

From Serbia to Trinidad and Tobago
Fixing Each other a world away:
Improving the institution of the Police Service.



Introduction

Over the past two decades the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago has seen a consistent rise in the levels of crime throughout the twin-island state. Numerous factors have been highlighted as contributing elements to the overall crime and safety situation, primarily on the main island of Trinidad. To delve into the plethora of factors that could be viewed as potential causes for the increasing rate of crime would be much too broad a scope for this policy paper. On the other hand, the intention is to limit this paper's scope to assessing how to improve the institution which is meant to deal with criminal activity – the police service. By drawing comparisons between the police service of Trinidad and Tobago and that of Serbia, the intention is to gain from the strengths of each country's institution with the aim of applying the positives.

Using data and information provided by the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), which could be considered a relatively neutral source of information in assessing the safety of particular destinations and is used by US Bureau of Diplomatic Security in briefing American diplomats, Trinidad and Tobago's crime situation is considered **critical**. Serbia's crime rating is labelled as **high**, one rank below that of T&T.

Furthermore, the issue of main concern in this study is not necessarily to break down the various types of crimes which are being committed in the particular territories, or the deficiencies that may exist in the judicial system – all of which are strongly connected, - but rather on the organisation of the police service along with the structures and mechanisms which are in place to solve crime.

In any country, or jurisdiction, the police service is the first point of contact as it regards the reporting of crimes. It is then the job of the police service to engage in investigation and then take a particular case to the point of a possible charge of a suspect(s). From that point on the judicial branch of government takes on the main role (in further collaboration with the police service to some degree).

One useful source of information for this policy paper, has been an OSCE Report (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) by the then Mission to Serbia and Montenegro in 2004 entitled '*Police Reform in Serbia – Towards the Creation of a Modern and Accountable Police Service*'. Although the Report is more than ten (10) years old, it does

provide access to information that would otherwise be difficult to attain. In addition, it also gives an analysis of a police service that at the time was in desperate need of reform after the so-called 'Milosevic-era' in Serbia.

Serbia's problems concerning its police service and those of Trinidad and Tobago appear to be starkly different. For Serbia, to quote the OSCE Report, after October 5th 2000 – and the overthrow of 'strongman' leader Slobodan Milosevic - , **“emerging from ten years of international isolation and economic sanctions, it's [Serbia's Police Service] infrastructure had been damaged by NATO during the Kosovo campaign, its equipment had become obsolete and its ethics and policing methodology had degenerated.”**¹ The Serbian police service effectively started from 'ground zero'. The country, only sixteen years from the date being described, has now reached the present state in which there is a general sense of personal safety. The UK Foreign travel advice concerning Serbia notes, **“most visits to Serbia are trouble-free.”**² The strides made by Serbia in this regard should be noted. In a relatively recent publication by junior researcher Isidora Stakic of the Belgrade Centre for Security Studies, a comparative study entitled: *'Perceptions of Personal (Un) Safety and Perceptions of Security Threats at the Local Level: A Comparative Overview of Serbia, Kosovo and Albania'* was undertaken. In one particular survey, which was highlighted in the study, 59% of Serbian citizens claimed to 'feel safe' in Serbia, while 84% claimed to 'feel safe' in their homes. Contrast that to the 36% and 33% in Kosovo and Albania respectively who reported to 'feel safe' in their respective countries.

Even compared to some of its regional neighbours, Serbia has made strides as it concerns the general safety in the country. It does have its problems however, ranging from organized and white colour crime to outright corruption, which has stemmed mainly from the interlocking of criminal, business and political interests – a reality which may prove even more difficult to solve in the long term. Nevertheless, the general stability and personal safety which many of the nation's citizens take for granted, is something to note.

¹ Downes, Mark. 2004. *Police Reform In Serbia: Towards the Creation of a Modern and Accountable Police Service*. Law Enforcement Department OSCE Mission to Serbia and Montenegro, p.12.

² Foreign Travel Advice – Serbia. Summary – Current travel Advice. Accessed 30 May, 2016 <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/serbia>.

There is much that Trinidad and Tobago could learn from the Republic of Serbia. As noted earlier, the consensus is that crime in Trinidad and Tobago is at a critical level. The police service however has made strides in improving the situation by attempting to increase efficiency and accountability within its ranks. Nevertheless, the main focus ought to be placed on the broader policies that help shape the police service. It has become clear that the more effort and money poured into a broken system only leads to minimal progress at best.

Significance of the Problem & Analysis of Current Policy

Trinidad and Tobago

Trinidad and Tobago is a Caribbean Republic located just about seven (7) miles off the north-eastern coast of Venezuela. The problem of crime in the country has been exacerbated by the geographic location of the Republic. It's considered an accepted fact that Trinidad and Tobago is a trans-shipment point for the narcotics trade, with suppliers based in South America and consumers in North America. This has also allowed for the trade in illegal arms to flourish, thus taking a toll on an already strained and poorly organised police service.

It's widely noted that not all crimes are reported in T&T, with an only 6.4% detection rate for murders in 2014 and only approximately 23% of reported crimes resulting in arrests – according to the OSAC (Overseas Advisory Security Council).

The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service comes under the portfolio of the Ministry of National Security, under the purview of a Minister who holds a place in the Cabinet. It is important to note that the Police Service is only one part of the Minister's portfolio. The Ministry of National Security is the civilian arm that dictates policy for the protective services of the country. Since the independence of Trinidad and Tobago in 1961, the Police Service has taken numerous different forms.

According to its website, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service consists of over 6,500 personnel and is organized in nine divisions spread across the two islands. The Service consists of eighteen (18) branches and units, ranging from a Fraud Squad to a Homicide Unit, Community Police Unit etc.

The government has sometimes used methods like combining the T&T Defence Force and police officers in joint patrols. This has usually been done in cases where there has been a sudden increase in murders or general lawlessness in specific areas of the country.

The absence of political will in the form a lack of collaboration between government and opposition has proven to be a consistent theme in the nation's inability to deal with crime. The absence of basic job security for the head of the Police Service has made it difficult to ensure accountability from the Service's hierarchy. The convoluted process to select a Commissioner of Police and the lack of agreement within the Parliament to reform this process has led to the appointment of the Commissioner in a temporary capacity. The present Commissioner of Police, Stephen Williams, has been acting in that capacity since 2012, receiving seven temporary extensions throughout his tenure.

Notwithstanding the issue of job security for the Police Commissioner, which ought to be a high priority, every police service ought to be competent enough to function independently of the government and to have the tools, through law, to avoid political interference. The main job of the government, through its line Minister, is to ensure that a legal framework is in place - through legislation laid down in Parliament - in order for the Police Service to do its job effectively. The Ministers prime task is to formulate policy in a broad sense. The Commissioner of Police ought to have the autonomy to operationalize, as he/she sees fit, the policies which have been handed down from the civilian authority i.e. the government.

Serbia

In a 2008 publication by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime entitled '*Crime and Its Impact on the Balkans – and affected countries*', the Balkan³ region – of which Serbia is a part – is noted to have been **“a region stigmatised for its role in heroin trafficking, human trafficking, and other forms of organised crime.”**⁴ The reality however, as noted later on in the aforementioned publication is that **“the available data indicate that South East Europe**

³ The Balkans – In the study mentioned above (UN Office On Drugs and Crime – Crime and its Impact on the Balkans – and affected countries) the Balkans is defined as consisting of the following countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia

⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Crime and its impact on the Balkans and affected countries', March 2008. Accessed 31 May 2016. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Balkan_study.pdf, p. 7

does not, in fact, suffer from high rates of crime, at least in terms of the range of offences commonly referred to as “conventional crime”: murder, rape, assault, robbery, burglary, theft and the like. In fact, most of the region is safer than West Europe in this respect. This key fact is often omitted from discussions of crime in the region.”⁵

The major problem as it concerns disorder or lack of security in the Republic of Serbia is ‘organised crime’; there is the need for a police service prepared and equipped to take the initiative in dealing with this reality. Consensus is that the political instability of the 1990s created, among other things, protection rackets and organized crime networks which have survived to the present day, moving into different industries and even developing legitimate business interests and political connections.

Concerning the limited presence of ‘conventional crime’, the argument has been made that the social ills which have arguably been the source of criminal activity like, : income inequality, unemployment etc., has historically been limited within South East Europe in general - especially given the region’s history with socialism and communism. A historical levelling of the inequalities, some argue, has deterred ‘conventional crime’ in this regard. This could prove misleading, due to the fact that statistics of criminal activity in communist states have historically proven unreliable. It’s no secret that in authoritarian or fully-fledged communist states, where secret police actively play an integral role in maintaining order, a great deal of data and statistical information is either poorly recorded or blatantly doctored.

Nevertheless, the Republic of Serbia has made concrete and visible strides over the past decade in ensuring general safety and security within the country. The Serbian police service has proven to have some capacity in dealing with the criminal activity that has come its way.

The issues that face Serbia are narrower and more specific, however they may prove more difficult to uproot. In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, there are obvious structural problems which need to be fixed and certain basic institutions improved. The path appears clearer. But as is the case in Serbia, to deal with a culture of corruption which has been developed over a substantial period of time may prove somewhat of a greater challenge for policy makers. The study, *‘Crime and its Impact on the Balkans – and affected countries’*

⁵ Ibid, p.9.

notes that: **“while conventional crime levels are low and organised crime appears to be in decline, there is one area of criminal activity that is especially problematic in the Balkans – corruption and economic crime.”**⁶ It highlights bribery and consumer fraud as two of the manifestations of organised crime. This affects to a large extent the economic prospects of the country.

Perception

Perception is almost as important as reality when concerning issues which exist in the public realm. In most cases, ‘conventional’ criminal activity in a particular jurisdiction is concentrated in specific areas – for various different reasons (which won’t be delved into here). The perception of the general security situation of a country therefore affects not only the domestic situation in a country but also the international image of that country. This could have run-on effects on the country’s economic situation (tourism, foreign investment etc.), quality of life etc.

For the purpose of this study, and specifically with regard to analysing perception, a survey was done of Serbian university students at the University Of Belgrade Faculty Of Political Science. The students ranged from ages 18-26 years. Nineteen (19) students participated. The sample was collected via survey. Another sample was taken from citizens of Trinidad and Tobago through social media, most particularly Facebook; most of whom were vetted as either presently at tertiary level institutions or A-levels, or having just completed their higher education recently. They ranged from 18-26 years old. Their responses were given through an online survey. These samples ought not to be held to the strict standards of data collection. They were unscientific. The intention of these surveys is to gain some notion, in a broad sense, of how citizens of the two countries - Serbia and Trinidad and Tobago - view the security situation of their own countries and that of the other.

⁶ Ibid, p 17

Sample of Serbian students

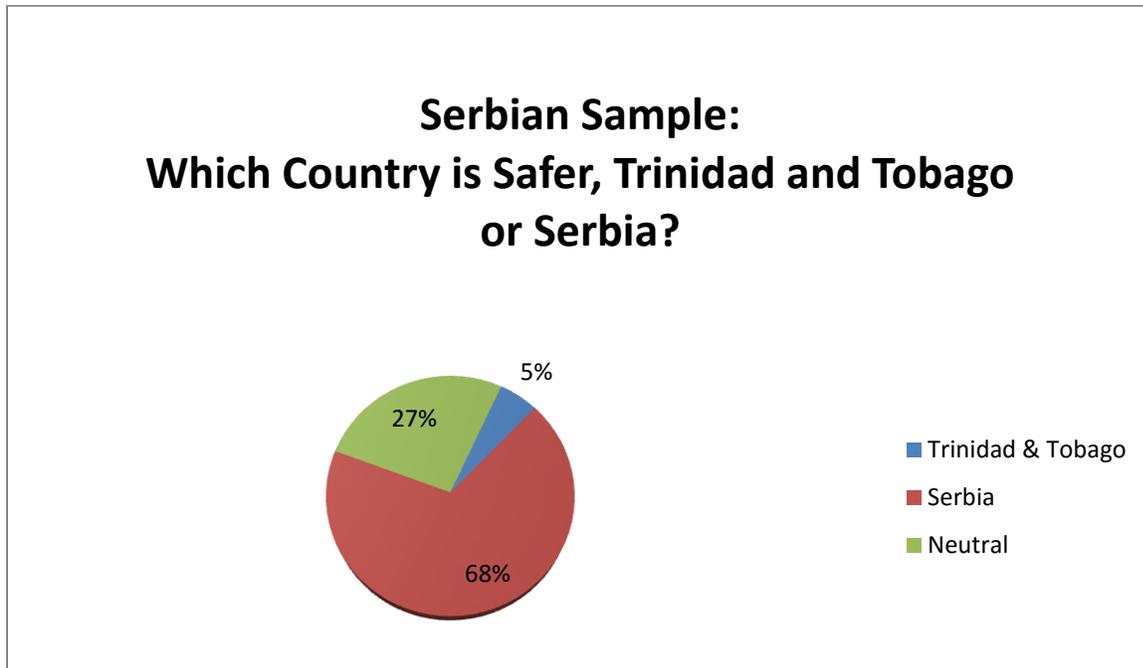


Fig.1



**Serbian Sample:
Which Region is Safer, the Caribbean or the
Balkans?**

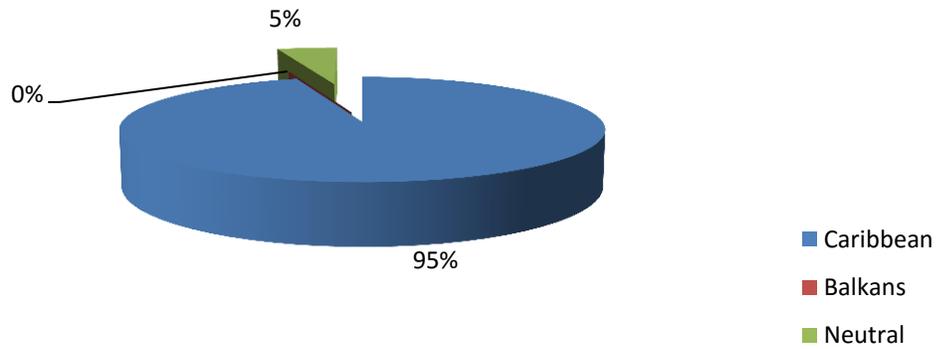


Fig. 2



Sample of Trinidad and Tobago Students

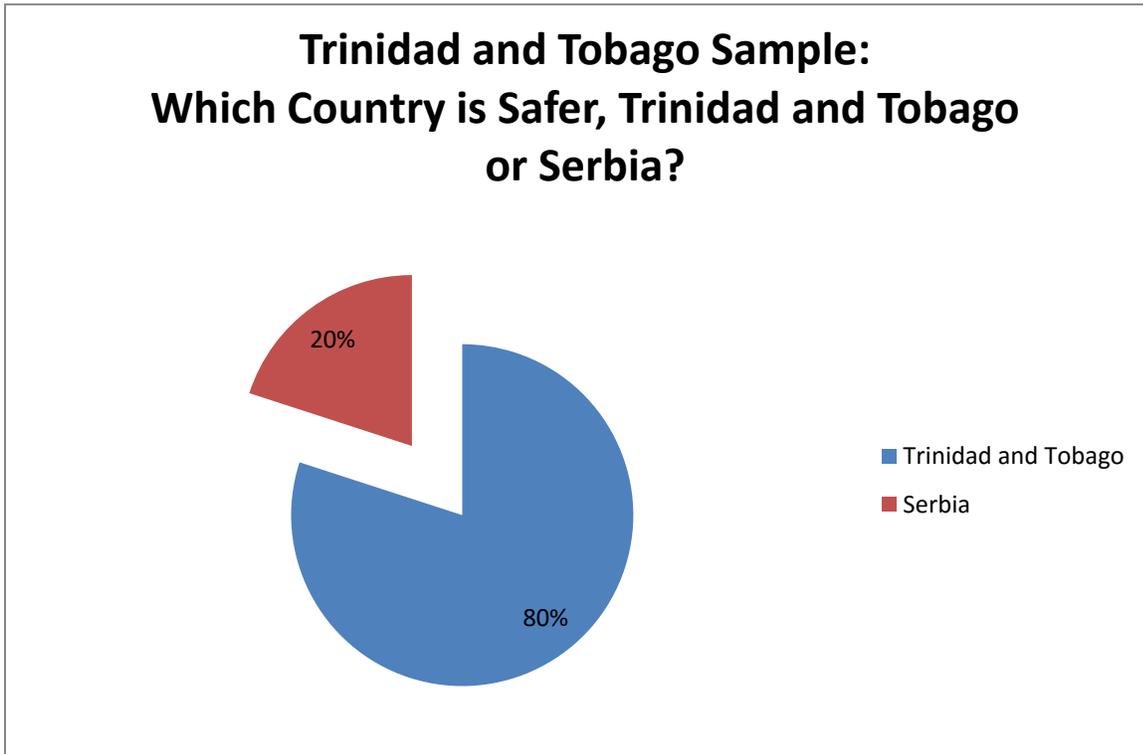


Fig. 3

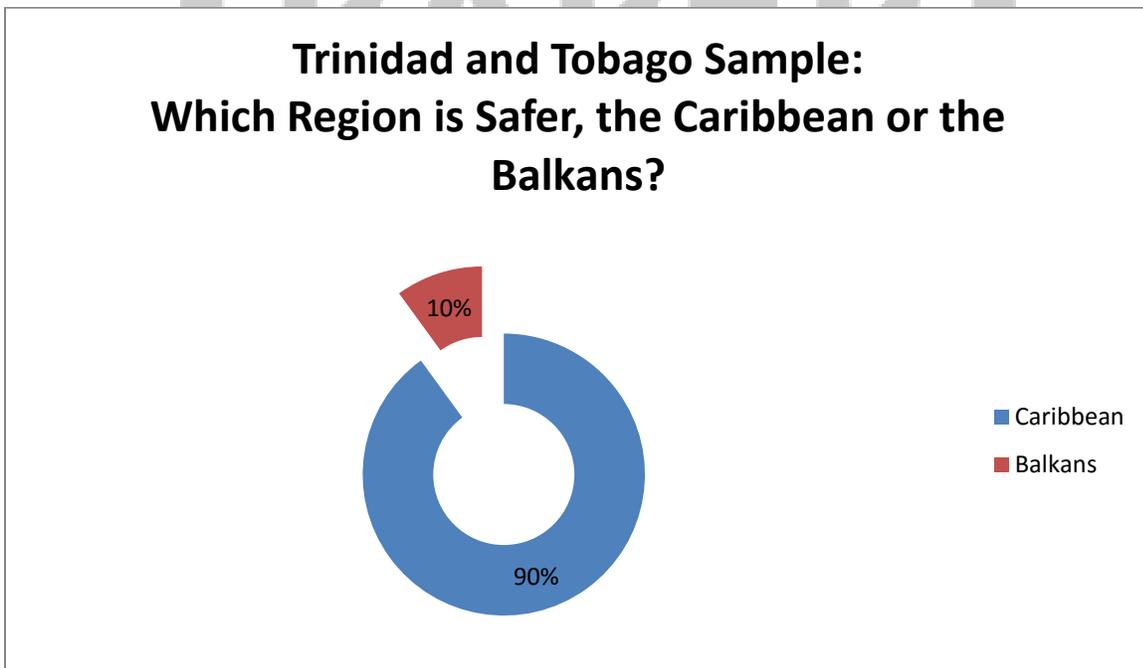


Fig. 4

From the data illustrated above, one could surmise that the Serbian respondents have a more positive view of the Caribbean as opposed to the Balkans, while by a substantial margin (68% to 32%) they view their homeland of Serbia as safer than Trinidad and Tobago. This brings into question the distinction between perceptions of the region as opposed to that of individual countries, in this case Trinidad and Tobago specifically.

Concerning the Trinidadian respondents, on all levels they viewed Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean region as safer than Serbia and the Balkan region – by substantial margins. This highlights not only the possible negative perception which may exist concerning the Balkan region and Serbia, but also the overly optimistic view that Trinidadians have of their own situation. It is important to note however that 20% of the Trinidadian respondents did indicate that they view Serbia as safer than Trinidad and Tobago as opposed to the 10% which stated – on the regional level – the Balkans over the Caribbean (as being safer). Although the numbers in both cases are low, they do highlight a distinct difference in the perception of the wider region and the individual country, as it concerns security.

To make any outright or conclusive assessment by such a small sample size would be premature. But in the case of Trinidad and Tobago particularly, there does appear to be a level of naivety on the part of the general public. It appears that the general public still maintain some degree of optimism; or could it be that the perception of Serbia and the Balkans is that bad? The argument could be made that images appear to be the most effective way of conveying reality to the masses. As gruesome as the severing of a woman's head⁷, or the discovery of a woman's lifeless body wrapped in plastic⁸ (some of the recent crimes which have taken place in Trinidad), it appears to have had a minimal effect on the general psyche of the citizenry of the twin-island Republic.

On the other hand, the pictures and images of the conflicts of the 1990s have led to the troubling and widespread negative perceptions of the Balkans and Serbia (widely broadcasted on

⁷ Susan Mohammed, 'Horror: No Head No Cause of Death', Daily Express, accessed 01 June 2016, <http://www.trinidadexpress.com/20160324/news/horror-no-head-no-cause-of-death>.

⁸ Nikita Braxton, 'Heartbreak: Missing Felecia found in river', Daily Express, accessed 01 June 2016, <http://www.trinidadexpress.com/20160415/news/heartbreak-missing-felecia-found-in-river>.

global networks like CNN and BBC). As negative as it may have been to the general perception of the country, the results clearly show that such has aroused the nation's policy makers and politicians to action, as well as various regional and international institutions which have focused in on the problems of the region. On the ground the situation has vastly improved.

Making Realistic Goals

For Trinidad and Tobago in particular, it would be unrealistic for one to expect a jump from a 'critical' level of crime to a 'low' level of crime. One UN report noted the following about the Balkans: **“Observers report serious problems with corruption, impunity, and poor detention conditions, for example. But they do suggest that, in terms of basic capacity, most of the countries of this region are adequately equipped to respond to crime, which places them at an advantage over many regions facing crime challenges.”**⁹ This is where Trinidad and Tobago ought to be aiming, simply to be **“adequately equipped to respond to crime”** on the most basic level.

Recommendations

There are numerous policies and recommendations which are already in the public domain. Nevertheless it's important that certain policies take priority.

Trinidad and Tobago

Increased Collaboration

1. Increased collaboration with regional (CARICOM, OAS etc.) and international institutions (UN, World Bank etc.) to find potential solutions and to receive recommendations concerning concrete reform of the police service.

Greater political will & bi-partisan collaboration

2. The political will is presently absent within the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago to solve the problem of crime – as absurd as this may seem given how dire the situation is. It must become clear that national security ought to be effectively an apolitical issue.

⁹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 'Crime and its impact on the Balkans and affected countries', March 2008. Accessed 31 May 2016. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Balkan_study.pdf, p. 8.

Proposal for a Non-Political Minister of National Security

3. A proposal for the Minister of National Security to be an appointed or nominated, not by the Prime Minister, but through a collective process. Through consultation between the Prime Minister, leader of the Opposition and the President of the Republic, and subject to consensus approval of the Parliament. The fact is that there can be no possible political gain from an unstable security situation within the country. Furthermore, the potential for political gamesmanship concerning matters of national security would be, for the most part – if this recommendation is adopted, gone. This proposal does two things: 1) To the benefit of politicians, it removes the political liability that has been the National Security portfolio (noting that none of the major political parties which have held office has been able to make substantial progress on the issue – with the issue being a proverbial ‘political football’ come election time). 2) It allows for full disclosure of the facts and the statistics concerning national security in a ‘matter of fact’ manner – without the political strings attached. This Minister should still be entitled to attend Cabinet meetings & bound to confidentiality – as is to be expected. He/ she should also have special privileges to propose legislation to the Parliament. There should be provisions for his/her recall if necessary.

Independent administrative and resource audit

4. An independent audit of the administrative and resource needs (including human resources) of the police service must be carried out as the first step before the implementation of any other recommendation or policy.

Compensation Review

5. An assessment and review of the compensation package of police officers with the intention to create incentives that would assist in deterring corruption.