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CROSSROADS

KAZAKHSTAN'S CHANGING
ILLICIT DRUG ECONOMY

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OCTOBER 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is co-authored by a second expert who wishes to remain anonymous. The authors are very grateful to the anonymous interviewees from law enforcement agencies in several Central Asian countries for their valuable input.

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FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kazakhstan has long been an important transit corridor for drugs, being strategically situated between drug-producing areas in South Asia (mainly Afghanistan) and drug consumption markets in Russia and Europe.¹ Trafficking of Afghan opiates on the so-called 'northern route' generates an estimated US\$1.1–2.1 billion.² Afghan-produced cannabis resin ('hashish') also flows along the northern route to Russia or Western Europe via Russia.³

A complex array of actors coordinate the drug trade through Central Asia. Arguably the most significant actors in opiate trafficking (with loads measured in tonnes) are Turkey-based Kurdish organizations, who undertake all the necessary arrangements and maintain regular contact between members in transit countries and the main coordinators. Tajiks are arguably the predominate nationality in organizing mid-level (loads of 100–200 kilograms) wholesale drug trafficking (mostly opiates) via Tajikistan territory and when it comes to the supply of the Russian heroin market, with linguistic ties and geographical proximity facilitating flows from Afghanistan. Many different paths and modus operandi are used, with Uzbekistan emerging in recent years as a key country in this space, although the Tajikistan–Kyrgyzstan pathway continues to see high volumes of drugs passing through to Kazakhstan.

As well as being a transit country, Kazakhstan is also a consumer market for cannabis.⁴ Like several other countries in the region, since approximately 2015 Kazakhstan has also recently seen an increase in consumption of synthetic drugs. More recently, the country has emerged as a domestic producer of synthetic drugs in its own right. One of the major criminal groups active in Central Asia is Khimprom, a criminal network that has specialized in the distribution of synthetic drugs through the internet mainly in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus since about 2014.

Key findings

- While Kazakhstan continues to serve as a transit hub for Afghan opiates, there are signs that political instability in the region (the collapse of the Afghan government and violent clashes on the Tajikistan–Kyrgyzstan border) and changing market dynamics have led to shifts in trafficking routes and increases in trafficking of Afghan methamphetamine and cannabis resin along the northern route.
- Kazakhstan is becoming a major producer of synthetic drugs that serve not only domestic but also neighbouring markets such as Russia and Uzbekistan. Clandestine laboratories for synthetic drug manufacturing in Kazakhstan appear to be increasing in size, number and geographical scope. Russia plays an important role as a source of precursor chemicals sought by drug manufacturers



FIGURE 1 Kazakhstan, showing major roads and rail routes.

in Kazakhstan, a trend that increased after February 2022 when some of the Russian drug trafficking organizations relocated production to Kazakhstan.

- The emergence of Kazakhstan as a regional hub for synthetic drug manufacturing highlights the pressing need to invest resources into drug use prevention. These efforts should be coordinated between law enforcement, public health authorities and civil society to use evidence-informed approaches to drug use prevention and treatment of drug consumers.
- With the ongoing spread of consumption of synthetic drugs across Central Asia, other countries of the region should be wary of the emergence of large-scale manufacturing on their territory. Indeed, some clandestine laboratories have already appeared in Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan's growing role both as a transit hub for Afghan drugs and as a destination of synthetic drugs manufactured in Kazakhstan also deserves attention of national and regional authorities.
- In terms of responses, Kazakhstan tries to strike a balance between Russia, the US and China, but such multi-faceted diplomacy is fraught with difficulty. Russian influence on Kazakhstan continues to hamper the countries' ability to fight drug trafficking effectively, not least through Russian efforts to discredit counter-narcotics cooperation between Kazakhstan and the West.
- Kazakhstan's new drug strategy may stand a chance of advancing a comprehensive anti-drug policy, provided it is taken seriously and implemented through scientifically proven approaches and evidence-informed policies.



View of Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city and a hotspot for the consumption of synthetic drugs. © Mahmut Serdar Alakus/Anadalou Agency via Getty Images

Methodology

This report is based on findings from seven interviews with experts from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Ukraine and an international agency conducted remotely by the GI-TOC in 2023. The experts interviewed are active or former members of specialized units of national law enforcement agencies. The report also draws heavily on the professional field experience of one of the authors and their personal communication with 16 key informants between 2018 and 2022 in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The findings are supported by extensive desk review of secondary sources (official documents, research and policy papers, academic literature and media reports).



CENTRAL ASIAN DRUG TRAFFICKING DYNAMICS

Kazakhstan has been traditionally a key transit point for Afghan opiates and, to a lesser degree, cannabis resin ('hashish'),⁵ trafficked north to consumers in Russia or to Western Europe via Russia along the so-called 'northern route'. But understanding the role the country plays requires an appreciation of the broader dynamics of drug trafficking in the Central Asia region and beyond. Indeed, drug trafficking in and through Kazakhstan is often coordinated by actors far removed from the country itself.

According to research for this report, Turkey-based Kurdish drug-trafficking organizations are the primary actors along the northern route, hiring drivers, setting up front businesses and warehouses and carrying out all logistical services for the drug shipments. Their most typical methods of concealment for heroin are in furniture (wood), tile and food products.⁶ Between 2019 and 2021, a joint operation led by Dutch, German and US law enforcement with cooperation from European, Caucasus and Central Asia partners resulted in the seizure of estimated 11 tonnes of heroin from Turkish Kurd organized crime groups in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Germany, Turkey and the Netherlands, highlighting the geographic reach of the criminal network. One drug trafficking group was based in the Netherlands and coordinated cells throughout the EU and Central Asia.

Investigators were able to identify members of the group who had travelled to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and set up front businesses for heroin shipments originating in Iran that would be re-exported from Central Asia.⁷ On this route, trucks carrying drugs were shipped via ferry from Iran across the Caspian Sea to Turkmenistan, before driving on to Uzbekistan or to Kyrgyzstan.

At that point, the narcotics were offloaded, sometimes repackaged, and loaded onto a different truck. Then Uzbek drivers took the load into Kazakhstan, either via Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan, towards Belarus, where there was a change of drivers and trucks able to move within the Schengen zone, before the load was transported on to the EU (see Figure 2). The key players along the routes would communicate with the main coordinators based in Antalya, Turkey and the Netherlands.⁸ There were also Turkish members based in Ukraine who maintained contact with the northern route, providing logistical support and brokerage in operations across the neighbouring countries.

Another major regional subroute sees drugs transported from Afghanistan via Tajikistan (Figure 3), which is a major gateway for opiates. Geographic and linguistic linkages (Tajik and Dari languages are



FIGURE 2 Flows of Afghan opiates to Western Europe via Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus.



FIGURE 3 Flows of Afghan opiates to Russia via Tajikistan.

closely related) facilitate communication between Tajik and Afghan traffickers, in turn facilitating the procurement of drugs from Afghan organized crime groups by Tajiks, who further distribute them through Central Asia and Russia. Indeed, Tajik nationals are more involved in organizing wholesale drug trafficking (mostly opiates) in Central Asia than nationals of other countries in the region.⁹

Responsibility for the transportation of drug loads in Central Asia among Tajik criminal networks is mainly divided according to subnational areas of operation. Flows across the Afghan–Tajik border are facilitated by Pamirian drug-trafficking groups, which have long-standing ties with Afghan traffickers. Pamir’s location also makes it possible for drugs to cross the border easily.¹⁰ Leninabadskiye (Khujand) is another major Tajik group involved in the transportation of opiates around the Tajik/Uzbek border crossing areas.

While much trafficking is done by road, rail also provides a means to transport drugs in bulk. The Mastchoh group (Sughd Region, Tajikistan) allegedly have close links with local law enforcement agencies who provide protection to the illicit merchandise that is loaded on to trains, which are then sealed and sent either through the northern route via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for the Europe–Asia railway that crosses Russia (this being the most popular due to easier logistical services)¹¹ or through the so-called Middle Corridor, which crosses Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia as well as the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea (with the aid of train ferries).

Kyrgyzstan is also a major pathway for drugs heading from Tajikistan to Kazakhstan, particularly through the Korday checkpoint near the Kyrgyz city of Bishkek, although recent unrest has seen flows divert through Uzbekistan. On 28 April 2021, Tajik and Kyrgyz civilians in the Kyrgyzstan border region of Batken violently clashed over a long-lasting dispute over a water supply facility near the village of Kök-Tash.¹² According to two law enforcement officers interviewed, the incident



FIGURE 4 Drug routes to Russia rerouted via Uzbekistan as a result of tensions between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

forced major drug routes transiting Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan towards Kazakhstan to be rerouted to Uzbekistan. From Uzbekistan, the narcotics are currently being imported into Kazakhstan mainly via two customs checkpoints north of Tashkent: Kaplanbek and Zhibek-Joly (Figure 4). At the same time, the previously used Korday checkpoint on the border with Kyrgyzstan has seen a sharp decrease in the number of drug seizures.

With the clashes on the Tajik and Kyrgyz border having escalated in September 2022,¹³ the drug routes still seem to be shifting. The interviewees believe that, given Uzbekistan's shared border with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, its role as a transit country in drug trafficking logistics will remain important in the near future.¹⁴ That said, the Tajikistan–Kyrgyzstan corridor still appears to be attractive. In March 2023, a Tajik national was arrested in connection with a seizure of 100 kilograms of heroin in Kazakhstan that came via Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁵



The Korday checkpoint on the border with Kyrgyzstan has seen a sharp decrease in the number of drug seizures as narcotics are moved through Uzbekistan. © Government of Kyrgyzstan



THE RISE OF SYNTHETIC DRUGS IN KAZAKHSTAN

Since approximately 2015, the drug market in Kazakhstan has shown signs of diversification, with a growing variety of substances seized.¹⁶ Besides heroin and cannabis, drugs seized in Kazakhstan now include multiple types of synthetic drugs, including new psychotropic substances (NPS).

The reasons for these shifts are both domestic and regional. Afghanistan has recently emerged as a major producer of meth, some of which has joined heroin and hashish flows along the northern route, while growing domestic production (and consumption) of synthetics in Kazakhstan has also shaped the local picture.

Mixed loads from Afghanistan: meth, hashish and heroin

Two recent seizures at the Kaplanbek and Zhibek-Joly checkpoints – the main truck crossing points from Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan – were from Pakistani-Afghan traffickers, who were attempting to move mixed loads of heroin, methamphetamine and hashish concealed in flour, with the further plan to repackage it as if made in Kazakhstan.¹⁷

The 'mixed' nature of the busts was indicative of the changing nature of drug flows along the northern route into Kazakhstan. While Afghanistan has long been a source of heroin and hashish, the presence of methamphetamine is a relatively recent development. During the US occupation of the country, drug traffickers discovered that the wild-growing ephedra plant was a source of ephedrine, which is a precursor for methamphetamine, and by 2018, Afghanistan had emerged as an important producer of the drug.¹⁸ According to consultations with intelligence sources, Iranian 'cooks' travelled to Afghanistan and taught chemists from local drug trafficking groups how to extract the ephedrine and convert it into methamphetamine.¹⁹

The manufacturing of methamphetamine has reportedly continued to increase under the Taliban and may currently compete with opium and heroin production as a major source of revenue.²⁰ A high-ranking Tajik law enforcement official noted that they are seeing an increase in seizures of Afghan methamphetamine.²¹ Given the existence of established logistics to traffic opiates via the northern route, the boom in methamphetamine manufacturing in Afghanistan might result in an increase in its availability throughout Central Asia and Russia, complementing the emergence of domestic production

of synthetic drugs (see below).²² That said, the Taliban have also imposed a ban on the cultivation of ephedra, the consequences of which have yet to be seen.²³

Hashish also appears to be much sought after. According to one law enforcement officer in Kazakhstan, Afghan hashish has become extremely popular and readily available in Kazakhstan. The officer stated that the hashish production in Afghanistan had doubled to keep up with the rising demand in Central Asia and Russia. The price per kilogram of hashish in Afghanistan varies from US\$400 to US\$1 000 US dollars per kilogram, while in Russia it reaches US\$7 000–US\$8 000 as of 2023.²⁴ However, more research is needed to assess the dynamics of the hashish market in the region.

The trajectory of heroin production in Afghanistan is less certain. After returning to power, the Taliban announced a ban on opium cultivation, although assessments of its impact on the drug trade differ widely.²⁵ According to some, poppy cultivation has drastically reduced, but others argue that sizeable stockpiles remain and revenues from heroin trafficking will likely not be harmed in the short term.²⁶ As such, prohibitions on cultivation may actually benefit traffickers' bottom line. As research into the impact of the ban continues, it may be that heroin seizures in Kazakhstan and other Central Asia countries provide a true bellwether of the current health of the heroin trade of Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan's 'home-grown' synthetic drugs

Like other countries in Central Asia and elsewhere, over the past decade, Kazakhstan has experienced a spread of synthetic drugs, including amphetamine-type stimulants and other NPS.²⁷ Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, was a consumption hotspot according to data from 2017, with the percentage of consumers dependent on synthetic drugs significantly surpassing the national average.²⁸ A more recent study (2021) suggests that prevalence of NPS continues to grow in Kazakhstan, with the cities of Kokshetau, Pavlodar, Turkestan and Shymkent among those with the highest availability of synthetic drugs in the country.²⁹ According to the Ministry of Health data, only the number of registered users of synthetic drugs – who represent a tiny fraction of all users of synthetic drugs – increased from 40 to 528 over the last five years.³⁰ Kazakh authorities recognize the spread of synthetic drugs as the biggest threat among drug trafficking-related issues.³¹ As stated by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in September 2022, seizures of synthetic drugs increased 10 times in the past three years.³²

In the early 2010s, synthetic drugs (including amphetamine, Ecstasy and methamphetamine) seized in Kazakhstan were solely of foreign origin, imported mostly from China, Myanmar, Thailand and Laos, as well as Russia, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland and the Baltic states.³³ This pattern changed around 2018, when Kazakh law enforcement noticed a rise in lab equipment being ordered through the postal service, destined to various remote parts of the country. At the same time, clandestine laboratories that produced alpha-PVP,³⁴ a synthetic stimulant, began to emerge across the country.³⁵

Those involved in the illicit manufacturing were typically young people who had travelled to Russia and some EU countries, such as the Netherlands and Germany, to learn first-hand from 'chemists' how to manufacture synthetic drugs. Later, Kazakh-based drug trafficking organizations were able to obtain the tools for the domestic manufacture of the substances by ordering the precursor chemicals from China and Russia via the dark web and by importing the equipment by mail.³⁶

Stanislav Odayskiy, an ethnic Russian and a citizen of Kazakhstan, was one of the early entrepreneurs of synthetic drug production in Kazakhstan.³⁷ In the early 2010s, he learned how to produce NPS

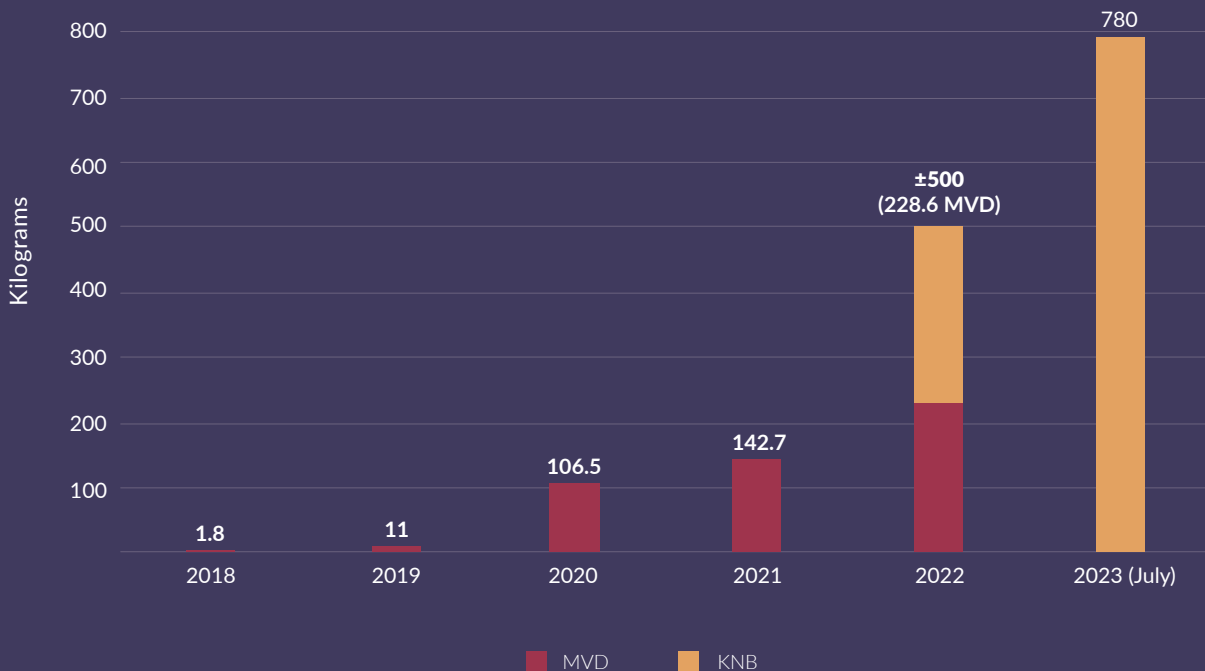


FIGURE 5 Synthetic drugs seized in Kazakhstan, 2018–July 2023.

NOTE: The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) seizes only part of the drugs. The rest are typically seized by the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KNB).

SOURCES: Ministry of Internal Affairs, quoted in the Presidential Decree Об утверждении Концепции обеспечения общественной безопасности в партнерстве с обществом на 2024-2028 годы, 12 May 2023; National Security Committee press release, quoted in Kursiv Media, 19 July 2023, <https://kz.kursiv.media/2023-07-19/Insh- knb-sintetika/>.

from his Russian contacts, whom he communicated with via the dark web. He then set up a laboratory in Shymkent, where he hired chemistry professionals to manufacture the drugs. Odayskiy carefully studied the Kazakh legislation on NPS to ensure that the substances produced in his laboratory were not technically illegal, as they were not listed as such under the Kazakh law. The precursor chemicals were also legally ordered from Chinese companies in large quantities. The NPS manufactured in Odayskiy’s laboratory were shipped by mail to as far as the US, the UK, Sweden, Switzerland and Austria, while payments were received in Bitcoin.³⁸

But his fortunes were soon to change. In 2019, Kazakhstan adopted a new emergency scheduling law that helped crack down on NPS by including them on the lists of controlled substances.³⁹ Under the law, Kazakh law enforcement were able to target Odayskiy for distributing prohibited chemical compounds.⁴⁰ In 2019, Odayskiy was arrested by Kazakh authorities and later prosecuted.⁴¹

While Odayskiy distributed drugs internationally, at a much larger scale than previously thought Kazakhstan drug producers were capable of, his case is not isolated. Indeed, Odayskiy’s operation represents a typical modus operandi for NPS manufacturing in Kazakhstan, in which precursor chemicals are ordered from Russia or China and laboratory equipment from the EU or Russia, with a view to setting up a medium- to large-scale manufacturing operation.

COVID reinforces shift to synthetics

The trend towards manufacturing NPS domestically in Kazakhstan, rather than acquiring them from abroad, was reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, Kazakhstan, like many other countries, closed its borders to international travel and imposed strict movement restrictions within the country. As a result, consumers of synthetic drugs were not able to travel abroad where they would typically consume drugs in recreational settings. Instead, most people organized home parties, where alcohol and ‘party drugs’ were consumed.⁴²

Local dealers (*zakladchiki*), in turn, could not rely any longer on ‘dead drops’ (*zakladki*), which required physical movement across the city to hide a stash of drugs for a buyer. Due to movement restrictions and the growing domestic demand for NPS, the purchase of NPS through the dark web and messaging platforms became more prevalent among Kazakh drug consumers. Delivery was carried out by individuals working as couriers delivering food and other items, who were some of the few people able to move with relative freedom.

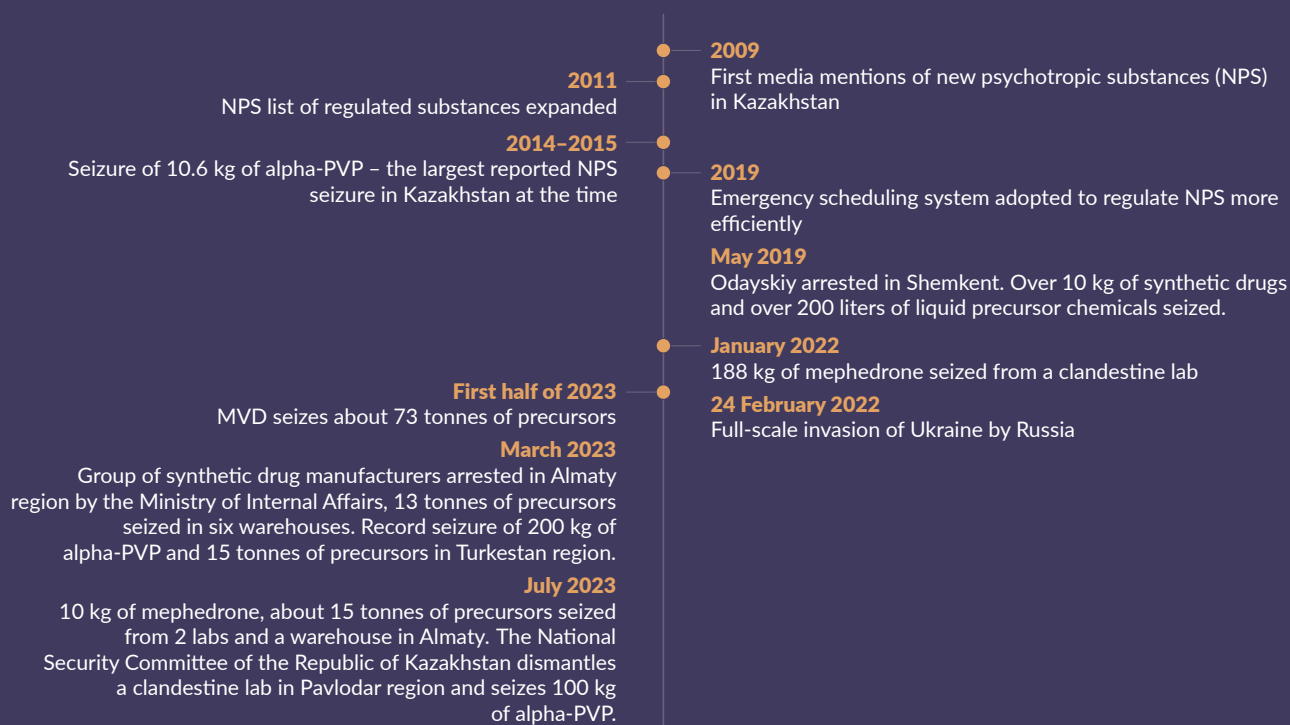


FIGURE 6 New psychotropic substances in Kazakhstan and major seizures of synthetic drugs, 2009–July 2023.

SOURCES: Yussopov et al, National Report on Drug Situation in the Republic of Kazakhstan, Central Asia Drug Action Programme, 2018; UNODC, Central Asia Synthetic Drugs Situation Assessment, 2017; Обновленную криптоплощадку наркогруппировок пресекли в Казахстане, Sputnik, 11 October 2022; КНБ, О ликвидации нарколабораторий и склада с прекурсорами, 9 July 2023; КНБ, О ликвидации крупной подпольной нарколаборатории, 1 August 2023.

At the same time, some drug producers saw an opportunity to service the growing demand for NPS by setting up production in the country. In 2020–2022, clandestine laboratories that manufactured NPS began to spread across Kazakhstan, registering an almost three-fold increase (from 24 labs dismantled in 2020 to 70 in 2022).⁴³ In January 2022, the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KNB) dismantled a large clandestine laboratory where 188 kilograms of mephedrone were seized. The facility manufactured drugs for the domestic market, as well as for export to Uzbekistan and Russia.⁴⁴ As in the case of Odayskiy, the manufacturers received payments in cryptocurrency (typically Bitcoin) and exchanged it for cash with the assistance of some employees of the exchange offices in Almaty.⁴⁵ In another case, reported by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), a group of unspecified foreign nationals was arrested in late 2022 for manufacturing synthetic drugs in three clandestine laboratories, and were reportedly planning on establishing another eight laboratories across the country.⁴⁶ As of July 2023, the KNB seized 780 kg of synthetic drugs, about 68 tonnes of chemical precursors and dismantled 24 large-scale clandestine labs.⁴⁷

Link to the conflict in Ukraine?

Our research suggests that most of the large-scale clandestine laboratories in Kazakhstan have been set up by Russian nationals, some of whom may have immigrated after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁴⁸ Russian nationals came to the attention of Kazakh law enforcement even before the war, around 2020, as they reportedly began setting up clandestine laboratories to expand their market.⁴⁹ After February 2022, however, synthetic drugs manufacturing in Kazakhstan has increased exponentially.⁵⁰

At the same time, a Kazakh law enforcement source claimed that after the start of the partial military mobilization in September 2022, clandestine laboratories and seizures of synthetic drugs in Russia dramatically decreased. The source stated that individuals who fled Russia to avoid mobilization might have included members of drug trafficking organizations who relocated their production to the host country.⁵¹ The source cited one example of a recently dismantled clandestine laboratory in Shymkent that had been set up by Russian nationals who had fled their country to avoid being mobilized. After arriving in Kazakhstan, the members of the organizations ordered lab equipment and precursor chemicals from Russia. Once established, the laboratory manufactured substances for export to Russia, where most of their clients were based, and to Uzbekistan, where consumption of synthetic drugs (such as alpha-PVP and mephedrone) has been on the rise in recent years.⁵²

This expansion of synthetic production is reflected in the scale of drugs busts in 2023. During the first quarter of 2023, Kazakh law enforcement reported the dismantling of eight large-scale clandestine laboratories, noting that manufacturing operations were spreading across the country to new provinces.⁵³ In the first half of 2023, Kazakh Ministry of Interior seized about 73 tons of precursors and lab equipment stored in Kazakhstan with the aim of setting up large-scale laboratories for synthetic drugs manufacturing (mephedrone was also seized during the operation).⁵⁴ The detained members of a criminal group reportedly included Armenian, Belarusian, Kazakh and Russian nationals.⁵⁵ In March 2023, the largest (to date) clandestine laboratory was dismantled in the southern province of Turkistan, in which 200 kilograms of synthetic drugs and 15 tonnes of precursors were seized.⁵⁶ The laboratory also had been set up by a Russian national, although it is not clear when he had arrived in Kazakhstan.⁵⁷

According to a local law enforcement officer, synthetic drugs manufactured in Kazakhstan are often distributed among the Russian diaspora by Kazakhstan-based Russian drug trafficking organizations.

The precursor chemicals for these substances are typically shipped from Russia, essentially making it a closed system of production and distribution. Nevertheless, the source stated that their agency did not exclude the possibility of the newly arrived Russian traffickers starting to expand sales to the local Kazakh population in the future.⁵⁸

Khimprom: a transnational synthetics syndicate

One of the major criminal groups active in the region is Khimprom, a criminal network that has specialized in the distribution of synthetic drugs via internet mainly in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus since about 2014. Khimprom was reportedly first based in Russia and then in Ukraine.⁵⁹ After coming under pressure from law enforcement agencies of both countries, its alleged leader, Egor Burkin (also known as Levchenko⁶⁰), was reported to have fled to Mexico. However, according to a Kazakh law enforcement officer, Burkin continues to run Khimprom's lucrative business and has set up a new network of clandestine laboratories in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Khimprom obtains lab equipment and precursor chemicals from China; acids are obtained from Russia.⁶¹ In June 2023, Kyrgyz law enforcement, in cooperation with the KNB, dismantled a large-scale lab, where 30 kg of mephedrone and 2.2 tonnes of precursors were seized.⁶² ■



RESPONSES: VULNERABILITIES IN COUNTERDRUG EFFORTS

Kazakhstan seeks to foster international counternarcotics cooperation by taking active part in collaborative activities with a range of international partners, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Commonwealth of Independent States. Kazakhstan hosts the Central Asia Regional Information and Coordination Center; its law enforcement agencies receive training and support from the US Drug Enforcement Administration; and it is part of the EU-funded drug demand reduction programme, the Central Asia Drug Action Programme.⁶³ Kazakhstan has incorporated international experience into its progressive counternarcotics legislation and its emergency scheduling laws that allow to list new psychotropic substances under the national regulation through a speedy process.

In recent years, the government of Kazakhstan has been stepping up its counternarcotics measures, especially against synthetic drugs, which was highlighted by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in September 2022 as a top national priority.⁶⁴ Some ongoing or projected measures on the supply side include an increased control over recreational spaces and trade in pharmaceutical substances; the formation of an interagency monitoring group to detect new types of drugs in cross-border trafficking; and a strengthened oversight of banks and financial institutions to detect suspicious transactions.⁶⁵

On the demand side, a mixture of tolerant and more hardline approaches coexist. Non-medical use of psychotropic substances is largely decriminalized (an administrative offence). The use of drugs in public spaces is currently a criminal offence but an amendment is being discussed to decriminalize it as well.⁶⁶ At the same time, in 2021, the criminal threshold for quantities of drugs was reduced; being caught with 1 gram of heroin, mephedrone or synthetic cannabinoids carries a prison sentence of between three and seven years. This potentially increases the likelihood of drug users to end up in the criminal justice system charged with drug distribution.⁶⁷

There are further gaps in the area of drug use prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. As recognized in the new Public Security Strategy developed by the MVD for 2024–2028, ‘the existing measures are not effective enough’.⁶⁸ For example, there are only seven public medical facilities for rehabilitation of synthetic drugs users in Kazakhstan.⁶⁹ Access to services for people who use drugs is very limited due to the lack of treatment facilities and stigma associated with drug users among medical personnel and the general population.⁷⁰ In July 2023, the government presented its Comprehensive Plan to Combat Drug Addiction and Drug Trafficking for 2023–2025 that aims to address these gaps,



The Kazakh government considers the Comprehensive Plan to Combat Drug Addiction and Drug Trafficking for 2023–2025, March 2023. © Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan

among others.⁷¹ As part of the integrative strategy, an interagency coordination body for drug use prevention is expected to be created under the Ministry of Health.⁷²

At the operational level, Kazakhstan has several vulnerabilities that hinder its counterdrug efforts, ranging from corruption to operational weaknesses.

Corruption

Of Kazakhstan's two main law enforcement agencies, the MVD and the KNB, endemic corruption seems to affect the former to a greater extent.⁷³ Corruption in the MVD is highly institutionalized, from new recruits (who often pay to attend the MVD academy) to the upper political echelons, while corruption in the KNB is in general restricted to the upper ranks, in part due its perception as an elite force and its higher salaries.⁷⁴

Academic research suggests that historical legacies of the criminal justice system that formed during the Soviet era play an important role in incentivizing corruption in Kazakhstan. Specifically, police officials are incentivized to cooperate with drug dealers or become involved in drug dealing themselves due to the system of statistical performance evaluation and the strict hierarchical structure.⁷⁵ One high-ranking law enforcement source in Kazakhstan interviewed by the GI-TOC recalls participating in a seizure of a large quantity of heroin (over 100 kilograms) in the early 2000s. Later on, the same day, the participating officers were informed by their superiors that 'someone' would be stopping by to pick up the heroin and were told to release the arrested individuals. Obeying the established hierarchy, the officers followed the order without question.⁷⁶

While Kazakhstan has mainly avoided the infiltration of drug trafficking interests into the national level of its government, police officers at the local level are occasionally caught dealing in drugs or protecting drug dealers. In May 2023, for example, media sources reported that a police officer in Almaty was detained for distributing at least 10 kilograms of alpha-PVP.⁷⁷

Politicization

While drug enforcement is typically presented as a non-partisan, non-political issue in the official discourse, politicization of narcotics is common in post-Soviet countries. Kazakhstan often tries to strike a balance between Russia, the West and, more recently, China. During the last decade, Kazakhstan's cooperation with the EU and the US in the field of drug enforcement has been often met with skepticism and suspicion from Russia. For this reason, the Kazakh government has tried to have the same amount or more ongoing bilateral investigations with Russia as it did with the West.⁷⁸

Although Kazakhstan and Russia are geographically close and could have more ongoing bilateral investigations, Russia's negative attitude towards Kazakhstan's cooperation with the West has been a significant hindrance to any meaningful partnership. Russian media, politicians and diplomats also regularly attempt to undermine cooperation with the West by spreading propaganda and disinformation and attack any point of common interest between Kazakhstan and the West, including the cooperation in counternarcotics efforts. For example, Russian diplomats and the media stated on several occasions that Americans were bringing heroin from Afghanistan and selling it in Russia and Central Asia to poison the population.⁷⁹ On the other hand, some Western counterparts perceived Kazakh law enforcement agencies and ministries as puppets of the Russian government. This simplified view of Kazakhstan as playing into Russian interests creates mistrust and may negatively impact cooperation; indeed, it has led some Western law enforcement agencies to reduce their engagement with Kazakh law enforcement.

These geopolitical tensions were visible in 2018–2019, when the MVD closed the Regional Counternarcotics Unit based in Almaty. This unit was unique in several ways. Firstly, it was the only unit that had jurisdiction to operate throughout Kazakhstan. Secondly, it was based in Almaty and received training and equipment from the US. Thirdly, it was made up of some of the best narcotics officers in the Ministry of Internal Affairs.⁸⁰ The official claim by the ministry was that the unit was not needed due to the duplication of efforts, despite the fact that the unit's seizures outpaced those of any other counternarcotics unit in Kazakhstan. In reality, it appears that Russian influence over the MVD led the MVD to reduce cooperation with their US counterparts, removing a direct and local channel of contact (the US counternarcotics effort is also based in Almaty) and forcing engagement to be rerouted through the main MVD headquarters in Astana, increasing bureaucracy and reducing the effectiveness of US-Kazakh collaboration.

Internal politics also play a factor, with statistics sometimes manipulated to justify departmental budgets. The Chüy Valley on the border of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is an area of approximately 32 000 sq km and home to over 100 000 hectares of wild-growing cannabis.⁸¹ Every year, the MVD, the main law enforcement agency responsible for enforcing drug laws within Kazakhstan, conducts an annual operation called 'Koknar' during the cannabis harvest season (June through October), aimed at eradicating the plant in the valley and interdicting trafficking of cannabis herb.⁸² Typically, MVD officers weigh the eradicated cannabis and provide daily reporting to headquarters. However, according to police sources who participated in this operation, they are instructed to seize a certain amount of cannabis. To increase the weight, officers often place the plants in non-transparent bags and add rocks. The operation, therefore, is used to justify spending and show productivity of the MVD's narcotics department, while having little impact on cannabis production in the country.⁸³

Operational weaknesses

According to sources in Kazakhstan, it is very difficult to detect Afghan heroin transiting the country without human intelligence. Like most of the large seizures in Central Asia, a seizure of 100 kilograms of heroin in February 2023 on the border of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, for example, was a result of human intelligence. The narcotics were pressed and concealed inside ceramic plates. According to a source, it took a long time to locate the plates and to extract the heroin for testing. The source stated that without direct intelligence, the scanner would not have been able to identify the concealed narcotics. It is believed that many other similar loads of narcotics made it safely across.⁸⁴

While Kazakh law enforcement understands that large amounts of heroin transit through the country, privately they admit that they are not equipped to deal with the scale of transshipment.⁸⁵ There are several vulnerabilities that prevent law enforcement from detecting drugs more effectively.

Firstly, the use of trucks cleared under a harmonized border procedure (TIR) allows them to circulate within the Eurasian Economic Union without customs inspection. If heroin enters Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, it can be placed in one of these trucks and transported with no inspection to Russia. If an officer decides to inspect the cargo and breaks the seal on the TIR truck and does not find any contraband, the officer is likely to be held personally liable for the delay of the truck or damage of the goods inside. This strongly disincentivizes Border and Customs officers in Kazakhstan from breaking the seal on a TIR truck.⁸⁶

Secondly, the overuse of sniffer dogs prevents them from 'hitting' narcotics. Dogs, like humans, need rest and comfortable conditions for work. Kazakh customs checkpoints often do not rotate their dogs and keep them outside in the heat during summer months. As a result, the dogs become overworked and tired. Moreover, as per Soviet-era regulations, the sniffer dogs in most post-Soviet countries, including Kazakhstan, are trained on drug simulants, rather than real substances.⁸⁷ While there is ongoing scientific research to develop alternative training aids, true materials are generally considered more effective than pseudo among the canine community.⁸⁸ Thirdly, the lack of operational scanners and qualified operators is an ongoing issue in Kazakhstan. Scanners are often nonfunctional, or the operators do not receive enough quality training.

In terms of the synthetic drugs, there are significant gaps in the forensic capacity to detect and analyze NPS. The new drug strategy includes measures to improve it. The challenge of a proliferating online marketplace is also considerable – although the police have been active in taking down drug-selling sites, the sheer number and variety of approaches (including the use of electronic wallets for payments) complicates both the work of interdiction and efforts to monitor the synthetic retail market.



CONCLUSIONS

The nature of the illicit drugs economy in Kazakhstan is changing in response to market developments as well as the socio-political dynamics in the region. While the northern route still serves for trafficking of Afghan opiates across Central Asia, methamphetamine and cannabis resin are increasingly common along the same route. At the same time, the emergence of Kazakhstan as a regional hub for manufacturing synthetic drugs – such as alpha-PVP and mephedrone – in recent years presents an unprecedented challenge for the country's current administration. The government's new drug strategy recognizes the complexity of the issue and the need to tackle it in a comprehensive way.

To implement a well-designed strategy effectively and to stem a further expansion of synthetic drugs consumption and production across the country, the government will need to invest in modernizing its approach to prevention, treatment and rehabilitation of drug consumers, as well as in partnering with civil society actors who can assist in these tasks. Similarly, reforming the police to address structural incentives for corrupt practices will be essential.

International cooperation should focus on strengthening the operational and technical capabilities of drug enforcement units, modernizing the judicial approach to drug-related crimes, and improving interagency cooperation within the country and with regional and global partners. If shielded from the politicization of narcotics issues, regional mechanisms such as the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre for combating the illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors can go a long way in achieving meaningful intelligence sharing among its members and other partners. Building trust among regional counterdrug units becomes essential given the threat of synthetic drug manufacturing spreading beyond Kazakhstan.



NOTES

- 1 Along with other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan is situated on the so-called 'northern route', a transit corridor for the supply of Afghan heroin. Opiates are trafficked from Afghanistan alongside three major routes: the Balkan route, which supplies Western and central Europe through Iran and Turkey via South Eastern Europe, and to a lesser degree, via Iran, the South Caucasus, the Black Sea and the Balkans to final destination markets in Western and central Europe; the northern route, which runs through Central Asia, and to a lesser degree through the South Caucasus, to mainly supply markets in Russia; and the southern route, which supplies all other markets and runs through Pakistan and partially through Iran mainly to the Gulf region, Africa and South Asia.
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