



# Production, trafficking and consumption of illicit drugs in EECACD region

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EECA (Eastern Europe and Central Asia) region hosts the major routes for trafficking Afghan opiates as well as newly emerging Afghan-produced ephedrine and amphetamine.<sup>1</sup> It also plays an increasingly important role in cocaine trafficking out of Latin America destined for European and Asian markets. There is a burgeoning industry of kitchen-type laboratories producing various types of NPS (new psychoactive substances) and ATS (amphetamine type stimulants) in the region even though most of these products are produced for domestic consumption rather than the export. Generally the region is not considered to be the production center for drugs but the production has been growing in recent years. The lack of heroin and availability of pharmaceutical compounds have led to a rise in injection of other types of drugs, including pharmaceuticals, homemade opioids, other types of stimulants, and lab-made methadone.<sup>2</sup> Some of these products are trafficked from abroad including China, Iran and European countries and the other part is produced locally.

The region also hosts a wide variety of criminal groups that are involved in various stages of drugs supply chains. Corruption is a major facilitating factor for drug trafficking with some state-embedded actors going beyond offering mere protection to drug trafficking networks and taking a direct role in organising drugs smuggling. Interestingly, drugs trafficking is not generating significant levels of violence in major transit hotspots like Central Asia (unlike the comparable region of Central America for example). Part of the explanation to this is corruption and the involvement of state-embedded actors in the drugs trade that will be discussed at length in the section on corruption.

Most EECA countries have harsh drug laws and policies that have resulted in the stigmatization and marginalization of people who use drugs. As discussed in the chapter on corruption these harsh policies were also instrumental in generating corruption rents for lower and higher ranking law enforcement personnel. Across the Eastern European as well as Central Asian countries possession of small amounts of illegal substances results in various criminal and administrative charges, though there has been some decriminalization of certain minor charges in EU member and candidate countries as well as Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that EECA region (comprising of Balkans, Central Europe, Baltic states, Central Asia region) is large and diverse. There are some common trends, but also these sub-regions display many specific characteristics. The summary at the end of each section below will try to point out generalisable findings and acknowledge variations.

The report discusses these trends and compares within and across sub-regions of EECA and is presented in four sections. First, the trends and patterns of drugs production are reviewed. Traditional cannabis and opiates are only produced in limited quantities however there is a tradition of producing homemade drugs and this was exacerbated by recent popularity of NPS and ATS stimulants. In recent years we witnessed the proliferation of laboratories producing drugs mostly for local consumption.

Second, the trends and patterns of drugs trafficking are addressed. The region hosts major routes of trafficking for Afghan-produced heroin, ephedrine and amphetamine. More recently the trafficking of Latin American cocaine has been on the rise. Balkan organised crime groups are playing an important role in cocaine trafficking and

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1 EMCDDA 2020. EU4MD SPECIAL REPORT Emerging evidence of Afghanistan's role as a producer and supplier of ephedrine and methamphetamine, available at [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/ad-hoc-publication/emerging-evidence-of-afghanistans-role-as-a-producer-and-supplier-of-ephedrine-and-methamphetamine\\_en](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/ad-hoc-publication/emerging-evidence-of-afghanistans-role-as-a-producer-and-supplier-of-ephedrine-and-methamphetamine_en)

2 Alves EA, Grund J-PC, Afonso CM, Netto ADP, Carvalho F, Dinis-Oliveira RJ. The harmful chemistry behind krokodil (desomorphine) synthesis and mechanisms of toxicity. *Forensic Sci Int.* 2015;249:207–13

3 Ancker S, Rechel B. Policy responses to HIV/AIDS in Central Asia. *Glob Public Health.* 2015;10(7):817–33;

there is a range of other drug trafficking organisations including traditional organised crime e.g. mafia-type groups as well as more loosely-organised criminal networks. While it is impossible to know how much of the regional drug trade is done by smaller scale, ad-hoc groups, it is clear that 'kitchen type' production of NPS and ATS in some countries is not linked to organised crime but to small circle of people who use drugs.

Third, the trends and patterns of drugs consumption are addressed. EECA region has the second highest prevalence of injecting drug use worldwide. Cannabis followed by opioids are the most popular drugs in the region and according to some accounts heroin is pushed out by more available NPS drugs and pharmaceutical opioids. There are significant sub-regional variations conditioned by geographic location, law enforcement pressures and sophistication of drugs trafficking groups.

Fourth, the problem of corruption is highlighted that is considered to be one of the major issues in EECA region generally as well as in the context of drugs trafficking. Bribery and corruption of various types facilitate the function of drugs trafficking but the problem is even greater than that with state-embedded criminal networks often playing a more direct role in regional drugs smuggling.

The conclusion will summarise the discussion and propose several policy recommendations.

# 1. Patterns and trends in drug production

Production of opiates is limited in the EECA region. Wild cannabis and ephedra grow in Central Asian countries and there is some cannabis production in Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. In the past there were cases of illegal trade in ephedra from Central Asia to China and Albanian cannabis has been regularly smuggled to Italy and other European destinations. However newer trend is a growing production of NPS and synthetic drugs in Russia as well as in the countries surrounding EECA region such as China and Iran.

The region has some tradition of producing homemade drugs.<sup>4</sup> There is a small scale regional production of homemade opiates (called 'Cheornaya' and 'hanka' in Russia, 'Shirka' and 'Himiya' in Ukraine and 'Braun' in the Czech Republic) and homemade methamphetamines ('Vint' in Russian and 'belyi' and 'ephedrone' in Ukrainian). This has occurred in response to reduced availability of heroin.<sup>5</sup> Other substitutes such as 'Krokodil'<sup>6</sup>, 'baltushka' were also traditionally quite popular and more available than heroin.

Krokodil has been noted as one of the most dangerous substances having adverse health consequences for people who use drugs. Its first use for detected in Russia in 2003 and its injection has increased since 2011, with use observed in Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Kazakhstan. Due to difficulties in lack of heroin availability, combined with easiness to get access to pharmaceutical drugs, use of krokodil has dramatically expanded. According to some estimates around 100,000 people used krokodil in Russia and around 20,000 in Ukraine in 2011.<sup>7</sup> In 2012, over-the-counter codeine was banned in Russia and as a consequence reports of Krokodil use declined. However according to media reports its use has spread beyond EECA with the cases been reported in USA, UK and Australia.<sup>8</sup>

Homemade opiates have been widely popular. For example, 'kompot' a homemade opiate derivative of the pod and straw of the poppy, became widely used after the fall of the Soviet Union, when the regional borders started to open up. Since then the use of homemade opiates has been expanding. Opium extracts derived from poppy straw remained the most frequently injected substance in homemade opiates throughout the 1990s. However access to poppy straw is seasonal and whenever it was scarce, people who use drugs would turn to other opiate-type drugs in the early 2000s. More recent research showed that people who use drugs in Russia and Ukraine no longer sourced poppies or raw opium for injectable drug solutions, and have diverted their attention to available medications containing codeine in pharmacies.<sup>9</sup>

4 Grund JPC, Zábranský T, Irwin K, Heimer R. Stimulant use in Central and Eastern Europe: how recent social history shaped current drug consumption patterns. In: Pates R, Riley D, editors. *Interventions for amphetamine misuse*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell; 2009.

5 Hearne, E., Grund, J. P. C., Van Hout, M. C., & McVeigh, J. (2016). A scoping review of home-produced heroin and amphetamine-type stimulant substitutes: implications for prevention, treatment, and policy. *Harm Reduction Journal*, 13(1), 14.

6 Krokodil is made by synthesizing desomorphine from codeine and mixing it with other additives, such as: hydrochloric acid, paint thinner, iodine, gasoline, lighter fluid, red phosphorus. Some accounts suggest the name was derived from one of the drug's precursor chemicals, alpha-chlorocodide.

7 Grund, Latypov and Harris 2013

8 See for example <https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/gloucester-news/gloucester-woman-who-used-flesh-2509120>; <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-06-20/krokodil-the-russian-flesh-eating-street-drug-is-in-australia/11226686>

9 J.P.C. Grund, A.B. Latypov, M. Harris. Breaking worse: The emergence of Krokodile and excessive injuries among people who inject drugs in Eastern Europe. *Int. J. Drug Pol.* 2013, 24, 265.

Czech republic is a centre for the production of methamphetamine which is produced in small-scale illicit laboratories. Other East European countries like Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Baltic countries have also dismantled small-scale illicit methamphetamine labs.<sup>10</sup> In recent years some of this production moved away from EU member and to non-EU countries in the Balkans and the Caucasus but methamphetamine production remains a significant concern in Eastern European countries.<sup>11</sup> Manufacturing in Czech republic involves ephedrine or pseudoephedrine extracted from pharmaceutical preparations that are smuggled in from abroad, allegedly from Poland, Slovakia and Turkey.<sup>12</sup>

Other countries in the region have also reported the expansion of local production in NPS and ATS. In 2017, the Estonian police closed a major domestic fentanyl production site and shut down distribution. This closure coincided with a substantial reduction in overdose deaths in the country that became a hub for fentanyl trafficking in recent years.<sup>13</sup> However this did not bring back heroin that literally disappeared in Estonia once fentanyl was introduced in the market. Since 2017 people who use drugs turned to synthetic drugs, including amphetamines, alpha-PVP.<sup>14</sup> There is some production of amphetamines in other Baltic countries as well.<sup>15</sup>

NPS is a growing threat in the countries that traditionally have a reputation of significant suppliers of other types of drugs. For example Kazakhstan has been known to be an important source of illicit cultivation of cannabis for the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) markets with most of its cannabis coming from the southern Zhambyl region.<sup>16</sup> More recently though NPS has been perceived as a growing threat in the country with reported seizures of clandestine synthetic drug laboratories on the rise.<sup>17</sup>

There is also some evidence that Illicit heroin manufacturing has moved closer to European consumer markets with a number of production sites discovered within the EU in recent years. In 2017 Bulgaria seized 698 kg of heroine third in Europe only after UK and Netherlands.<sup>18</sup> Most of this heroine originated in Iran or travelled through Turkey but reports suggest that laboratories producing heroine has been discovered in Bulgaria as well as in Czech republic, Netherlands and Spain. The increase in trafficking of precursors to EU countries provides further evidence for this. In 2018 around 16 tonnes of the heroine precursor chemical acetic anhydride was seized in the EU.<sup>19</sup>

10 EMCDDA-Europol threat assessment 2019, Methamphetamine in Europe; Poland Reitox (2013), 2013 National report (2012 data) to the EMCDDA by the Reitox national focal point. Poland. New development, trends and in-depth information on selected issues, National Focal Point on Drugs and Drug Addiction, Warsaw.

11 EMCDDA 2015. Perspectives on Drugs. Synthetic drug production in Europe, available at [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/topics/pods/synthetic-drug-production\\_en](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/topics/pods/synthetic-drug-production_en)

12 International Narcotics Control Board, 2017. Precursors and chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, available at [https://www.incb.org/incb/en/precursors/technical\\_reports/precursors-technical-reports.html](https://www.incb.org/incb/en/precursors/technical_reports/precursors-technical-reports.html)

13 The Lancet, 2019. Online publication, vol 6 December 2019. Available at <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2215-0366%2819%2930436-5>

14 See the report Associate Press available at <https://apnews.com/article/be15d6289f39b45742d598f6f65185ce>

15 Kego W. and Leijonmark E., 2011 Countering Cross-Border Crime in the Baltic Sea Region: Research and Law Enforcement Perspectives, available at [https://isdpeu.org/content/uploads/images/stories/isdpeu-main-pdf/2011\\_kego-leijonmarck\\_countering-cross-border-crime.pdf](https://isdpeu.org/content/uploads/images/stories/isdpeu-main-pdf/2011_kego-leijonmarck_countering-cross-border-crime.pdf)

16 EMCDDA, Overview of the drug situation in Kazakhstan (2014), [http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/country-overviews/kazakhstan-2014\\_en](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/country-overviews/kazakhstan-2014_en)

17 US department of state, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2020

18 International Narcotics Control Board, 2019. Report available at <https://www.incb.org/incb/en/publications/annual-reports/annual-report-2019.html>

19 See for example <https://bordersens.eu/european-drug-report-2020/>

Some production of NPS and its precursors have been reported in Central Asian countries as well especially in Kazakhstan<sup>20</sup> but Russia is probably the largest and growing producer in the EECA region. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, 108 such laboratories of synthetic drugs were dismantled in 2018.<sup>21</sup> There were several cases of discovering mephedrone (known locally as '*mef*') production sites and there is some evidence that the demand on this product, especially among younger people, is on the rise.<sup>22</sup> The analysis of drugs availability and drugs sales on Hydra online illicit shop demonstrated that amphetamine and mephedrone are the most popular ones.<sup>23</sup>

In summary it can be safely concluded that the production of NPS is a growing threat across the whole EECA region; with the problem reaching alarming scale in countries like Czech republic, Estonia and Russia. However the tradition of producing homemade opiates is still strong especially on the background of reduced heroine availability. This is particularly concerning given adverse health consequence emanating from these substances.

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20 See for example <https://24.kz/ru/news/incidents/item/356554-v-nur-sultane-likvidirovali-laboratoriyu-po-proizvodstvu-sintetiki>; <https://zonakz.net/2020/04/28/knb-zayavil-o-rastushhix-obemax-izgotovleniya-i-sbyta-sinteticheskix-narkotikov-v-almaty/>

21 US department of state, International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2020, available at <https://www.state.gov/2020-international-narcotics-control-strategy-report/>

22 Dorozhny, Andrey and Khachataryants, Artur (2019), "Вся эта дурь. Исследование о том, на чем сидит Россия," *Проект*, July 25, <https://www.proekt.media/research/narkotiki-v-darknete/>; Проблема не в наркополитике и даже не в 'Гидре'," Luna, January 22, 2020, <https://luna-info.ru/discourse/drugstat/>.

23 DrugStat (2019), "На чём сидит Питер?" April 3, <https://telegra.ph/Na-chyom-sidit-Piter-04-03>; Dorozhny, Andrey and Khachataryants, Artur (2019), "Вся эта дурь. Исследование о том, на чем сидит Россия," *Проект*, July 25, <https://www.proekt.media/research/narkotiki-v-darknete/>.

## 2. Patterns and trends in drugs trafficking

The region remains the major hub for drugs transit. The Afghan opiates are trafficked through two major regional routes: the Balkan route, which supplies Western and Central Europe and the northern route, which runs through Central Asia, and to a lesser degree through the South Caucasus, to mainly supply markets in the Russian Federation. These routes are changing permanently and depending on the law enforcement pressure, evolution/changes within underworld and other factors, new routes and sub-routes are occurring.

The Caucasus route is less used for opiates trafficking compared to other routes however the data suggests that its importance may be increasing in recent years.<sup>24</sup> The Caucasus route supplies roughly 20% of opiates of Russian market (Afghan heroine)<sup>25</sup> as well as serves as a significant transit point for opiates travelling from Turkey to Europe (via Black sea and Ukraine). Notably, ATS and NPS in trafficked only in low volumes through Caucasian or Central Asian routes<sup>26</sup> even though Georgia reported an “unprecedented” seizure of 57 kg of amphetamine transiting from Armenia in 2015, as well as 492 ecstasy tablets seized in the Georgian Black Sea port of Batumi in 2016.<sup>27</sup>

Azerbaijan’s amount of seized heroin between 2018 and 2019 (with 1220kg of heroin seized in 2018 and 1784 kg seized in 2019) was higher than the average quantity seized annually in the rest of the southern Caucasus between 2008 and 2017.<sup>28</sup> Most of this heroine was following the established smuggling channel: Islamic Republic of Iran – Azerbaijan – the Russian Federation – Ukraine or Belarus, from where the drug was intended to be transported to Western and Central Europe.<sup>29</sup> Iran was a source for two major seizures in Europe in 2019 (670 kg Afghan heroine and 170kg heroine in Netherlands) but in this case drugs passed through Central Asian countries, Russia and Belarus.<sup>30</sup> Azerbaijan is also a transit country for the transfer of synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine and opium mainly from Afghanistan and Iran to Turkey and/or Europe. Data from Iran demonstrates a rise in drug seizures on its borders in the last six years, reflecting a spike in the synthetic and other drug trades along the Iranian-Azerbaijani border. High volumes of seized heroine in Azerbaijan indicates law enforcement priorities as well as the willingness of the traffickers to take risks for greater profit.

However official data of drugs seizures contains huge selection bias and shall be approached with caution. At the very least the seizure data is conditioned and shaped by political considerations. For example Afghanistan and Tajikistan do not agree on the estimate of the volumes of heroine transiting through the Northern route. Tajikistani authorities often contest Afghanistan’s higher estimate because it puts too much pressure on them and they are keen to lower the expectations for the seizures (which is often used to judge their performance). Hence the official seizure data is influenced by numerous factors including politically-motivated number-crunching, corruption, lack of

24 UNODC (2019), Heroin Seizures and Opiate Trafficking along the Caucasus Route, AOTP Update Vol. 2 (Vienna); SELEC (2019), 2019 Report on Drug Seizures in Southeast Europe, Anti-Drug Trafficking Task Force, <https://www.selec.org/analytical-products/>.

25 UNODC World Drug Report 2017, available at <https://www.unodc.org/wdr2017/index.html>

26 UNODC 2019. Heroin seizures and opiate trafficking along the Caucasus route, available at [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/AOTP/AOTP\\_newsletter\\_caucasus-route\\_2019\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/AOTP/AOTP_newsletter_caucasus-route_2019_web.pdf)

27 *ibid*

28 *ibid*

29 UNODC 2020. Research brief Recent developments in the opiate market in Central Asia, the Russian Federation and the Caucasus.

30 UNODC 2020

reporting capacity, lack of willingness to report, incompetence, etc. On the other hand one should be cautious with using the seizure data for diagnosing the inefficiency and corruption in the law enforcement structures. In Ukraine for example domestic seizures are usually found in small quantities, ranging from several grams to several hundred grams.<sup>31</sup> This can be indeed caused by the factors mentioned above but it is often unclear how much explanatory power can be given to corruption or lack of detection/enforcement capacity because other variables e.g. misguided prioritising, increasing sophistication of drug trafficking networks play an equally important role.

Interestingly the seizures of Afghan heroin smuggled along the northern route have dropped by 76% compared to 2004 levels. At the same time, opium production in Afghanistan more than doubled over the last two decades.<sup>32</sup> Heroin seizures have been decreasing in Balkan countries as well while the cocaine seizures have been on the rise. This decline in heroine seizures can be linked to many factors including an actual decline in opiate trafficking as other routes are gaining more significance; less stringent law enforcement control linked to corruption, change in law enforcement priorities or capacity and other factors.<sup>33</sup> The increase in cocaine seizures along the Balkan route can be indicative of increased demand on this product as well as more important role that Balkan-based criminal networks play in supplying cocaine to Europe.

Drug trafficking runs both ways: from East to the West as well as from the West to the East. There are some relatively new routes too such as the drugs smuggled to China from Central Asia; as well as synthetic drugs such as ecstasy and methamphetamine trafficked in the opposite direction from the West to the East destined for Central Asian and Caucasus countries. Also there are some reports suggesting an important link between Latin American cocaine trafficking and EECA region especially its Balkan and Central Asian sub-regions.<sup>34</sup> For example Kazakhstan is a transit hub for cocaine shipments from South America destined for Turkey (gateway to European market). In late 2019, Kazakh media reported the suppression of an international cocaine supply route stretching from Brazil, via UAE to Kazakhstan, for onward transportation to Turkey.<sup>35</sup> There are media reports that criminal groups in Columbia and Peru attempted to establish transit routes for cocaine shipments via Kazakhstan.<sup>36</sup> Evidence indicates that some Caucasian countries play a similar role. For example National Armenian Security Service affirms that Armenia as a transit country for cocaine and other drug smuggling routes, such as from Latin America to Turkey and then to Europe, or from Iran to the UAE and then to Malaysia.<sup>37</sup> Actors from Armenia, Georgia and Iran have been involved in the production and smuggling of methamphetamine to Australia.<sup>38</sup>

Balkan traffickers are probably most important players in the region when it comes to cocaine trafficking. They not only operate in Europe but also supply markets in Asia. As Europol's investigation demonstrated in 2019 they

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31 US department of state, INCSR, 2020

32 UNODC 2020

33 UNODC 2020, RESEARCH BRIEF. Recent developments in the opiate market in Central Asia, the Russian Federation and the Caucasus

34 Tengrinews.kz 08/10/2012 Columbian drug lords tried to make business in Kazakhstan  
<https://en.tengrinews.kz/crime/columbian-drug-lords-tried-to-make-business-in-kazakhstan-13392/>

35 Kaztag.kz 14/10/2019, International channel of cocaine supply from Brazil suppressed in Kazakhstan  
<https://kaztag.kz/en/news/international-channel-of-cocaine-supply-from-brazil-suppressed-in-kazakhstan>

36 Tengrinews.kz 08/10/2012 Columbian drug lords tried to make business in Kazakhstan  
<https://en.tengrinews.kz/crime/columbian-drug-lords-tried-to-make-business-in-kazakhstan-13392/>

37 OCCRP 2016. Organised Crime and Corruption reporting project. Note available at <https://www.occrp.org/en/27-ccwatch/cc-watch-briefs/4769-report-says-armenia-a-transit-point-for-drugs-smuggled-to-europe-malaysia>

38 See for example INTERNATIONAL NARCOTICS CONTROL BOARD, report 2018. Available at [https://www.incb.org/documents/Publications/AnnualReports/AR2018/Annual\\_Report/Annual\\_Report\\_2018\\_E\\_pdf](https://www.incb.org/documents/Publications/AnnualReports/AR2018/Annual_Report/Annual_Report_2018_E_pdf); News.am website, 25 December 2019 available at <https://news.am/eng/news/551665.html>; Arminfo, 7 October 2019, available at [https://arminfo.info/full\\_news.php?id=45882&lang=3](https://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=45882&lang=3)

have smuggled hundreds of kilograms of cocaine to Hong Kong and Macao.<sup>39</sup> There are well-documented trends of Brazil-based organised crime groups establishing links with criminal networks in Serbia and Montenegro with an aim to use Balkans as a transit points for cocaine destined for Europe.<sup>40</sup> Albanian organised crime groups are also dominating other types of drugs trafficking to Europe. According to Slovak, Czech and the Dutch law enforcement estimates between 40 and 90 percent of the narcotics trade was dominated by Albanian gangs.<sup>41</sup> Generally Europe's cocaine problem is steadily increasing with the seizures hitting highest numbers in recent years<sup>42</sup> and Balkan-based groups have a significant role here. One report claims that Balkan groups have become major distributors of cocaine and have control over the supply chain stretching from Latin America to Western Europe and South Africa.<sup>43</sup> Albanian organised crime for example has moved up the value chain in the last 20 years: instead of using intermediaries they started to buy heroin from Turkey and distributing it via their networks in the Western Europe. However it would be an exaggeration to say that the Balkan region plays a strategic role in relation to cocaine smuggling from a global perspective.<sup>44</sup>

In comparison to Balkan groups, the organised crime groups based in Baltic region or South Caucasus do not play a major role in cocaine supplies however there is some evidence that Baltic DTOs (drug trafficking organisations) are playing an increasingly important role in smuggling synthetic drugs from the Netherlands to Baltic States, to Russia and post-Soviet states. They also supply drug precursors from Russia and China.<sup>45</sup>

Traffic in precursors follows the Balkan and Northern routes in the opposite direction towards Turkey and Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> Sulphuric acid is mostly seized in Central Asian countries with significant volumes seized in Tajikistan (20,000 litres in 2012-16) and Kyrgyzstan (29,000 litres in 2012-15). Some portions of Hydrochloric acid have been also detected in Belarus (16329 litres in 2015) and Ukraine (5588 litres in 2012-2016).<sup>47</sup> However these numbers wane in comparison to Latin American countries such as Bolivia and Columbia but indicate that precursor trafficking is a problem in the region.

There is significant overlap between illicit trafficking in drugs with other forms of licit and illicit trade. Central Asian DTOs often combine drug trafficking with a legal business activity, such as the trading of consumer goods at local markets, which requires trips across the region. Similarly in the Caucasus most seized opiates were hidden in vehicles

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39 Europol 2019. Press release available at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/balkan-cartel-trafficking-cocaine-around-globe-in-private-planes-busted>.

40 Berg R.C., 2020. Blog post 'The burgeoning Balkan-Latin American crime nexus threatening the Balkans' future' available at <https://www.aei.org/foreign-and-defense-policy/the-burgeoning-balkan-latin-american-crime-nexus-threatening-the-balkans-future/>

41 Binder David, n.a., Organised crime in the Balkans, Wilson Center, available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/269-organized-crime-the-balkans>

42 European Drug Report 2020, available at [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/edr2020\\_en](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/edr2020_en)

43 Kemp W., 2020. Transnational Tentacles – Global Hotspots of Balkan Organized Crime, report written for Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, available at [https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Transnational-Tentacles-Global-Hotspots-of-Balkan-Organized-Crime-ENGLISH\\_MRES.pdf](https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Transnational-Tentacles-Global-Hotspots-of-Balkan-Organized-Crime-ENGLISH_MRES.pdf)

44 Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), 2019. Report on Drug Seizures in Southeast Europe available at <https://www.selec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/SELEC-Report-on-Drug-Seizures-2019-Public-version.pdf>

45 Zabyelina Y., 2015. Drug trafficking trends in the Baltic Sea Region, available at [http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/direct\\_speech/?doc=114620](http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/direct_speech/?doc=114620)

46 International Drug Policy Consortium, Profile for Southeast European region available at <https://idpc.net/policy-advocacy/regional-work/south-east-europe>

47 INCB 2017. Precursors and chemicals frequently used in the illicit manufacture of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances

or in licit trade goods.<sup>48</sup> Cocktail shipments are also popular with some DTOs conveying different type of drugs in the same vehicle, as heroin with methamphetamine from east to west, or MDMA and cocaine from west to east.<sup>49</sup>

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), trade union led by Russia which means the withdrawal of customs controls and reduced border management between these countries to facilitate the movement of goods and services. This also represents a vulnerability for illicit drugs trafficking that usually goes hand in hand with legal trade flows with drugs being disguised in legitimate goods such as car spare parts, agricultural and/or consumer products. Generally the regional and international trade facilitation and infrastructural projects such as China's Belt and Road initiative, Lapis Lazuli transport corridor boost the legal trade flows but also unintentionally benefit illicit trafficking by reducing transaction costs of smuggling. Generally the infiltration of licit supply chains, shipping routes and seaports by organised crime groups is becoming a significant and growing problem in the region (and beyond) as European Drug Report claimed in 2020.<sup>50</sup>

Another important issue for the region are the zones of armed and 'frozen' conflicts including Donbas region in Ukraine, Transnistria in Moldova and Abkhazia in Georgia. There is research documenting the important role that these regions play in regional smuggling networks due to the established 'war economies' in these areas where smuggling is an important source of licit (benefiting impoverished economies and official budgets of these breakaway areas) and illicit income (benefiting corrupt law enforcement and military officials from both sides of the conflict).<sup>51</sup> These smuggling networks are usually difficult to take down due to the vested interest as well as absence of formal cooperation between the conflicting sides.

The groups involved in the drugs production, trafficking and distribution are of diverse nature. In post-Soviet countries traditional organised crime, mafia-type groups headed by thieves-in-law are often involved however significant part of the drugs trade is done by less organised and non-hierarchical criminal networks. Similarly small-scale 'kitchen type' production methamphetamine in EU member states is usually not linked to organised crime groups but to small circles of users.<sup>52</sup> Large scale amphetamine production is mostly undertaken by Polish and Lithuanian criminal organisations.<sup>53</sup> In Balkan countries various types of criminal entrepreneurs as well as more traditional mafia-type criminal groups are involved that have the capacity to transport goods over the long distances. Importantly state-embedded actors e.g. networks comprising representatives of law-enforcement structures are significant players in the drugs scene with their role varying from providing protection to trafficking networks, to turning a blind eye, and to direct complicity (organising drugs trade themselves). This will be discussed more in the section below on corruption.

In summary the Balkan DTOs are potentially the most potent and internationalised and represent a major threat in the region. Given their increasing role in cocaine trafficking it must become paramount for the EU to clamp down on them. However the organised crime scene is quite diversified in the region with a number of more traditional underworld actors playing an important role. This suggests increased professionalization and sophistication of smuggling networks and the related risk of many shipments going undetected. It is important to acknowledge that not all production and trafficking is done by organised criminal networks and substantial part of is run by small-scale, ad-hoc groups.

48 UNODC Individual Drug Seizures Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, 2012-2017.

49 SELEC 2019

50 EMCDDA, European Drug Report 2020

51 See for example Kukhianidze, A., Kupatadze, A., & Gotsiridze, R. (2004). Smuggling through Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region of Georgia. American University's Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (TraCCC) Georgia Office; the report by NAKO and TI Ukraine 2017 available at <https://nako.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Crossing-the-line.-How-the-illegal-trade-with-occupied-Donbas-undermines....pdf>

52 EMCDDA-Europol threat assessment 2019, Methamphetamine in Europe, available at [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/12132/20195788\\_TD0119853ENN.pdf](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/12132/20195788_TD0119853ENN.pdf)

53 EMCDDA 2015. Perspectives on Drugs. Synthetic drug production in Europe, available at <https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/pods/synthetic-drug-production>

### 3. Patterns and trends in drugs consumption

An estimated 3 million people inject drugs in Eurasia, representing the second highest prevalence of injecting drug use worldwide. The largest numbers of people who use drugs are reported in Russia (1.8 million), Ukraine (317,000), and Kazakhstan (94,600), Romania (81,500).<sup>54</sup>

Cannabis followed by opioids are the most popular drugs in the region. According to some accounts heroin remains to be the most commonly injected drug<sup>55</sup> even though injection as the primary route of administration has reduced in recent years. There are significant variations within the region. Historically opiates were more popular in countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan but in Ukraine homemade liquid extract of poppy straw has been used instead of heroin.<sup>56</sup> After opiates, the second most commonly injected drug type in EECA is amphetamine-type stimulants.<sup>57</sup>

In recent years synthetic drugs have also claimed significant share of the market even though they don't necessarily substitute opiates and there is no evidence to suggest that the market in synthetic drugs is larger than that in opiates. It can be the case that synthetic drugs are more used for recreational and occasional purposes.<sup>58</sup> Certain synthetic drugs have become widespread in post-Soviet countries including mephedrone, amphetamine, methamphetamine, and alpha-PVP. In Georgia, low heroin availability caused by law enforcement pressure resulted in widespread injection of suboxone.

There are significant variations in the region and within the sub-regions. For example Estonia has a significant fentanyl problem while this is not the problem of similar scale in neighbouring countries of Latvia, Lithuania and Russia. Illicitly manufactured fentanyl emerged in Estonia in 2003, and, within a year, replaced heroin as the most common drug in the illicit drug market. A sharp increase (by 38%) in fentanyl-induced deaths has been recorded in Estonia.<sup>59</sup> Fentanyl use boosted drug overdoses in Estonia to the highest mortality rates in Europe in 2007-20017.<sup>60</sup> Fentanyl seizures have been also on rise in neighbouring Latvia but the problem has never developed to the same scale as in Estonia.<sup>61</sup>

There are variations within Central Asia as well. More 'traditional' opiates and cannabis is prevalent in Tajikistan while the drug scene is more transient in other Central Asian countries. In Tajikistan Cannabis seems to be the most socially accepted drug, with 45-48% of 15-16-year-olds who would admit the use of marijuana and hashish.

54 Harm Reduction International, Global State of Harm Reduction, Report 2020. Available at [https://www.hri.global/files/2020/10/27/Global\\_State\\_of\\_Harm\\_Reduction\\_2020.pdf](https://www.hri.global/files/2020/10/27/Global_State_of_Harm_Reduction_2020.pdf)

55 European Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. European drug report 2017: trends and developments 2017.

56 Booth RE, Kwiatkowski CF, Brewster JT, Sinitsyna L, Dvoryak S. Predictors of HIV sero-status among drug injectors at three Ukraine sites. *AIDS*. 2006;20(17):2217-23; Abdala N, Grund JP, Tolstov Y, Kozlov AP, Heimer R. Can homemade injectable opiates contribute to the HIV epidemic among injection drug users in the countries of the former Soviet Union? *Addiction*. 2006;101(5):731-7

57 UNODC World drug report 2017.

58 UNODC World Drug Report 2019, Booklet 4: Stimulants.

59 Zabyelina 2020

60 European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. European drug report 2018: trends and developments. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018. [http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/8585/20181816\\_TDAT18001ENN\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/8585/20181816_TDAT18001ENN_PDF.pdf)

61 EMCDDA 2020. Statistical bulletin available at <https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/data/stats2020/szr>

It was also perceived as the most accessible drug<sup>62</sup>. As of 2014, expert perception in Tajikistan estimated the usage of synthetic drugs to be lower compared to heroin, opium and cannabis use.<sup>63</sup>

Over the years, the number of NPS reported in Central Asian countries has significantly increased. Whereas only two NPS case was reported in 2013 and 2014 (one in Tajikistan and one in Kazakhstan respectively), the number of reported NPS increased to 48 in 2016. This increase is primarily attributable to the growing number of NPS reported in Kazakhstan.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, it is not clear whether the Central Asian region presents a significant transit region for NPS trafficked to and from the Russian Federation or whether NPS are rather trafficked on an intermittent basis and at a small scale only.<sup>65</sup> In Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan heroine shortages have boosted the use of sedatives, pharmaceutical opioids and synthetic drugs.<sup>66</sup> However studies indicate that heroine may still be the primary and the most frequently consumed drug.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, ATS seizures in Central Asia have remained at relatively low levels, especially when compared to other drugs, such as cannabis and opiates, which have a more dominant presence in the region. Overall it is safe to conclude that in Central Asia there is a growing market for NPS (especially among the younger generation) but regular opiate use is still prevalent with the people who use drugs also using pharmaceutical opioids.<sup>68</sup> There are significant numbers of people who use drugs who experiment with opiates as well as NPS and ATS. Researchers looking at Russia reached similar conclusion that despite NPS popularity commercial heroin remains the predominant form of opioid injected in most Russian cities.<sup>69</sup> Increasing popularity of pharmaceutical opioids also has implications for crime levels because some part of these drugs can be sourced via pharmacy theft or black market dealing.<sup>70</sup> People who use fentanyl or fentanyl patches may try to illegally obtain used patches from elderly nursing home residents.<sup>71</sup>

Similar to Central Asian countries Cannabis remains the most widely used drug in South East Europe and estimated annual prevalence of opiate use (injected heroin) remains higher than the global average, at 1.2% of the adult population however a significant increase in the consumption of ATS and NPS is reported by the countries in the region.<sup>72</sup> The change is more pronounced in some countries than in the others. For example in Romania NPS have reportedly replaced heroin in Bucharest in 2010-2012 and the law enforcement data indicates decrease in heroine and increase in cocaine and NPS seizures.<sup>73</sup>

62 Chingin A. and Fedorova O., Drug situation and drug policy in Tajikistan., Pempidou Group of the Council of Europe , available at <https://rm.coe.int/drug-situation-and-drug-policy-by-alex-chingin-and-olga-fedorova-decem/168075f2fe>

63 UNODC, Central Asia Synthetic Drugs Situation Assessment: A report from the UNODC Global SMART Programme December 2017, available at [https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/Central\\_Asia\\_November\\_2017\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/Central_Asia_November_2017_FINAL.pdf)

64 ibid

65 UNODC, Central Asia Synthetic Drugs Situation Assessment: A report from the UNODC Global SMART Programme December 2017 [https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/Central\\_Asia\\_November\\_2017\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/Central_Asia_November_2017_FINAL.pdf)

66 Makarenko, Nikita (2019), "Ташкент торчит!" Gazeta.uz, June 27, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2019/06/27/pharm-drugs/>;

67 Yussopov et al. (2018), National Report on Drug Situation in the Republic of Kazakhstan, Central Asia Drug Action Programme, [www.cadap-eu.org](http://www.cadap-eu.org), pp. 30-31.

68 UNODC 2020

69 K. Eritsyanyan et al., Individual-, network-, and city-level factors associated with HIV prevalence among people who inject drugs in eight Russian cities. *Brit. Med. J.* 2013

70 C. Wilkins, M. Girling, P. Sweetser. Recent trends in illegal drug use in New Zealand, 2005–2007: Findings from the 2005, 2006 and 2007 Illicit Drug Monitoring System. Massey University Centre for Social and Health Outcomes Research and Evaluation, Wellington, New Zealand, 2008.

71 E.J. Cone. Ephemeral profiles of prescription drug and formulation tampering: Evolving pseudoscience on the internet. *Drug Alcohol Depend.* 2006, 83, S31.

72 International Drug Policy Consortium, Profile for Southeast European region available at <https://idpc.net/policy-advocacy/regional-work/south-east-europe>

73 Ibid

Most EECA countries' law enforcement strategies tend to focus on arresting people for drug use or possession even though some countries have decriminalised possession of small amounts for personal use. As table 3 demonstrates a number of countries do not punish these offences however in other countries (e.g. in Ukraine) the threshold for the acceptable dosages in possession are quite low which causes the small amounts of drugs leading to inadequately many years of imprisonment.

**Table 1. Prisoners convicted for drugs-related crimes in EECA<sup>74</sup>**

	Number of Prisoners	Number of prisoners for drug law offences
Albania	5280	516
Armenia	3536	N/A
Azerbaijan	23319	5570
Belarus	32500	N/A
Bosnia Herzegovina	2585	1290
Bulgaria	6988	612
Croatia	3190	202
Czech republic	22159	2431
Estonia	2585	585
Georgia	9404	2733
Hungary	17944	478
Kazakhstan	31001	N/A
Kyrgyzstan	7475	526
Latvia	3765	1104
Lithuania	6599	796
Moldova	7635	695
Montenegro	1141	163
North Macedonia	3029	518
Poland	738822	2195
Romania	23050	1125
Russia	602176	129419
Serbia	10807	2336
Slovakia	10028	1028
Slovenia	1346	126
Tajikistan	13300	N/A
Ukraine	54905	4360
Kosovo territory	1648	118

74 The data had been fetched from <https://harmreductioneurasia.org/criminalization-costs/>. The numbers are from the years 2017 and 2019

Prison overcrowding might be a direct consequence of the strategy of punishing consumption and possession<sup>75</sup> which leads to further problems because illegal drugs trade in the penitentiary system may generate violence inside the prisons, creates opportunities for corruption of the prison guards and prison management as well as enriches and empowers criminals having control over drugs supply and distribution inside the prisons. The following table displays the data on the prisoners convicted in drugs-related crimes and average punishment they get in respective countries.

The following table looks at the offences in select EECA countries related to 'use' vis-a-vis 'supply' of drugs in 2018. It is clear from the table that with some exceptions it is mostly about punishing drugs consumption and possession. Similar data is not available for other EECMA countries but there is anecdotal evidence indicating that law enforcement mostly targets drugs consumption rather than drugs trafficking.

**Table 2. Offences against national drug legislation (use and supply) in select countries of EECA<sup>76</sup>**

	Cannabis		Heroin		Cocaine		Methamphetamine	
	use	supply	use	supply	use	supply	Use	supply
Croatia	N/A	1355	114	149	335	194	N/A	N/A
Czechia	6176	940	103	25	66	75	1486	1311
Hungary	4204	605	25	10	228	28	84	17
Lithuania	378	98	37	33	27	17	74	27
Slovakia	247	239	6	12	9	8	111	N/A

Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA) estimated that incarcerating people who use drugs in Eurasia costs two to six times more than providing health and social service.<sup>77</sup> However states show little sign to give up their harsh policies. The following table summarises criminal law provision for drug offences in the region.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid

<sup>76</sup> Data has been fetched from the statistical bulletin of EECDDA, available at <https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/data/stats2020/dlo>

<sup>77</sup> Olafsson S. Global State of Harm Reduction 2020 survey response. 2020.

**Table 3. Criminal law provisions in EECA<sup>78</sup>**

	Consumption	Possession	Supply
Albania	small quantities for personal use is not punishable	5-10 years of imprisonment depending on the circumstances and quantities	5-15 years of imprisonment depending on the circumstances and quantities
Armenia	Drug use is decriminalised	arrest for the term of up to 2 months or with imprisonment for the term of up to 1 year.	Up to 6 years depending on the quantity
Azerbaijan	Up to 3 years	Up to 3 years	3-12 years with confiscation of property or without it depending on the circumstances
Belarus	Up to 5 years of imprisonment	Restriction of liberty for a period of up to 5 years or imprisonment for a period of 2-5 years	3-25 years with or without asset forfeiture depending on the circumstances
Bosnia Herzegovina	Fine of about EUR 250-750	Fine of about EUR 250-750, or imprisonment up to 1 year	1-15 years depending on the circumstances
Bulgaria	Only use of high-risk and especially harmful substances is punished by a fine 1000-2500€	Fine 500-2500€, or imprisonment up 1-6 years in case of high-risk substances	1-7 years of imprisonment but can be 3-12 depending on quantity and aggravating circumstances
Croatia	Only use in public is punishable with a fine of about €100.	Fine of EUR 650 - 2,600 or by imprisonment up to 90 days	1-12 years of imprisonment but 3-15 years depending on circumstances
Czechia	Use of drugs is not mentioned as an offence.	Possession of small amount for private use is punished by a fine. Possession of drugs other than cannabis punished by a fine 1-6 years of imprisonment depending on the quantity	1-5 years of imprisonment but 2-18 years depending on aggravating circumstances
Estonia	a fine of up to 300 fine units (about €1200) or by administrative detention (in the police arrest house rather than in a prison, up to 30 days of deprivation of liberty)	a fine of up to 300 fine units (about €1200) or by administrative detention in the police detention center	0-3 to 3-15 years of imprisonment depending on quantities (with additional factors, might lead to 6-20 years or lifetime imprisonment).
Georgia	Administrative offence, punished by a fine of GEL 500 (175 €) or Administrative Detention up to 15 days. Marijuana consumption is de-criminalised	without intent to distribute or supply is a criminal violation, punishable with 0.5 – 6 to 8 – 20 years or lifetime imprisonment	in amounts of more than small is criminal offence, punishable with 6-12 to 8-20 years or lifetime imprisonment

78 Data on post-Soviet countries comes from <https://harmreductioneurasia.org/drug-laws/#Supply>; data on Central and Eastern European countries comes from [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/topic-overviews/content/drug-law-penalties-at-a-glance\\_en#section5](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/topic-overviews/content/drug-law-penalties-at-a-glance_en#section5). The Criminal Law of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Albania, Bosnia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia has been also consulted

	Consumption	Possession	Supply
Hungary	up to 2 years imprisonment	1-5 years imprisonment	2-8 years imprisonment but can be 5-20 depending on circumstances
Kazakhstan	fine of up to 80 monthly fine units (493 €) or correctional labor in the same amount, or community service for up to 80 hours, or arrest for up to 20 days.	160 -200 fine units (859-1074 €) or correctional labor, or community service 160-200 hours, or by arrest for 40 days – 7 years depending on the quantity	imprisonment for 5-15 years with confiscation of property depending on the quantity
Kyrgyzstan	55 fine units (69 Eur) for individuals and 170 fine unites (213 Eur) for legal entities	Fine 150 units to 300 units (188 – 3770 EUR), or imprisonment from 2.5 to 7.5 years depending on the quantity	a fine from 754 € to 3267 €, or imprisonment 2-12.15 years depending on age
Latvia	administrative offence punished by a warning or a fine up to 280 €	a warning or a fine up to 280 €, or imprisonment depending on the quantity	punished by 2-8 years imprisonment
Lithuania	administrative offence, punishable by a fine (30 – 150 €).	Community service, fine, arrest or up to 2 years imprisonment depending on the quantities involved	2-15 years imprisonment depending on the quantities
Moldova	fine from 12 to 30 fine units (30-75 €) or 72 hours of a community service	a fine of 12 to 30 base units (30-75 euros) or 72 hours of community service, or imprisonment depending on the quantity	punishable by 2-5 up to 7-15 years of imprisonment, depending on the quantity of the substance
Montenegro	Imprisonment 6 months to 5 years	2-10 years depending on the circumstances	2-15 years depending on the circumstances
Poland	Use of drugs is not mentioned as an offence.	Up to 3 years of imprisonment but can be 1-10 years depending on quantity	Up to 3 years but can be 2-12 years depending on the quantity and aggravating circumstances
Romania	Use of drugs is prohibited, but no punishment is specified.	Up to 3.2 years of imprisonment but up to 3 years depending on the substance	2-7 years of imprisonment but can be 3-15 years depending on the quantity and circumstances
Russia	fine of 4000 – 5000 RUB (55 -70 EUR) or Administrative Detention up to 15 days depending on the circumstances	a fine of 4000-40000 (55 -7000 EUR), administrative Detention up to 15 days, or imprisonment from 3 up to 10-15 years depending on the quantities involved Possession of significant, large and	imprisonment of 4-8 to 15-20 years or life imprisonment and a possible fine of up to 1 000 000 RUB (14 000 EUR), depending on the quantities and the substance.
Serbia	Use of drugs is not punished	a fine or imprisonment up to 3 years	3-12 years depending on circumstances
Slovakia	Use of drugs is not mentioned as an offence	Up to 3 years but can be up to 5 years depending on the quantity	3-10 years of imprisonment but can be 10-25 years depending on the quantity and circumstances
Slovenia	Use of drugs is not mentioned as an offence.	Fine 40-625 € depending on quantity	1-10 years but can be 3-15 years with aggravating circumstances

	Consumption	Possession	Supply
Tajikistan	legal as there are neither administrative, nor criminal sanctions assigned to drug use, per se	Fine 20-500 units (108-2700 €), 0-12 years of imprisonment depending on the quantity	Fine 40 to 50 fine units (216 -270 €), or 0-5 to 12-20 years of imprisonment depending on the quantity
Ukraine	Legal unless in the public places that is punishable by restraint of liberty for up to 4 years or imprisonment for up to 3 years.	a fine, community service, administrative arrest, restriction of liberty or imprisonment for up to 8 years depending on the quantity	4 to 12 years of imprisonment, depending on circumstances of the offence

Repressive policies and the popularity of the darknet purchases led to the new ways of selling drugs. The traders now stash the drugs in geotagged hiding spots to be picked up later by the online buyers.<sup>79</sup>

People who use drugs are increasingly using different messenger apps (Telegram; Facebook messenger; WhatsApp; Viber) to establish contact with the sellers. The main reasons for using online markets is convenience, the wide variety of drugs (including NPS) and the lesser probability of getting arrested. Apart from darknet NPS has been advertised through social media apps. For example in Moldova NPS drugs is sold via Instagram, Facebook or facebook's Russian equivalent Odnoklassniki.<sup>80</sup>

There is some age-related variation in drugs consumption pattern. For example in Western Balkan and Baltic countries cannabis is illicit drug mostly used among young adults while this is not necessarily the case with older age groups.<sup>81</sup> Other reports indicate that NPS is mostly used by youth in big cities in Ukraine while those living in rural areas mostly continue using home-made opiates and cannabis. Studies suggest that in some countries ATS can be particularly popular among MSM and sex workers communities.<sup>82</sup> Another trend is the changing drug use behaviour including the shifts from open drug scene to the hidden ones, using drugs in music festivals, illegal raves and private parties.<sup>83</sup>

In summary, it should be acknowledged that despite the variation in regional drug consumption patterns one can conclude that use of NPS and ATS is on the rise even in the countries with traditional prevalence of opiates. However synthetic drugs did not necessarily replace opiates completely and its use is more prevalent in certain demographic and social groups; and in specific settings (e.g. in recreational environment).

79 Harm Reduction International, Global State of Harm Reduction, Report 2020. Available at [https://www.hri.global/files/2020/10/27/Global\\_State\\_of\\_Harm\\_Reduction\\_2020.pdf](https://www.hri.global/files/2020/10/27/Global_State_of_Harm_Reduction_2020.pdf)

80 See for example 2019 research report on NPS in Moldova available at [https://harmreductioneurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Moldova-NPS-Research\\_ENG.pdf](https://harmreductioneurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Moldova-NPS-Research_ENG.pdf)

81 [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/edr/trends-developments/2017/html/prevalence-trends/cannabis-use\\_en](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/edr/trends-developments/2017/html/prevalence-trends/cannabis-use_en)

82 Chintalova-Dallas, R., Case, P., Kitsenko, N., & Lazzarini, Z. (2009). Boltushka: a homemade amphetamine-type stimulant and HIV risk in Odessa, Ukraine. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 20(4), 347-351.

83 See for example EMCDDA (2018) report available at [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/9887/Technical%20report\\_Monitoring%20drug%20use%20in%20recreational%20settings.pdf](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/publications/9887/Technical%20report_Monitoring%20drug%20use%20in%20recreational%20settings.pdf)

## 4. Corruption as a key facilitating factor

Most of the countries in the region have a significant corruption problem. There have been well-founded allegations of politicians and law enforcement officials as well as lower-ranking police and border guards personnel being involved in drugs trafficking.<sup>84</sup> The involvement of state-embedded actors varies from providing protection to the smuggling groups, to direct complicity, and to occasional bribe-taking in exchange of turning a blind eye.

Very often the failure of law enforcement structures is related to weak capacity for example lack of equipment for detecting and testing drugs and psychoactive substances; or lack of the special laboratories, etc. But more often the problem is [the lack of] willingness to enforce. For example laboratory staff may not be willing to make tests properly because they have accepted a bribe from a smuggler. Quite often cocaine can be substituted by flour in seized samples. For example sources in Ukraine report that sometimes it is just 10% of real cocaine that is burned during public destruction of seized drugs, everything else is substituted by flour. Express-tests, which are used during such public destruction, react to even those 10% of real drugs, thus all the witnesses can be convinced that all drugs are burned. In fact the biggest part of that shipments go to illicit market through corrupt and complicit customs and law enforcement officers and their partners from the underworld.<sup>85</sup>

The patterns of corruption vary. For example drug traffickers in Kazakhstan have been known to use corrupt officials<sup>86</sup> to facilitate the transfer of heroin and money through distributors: in addition to heroin in exchange for protection, some law enforcement officers received monthly or occasional payments from drug dealers. In other Central Asian countries there is a nexus between drugs trade and politics. For example Kyrgyzstan holds a long-standing record of drugs-related criminals being elected in the Jogorku Kenesh (national parliament). In Uzbekistan the drugs trade has been managed by the state via two proxies linked to the Karimov regime.<sup>87</sup> Previous research<sup>88</sup> has demonstrated that the involvement of police officials has gradually expanded, although it is difficult to assess the degree of their complicity in numerical terms. With so many high-level security officials involved in the drug trade, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan could be defined as “mafia-states” at least at some stage in their recent history. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, Janysh Bakiev, brother of former President Kurmanbek Bakiev and chief of the semi-militarized State Guard, was deeply involved in transnational drug trade. In Tajikistan, the brother of the deputy head of the national security agency was jailed on suspicion of being part of a drug trafficking ring in 2012.<sup>89</sup> Sometimes the cases of high-level involvement are investigated for example the 2004 imprisonment of Tajikistan’s head of the government’s *Drug Control Agency*.<sup>90</sup> But these cases are mostly linked to political infighting and the redivision of spoils between competing elites rather than real investigations of high level involvement in drugs trade.

84 Kupatadze, A. (2014). Kyrgyzstan – A virtual narco-state?. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 25(6), 1178-1185; De Danieli, F. (2014). Beyond the drug-terror nexus: Drug trafficking and state-crime relations in Central Asia. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 25(6), 1235-1240.

85 The author wants to acknowledge Vladimir Tymoshenko, experts on drugs, professor holding a rank of general of Security service of Ukraine for the information provided in this paragraph

86 UNODC, 2018 Afghan Opiate Trafficking Along the Northern Route  
[https://www.unodc.org/documents/publications/NR\\_Report\\_21.06.18\\_low.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/publications/NR_Report_21.06.18_low.pdf)

87 Omelicheva, M., & Markowitz, L. (2019). *Webs of corruption: trafficking and terrorism in Central Asia*. Columbia University Press.

88 Kupatadze 2014, Latypov, A. (2012). *Drug Dealers, Drug Lords and Drug Warriors-cum-Traffickers: Drug Crime and the Drug Trade in Kyrgyzstan*. *Drug Trafficking, Drug Abuse, Money Laundering, Judicial Corruption in Central Asia*. Collection of Brief Summaries, 23-41. Chicago

89 Eurasia Daily Monitor, 2012).

90 BBC News, 2015. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33139652>

However the high-level interest in drugs trade had some ‘positive’ consequences as well. Central Asian region never experienced drug-related violence levels similar to other drugs transit regions most notably Central America (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador). One of the key explanations for the relative absence of violence from the drugs trade scene of Central Asia is the complicity of the representatives of politicians and law enforcement officials that hold a near-monopoly over trafficking market and solve the disputes via non-violent means including arrests of the employees of competing agencies.<sup>91</sup>

High-level involvement in various trafficking and illegal trade activities is not unique to Central Asian countries. This is a significant problem in Eastern European states which are generally believed to be more transparent and less corrupt. One research report cites several examples from the region including the wife of a Bulgarian prime minister, a deputy minister of interior and his wife in Romania, a senior prosecutor and a police chief in Albania and, most notably, the prime ministers of Montenegro and Serbia, all benefiting from illicit trade of various types.<sup>92</sup>

At a lower level, corruption in the border guards/police and local criminal justice system helps drug traders to evade detection and conviction. As argued above most of the large-scale trafficking may go undetected partially thanks to the widespread bribery in the criminal justice system in EECA countries. On the other hand existing harsh policies help law enforcement officials to extort illegal fees from people who use drugs in exchange of non-enforcement/prosecution.

In most of the post-Soviet countries drug laws provide an opportunity for the police to meet their ‘arrests quotas’ and this is done in the conditions of wide discretionary powers of the police and low respect for human rights. As a consequence drug laws become a tool in the hands of police to extort bribes from the people who use drugs as well as target non-consumers by fabricating evidence against them<sup>93</sup>. For example the cases of provocation of drug sale, planting drugs, and using quasi-witnesses are frequently reported in Russia, Ukraine and other countries.<sup>94</sup> Apart from the tool of bribe extortion this practice is also an useful disguise for police involvement in drugs trade. For example in Tajikistan police officers use ‘sting operations’ and ‘test buys/sales’ to disguise their illegal drug trade.<sup>95</sup> Most likely these practices have now moved online with police running ‘test buy/sales’ online marketplaces or advertising drugs via telegram channels to promote their own illegal trade but also to catch some people who use drugs in order to meet ‘arrests quotas’.

In summary the regional law enforcement structures sometimes face capacity issues that defines some of their failures in anti-drug policies. However most frequently the problem is the lack of willingness to enforce the laws due to the vested interest and the prospect of private benefit. Moreover, their role in regional drugs smuggling goes beyond mere protection or non-systematic bribery since the representatives of law enforcement structures are frequently organising the crime of drugs trade themselves. Indeed there is a variation in terms of intensity and frequency of their involvement varying from *extreme* in more corrupt countries (e.g. Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine) to *occasional and non-systematised* in less corrupt ones (e.g. Estonia, Croatia and Georgia).

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91 There are some exceptions. One such instance occurred in 2017, when a gun battle occurred between law enforcement and drug traffickers at the Panj crossing to the west. After the clash, border guards discovered 16kg of hashish. See <https://thetimes.com/news/growing-gunplay-in-hashish-gateway-tajikistan/>

92 Binder, Wilson Center

93 Ataiants, J., Merkinaite, S., & Ocheret, D. (2012). IDPC Briefing Paper-Policing People Who Inject Drugs: Evidence from Eurasia. Available at SSRN 2185910

94 See for example <https://www.rferl.org/a/ex-russian-officer-tells-court-he-was-ordered-to-plant-drugs-on-reporter/30444018.html>;

95 Latypov 2011

## 5. Conclusion

Drugs trade has been gradually expanding in the region with new routes emerging and new production and consumption patterns appearing. Given the increasing demand in Europe and expanding drugs market in China the regional drug trade is expected to grow even more. Drugs often move disguised within the legal trade flows and in this respect a number of new trade/transport corridors in the region are worth to watch including China's Belt and Road initiative, Lapis Lazuli transport corridor as well as the prospective new routes following the premise of unblocking regional routes in South Caucasus (in the aftermath of 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war).

Based on the above discussion, several conclusions are offered:

- Heroin and other opiates still remain the major substances used by people who inject drugs but overall the popularity and availability of the new psychotropic substances (NPS) and Amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) are on the rise. There are cases of NPS replacing use of traditional drugs but most likely people who use drugs combine heroin use with other substances.
- Even though the region is not considered to be a major center of drug production, burgeoning 'kitchen-type' laboratories producing NPS and ATS as well as the trend of moving heroin production close to consumer market in the EU, require particular attention
- There are many regional and sub-regional variations within EECA in terms of production, trafficking and consumption patterns and hence each country and sub-region requires careful, tailored approach to the solution of its drugs problem.
- There are a myriad types of organised crime groups involved in regional drug trade ranging from highly-organised networks to loosely structured, ad-hoc groups. Balkan organised crime probably deserves most attention in this regards since it is playing an increasingly important role in cocaine trafficking to Europe.
- Corruption and bribery, especially high-level corruption, is one of the most important (if not the most important) problems in the region and it needs to be addressed. There is no uniform recipe for an anti-corruption policy but any attempt to reduce it would require willingness and commitment within the political leadership of respective countries.
- The *modus operandi* of drug trading is changing throughout the region with the rise of darknet, and drug markets moving from the physical space to the digital one. Given the popularity of certain NPS and ATS stimulants within younger, tech-savvy consumers, this problem may only become worse in the future. Boosting law enforcement capacity for online policing should be a priority in this regard.



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