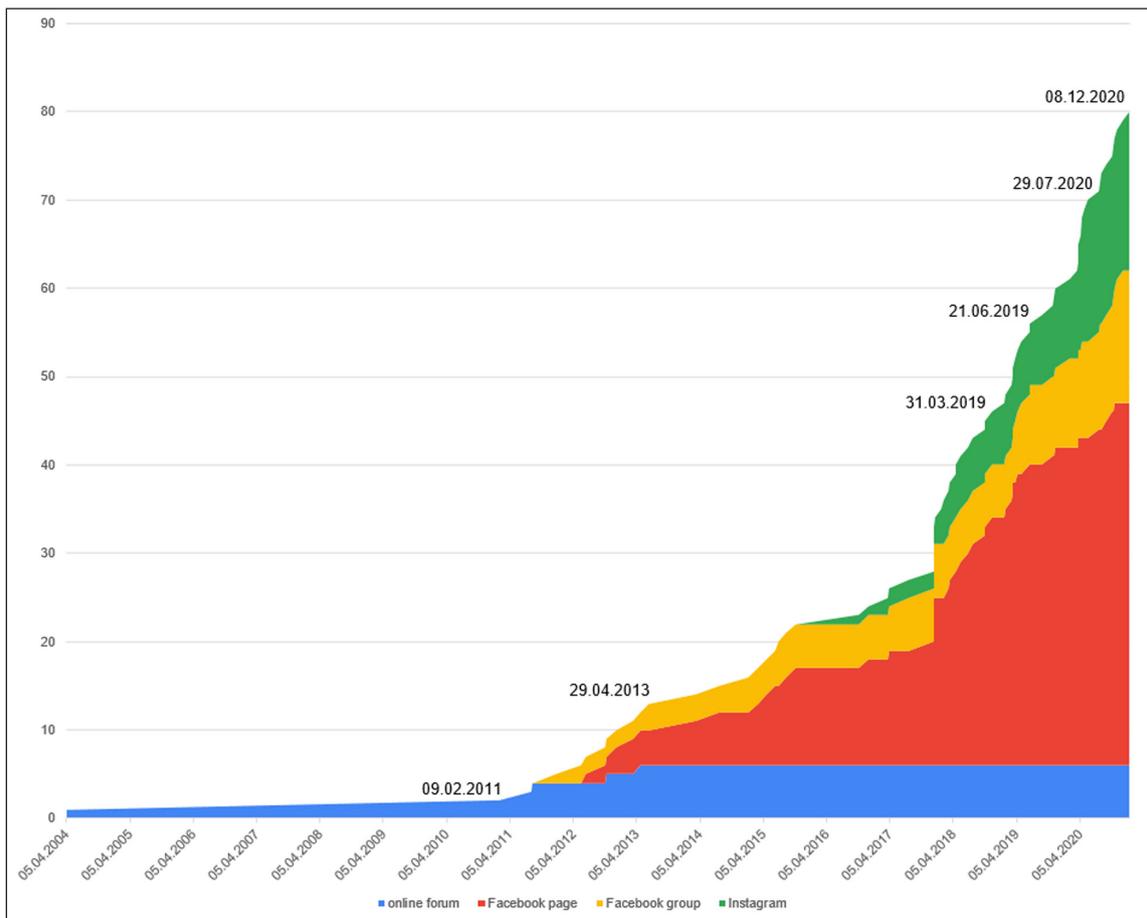


Figure 9 Cumulative numbers of online communities by type, total.

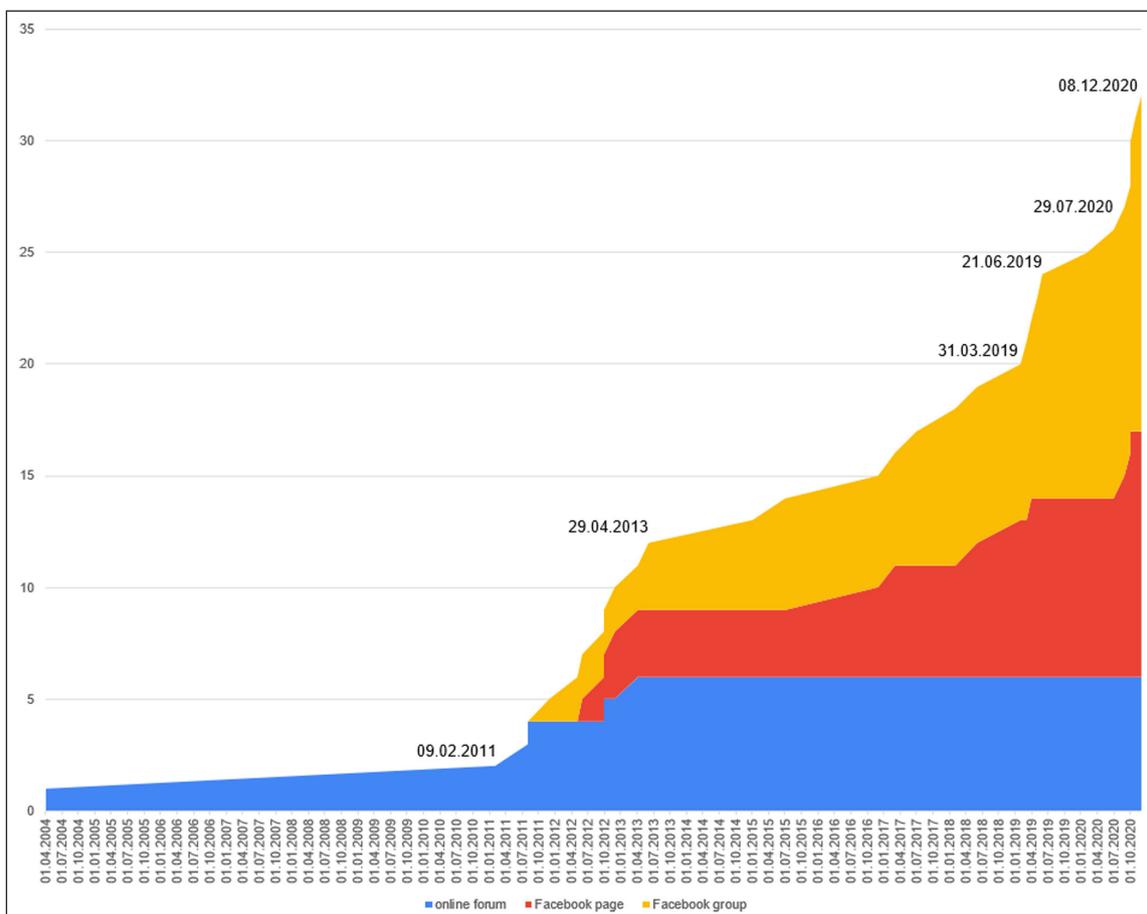


Figure 10 Cumulative numbers of online communities by type, excluding industrial pages, industrial scams and personal accounts.

and Paul with Graham 2019: 19). This study found that, in former Yugoslavia, there were 1.4 (or, including sockpuppet accounts, 1.73) administrators per group and only 3.85 per cent of administrators were involved in the administration of more than one group (see *Figures 11* and *12*).

Statements and conversations in online communities demonstrated some acquaintances and friendships among artefact-hunters who could not otherwise be linked directly. Nonetheless, these data suggest

particularly distinct organisation and operation of communities.

At the same time, some participants may link communities for different regions. Beyond the simple fact that cultural goods from West Asia are smuggled through former Yugoslavia (e.g. through Serbia, according to the head of the Department of Investigations of the Serbian Customs Administration, Branka Knezevic, cited by Vecernje Novosti 2015; through Slovenia, see RTV MMC



Figure 11 Administration of national Facebook groups for artefact-hunters in former Yugoslavia; private group RSOC022, which had had 17 members in 2019, had been removed by 2021.

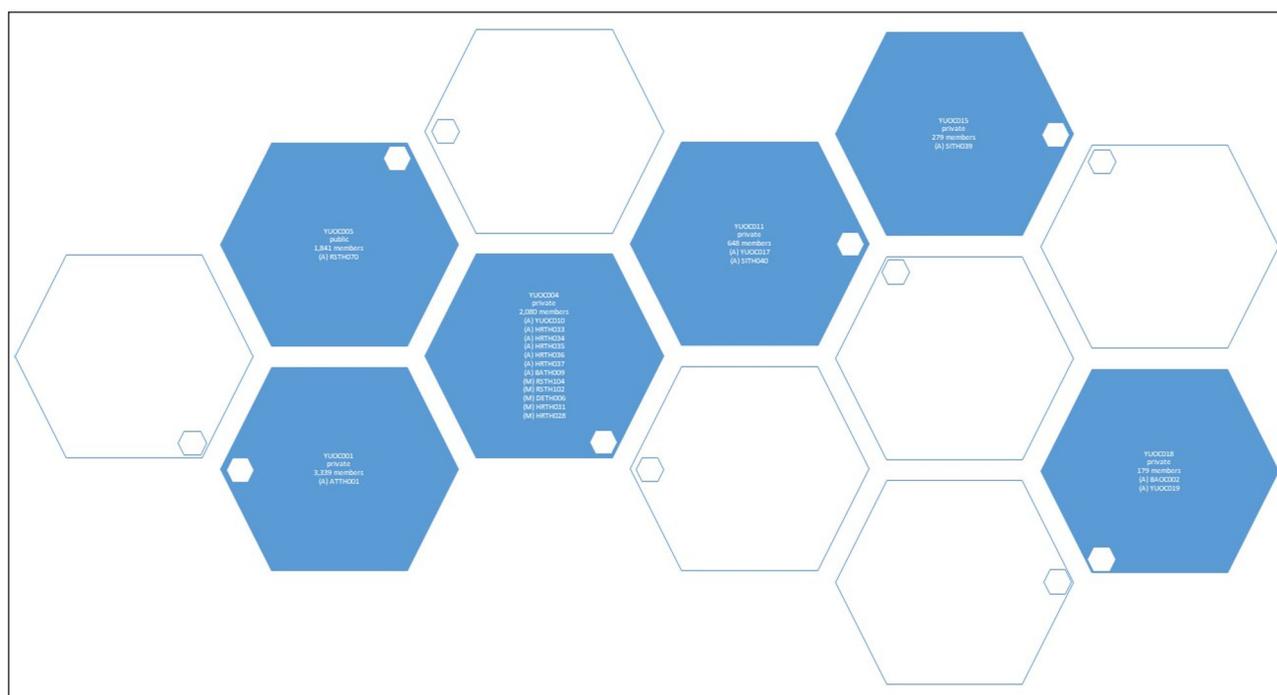


Figure 12 Administration of regional Facebook groups for artefact-hunters in former Yugoslavia.

2016), at least recently, at least one co-administrator of a private group for trafficking of antiquities from North Africa and West Asia was in North Macedonia (according to al-Azm and Paul with Graham 2019: 72).

4.2.5. The politics of artefact-hunters

There was secure evidence of the politics of some artefact-hunters. In light of connections between cultural property crime and political violence, from crimes of (increased) opportunity to financing of violence, there were indicators of potentially particularly concerning activity.

For instance, one sockpuppet account for YUOC004 administrator HRAH037 used a photograph of American neo-Nazi terrorist David Eden Lane as its profile image and mockingly claimed to work at the Auschwitz Memorial (see [Figure 13](#)).

There was also potential evidence of the politics of, or subordination of politics to business by, some artefact-hunting communities. Some had similarly-minded administrators and moderators, while others had ideologically-opposed management (see [Figure 14](#)).

4.3. ONLINE TRADING

4.3.1. Range of activity

Metal-detectorists use national and regional trading platforms such as (formerly pik.ba, now) olx.ba, global trading platforms such as eBay and specialist trading platforms such as VCoins (e.g. RSOC016), as well as online forums and social networks, plus social media. For instance, they use Pinterest as a virtual storefront for rare antiquities (Guštin 2017: 351 – fig. 1), which ‘are sold

anonymously and without data on the place of finding’ (Guštin 2017: 356).

While trading in social networks is typically conducted in private groups, there is some public trading. For instance, RSAH082 advertised an Ostrogothic cross for sale in Facebook group RSOC007, with deals to be arranged in private messages. RSOC016 temporarily posted adverts on Instagram of lots that were for sale on the international online coin-dealing platform VCoins.

Instagram account HROC001 held 24-hour auctions and time-unlimited auctions, where bids were submitted in private messages; held competitions for followers who promoted his account, with ancient coins as prizes; and advertised for others. Artefact-hunters (e.g. RSOC016) were sometimes approached about the sale of finds in posts’ comments.

Sometimes, activities and communities spanned platforms and regions. For example, HUAH002 repeatedly used Instagram account HUOC001 to post links in comments to HROC001, in order to channel his followers to a private Facebook group for the buying and selling of ancient artefacts, which was administered by HUAH002 and CYAH001.

4.3.2. Offline trade through online communities

According to ancient coin dealer RSAH062 (5th August 2014), the best sources of fairly-priced coins were numismatic meetings and flea markets. Yet even such face-to-face trade was mediated by the internet. So, the practices and businesses of artefact-hunters and antiquities-traders, across the region and beyond, were laid out across the web.

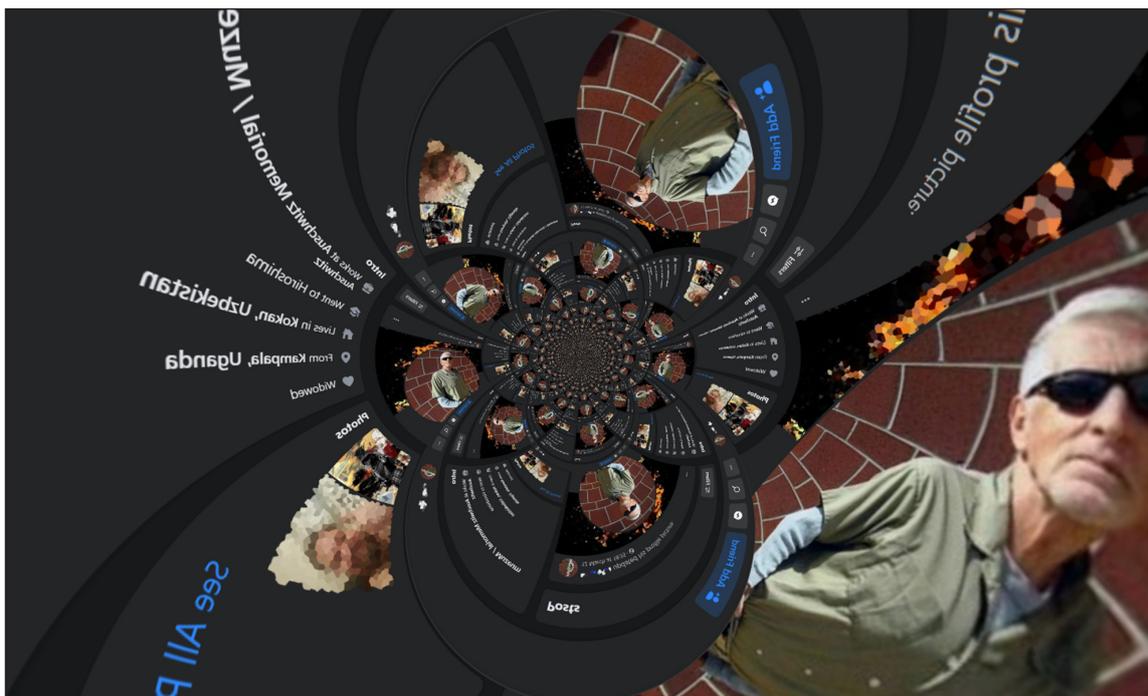


Figure 13 A sockpuppet account of a neo-Nazi artefact-hunter.

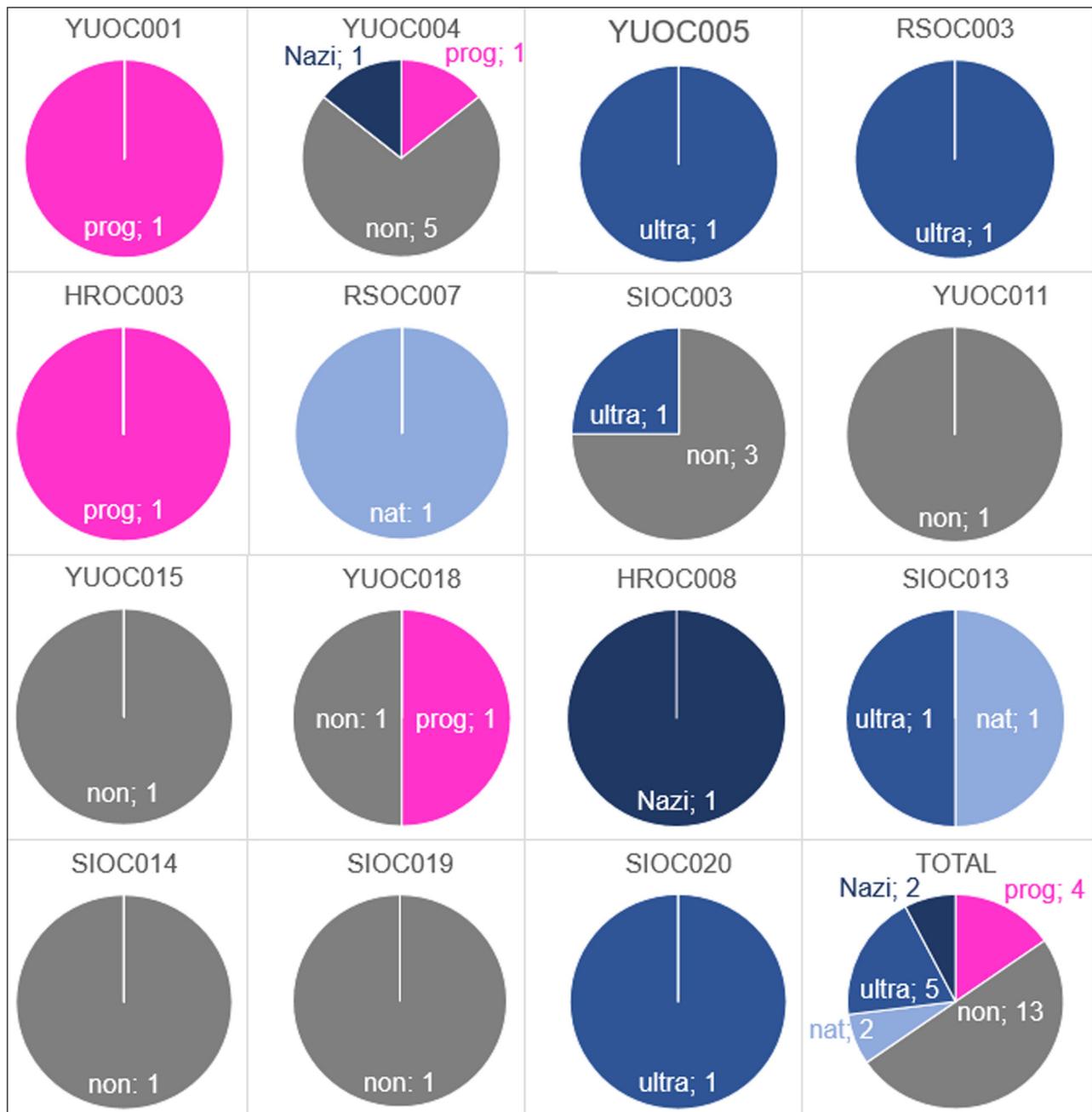


Figure 14 Political alignments of administrators and moderators of Facebook groups for artefact-hunters in former Yugoslavia – progressive (prog), nondescript (non), nationalist (nat), ultranationalist (ultra) and neo-Nazi (Nazi).

For instance, there were two ancient coin dealers in Spain, at least one of whom frequently travelled to buy lots of coins direct from artefact-hunters as well as dealers and collectors. ESAH001 and his partner sought ancient coin dealers in Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia through an English-language international online forum, in order to travel overland and buy in person. A dealer in Germany, DEAH003, often did the same, to buy lots of coins primarily from artefact-hunters though additionally from dealers, and offered to advise by e-mail.

4.3.3. Etsy, eBay and Google Shopping

Across former Yugoslavia, only traders in Serbia sell more than USD 20,474 (and less than USD 42,713) of antiquities per year on eBay (according to Altaweel 2019:

17 – fig. 7). However, that is not a low bar. It puts them in the same bracket of activity as traders in Austria.

Internationally-focused suppliers sometimes corroborate the authenticity of cultural objects, and optimise their visibility in search engines to consumers who demand new supplies of ancient objects, by advertising that their goods have been found with a metal-detector. Through a seemingly unpublicised yet effective change in filters, adverts of antiquities that had been ‘found with metal detectors in the country sides [sic – countryside] of the former Yugoslavia’ on Etsy (and similar attributions for similar objects on other platforms) in 2018 were not discoverable via Google Shopping by 2021. Nonetheless, such traders continue to operate on the trading platforms themselves (see [Figure 15](#)).

4.3.4. Facebook groups

YUOC004 has repeatedly been warned by Facebook not to display Nazi symbols, its members have persisted and it has prohibited them. However, YUOC004 has evidently not faced any problems for displaying or selling other historic artefacts, even though ‘the exchange, sale or purchase of all historical artefacts’ has been banned on Facebook and Instagram since 23rd June 2020.

Recently, contrary to efforts to distinguish between the ostensibly legal market and the unregulated online market and to assert the ostensibly legal market’s ethics, very rare antiquities that had been looted in Serbia were sold through a Facebook group then offered through an auction house in Austria. The marketable objects were advertised with a provenance (collecting history) that was ‘a hideous and intentional lie’, while the unmarketable objects were not offered at all (Filipović 2019: 9).

4.3.5. Instagram

Reaffirming the casually transnational nature of artefact-hunting networks, HROC001 posted photos of a spearhead and a sword that had been found by a two-person partnership in Serbia. HROC001 knew one of the partners in Serbia and the other partner,

RSOC009, followed HROC001, yet RSOC009 did not know that HROC001 knew his partner. So, when HROC001 reposted photos of the sword, RSOC009 thought that HROC001 was taking credit for the partnership’s find. Ultranationalist RSOC009, whose full name is listed on his public Instagram account and who can be traced on other social networks, proceeded to state that he and his partner had dug up the sword, while HROC001 tried to show that he was not taking credit for their find by naming the other member of the partnership (see [Figure 16](#)).

4.3.6. Forgeries

Antiquities dealer USAH005 cautioned that offerings from the region on eBay were mostly forgeries. On Facebook, profiles are created for the sale of forgeries and the fraudulent sale of fakes, then deleted (Filipović and Vasić 2017: 342–343). Genuine social networks are manipulated to advance sales as well. For instance, HRAH025 claimed to have used his metal-detector to find a forged statuette, then an international metal-detector manufacturer displayed the forged statuette as an advert for metal-detecting in general and their brand of metal-detector in particular, then HRAH025

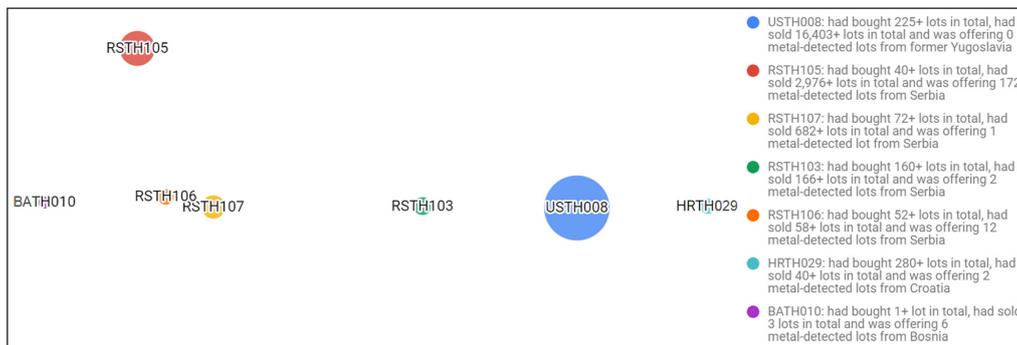


Figure 15 Traders who were offering or had offered metal-detected cultural objects from former Yugoslavia, on 31st March 2021; USAH008 primarily handled objects from elsewhere.



Figure 16 Part of the conversation between HROC001 and RSOC009.

was able to present the advert as purported proof of the authenticity of the statuette.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. DESTRUCTION THROUGH EXTRACTION AND CONSUMPTION

As observed with regard to artefact-hunting in North-Western Europe, unscientific collections are not representative of the archaeological record (see Barford 2020). They cannot reliably and informatively serve as sources of archaeological data. And they interfere with the remaining record, partly through the selectiveness of the extraction, which deprives the remaining record of informative finds, and partly through the destructiveness of the extraction, which obliterates finds that are not collectible/marketable and disturbs deposits that provide archaeological context. The antiquities market, too, is a destructive industry. Hinting at the scale of cultural destruction for commercial consumption, USAH005 noted that he had previously bought lots of around 1,000 uncleaned coins from the region, yet sold fewer than 300 collectible/marketable coins from each lot. This well-established, low-end dealer's business model suggests that even 70 per cent of the cultural objects that reach actors on the international market may be discarded, rather than preserved.

5.2. THE COMPLEX SIMPLICITY OF CRIMINALITY

This study highlights that artefact-hunters have long had simple tools to significantly interfere with efforts to monitor their activities and document their crimes, since long before they had access to encrypted communications and encrypted transactions. And, once a vague conversation has publicly identified some participants, they can be contacted privately by other publicly-invisible participants. RSAH028 observed that numerous metal-detectorists in an unrelated niche online forum had only commented privately.

It also highlights source-end actors' knowledge of market-end actors' business. SIAH018 argued that he would sell his finds to public museums in Slovenia if they paid more than private buyers in Germany (specifically Munich). MEAH003 (26th November 2012) suggested that, since artefact catalogues, artefact-hunting forums and auction platforms were online, only lazy, naïve and ignorant artefact-hunters could not secure fair market prices for finds.

And it highlights the fact that the international market embodies a net flow from the Global South/East to the Global North/West, with some flow in the other direction. RSAH069 recommended purchases from an auction house in Germany with reasonable prices.

Furthermore, it highlights South-South cooperation and flows among criminals. RSAH031 advertised the

urgent sale of a very rare, well-preserved, early modern lantaka cannon or swivel gun that had been directly or indirectly smuggled into Serbia from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

5.3. GENDERED PARTICIPATION IN CYBER-ENABLED CRIME

According to RSAH032 (16th January 2013), who had been artefact-hunting for 61 years, traditionally, women were not allowed to participate. Although many artefact-hunters still show a need to assert their masculinity amongst themselves and in opposition to archaeologists (e.g. HRAH011), participation has changed significantly since 1952.

Female artefact-hunters in or from the region are visible online. They play active roles on generic national online platforms (e.g. diaspora DEAH002; HRAH017; HRAH018), in national electronics online forums (e.g. HRAH009), in international military history online forums (e.g. SIAH002), in national artefact-hunting online forums (e.g. RSAH040; RSAH073; RSAH078; RSAH079; RSAH081) and in artefact-hunting social networks (e.g. BGAH001; RSAH066; RSAH071; RSAH075; RSAH082; RSAH092).

Some women play significant organisational roles in artefact-hunting communities. RSAH075 was an administrator of social network RSOC007 (at least until 10th May 2017), while HRAH028 and HRAH031 are moderators of social network YUOC004 (as of 14th March 2021).

Still, even now, numerically, women play a minor role. At least sometimes, as in a conversation with 33 participants in online forum RSOC001, RSAH040 was conscious that she was the only woman (apart from one who revealed her presence later, RSAH072). Indeed, women constituted only 5.45 per cent of the 624 members who had joined YUOC012 in the previous year (which is a 33.84 per cent sample of the community of 1,844 members on 10th February 2021), 2.02 per cent of the 248 members who had joined RSOC007 in the previous year (which is a sample of 18.58 per cent of the community of 1,335 members on 14th March 2021) and 0.86 per cent of the 1,628 members who had joined RSOC003 in the previous year (which is a sample of 93.35 per cent of the community of 1,744 members on 14th March 2021).

5.4. THE ECONOMICS OF THE LOW-END MARKET IN CULTURAL GOODS FROM POOR COUNTRIES

Although it was beyond the scope of this study (and perhaps beyond the capacity of this study, if much potential evidence was only shared in private venues), there was tentative quantitative evidence of the investment of time and money by artefact-hunters. This could contribute to analyses of the economics of the activity and the scale of loss of archaeological knowledge.

For instance, part-time artefact-hunter HRAH014 explained that, over the course of five years, he had bought ten metal-detecting devices. Whether sold, exchanged, gifted or discarded, he had apparently disposed of the first eight. Meanwhile, he still used one device for underground artefact-hunting and another device for underwater artefact-hunting, each of which had cost around €650–750.

At least sometimes, he only engaged in metal-detecting for three hours a day on seven days in four months, so potentially only for sixty-three hours in one year. Yet his investment in both devices had been repaid within two years. Indeed, he characterised metal-detecting as a profitable hobby.

Even if he was not accounting for the other costs of metal-detecting, such as other equipment, plus food and drink and possibly fuel and accommodation, and even if he was engaging in metal-detecting more intensively at other times, realistically, he would have been finding more than €10's worth of collectible/marketable antiquities per hour *that he sold*. He would also have found pieces that he kept in his own private collection and pieces that he discarded as worthless to him or his customers.

A full-time, minimum-wage worker in Croatia would then have been earning less than €400 per month (less than €2.50 per hour, before tax). So, even metal-detecting for cultural objects to supply the low-end market would clearly have been an attractive option.

Likewise, a full-time, minimum-wage worker in Serbia would then have been earning less than €235 per month (less than €1.50 per hour, before tax). RSAH027 was a part-time, minimum-wage worker who supplemented his income by selling everything that he found.

Meanwhile, a full-time, minimum-wage worker in Bosnia and Herzegovina would then have been earning around €168–226 per month (€1.05–1.41, before tax, which would have been comparable to RSAH027's wage). In such a position, an individual artefact-hunter might not have been able to afford a metal-detector. However, BAAH004 explained that five people could save money for three months, buy a very high-quality metal-detector, and share the profits from their sales. Through such cost-sharing collaborations, labour-sharing collaborations and/or profit-sharing partnerships (and other arrangements, where dealers loan metal-detectors in return for a cut of the profits from the sales, according to RSAH050, or they loan metal-detectors in return for the first opportunity to buy finds or barter metal-detectors in exchange for finds, according to Ćirić *et al* 2005), even more poor people gain access to the market – and even more activity is undertaken.

Currently, the mean average net income (after tax) ranges around €905 per month (€5.66 per hour) in Croatia, €536 per month (€3.35 per hour) in Serbia and €495 per month (€3.09 per hour) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Clearly, artefact-hunting to supply the low-

end market may be an attractive option to other strata in society, who also have more resources to invest in participation.

6. CONCLUSION

As has been demonstrated with testimony from artefact-hunters and antiquities-traders and analyses by counter-traffickers, regardless of whether laws are designed very narrowly to prevent lazy denial or very broadly to prevent quibbling over technicalities, it can be very difficult to successfully enforce cultural property law. The critical difference, then, is effective enforcement. This is dependent upon the availability of sufficient resources for monitoring and intervention, plus the existence of practical (national and international) cooperation among relevant agencies; the capacity for expert investigation, where intelligence is followed, evidence is recognised and easily-prosecutable offences are identified; and the potential for expert prosecution and judgement, where crimes and criminals' excuses are understood for what they are.

Yet, even once capacity has been built within the region, counter-traffickers within the region may still be undermined by outside actors, while the international relations of states and international interactions of citizens may continue to be undermined by the lack of progress. For instance, the actions of cultural property recovery services from market countries may disrupt policing of organised crime in former Yugoslavia. Some services (cited in Pryor 2012), who have 'direct contact with the gangs' who are 'involved', offer an 'informal amnesty' – and 'payments' – to 'people in possession of stolen works', who are then relieved of the evidence of the crimes.

The perception that art and antiquities '*mogoće poceni nabaviti ali brez škode ukrasti* [can be cheaply purchased or easily stolen]' (or smuggled or trafficked) can do serious '*politine škode* [political damage]' to the societies where those things happen (Sedej 1977: 140). This is reaffirmed by the case of the icon that was stolen from Ukraine and flowed through Bosnian Serb paramilitary-and-political channels to Russia (see Chraibi 2020), as well as by the case of the paintings that were stolen from a museum in the Netherlands and later revealed to be in the possession of militiamen in Ukraine (where an international scandal was whipped up about the rule of law in Ukraine, even though the militiamen were being offered money by the victimised museum in the Netherlands through a cultural property recovery consultant in the Netherlands; see Hardy 2021a). Accordingly, reform within source countries must be accompanied by reform within market countries, or the socio-economic harm that is done to source countries by market countries will continue – and will continue to be accompanied by socio-political harm.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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