



Production, trafficking and consumption of illicit drugs in EECACD region

SUMMARY

Author: Dr Alexander Kupatadze
King's College London

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.¹ It also plays an increasingly important role in cocaine trafficking out of Latin America destined for European and Asian markets. There is 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.² The production of NPS is a growing threat across the whole EECA region especially in some 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.

The region also hosts wide variety of criminal groups that are involved in various stages of drugs supply chains. 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. Balkan DTOs (drug trafficking organisations) are potentially the most potent and internationalised and play an increasingly important role in cocaine trafficking to Europe. 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 trade.

Most EECA countries have harsh drug laws and policies that have resulted in the stigmatization and marginalization of people who use drugs. 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.³ The 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).

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).

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

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;

Based on the overview of the drugs trends in the region, several conclusions can be 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 myriad types of organised crime groups involved in regional drug trade ranging from highly-organised networks to loosely structured, ad-hoc groups.
- 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.



contact@eecacd.org

