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# BREAKING KLAD

RUSSIA'S DEAD DROP  
DRUG REVOLUTION

Max Daly | Patrick Shortis

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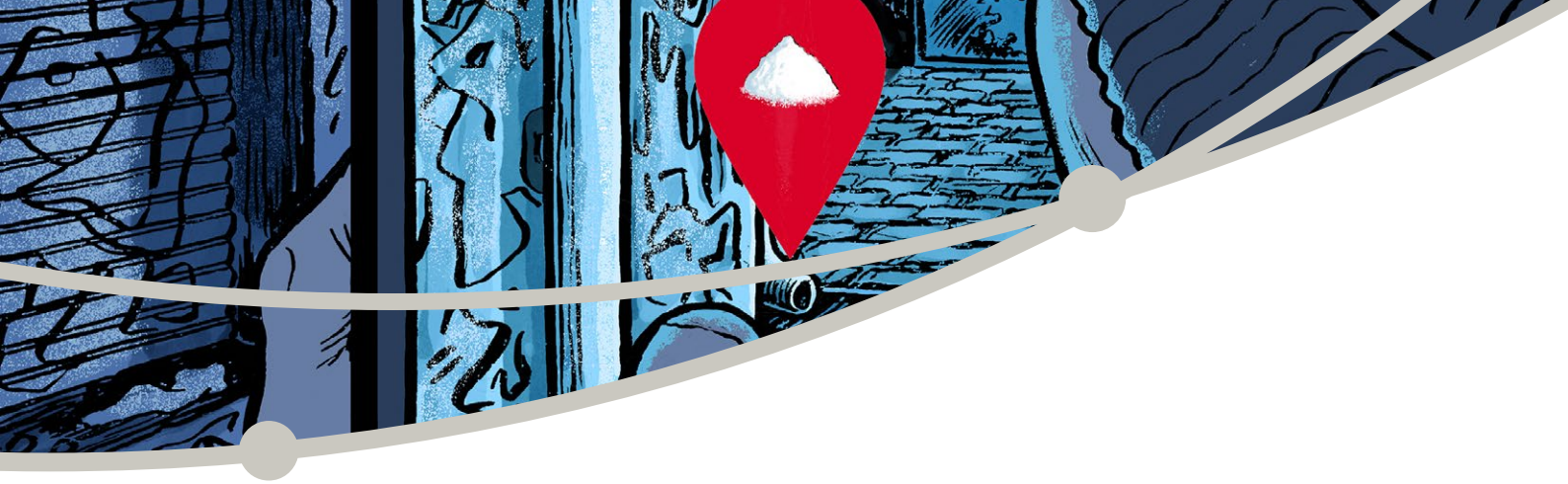
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A** new form of the drug trade, and of organized crime, has emerged in Russia. Geopolitical and domestic conditions such as reduced trade with the West, strict anti-drug laws and a strong tech culture have led to an illegal narcotics industry like no other.

Rather than buying drugs face-to-face in streets or bars, as is the norm in most of the world, most people in Russia now purchase them online and retrieve them from physical hiding places, or 'dead drops', secreted everywhere from bushes to drainpipes. This new model is dominated by a small number of large darknet market platforms which host thousands of online drug shops and facilitate the manufacture of many of the drugs they sell.

Behind polished websites and marketing videos, these platforms and the shops they host employ numerous couriers, online staff and drug producers. They have taken over much of Russia's drug economy. The platforms, which make billions of dollars a year, have become a new iteration of global organized drug crime. At the same time, the model has become increasingly violent and has triggered copycats across the region. Unlike most Western darknet markets, which remain marginal players in illicit drug markets, Russia's giant platforms have facilitated the establishment of cross-country delivery networks while industrializing production and pushing the widespread use of synthetic drugs.

While these developments have escaped the attention of most policymakers, this report offers insights into an expanding drug crime ecosystem that has consequences for Russia, the West and the wider international community. The Russian model is a game-changer, underpinning a new breed of public-facing organized crime groups – the darknet markets and the vendors who sell on them – who oversee everything from production and importation of drugs to marketing, recruitment, distribution and retribution, online and on the streets.

In Russia, buying drugs on the darknet or social media using cryptocurrency and picking up packages – or *klads* – within hours at a dead drop near your home is more prevalent than buying drugs either on postal darknet markets or by hand from street-level vendors. Interviewees universally agreed that the darknet dead drop system has become the dominant model of drug selling in Russia, encompassing traditional substances such as cannabis, opioids and cocaine as well as synthetic products.

One Russian journalist described traditional street drug dealing as 'practically dead'.<sup>1</sup> Instead, at any moment in almost every major city and town, thousands of drug packages are buried in the ground or attached by magnets to lamp-posts or electrical boxes, waiting to be collected by their purchasers.



The Kraken darknet market mascot. *Photo: YouTube*

As with the Mexican cartels, the major Russian darknet markets have shaped the market to suit their needs, rather than simply responding to demand. While drugs such as cocaine, MDMA and heroin are still imported, drug vending networks have been incentivized by the darknet markets on which they trade to pursue the production and sale of synthetic cathinones.

As a result, cathinones have begun to displace traditional drugs. Supply, fuelled by the acquisition of 'grey market' precursor chemicals often imported from countries such as India and China, has been simplified. An increasing amount of the drugs consumed in Russia and its surrounding region are made in Russia: they are synthetic, potent, and quick and cheap to make.

This report reveals the damage being sown in Russia by this new version of the drug trade, whose senior figures have so far evaded law enforcement, perhaps due to the anonymity conferred by the operating model and by being dislocated from traditional organized criminal chains. But while the model promises secrecy, safety and privacy, this is an illusion for those on its lower rungs. The dead drop system means customers receive purchases faster but the swathes of young Russians who make it possible often receive heavy sentences or face violence at the hands of their employers. And there are fears that spiralling use of potent synthetic drugs presages a public health crisis.<sup>2</sup>

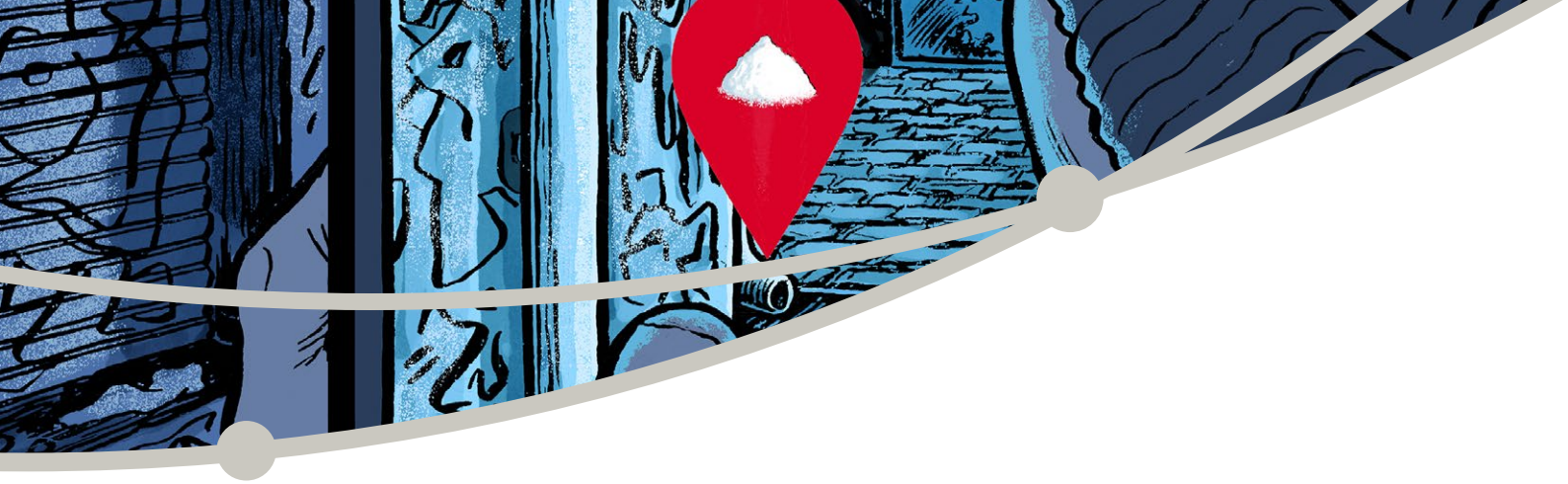
Moreover, the model is quickly expanding beyond Russia. It has become a major method of buying drugs in several countries on Russia's borders, making synthetic drugs and jobs in the drug trade more accessible. It is also gaining traction in Asia and its presence has been noted in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

The research presented in this report involved extensive examination of markets, interviews with experts and market participants, analysis of on-chain data from a blockchain intelligence company and a review of the nascent literature on Russian darknet markets. The report tracks the evolution of Russia's novel illicit drug model, examining how and why it came about and explaining what

distinguishes it from other illicit drug economies. It provides a detailed look at how darknet markets and vendors operate and the impact they are having on Russian society, and questions the role of law enforcement and organized crime. And it asks: could Russia's darknet drug market be signposting the future of the illegal drug trade worldwide?

## Key findings

- Russia has developed a unique drug trade model combining darknet markets, cryptocurrency payments and physical 'dead drops', which now dominates its illegal drug economy.
- This model has given rise to a new breed of tech-savvy organized crime groups operating large-scale darknet platforms that help facilitate drug production, marketing and distribution.
- The system has shifted drug consumption patterns in Russia, with locally produced synthetic stimulants like mephedrone becoming increasingly prevalent.
- Despite its digital nature, this model has significant real-world impacts, including high incarceration rates for low-level operatives, organized violence against employees and emerging public health concerns.
- Russian authorities have largely failed to effectively combat these darknet markets and their operators, focusing instead on low-level arrests of drug couriers.
- This drug trade model is expanding beyond Russia's borders, particularly to countries with strict anti-drug regimes, potentially signalling a shift in global illicit drug markets.
- The growing incidence of this system challenges conventional understanding of darknet markets and their impact on drug economies, demonstrating their potential to reshape entire national drug landscapes.
- Addressing this phenomenon requires a two-pronged approach: Russian authorities should prioritize mitigating the negative impacts on society, while international bodies must familiarize themselves with this model and closely monitor its potential spread beyond Russia's borders.



## PARADIGM SHIFT: RUSSIA'S STRANGE NEW DRUGS WORLD

Several bizarre, guerrilla-style PR stunts have unfolded recently on the streets of Moscow. At the end of 2022, a hologram of a giant sea monster advertising a company called Kraken was projected onto the side of a business centre.<sup>4</sup> That New Year's Eve, an advert for OMG! OMG! was projected onto buildings across the Russian capital.<sup>5</sup> In February 2023, a huge electronic billboard promoting Blacksprut showed a woman in a futuristic mask and the words, 'Come to me if you're looking for the best'.<sup>6</sup> In March 2024, a van pumping out electronic music and emblazoned with the Kraken logo and a QR code was parked in the Arbat District, blocking one of the city centre's busiest roads until it was removed by police.<sup>7</sup> Three months earlier, a bus covered with the Kraken logo was left across two lanes of traffic near the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, blocking the road for an hour.<sup>8</sup>

These stunts were not arranged by tech start-ups or political activists; they were the work of three of Russia's biggest drug markets. Each of these online platforms hosts thousands of virtual shops that sell illegal drugs anonymously through a vast network of couriers known as 'stashmen' (*kladmen* in Russian). The *kladmen* distribute drug packages, known as 'klads' (or stashes), through anonymized dead drops. Customers are sent coordinates and photos to enable them to pick up drugs secreted at a nearby location, for example buried by a tree in a park or attached by magnet to the back of a drainpipe in an urban alleyway.

Globally, over the last 15 years, the rise of darknet markets, cryptocurrency and encrypted messaging has provided new ways to buy and sell. Online



An advertisement for darknet market OMG! OMG! is projected onto a building in Moscow. Photo: Telegram

platforms have enabled anonymous trade in anything from drugs to stolen credit card details and counterfeit goods, using specialised browsers such as Tor to hide IP addresses and cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin to replace regular bank accounts.<sup>9</sup> Despite their criminal nature, these platforms feature a wide range of products from numerous sellers. Analysis of Western and Russian darknet markets has found that illegal drugs account for the largest volume of trade.<sup>10</sup>

In common with many legitimate e-commerce websites, it is not the marketplace owners who are selling drugs. They host the platform and individual shops pay fees to sell their products. Customers are protected by an 'escrow' system in which Bitcoin payments are released to the vendor only once the customer is happy with the product. These markets have discussion forums, a complaints process and an Amazon-style mechanism for feedback and reviews of vendors and products.<sup>11</sup> In darknet markets, reputation is a key factor for success, and each market has a list of trusted sellers.<sup>12</sup> Although some big markets around the world have been shut down by police over the last decade, the darknet drug market system has remained largely resistant to enforcement action and has been able to flourish.<sup>13</sup>

For most of the world, buying drugs on the darknet is an auxiliary form of trade: drug transactions generally occur using hand-to-hand, street-level dealing.<sup>14</sup> Drugs such as cocaine, heroin and MDMA are produced thousands of miles away from destination markets before being trafficked and distributed, then sold to end-users by dealers.

In Russia, however, the darknet drug trade has disrupted this model. Technological advances have created a system dominated by vendors who not only promote and distribute substances through networks of thousands of employees but, in the case of cathinones and cannabis, are increasingly likely to produce them as well.



Mega mascot Moriarty delivers a Christmas message on his YouTube channel. *Photo: YouTube*



A growing body of evidence indicates that most drugs are now sold digitally via darknet markets, online shops, encrypted messaging apps and automated bots.<sup>15</sup> And rather than sending drugs via the postal system like Western darknet markets, the Russian model borrows from spycraft.<sup>16</sup> One study observed adverts for more than 417 000 dead-dropped drug packages throughout Russia in April 2020, including more than 78 000 in greater Moscow. Darknet marketplace vendors serve more than 1 100 cities, towns and villages, with the potential to reach more than two-thirds of the country's 144 million population.<sup>17</sup>

A spokesperson for Tochka Sborniki, a Moscow-based harm-reduction organization, said the transformation of the traditional drug market has been stark: 'The method of purchasing drugs hand-to-hand is no longer relevant, even for acquiring 'traditional' drugs. All opioid substances, cocaine and cannabis are obtained through hidden drops.' Among the many homeless drug buyers who do not have Bitcoin, they said, online payments are made using bank cards. The rise of darknet drug markets had changed drug habits, with people adding cathinones and the heroin substitute methadone to their diet. 'Many of those who have been using opiates for decades now also use alpha-PVP or mephedrone,' they said.<sup>18</sup>

## What are synthetic cathinones?

**S**ynthetic cathinones are a class of drugs chemically related to the naturally occurring cathinone found in the khat plant. Traditionally, khat was chewed in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula for its mild stimulant effects. Synthetic cathinones, such as mephedrone, MDPV and methyldone, emerged in the late 2000s as recreational drugs. They have potent stimulant effects, similar to those of amphetamines

and MDMA, and were initially sold legally as alternatives to banned substances. The production of these drugs has proliferated rapidly in Russia due to the ease with which they can be synthesized. Mephedrone, for example, requires some commonly available chemicals and a small number of precursors that are readily available online. ■

The localization of synthetic drug labs and indoor cannabis farms has reduced the use of imported drugs in Russia, such as cocaine, MDMA and heroin. Many of the labs specialize in the production of stimulants such as mephedrone and alpha-PVP.<sup>19</sup> These drugs are comparatively easy to make using basic equipment and precursor chemicals imported from countries such as India and China. As a result, they are much easier for darknet vendors to distribute and sell cheap, so their popularity has exploded.

The UN's World Drug Report 2024 noted: 'The expansion of cathinones in the last few years has been facilitated by the Russian language-oriented darknet market Hydra which, before its dismantling in April 2022, accounted for 80–90 per cent of all drug sales on the dark web. In contrast to almost all other darknet markets, drug sales on Hydra over the period 2018–2022 were dominated by stimulants, notably cathinones.'<sup>20</sup>

Mephedrone, in particular, is one of the most popular drugs listed on Russian darknet markets, outstripping cannabis. This has been confirmed by academic studies of darknet markets,<sup>21</sup> work by journalists,<sup>22</sup> and has been reported by market owners in YouTube videos.<sup>23</sup> Of the 417 000 dead-dropped drug packages in April 2020, 31% contained mephedrone, 18% cannabis, 13% amphetamine and 12% alpha-PVP.<sup>24</sup>

| Product                      | Sold as          | Unit sold in | Typical retail amounts | Wholesale Amounts | Drug Type   |
|------------------------------|------------------|--------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Cannabis (hash)              | Resin            | Grams        | 0.5–3g                 | 100–3 000g        | Plant-based |
| Cannabis (buds)              | Herbal matter    | Grams        | 1–20g                  | 100–2 000g        | Plant-based |
| Cannabis (leaves)            | Herbal matter    | Grams        | 1–10g                  | 100–4 000g        | Plant-based |
| Cannabis (oils/concentrates) | Liquids/oils/wax | Grams        | 0.5–3g                 | 5–15g             | Plant-based |
| Mephedrone                   | Crystals/powder  | Grams        | 0.5–3g                 | 50–1 000g         | Synthetic   |
| Alpha PVP                    | Crystals/powder  | Grams        | 0.5–3g                 | 100–200g          | Synthetic   |
| Cocaine                      | Powder           | Grams        | 0.5–3g                 |                   | Plant-based |
| Amphetamine                  | Powder           | Grams        | 1–10g                  | 50–1 000g         | Synthetic   |
| MDMA                         | Crystals         | Grams        | 1–3g                   |                   | Synthetic   |
| Ecstasy                      | Pills            | Pill         | 3 pills                | 50–3 000 pills    | Synthetic   |
| Heroin                       | Powder           | Grams        | 0.25–1.5g              | 50–100g           | Plant-based |
| Methadone                    | Crystal          | Grams        | 0.25–2g                | 50–1 000g         | Synthetic   |

**FIGURE 1:** Drugs sold on Russian darknet markets.

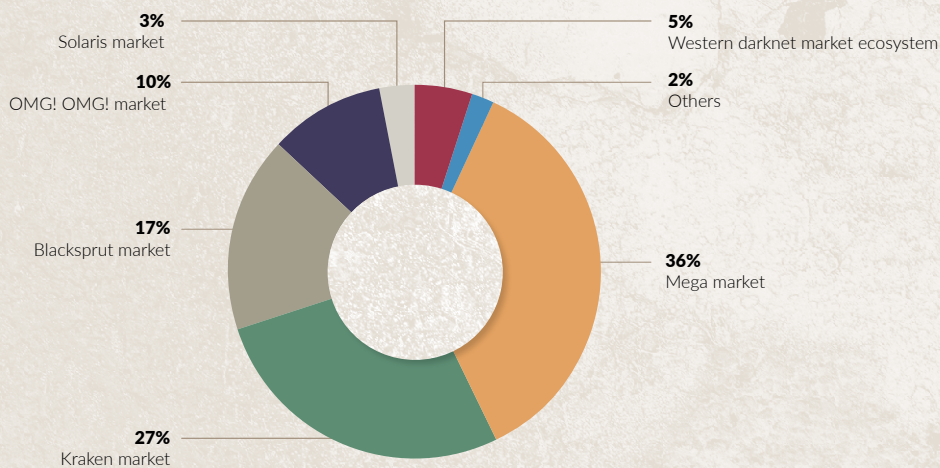
SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Kraken market

The prices of drugs on Russian darknet markets show sharp contrasts between those manufactured domestically and imports, and this is a probable driver for the production of synthetic cathinones. A 2020 study of the Russian darknet marketplace Hydra showed that median prices per gram for mephedrone (US\$21), amphetamine (US\$15) and alpha-PVP (US\$31) were far lower than for cocaine (US\$127) or ecstasy (US\$9 per pill).<sup>25</sup> A brief examination of Kraken Market in 2024 showed that while prices had risen there were still similar discrepancies; one vendor listed mephedrone at US\$33 per gram and cocaine at US\$183 per gram. The relative affordability of domestically manufactured drugs probably explains the popularity of synthetic cathinones on Russian darknet markets.

Mephedrone's rise to prominence has been confirmed by the authorities in Russia. Kirill Smurov, head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, said the share of synthetic drugs such as mephedrone in the total mass of seized drugs had increased from 29.5 per cent in 2019 to 52 per cent in 2022, noting that 'there has been a tendency towards a reduction in drug supplies from abroad and an increase in the volume of their domestic production, primarily synthetic ones'.<sup>26</sup> In just three years, according to research by the online newspaper Lenta.Ru, the number of criminal cases in Moscow courts involving mephedrone almost tripled, from 690 in 2020 to 1 940 in 2023.<sup>27</sup>

Russia's darknet marketplace ecosystem dwarfs its Western counterparts. New data from TRM Labs, which provides blockchain intelligence to law enforcement and governments to disrupt crypto crime, shows Russian markets almost entirely dominate the global darknet ecosystem.<sup>28</sup> When examining all cryptocurrency transactions sent to darknet markets globally, Russian markets account for 95%.

Russian darknet markets are also hubs for money laundering, counterfeit currency, identity theft and hacking,<sup>29</sup> and the individuals behind them have become the new, masked face of organized drug crime. Despite the notoriety and public nature of these darknet markets, those who run them have gone

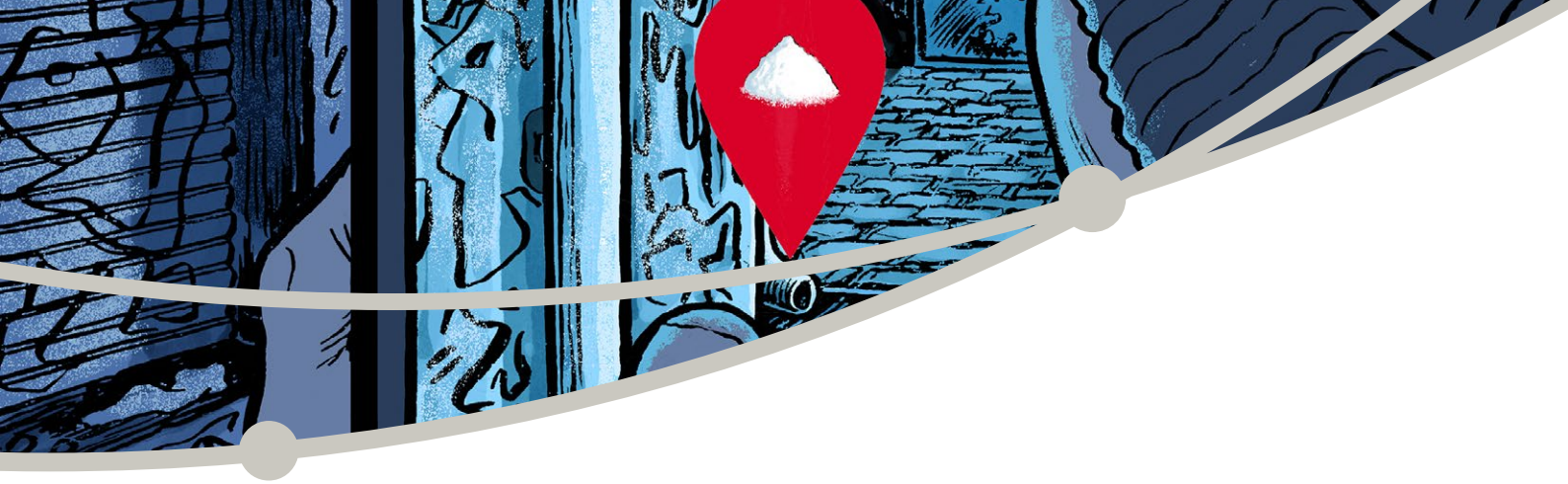


**FIGURE 2** Global darknet market share.

NOTE: As of 31 December 2023, five Russian darknet markets dominated the global landscape, accounting for 93% of all incoming volume to darknet markets. Other Russian darknet markets contributed 2%. In total, Russian darknet markets amassed approximately US\$1.5 billion in revenue. All Western darknet markets combined had a 5% market share, totalling about US\$80 million. These figures are a conservative estimate based on cryptocurrencies traced by TRM Labs and may not capture funds transferred by other means to these markets. SOURCE: Adapted from TRM Labs, <https://www.trmlabs.com/>

largely untouched by the Russian authorities. Hydra, by far the largest such entity so far, enabled huge levels of criminal trade between 2015 and 2022. It was not shut down by Russian law enforcement but by the German Bundeskriminalamt with the help of law enforcement agencies in the United States.<sup>30</sup>

The darknet markets that replaced Hydra in 2022 have avoided being shut down, and many interviewees suggest that the Russian authorities' lack of success could be due to two factors: a lack of the technical know-how needed to penetrate these organizations and a lack of motivation to seek out their most senior figures because police targets are achieved by arresting the most visible employees in this trade.<sup>31</sup>



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF RUSSIAN DARKNET MARKETS

**B**y the time the first major Western darknet market, Silk Road, was shut down by the FBI in 2013, similar less-publicized online black markets in the Russian-speaking world had also been selling drugs and other contraband, using Tor to hide their servers and Bitcoin to obfuscate payment records. Yet even at this early stage in the evolution of darknet drug markets, the way Western and Russian markets worked had already begun to diverge, most notably around the method of delivery.

The Russian dead drop system seems to have grown in parallel to the postal delivery system favoured by Western darknet markets, and may pre-date it. Court documents from 2010 show that dead drops had been used in the retail drug trade as an alternative to traditional hand-to-hand street dealers before the darknet market era.<sup>32</sup>

We cannot be sure why this drug trade model combining darknet shops and dead drops emerged and flourished specifically in Russia, but many interviewees for this report agreed that the convenience of the system and its anonymity were key factors. They suggested it came about due to a collection of circumstances including the country's unreliable, inefficient and heavily monitored postal system;<sup>33</sup> the high risk of being arrested or robbed during street sales; same-day deliveries via dead drops; the country's efficient digital tech systems; and police inability to keep up with digital crime.

According to one Russian drug expert: 'It was as if the Russian market was waiting for a contactless method of drug delivery. With dead drops, you have the illusion that drugs can be purchased more safely. Before this system of dead drops appeared, you'd have to wait for a dealer, sometimes for hours, be afraid of the hoodlums who could literally rob you of drugs, [and] you were visible to police, as everyone knew where a dealer's place was. So at first this system of dead drops created a sense of security, of not having to depend on someone's whims.'<sup>34</sup>

Russian darknet markets earned money by charging shops commission from each sale as well as rent and a licence fee to be on their platform. Competing markets and shops showed an early taste for guerrilla marketing techniques in the mid-2010s, such as promoting their websites on city streets using graffiti stencils and branded stickers.<sup>35</sup> One criminologist recalls noticing 'this literal spillover from an illegal industry into the physical world' after seeing graffiti advertising drug shops and courier jobs in St Petersburg around 2016. He said this tactic may have been borrowed from brothels.<sup>36</sup>

The markets included R2D2, a home for crypto anarchists and hackers which quickly turned into a drug market, and LegalRC and WayAway, which specialized in synthetic cathinones and cannabinoids.<sup>37</sup> Known respectively as 'salts' and 'spice', these drug types had grown in popularity across the world, including in Russia, due to the fact that they were initially sold legally and were far cheaper than the cocaine and cannabis they supposedly mimicked.

The most prominent darknet market was the Russian Anonymous Marketplace, or RAMP, which operated 'less like an eBay-style e-commerce site than a loose-knit, Craigslist-like web forum where buyers and sellers can find one another'.<sup>38</sup> RAMP was overseen by a figurehead called Darkside, whose avatar was Edward Norton's character in *Fight Club*. Darkside banned trade in weapons or stolen credit cards to avoid unwanted attention from law enforcement.

Cocaine, cannabis and amphetamines were RAMP's most profitable drugs, and by 2015 the site had begun dominating its rivals by optimizing the dead drop method.<sup>39</sup> Instead of placing dead drops after customers made a purchase, RAMP enabled vendors to pre-drop their products in bulk then sell the locations to find them. It created a training manual for dead drop dealers, the *Kladman's Bible*,<sup>40</sup> began developing courses for kladmen in how to make successful dead drops, and established closer links with drug producers. Before long, the model RAMP created spawned copycats in neighbouring Ukraine, such as the darknet market Psycho that operated on a similar dead drop model.<sup>41</sup>

Russia's authorities were blindsided by these developments. Despite a government pledge to de-anonymize Tor in 2016, law enforcement officials did not keep pace with the speed of change and de-anonymization of darknet markets never materialized.<sup>42</sup> In 2016, a retired police officer, talking about Tor and the darknet, told a journalist: 'We thought it was for a limited number of people, technologically advanced ones. But within two years, it turned out that almost the entire drug trade in major cities had shifted there. Today, hardly anyone deals in cash any more.'<sup>43</sup>

In 2015, WayAway and LegalRC merged to form a new darknet market, Hydra, and it went on to obliterate its rivals and flood Russia with domestically mass-produced synthetic drugs. Bolstered by the effective dead drop system, and with close ties to big online drug shops that produced mephedrone using precursors from China, Hydra became the world's longest-running and most lucrative online drugs platform.

For two years, Hydra and RAMP vied for control of Russia's increasingly lucrative online drug market, with a flurry of cyber-attacks, tit-for-tat poaching and doxxing of personnel, or revealing information about each other's staff.<sup>44</sup> Hydra reportedly had the edge over RAMP. It had a network of synthetic drug chemists and good connections with Chinese manufacturers of the precursor chemicals for synthetic cathinones such as mephedrone and alpha-PVP. These drugs could be produced at speed and in areas where imported drugs were not always available, leading to an explosion in sales.

Hydra's mission was to persuade the country's biggest wholesale producers of these drugs to deal exclusively with it, according to one Russian journalist.<sup>45</sup> This would deny RAMP a source of some of the most lucrative psychoactive products at a time when importing other drugs, such as cocaine and MDMA, had become more difficult. Not content with trying to dominate supply in big cities such as Moscow and St Petersburg, Hydra also launched targeted marketing campaigns in smaller cities and towns.

By 2017, weakened by the arrest of some of its senior traffickers, RAMP was losing ground, but for Hydra this was just the start. It launched a multipronged marketing blitz funded by rent and

commissions from the shops on its site. The campaign reportedly cost tens of millions of rubles a month and included paid adverts on YouTube, a mass mobile spam campaign and advertising across hundreds of drug-related Telegram channels.<sup>46</sup> By the end of 2018, Hydra's total costs for marketing on Telegram were almost 1 billion rubles (approximately US\$10.6 million ).<sup>47</sup>

After RAMP's closure in 2017, Hydra went on to monopolize Russian drug sales. The administrators established a system of rules, including fines for unreliable vendors. They also set up training programmes and apprenticeships inside vendor networks, a system of 'trusted sellers', and promised drug testing and a 'doctor on call' harm-reduction service. Despite these seemingly positive self-governance mechanisms, Hydra had a darker side than drug sales. It has been alleged that it ordered the assassination of a senior police investigator outside Moscow in 2018.<sup>48</sup> While drug sales are by far the biggest part of Russia's darknet markets, Hydra was also accused of being a hub for other crimes, including identity theft, money laundering and large-scale hacking.<sup>49</sup>

By the time Hydra was shut down in April 2022 by US and German law enforcement, which seized its servers and €23 million (about US\$24.2 million) in Bitcoin, the marketplace had 17 million customers and 19 000 vendor accounts. At least 4 500 active shops serving numerous countries employed tens of thousands of couriers and online staff.<sup>50</sup> It had facilitated more than US\$5 billion in illicit cryptocurrency transactions since 2015 and had transformed not only the way drugs are bought and sold, but the types of drugs bought and sold, in an entire region.<sup>51</sup>

Hydra was a colossal fish in the darknet pond, accounting for 80% of all darknet market-related cryptocurrency transactions in 2021.<sup>52</sup> Estimates of its 2021 revenue (US\$1.7 billion) dwarfed the all-time volume of the West's biggest darknet markets such as Silk Road (US\$90 million) and Dream (US\$187 million).<sup>53</sup> German police were surprised at the size and depth of Hydra's 55-server infrastructure, remarking that 'the technical investigation was extremely complex and required sophisticated expertise'.<sup>54</sup> Russian Dmitry Pavlov, accused of administering Hydra's servers, was arrested in Moscow a week after the network was shut down.



Blacksprut's Jessica Ocean mascot. *Photo: YouTube*

In the two years since Hydra was closed, four main darknet markets – Mega, Kraken (believed to be run by former Hydra staff),<sup>55</sup> Blacksprut and OMG! OMG! – have sprung up. They use a similar model and business continues to boom amid a wave of cyber-attacks against each other – part of ‘an extremely active fight for customers’, according to a journalist.<sup>56</sup> The most noticeable change stemming from increased competition is that these markets are stepping more blatantly out of the shadows to ramp up promotion, marketing and drug sales on the clearnet and via Telegram.<sup>57</sup> Even compared to Hydra’s speedy system, finding drug vendors and buying drugs has become easier and quicker than ever.

Moreover, unlike Western darknet markets, Hydra’s successors are likely to have staying power. Since the FBI closed Silk Road in 2013, more than 140 Western darknet markets have been opened and shut down, either by the authorities or by scammers, while Russia has had fewer than 15 darknet markets in total.<sup>58</sup> For Russia’s new PR-driven darknet markets, the future looks bright.

## Telegram’s role in Russian drug markets

Telegram is a cloud-based encrypted instant messaging platform created by Russian brothers Nikolai and Pavel Durov in 2013. The app is one of the most popular in Russia, especially among young people. One reason is that its functionality goes beyond direct-messaging to provide multi-layered channels, markets, subscription services and blogs.

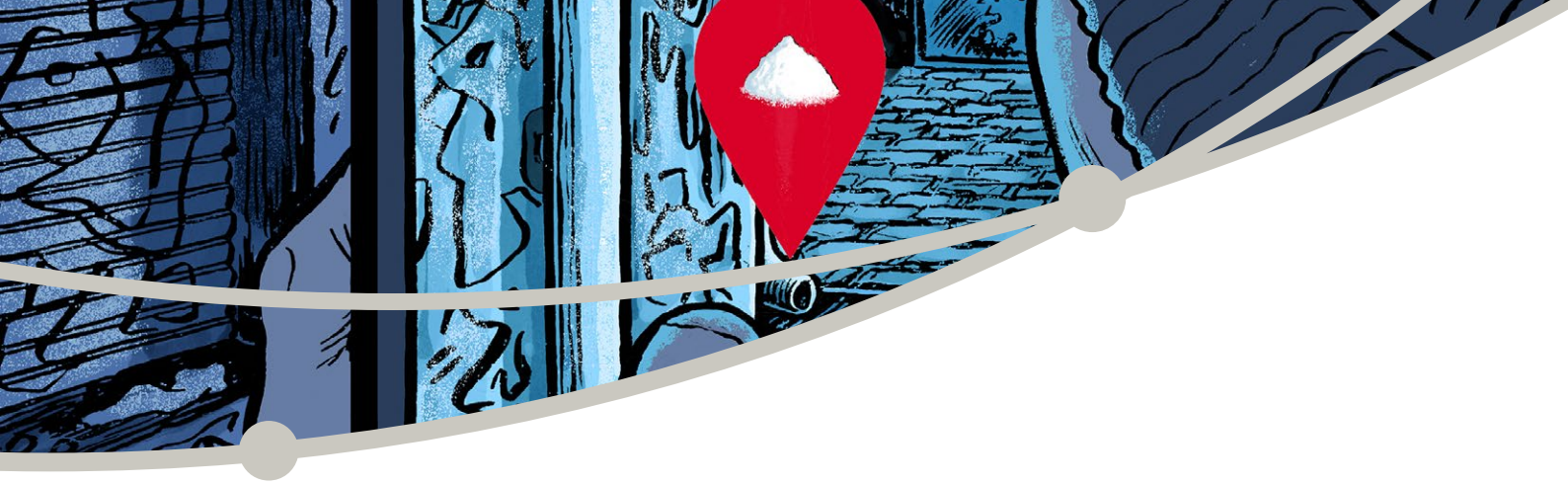
Telegram is a favoured application of Russian darknet markets and vendors, who use it to advertise, update customers, share market-related news and conduct community-building exercises like competitions and group discussions. In some cases, markets and vendors have leveraged Telegram’s ‘bots’ feature to conduct drug sales. This involves a chatbot routing customer selections to a vendor, enabling a direct sale.

Telegram also runs a microblogging site, Telegra.ph, which allows users to create a simple anonymized web page with

multimedia functionality and post it to readers, enabling them to share menus and long-form instructions on how to participate in markets.<sup>59</sup> In this way Telegram acts as an extension of the Russian darknet market ecosystem, providing important information, advertising, sales and community functions.

Telegram is also an important site for disseminating warnings from vendor networks to employees. Employees suspected of stealing may be targeted for attacks from hired enforcers at the behest of the vendor network. The enforcers will film a violent attack on the employee and upload it to Telegram sites to deter future thievery. Videos are often accompanied by an apology from the employee.

Pavel Durov, now a French national, was detained in France in March 2024 amid an investigation into alleged criminal activity on the app, including drug trafficking. He was freed on €5 million (about US\$5.5 million) bail pending his trial. ■



## HOW DOES IT WORK? INSIDE RUSSIA'S DARKNET DRUG VENDOR NETWORK

**B**ehind each Russian darknet market, the shops they host and the array of drugs they offer is a network of individuals in specialized roles, loosely divided into those involved in production, distribution and management. They include the people manufacturing drugs in labs, the couriers who service dead drops, the marketing teams promoting shops, and the hidden CEOs at the summit of the major platforms such as Mega and Kraken.

The key feature of Russia's darknet dead drop system is that it is highly anonymized: the buyer does not know who the courier or the shop owner is, and the courier does not know who the buyer or their employer is. Transactions require no real names, home addresses or face-to-face contact, reducing the risks of trading drugs in a country with harsh penalties for narcotics offences. And in terms of product supply, unlike the tricky logistics and foreign contacts required when importing illegal drugs such as heroin and cocaine, the fact that many drug vendor networks make the product themselves means less risky movement of large stashes of drugs across such a huge country.

The big platforms employ a raft of people, such as moderators, administrators, IT experts, marketers, medical advisers and drug testers<sup>60</sup>. They earn revenue by charging shops for a licence to start selling, commission on every sale, monthly rent, and for having prominent positions and statuses on their markets.<sup>61</sup> So they have a vested interest in making sure drugs are sold as efficiently as possible.

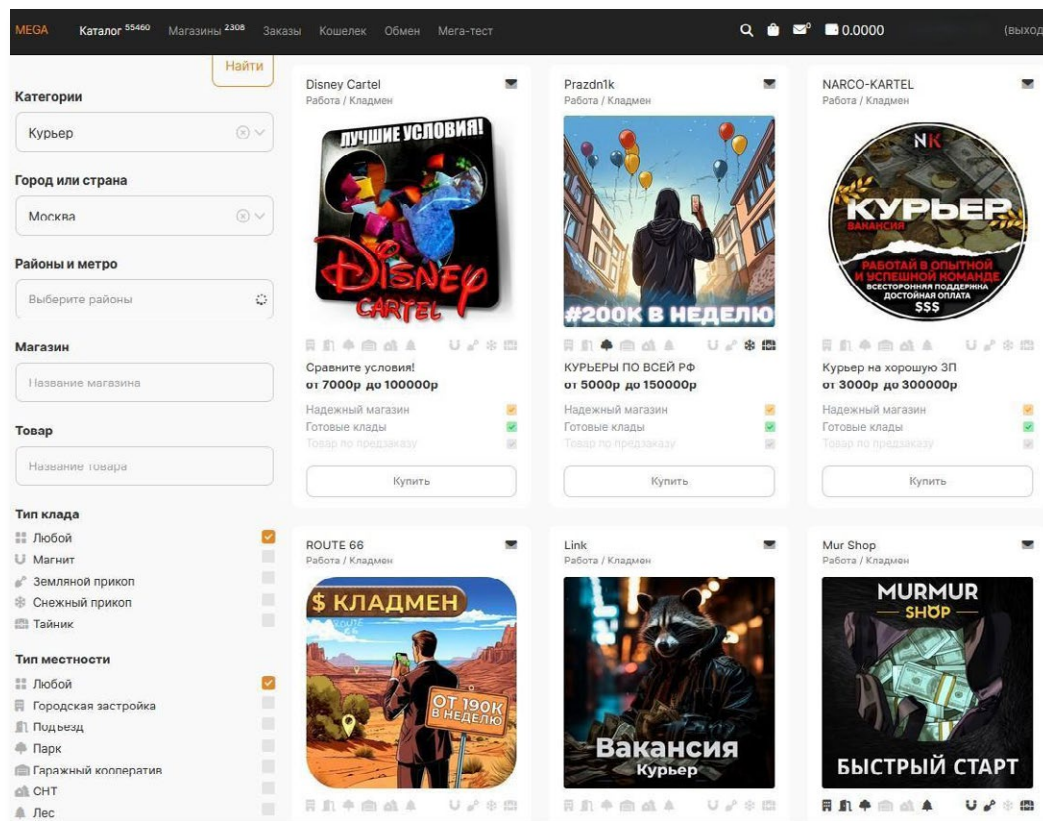
It is the individual shops that have become the major employers of a shadow workforce of couriers, wholesalers, operators and producers. To give a sense of scale, the authors of this report counted more than 5 000 shops across two darknet markets (Kraken and Mega). But the Dark Metrics project that provides statistics on darknet markets has counted at least 17 708 shops across 15 Russian markets.<sup>62</sup>

The need to organize and maintain a vast physical delivery network requires consistent hiring of staff. The more distributors and producers a shop can recruit, the wider its coverage and the deeper its well of supply. The more recruiters and publicists it employs, the more customers and staff it will attract. This level of recruitment dwarfs Western darknet markets, where reliance on postal deliveries allows vendors to keep teams small or operate alone. The model has also spawned a wide range of contractors who are paid by shops to carry out various tasks, from experts in marketing and recruitment to chemists and thugs for hire.



## Couriers (Кладмена – kladmen)

Since there are several thousand darknet drug shops in more than 1 000 towns and cities, dead-dropping more than 400 000 packages a month, it can be concluded that thousands of couriers operate in Russia.<sup>63</sup> In their entry-level role, like street dealers in the traditional drug trade model, couriers have been described as the Russian model's 'cannon fodder'.<sup>64</sup>



Advertisements for jobs as couriers ('kladmen') from vendors on Mega. Photo: Mega screenshot

Most couriers must provide a small security deposit to get the job, with the exact amount depending on factors such as location and drug type.<sup>65</sup> The deposit acts as a deterrent against couriers stealing drugs. However, those who cannot afford it are given a second option to clinch a job, which is to submit photo evidence of their ID documents as security.<sup>66</sup> Providing personal details can cause couriers problems later, such as being doxxed by their employers and located by thugs paid to punish them.

Drug vendors give couriers the locations of large dead drops of drugs in their area, known as 'master stashes'. If a master stash is not already broken down, couriers must divide it into retail-size bags before dead-dropping packages in hiding places and uploading the locations to the shop.<sup>67</sup> For each location, couriers must then create and upload the instructions and photos, known as 'the quest', that buyers use to find the drugs they have bought online. Couriers liaise with their shop's 'operators', who act as customer service staff, and sometimes need to help them if buyers cannot find their drugs.

According to a Russian lawyer who specializes in representing people arrested and convicted for drug offences, most of the couriers he encounters are aged 18–25, although some are younger and

some are middle-aged. They want to earn extra money for reasons including feeding a drug habit, leaving home, paying debts or buying items such as iPhones and bicycles. Couriers have often been customers of shops.<sup>68</sup>

Dead drops can be almost anywhere – under windowsills, behind drainpipes and lamp-posts or in apartment buildings' shared entrances. The most common dead drops are in suburban parks and woodlands, where there is less footfall and drugs are easier to hide.

There are three main dead drop techniques: buried, magnet or cache. Burying packages a couple of inches under the ground or snow, usually on the outskirts of cities, is seen as safest way to avoid thefts. Strapping a small magnet to packages with electrical tape enables them to be attached under or behind metal items in urban areas and picked up quickly. Caches are more basic hiding places, such as under stones, in holes in walls or in containers like cigarette packets.

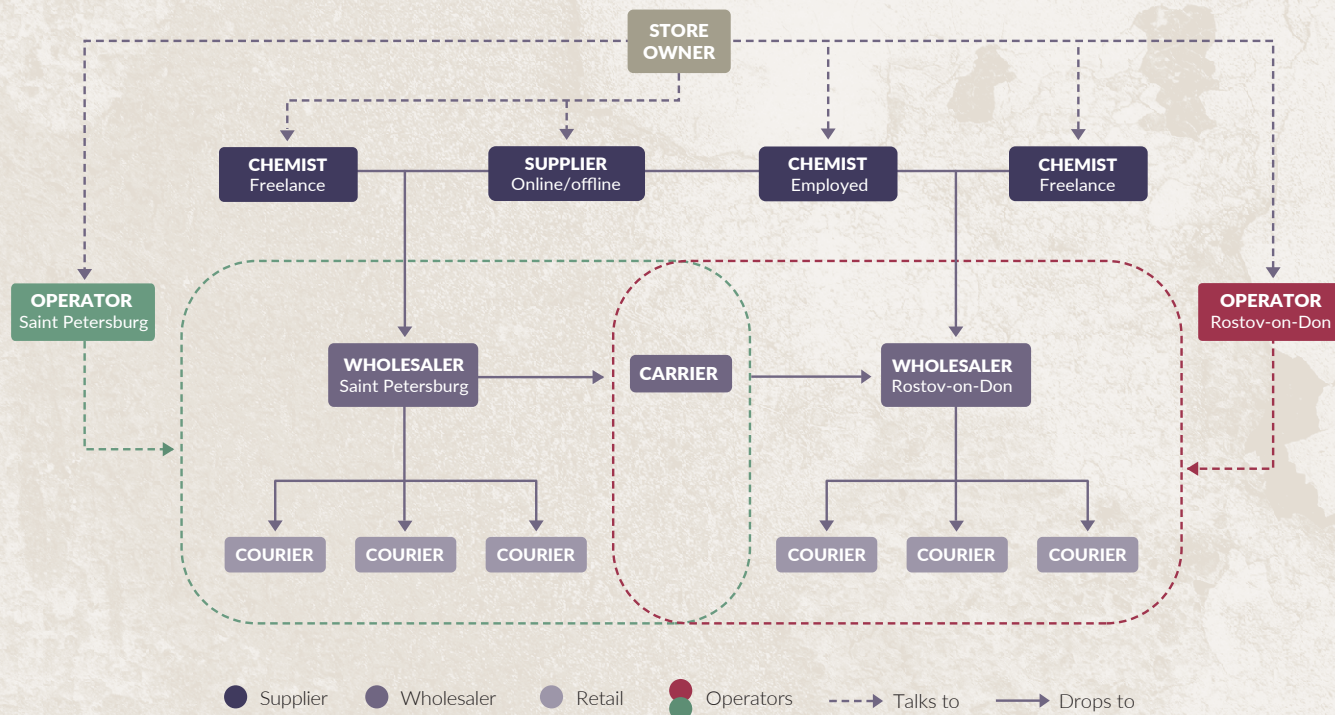
Couriers have their own downloadable 26-page how-to guide, the *Kladman's Bible*, first published and distributed by RAMP and updated by Hydra, which instructs them how best to stash drugs. They are advised, for example, how to behave to avoid suspicion. 'You need to look normal, average, but neat, and most importantly, move confidently, calmly. You don't have to turn your head like an idiot to focus your eyes on a specific subject,' the *Kladman's Bible* says. 'Don't act suspicious or be in a hurry; don't go around dressed like a punk or a hobo; and by the same measure don't go in a suit and tie either. It would be weird if someone sees an office manager crawling around the bushes.'<sup>69</sup>

Good hiding places, according to the guide, are 'where the customer has to reach their hand around somewhere', such as tall bushes and electrical transformer boxes. Bad places are near schools, cemeteries and police stations (because they can draw unwanted attention), apartment block courtyards (because the gates might be closed when the customer gets there) and gutters (unless packages are waterproofed). Yet couriers have chosen strange places for dead drops; one former courier said they had known of drugs being put in animal corpses and attached by magnets under parked cars, to a police station, on a house roof and under a train seat.<sup>70</sup>

Couriers are also warned to consider the wintry Russian weather by making sure dead drops are not impossible to find due to snowfall, and that their footprints do not attract police or the specialist thieves, known as 'seagulls' or 'changelings', who search for dead-dropped drugs. Seagulls have been known to track couriers as they make drops, picking up the drugs as they go along.<sup>71</sup> Although exact locations will differ, the type of location often remains the same, so seagulls know the areas most likely to be used. As the *Kladman's Bible* says, part of the skill of a good courier is to make sure a dead drop is not easily found by a seagull. It warns couriers to be extra careful when hiding drops around Metro stations because 'even though it's more convenient for customers, it's also more convenient for seekers'.<sup>72</sup>

The former courier we interviewed said it was important for a courier to 'create a hidden subsystem' on their mobile phone so that if police checked it, they wouldn't be able to find photos of dead drops.<sup>73</sup> Another courier said they reduced the time they were on the streets with a backpack full of *klads* by carrying out reconnaissance first, mapping out where they would put packages before returning with their stash to quickly hide and photograph the dead drops.<sup>74</sup>

This drug selling system breaks down if the 'stashes' cannot be found by the buyer, either because they have been stolen, found by police, become detached from their hiding place, or their location



**FIGURE 3** Organogram of Russian darknet vending networks.

SOURCE: Information supplied by TRM Labs

has been badly described. ‘They [the shop owners] would send us educational materials on how to hide drugs using a magnet,’ said a courier in Kyrgyzstan, one of the countries where Russian-style darknet dead drop markets have spread. ‘The longer you work the more you’re entrusted with, and [you] earn bigger bonuses. The worst is when someone doesn’t find the treasure and they’ll take it from your salary.’<sup>75</sup>

In a role reminiscent of the character Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, who schools London street urchins in the art of pickpocketing, a Russian drug shop owner said he employs a ‘mentor’ to train new couriers.<sup>76</sup> Customer feedback on online shops will often be reflective of the skill of the courier in making their dead drop safe and easy to find.<sup>77</sup>

A criminologist said couriers, most often 16 to 23 years old, are the exposed underbelly of the darknet dead drop model ‘because you spend more time outside having something risky and you maximize the chance that police can stop you and look into your phone, and then start searching you for drugs.’<sup>78</sup> Due to the risks involved, the financial reward is good compared to most jobs in Russia.<sup>79</sup> A former courier who took the job to earn money while studying said they were paid 800–1 000 rubles (US\$8.50–US\$10.70) per dead drop,<sup>80</sup> while a former shop operator from Moscow said although payments varied by the type of drug and the size of the package, on average couriers were paid 800 rubles (US\$8.50) per dead drop.<sup>81</sup> The former courier said ‘without any stress’ they could earn about 50 000 rubles (US\$535) a week<sup>82</sup> – more than double the average weekly wage – by making 10–15 drops a day.<sup>83</sup> Interviewees said couriers now earn about twice as much per dead drop as they did

several years ago. A shop owner said in 2018 he earned about 300 rubles (US\$3.20) per dead drop while working for a shop on Hydra.<sup>84</sup>

According to a Russian journalist, the ranks of couriers have swelled due to the 'harsh social situation' for young people: low wages, high inflation and a lack of prospects. Darknet markets and drug shops are packed with adverts and promotional videos aimed at would-be couriers, usually with inflated claims about how much they will earn and how safe the work is. As with street dealers in the traditional drug trade, couriers face a higher risk of arrest, violence or robbery than anyone else working for drug-selling outfits because they are the most exposed employees.<sup>85</sup>

The Russian shop owner said his business had 40 couriers in two cities and employee turnover was high. Due to the anonymized nature of this drug trade model, he had little idea who they were or why they stopped working, although he deduced from colleagues who worked more closely with couriers that most of them were men in their 20s. 'If kladmen disappear, you don't know where they went, maybe they overdosed or just stole drugs or got caught by the cops. We try to work as a well-coordinated stable team but there is still a lot of turnover. Of those who worked for me a year ago, now only one person remains.'<sup>86</sup>

## Wholesalers (Склад) and carriers (Перевозчик)

Wholesalers, a more senior role, oversee local supply centres where couriers replenish their drug stocks. They are also called stockists or warehousemen. Because they look after large stashes, wholesalers are well paid and often recruited by shops from among their most trusted couriers, rather than from the street. According to a Russian journalist, wholesalers must provide shops with large deposits to secure this role and can earn up to 2 million rubles (US\$21 000) a month.<sup>87</sup>

Wholesalers store drugs in rented garages or homes, usually on the outskirts of cities. They supply couriers with master stashes (*masterklads*) which are large weights of drugs, for example 100–200 grams, which are usually buried, also on the outskirts of cities or towns, and which the courier retrieves and divides into individual drops. Sometimes wholesalers divide their stashes into individual packages for the couriers. Tips available for wholesalers include wearing gloves and never flashing your money or working while drunk.<sup>88</sup>

Wholesalers are in close contact with shop managers, operators and carriers to maintain stock levels.<sup>89</sup> While they are less exposed than couriers because they make far fewer drops, if they are caught their prison sentences tend to be long because they carry large amounts of drugs, sometimes many kilos. Wholesalers collect stock from carriers, also known as transporters, who move drugs in bulk across regions by car, truck, public transport or aeroplane.<sup>90</sup>

Carriers, who must also provide shops with large deposits to secure a job, often receive their heavy-weight drug stashes direct from producers. For example, a carrier will move mephedrone manufactured in St Petersburg to Moscow. According to the journalist, if carriers are using a train they stuff a backpack with drugs and only use small, unpoliced stations. Those using cars will have hidden compartments custom-made to stash their drugs.<sup>91</sup>

Payment for this work varies depending on distance, method of transportation and the type of drugs being carried.<sup>92</sup> According to one darknet shop, carriers can earn about 500 000 rubles (US\$5 000)

for a week's work.<sup>93</sup> A journalist said they are paid an average of 200 000 rubles (US\$2 000) per trip.<sup>94</sup> Carriers are vulnerable links in distribution networks as they are upstream of wholesalers and couriers. If they are arrested, their drops can be controlled by police to arrest other staff members.

## Shop operators (Операторы)

Operators have a mix of outward-facing customer service and inward-facing managerial duties for shops, working purely online and often from home. They support couriers by giving them the drop locations of master stashes, and they assist buyers and manage disputes. They are also a point of contact between couriers, wholesalers and shop owners. According to one job description, the operator is a 'key employee of the shop' whose diligence and professionalism is vital to its popularity and financial success.<sup>95</sup>

A former operator in his early 20s worked until recently for a Moscow shop selling Russian-made mephedrone, methadone and alpha-PVP, and imported cocaine, on the Mega and Blacksprut markets. He got the job after being an active member of the shop's Telegram channel, which he later oversaw. To do the job, he said, 'you must be able to cope with stress and always be on call, because you're always taking orders, handling payments and assigning locations'.



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- 👉 Грамотно излагать свои мысли в тексте
- 👉 Отлично владеть компьютером
- 👉 Находить контакт с людьми
- 👉 Решать конфликтные ситуации

A job advertisement for an operator with a shop on Blacksprut. Photo: Blacksprut

His duties involved moderating the shop's chat, closing and reopening the chat if it was spammed by a disgruntled customer, and helping buyers find dead drops. During his time at the shop, one of its most efficient couriers was arrested but let off because the shop was willing to bribe police to let him go. His duties also included hiring thugs to inflict punishment beatings on couriers who had stolen product.

He claims to have earned 5 per cent commission on sales and received bonuses for recruiting couriers. He said often customers tried to scam the shop by saying they had been given the wrong drug, but the shop had a system to make sure this could not happen. The source admitted that he secretly scraped off his own commission from Bitcoin transactions. He was able to leave his job unscathed after being accused of scamming money.<sup>96</sup>

***In the Middle Ages in Russia, ordinary people brought to despair went to the woods and became outlaws. Now, they are hiding on the dark web to become drug dealers.***

- OWNER OF AN ONLINE DRUG SHOP

## **Shop owners (Владельцы магазинов)**

These are the entrepreneurs of the darknet drug market world, with total control over strategy, paying staff, sourcing drugs and the shop's Bitcoin wallets.<sup>97</sup> Some owners are hands-on while others employ managers.<sup>98</sup> It is not uncommon for shop owners to rise from the ranks of couriers and operators.

One shop owner with 10 000-plus sales on the Kraken marketplace said they operate two shops, one serving Russia and the other for Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, they sell drugs via cryptocurrency and dead drops, although it is unclear whether this supply is imported or made in local labs.

The shop owner had previously worked for someone else as a courier, operator and wholesaler. He set up his first shop with savings of 600 000 rubles (US\$6 500). He said that while couriers are now being paid at least twice what they earned six years ago for dead drops, the wholesale and retail prices of drugs had also increased. In 2018, shops were buying a kilo of mephedrone for 200 000–230 000 rubles (US\$2 000–US\$2 500), while it now costs 700 000 rubles (US\$7 500). The shop owner said the price of a gram of mephedrone bought via darknet dead drops varies from as little as 2 300 rubles (US\$24) in major cities to 6 000 rubles (US\$64) in Siberian cities such as Kemerovo and Ulan-Ude.<sup>99</sup>

Another shop owner said she opened on Hydra five years ago with just 100 000 rubles (US\$1 000), which was enough for start-up costs and initial rent. She employed an operator, a wholesaler, a chemist (who sourced precursor drugs) and six couriers. 'Once you understand how everything works and decide you've had enough of feeding on the breadcrumbs off the master's table, you've just got to save up some money,' she said.<sup>100</sup>

This source said that while the big darknet markets fight dirty wars against each other, in her experience shops on these platforms sometimes collaborate, buying drugs from each other and sharing warnings about unreliable employees and police threats. Some have niches, such as focusing on cocaine and 'high quality' mephedrone or selling only cannabis.

The woman said life running an online drug shop was busy but she also had a good social life. 'I'm a very cautious person and I like to keep everything under control. But of course, I need to relax. I visit bars and cafes, watch TV shows and documentaries. Sometimes I go to visit friends in another city. I'd like to take a road trip across Russia one day, but right now it's just not possible. I'm just another person driven to the edge by high prices, low wages and a lack of hope for the future. In the Middle Ages in Russia, ordinary people brought to despair went to the woods and became outlaws. Now, they are hiding on the dark web to become drug dealers.'

For some darknet shop owners, selling drugs is just one revenue stream among much larger ones. The owner of a large shop on Kraken said he has 300 employees overseen by a 15-strong management team. His main business is weaponry, which is distributed around Russia by a team of dead drop couriers. The source, who is based in Geneva, Switzerland, also owns a lab that produces mephedrone, which is the other big money-maker in his shop. He said his life was not trouble free: at the time of speaking three couriers and one chemist were under arrest.<sup>101</sup>

## Interview with an online drug shop owner

### How did you become a shop owner?

I simply bought a wholesale batch of mephedrone, hired a courier, and packaged and delivered it. We worked through Hydra, then through Telegram, and now on Kraken. Before, I had a small legal business. I've owned this shop for five years, it's in the regions. I'm keeping it small so as not to attract attention.

### How many employees do you have?

Forty kladmen in two cities, three warehouses (sklad) that package drugs, three online operators, one curator/mentor who trains kladmen where to attach dead drops, and a troubleshooter.

### What do you sell, and how much?

We work with mephedrone and alpha-PVP. On a good Friday we sell about 400 grams, on other days much less. They buy more in the spring. We could enter the Moscow market to sell more but we are more visible there; that's why we work in the regions.

### How much money do you earn?

80–90 million rubles (about US\$850 000–US\$960 000) a year in revenue ... it's hard to know the net profit.

### Do you have any control over the drugs you sell?

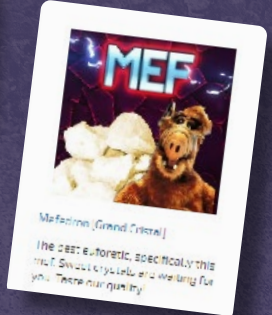
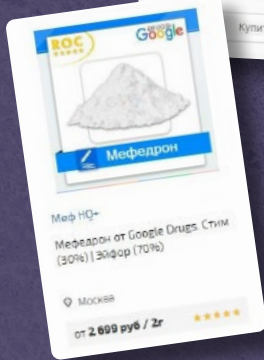
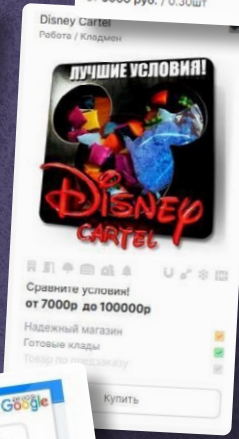
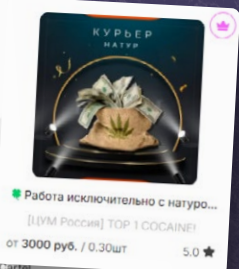
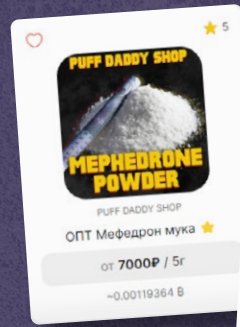
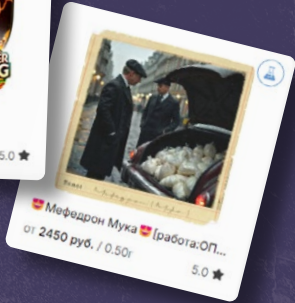
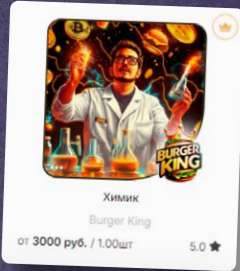
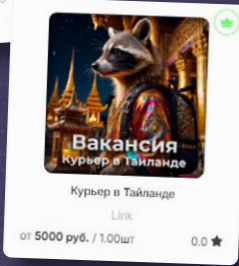
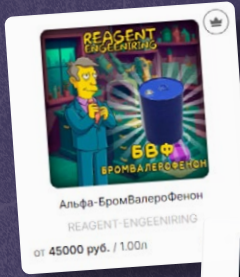
We buy from a good laboratory that we trust. Users don't complain either.

### What is your job like?

At the beginning there was a lot of work, now everything is simpler. I hardly spend time on management because we have reliable suppliers who organize transportation themselves. We have no problems with payments, we have no problems with the law. But not everyone does it like this, many prefer a manual management style, change suppliers, organize their own laboratories. This is all very tedious.

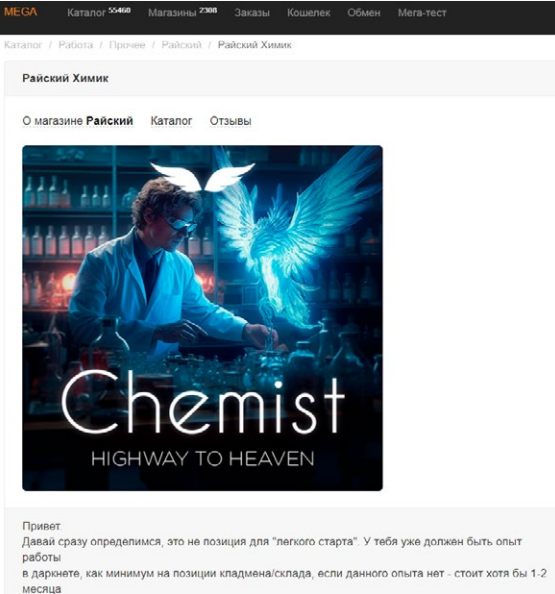
### What is the best thing about this job?

Money, the opportunity not to depend on the regime and politics, freedom to choose where to live and where to travel. I've been to London several times, it's a good city.



## Producers

Making drugs is a blossoming career path in Russia's novel drug landscape. Producers are either chemists who make synthetic drugs such as mephedrone and alpha-PVP, or growers who cultivate cannabis and 'magic mushrooms' (psilocybin). Across darknet markets, forums and individual shops there is a plethora of adverts for prospective chemists to produce mephedrone, a drug in high demand in Russia. Many of the thousands of shops on the darknet employ chemists to make drugs.




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A job advert for a chemist posted on Mega market (left) and for a grower with a shop on Blacksprut (below). Photos: Mega and Blacksprut



★★★★★ 0

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- Высокие зарплаты, качественный товар, бонусы
- Огромные скидки на товар для себя, дружная команда!
- Выплата по залитымкладам в чистом битке, монеро, на карту!
- !Г главное - человеческое отношение к каждому сотруднику!

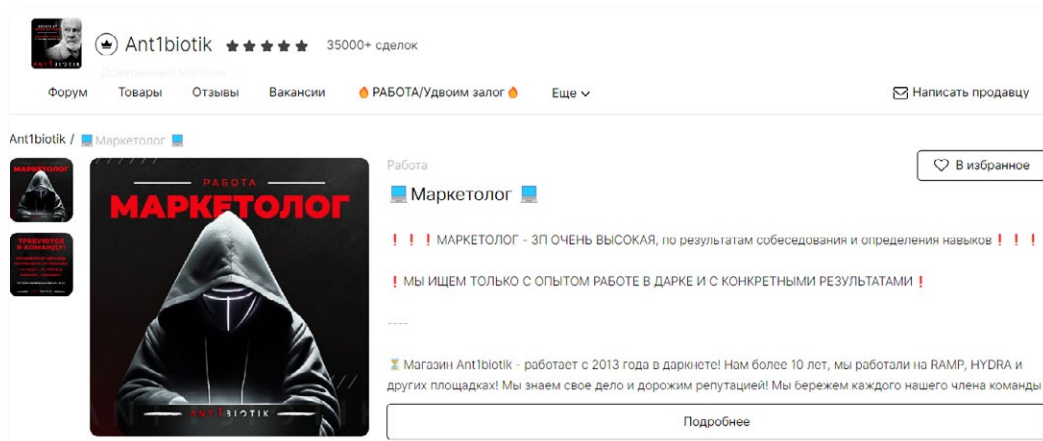
Five years ago, according to a Russian journalist, the usual career path for a drug shop courier was to become a wholesaler or an operator. But now it is common for couriers to become chemists or growers. Once couriers have saved some money, they inform the shop they want to become a chemist and receive the instructions and equipment they need in the post or via a dead drop. Sometimes, shops rent out a home for drug production.<sup>102</sup> 'That's why more and more people are involved in mephedrone production, it's so easy,' said the journalist.

Across darknet markets, forums and individual shops, there is a plethora of adverts for prospective chemists and growers. User-friendly drug production videos, articles and drug-making manuals are easily found on darknet marketplace forums, including instructions for sourcing precursor chemicals. Like growers, chemists are expected to sell their product to the shop, passing it to a carrier for distribution downstream.<sup>103</sup>



## Marketing and PR

Russia's darknet drug markets have made an array of expensively produced videos as competition has increased in the post-Hydra era. Shops post flyers on the streets and in clubs, often including a clearnet web address or a QR code for easy access.<sup>104</sup> Darknet markets have mirror images of their darknet sites on clearnet domains. One Russian journalist said that 'almost all key sites have acquired teams of marketers and PR specialists. They have developed quite clever strategies that help them, among other things, bypass YouTube's intelligent filters.'<sup>105</sup>

A screenshot of a job advertisement on the Kraken darknet market. The ad is for a 'Маркетолог' (Marketer) position. The header shows the shop name 'Ant1biotik' with a 5-star rating and '35000+ сделок' (35,000+ deals). Below the header, there are navigation tabs: 'Форум', 'Товары', 'Отзывы', 'Вакансии', 'РАБОТА/Удвоим залог', and 'Еще'. The main content of the ad features a large image of a person in a black hoodie with the word 'МАРКЕТОЛОГ' in red text. To the right of the image, the text reads: 'Работа Маркетолог', '!!! МАРКЕТОЛОГ - ЗП ОЧЕНЬ ВЫСОКАЯ, по результатам собеседования и определения навыков !!!', and 'Мы ИЩЕМ ТОЛЬКО С ОПЫТОМ РАБОТЕ В ДАРКЕ И С КОНКРЕТНЫМИ РЕЗУЛЬТАТАМИ !!!'. At the bottom, there is a paragraph: 'Магазин Ant1biotik - работает с 2013 года в даркнете! Нам более 10 лет, мы работали на RAMP, HYDRA и других площадках! Мы знаем свое дело и дорожим репутацией! Мы бережем каждого нашего члена команды'. A 'Подробнее' (More details) button is located at the bottom right of the ad.

A job advertisement for a marketing role for a shop on Kraken. *Photo: Kraken screenshot*

Marketing experts are either contracted or employed full time by shops, and by the markets that host them. They are responsible for a range of PR tactics including making videos, buying adverts on the Telegram channels of some of Russia's most popular streamers and bloggers, placing digital adverts in forums and markets, creating graphics, publicity stunts and promotional material,<sup>106</sup> as well as paying people to spray graffiti or put stickers on walls in public areas.<sup>107</sup>

Julia Finesse, a popular Telegram drug scene blogger, was paid by two darknet markets to have their logos tattooed on her neck. Her boyfriend, a famous Russian rapper, was also being paid to advertise darknet markets. Former drug blogger Vasilina Vorobyova, known as Hanna Montana, was described by Russian internet watchdog Ekaterina Mizulina as 'one of the largest bloggers in Russia promoting drugs and shops selling illegal substances'.

Claiming to have 70 000 followers on her Telegram channel, Vorobyova said she 'led an unhealthy lifestyle, behaved immorally, and it caught people's attention'. She posted videos showing her snorting powders and smoking from a bong, and sold advertising for darknet markets and online shops via a manager who took a 30 per cent cut.<sup>108</sup>

Vorobyova said when she reached 5 000 subscribers, a Blacksprut advert pinned at the top of her channel earned her 120 000 rubles (US\$1 200). She received a one-off payment of 100 000 rubles (US\$1 000) from Blacksprut for promising to post pictures of herself wearing its merchandise three times a week; and 5 000–10 000 rubles (US\$50–US\$100) for pre-weekend video clips in which she told viewers to 'buy on Blacksprut'. She was arrested in 2023, fined 30 000 rubles (US\$320) for insulting the authorities, and said she was forced to strip and later record an apology video that was sent to Mizulina. She stopped blogging in 2023 and is awaiting her latest trial, for wearing a Blacksprut T-shirt.<sup>109</sup>

**With dead drops, you have the illusion that drugs can be purchased more safely.**

Russia's biggest drug dealing platforms release promotional videos on social media, including YouTube, with the same production values of big corporations or pop stars. Sometimes backed by rap music, they have titles such as 'How they brew drugs in Russia'<sup>110</sup>, 'How they brew Mephedrone: Tour of Cartel Laboratories'<sup>111</sup> and 'The Future of Shadow Business'.<sup>112</sup> Some videos come with a cultural, philosophical arc that mirrors 'red pill' right-wing tropes about ultra-masculine living.

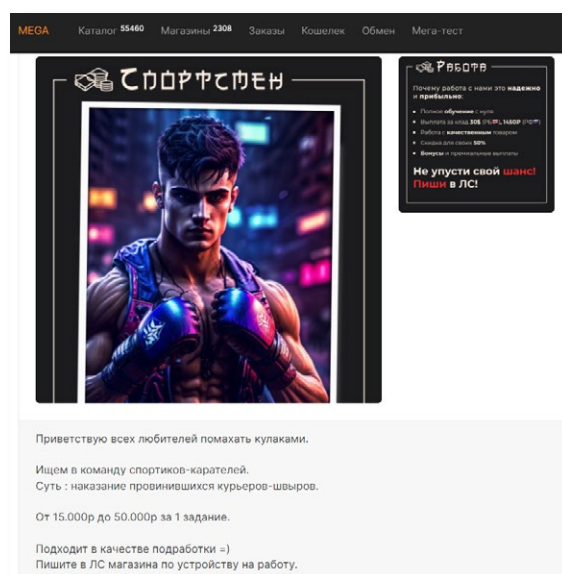
In one video, Moriarty, the masked figurehead boss of Russia's largest market, Mega, who has 2.8 million followers, gives Jordan Peterson-like advice about cleaning your room to be a better man.<sup>113</sup> These darknet market personalities, including Blacksprut's new masked character Jessica Ocean, can be thought of as 'market mascots' that subtly promote the drug market while attempting lifestyle or influencer campaigns, linking the world of kladmen with self-actualization.

A PR manager working for a company specializing in darknet marketing said they had been working for Blacksprut for about two years, promoting the market on numerous Telegram and YouTube channels, including producing videos straight out of the US hip-hop playbook. They said their main aim was to build traffic on social networks because increased traffic equates to increased drug deals. Some shops employ specialist recruitment services to attract workers, such as couriers and operators, by advertising on forums and Telegram groups. Larger vendor networks have human resources managers who oversee recruitment.<sup>114</sup>

## Sportsmen (Спортсмены)

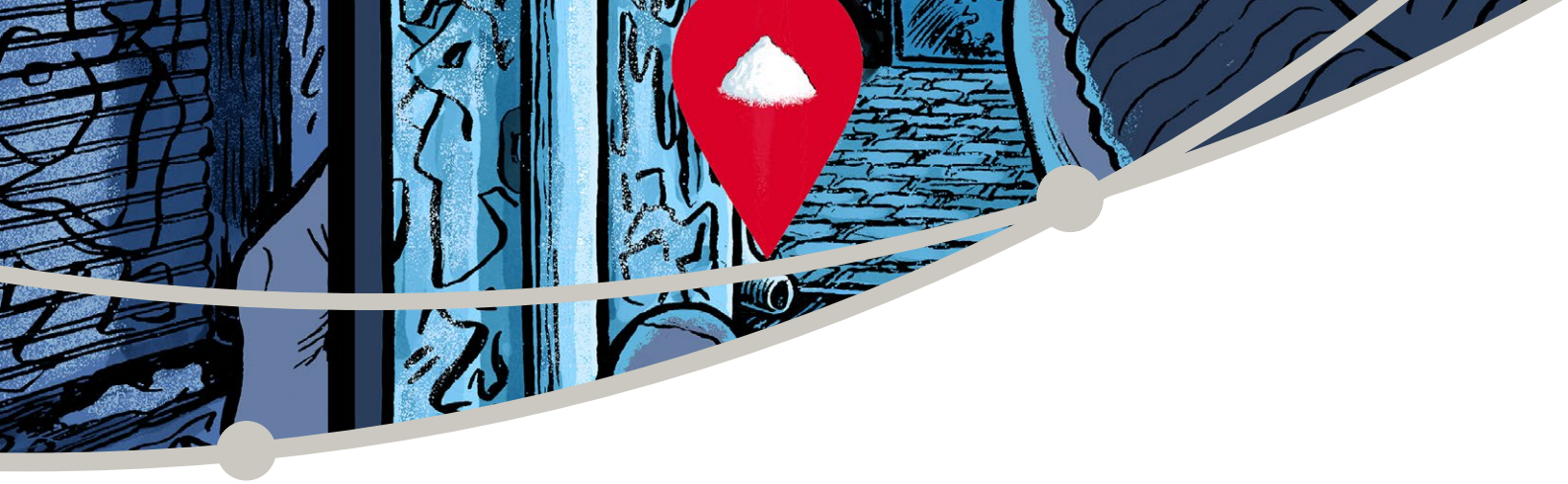
These are the enforcers employed by shops to punish couriers who get too many bad reviews, try to steal drugs or money or try to quit their jobs.<sup>115</sup> They are also employed to target the 'seagulls' who search for and steal dead-dropped drugs. 'Sportsmen' is a long-established term in Russia for criminal muscle, derived from the key role devotees of boxing clubs and judo dojos played in organized crime in the late 1980s and 1990s.<sup>116</sup>

Sportsmen advertise their services on forums such as RuTor, and on Telegram. Some have claimed to work for one vendor network, while others are freelancers who offer their services to many shops.



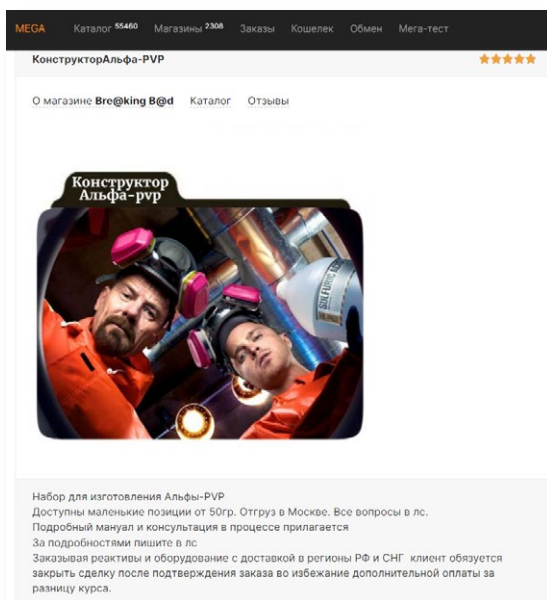
An owner of a large online shop in Russia said he had his 'own division' of sportsmen who would 'carry out murder' if they had to.<sup>117</sup> A shop operator said they 'took an active role' in tracking down couriers for sportsmen 'using passport details and certain services' if they consistently tricked the shop out of drugs. The operator said: 'But what exactly the sportsmen did [to the target] I don't know, that was someone else's responsibility.'<sup>118</sup>

**A job advertisement looking to recruit a 'sportsman' for a shop on Mega.** Photo: Mega screenshot



## DRUG PRODUCTION: HOW SELLERS BECAME PRODUCERS

Since the rise of darknet markets in Russia, the country's drug using landscape has altered. Drugs are increasingly being produced in large quantities by a mix of small and large-scale labs, mainly in Russia but also in neighbouring countries, effectively the process of near-shoring. The result is a steep rise in the use of synthetic cathinones such as mephedrone and alpha-PVP. Mephedrone, in particular, has become the substance of choice for a growing number of people, especially younger Russians.<sup>119</sup> As one online shop owner put it, mephedrone has become a 'new religion' in Russia. 'I see what is happening in the market, I communicate with colleagues and competitors. Sales [of mephedrone] in large shops are growing very strongly. Many new laboratories are being created.'<sup>120</sup>



An advertisement on Mega listing the equipment needed to produce alpha-PVP.

Photo: Mega screenshot

As noted, there has been a rise in sales, seizures and criminal cases involving cathinones. The substances are cheap and especially easy to make, and they lend themselves to dead drop dealing because customers tend to want them quickly and frequently. So illegal drug lab chemists are in high demand, and online shops and markets have played an active role in Russia's shifting drug menu.

★★★★★ 5

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ПОЛНЫЙ СПИСОК ПОСУДЫ - ПО ЗАПРОСУ В ЛС!!!

Если вы в данном разделе - то вы серьёзно настроены и хотите варить самый топовый меф на рынке, но без правильно обустроенной лабы - это невозможно. У нас вы сможете купить всё для варки своего детища, от конструкторов до полноценной лаборатории под ключ! Мы так же готовы поделиться личным опытом варки, как вы можете видеть, мы сами являемся производителями ( на нашей витрине продаются кристаллы мефедрона), так что если вы хотите узнать, как быстро и беспелевно сварить ОГРОМНЫЕ и чистые кристаллы мефа - милости просим в лс). На витрине представлены не все товары, ПОЛНЫЙ ПЕРЕЧЕНЬ КОНСТРУКТОРОВ / ПОСУДЫ + возможность доставки до вашего города ( не переживайте, НЕ ПОЧТОЙ, у нас только реальные клады) - уточните в лс. По Москве и Питеру отгруз так же кладами в укромных местах в максимально сжатые сроки.  
P.S. на витрине представлены 3 набора, бюджетный - средний и дорогой. Различие составляющих в каждом из наборов напрямую влияет на запах, конечный выхлоп продукта, метод приготовления и многое другое. Подробности уточняйте в лс.

An advertisement on Blacsprut for precursors and equipment to make mephedrone. *Photo: Blacsprut*

In traditional drug markets, the groups distributing drugs are usually different and distant from the entities making them. Cocaine sold in North America is produced by networks in South America.<sup>121</sup> Heroin sold in Europe is made in Afghanistan, although stockpiles of this product are being stretched due to the Taliban's 2022 poppy-growing ban.<sup>122</sup> Most meth sold in Australia is produced in the Golden Triangle.<sup>123</sup> Ecstasy pills sold in the UK are made in the Netherlands.<sup>124</sup>

But in Russia it's the retail vendors - the big online shops - that have become major producers. And while drugs such as heroin and cocaine are still available, drug networks rely less on expensive and risky smuggling routes from South America and Afghanistan.<sup>125</sup> This means there is less need to maintain links with the traditional organized crime groups and trafficking routes associated with them.

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Всем привет, друзья! Мы варим лучший меф на районе, заморачиваемся на чистоте продукта, чистом эйфорическом эффекте и многом другом. Так почему бы и вас не научить варить такой же крутой меф? Сказано - сделано! Отныне мы отгружаем любые прекурсоры для варки и кристаллизации мефедрона, в наличии есть любая ПОСУДА, от колб бунзена, до реакторов. Если вы только начинаете свой путь хим, с удовольствием возьмём вас под крыло и расскажем, как избежать запахов при варке, правильно под помещение, вырастить ОГРОМНЫЕ И ЧИСТЫЕ кристаллы, а главное, как варить годами и ОСТАВАТЬСЯ СВОБОДЕ! Ну а для опытных бойцов - дадим хороший прайс на реакенты и обеспечим надёжный канал поставки. Отгрузки всех предзаказов выполняются, как правило, в течении 1-3 дней.

Моментальный Предзаказ

Москва

Любой район

|  |                 |        |                |          |
|--|-----------------|--------|----------------|----------|
| Москва: За городом до 15км<br>За городом до 15км | Тайник          | 500.0r | 0.00260910 BTC | 15000 ru |
| Москва: За городом от 15км<br>За городом от 15км | Земляной прикоп | 20.0л  | 0.00852306 BTC | 49000 ru |

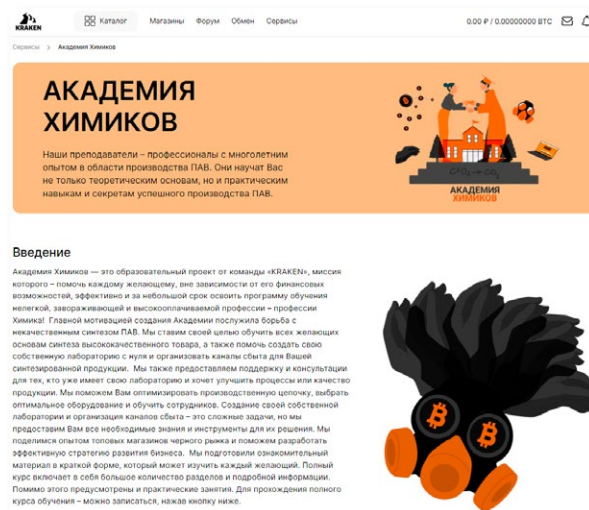
An example of a precursor vendor on Kraken offering support to buyers in manufacturing methamphetamine.

*Photo: Kraken*

Russia's online shops have spawned a network of small-scale, local drug producers. The consequence is that it is easy to buy synthetic drugs in remote places such as Siberia because producers are close to the markets. Darknet markets are populated with adverts not just for drugs but for cooks, growers and precursor chemicals.<sup>126</sup> These markets also provide support for people who want to become drug producers, such as help obtaining lab equipment and precursors, written guides for lab workers, and videos demonstrating drug manufacturing.

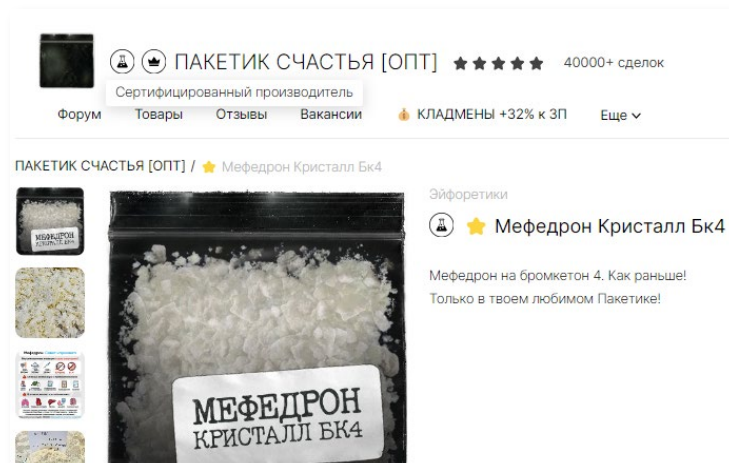
Many of the online shops sell precursor chemicals and equipment, and provide video tutorials on drug synthesis, while synthetic drug chemists and cannabis growers play critical roles in supplying online shops with the products they need to flourish.<sup>127</sup>

'Precursor kits' allow individuals to create one-off batches of drugs and sell them immediately to a network for profit. This 'gig economy' approach encourages people who may not want to work regularly with a market to involve themselves in drug production.



Kraken's so-called Academy of Chemists provides Udey-style online learning to would-be drug producers. *Photo: Kraken*

However, the market platforms are not idle bystanders to this push to recruit drug producers. They have a vested interest in promoting the sale of these easily made, addictive drugs. Sites such as Kraken, Mega and OMG! OMG! support the production of drugs in numerous ways, some unique to them and others broadly shared. All provide a dedicated space to sell precursors, laboratory equipment and consultations with drug manufacturers so the uninitiated can learn how to operate their own laboratory.



A vendor with 'certified manufacturer' status on Kraken advertising its 'certified product', mephedrone. *Photo: Kraken*

Some go further, like Kraken's 'certified manufacturer' status, which helps producers refine the chemical processes involved in making drugs and allows them to have their product 'certified' by the market's laboratory team to show its purity. Similarly, Mega's 'Test' service provides an unsolicited review of a shop's drugs and certifies their purity. Almost all the markets have a knowledge exchange space on their drug production forums, answering questions on methods, precursors, equipment, sourcing and selling finished product. In this way, the markets shape the drug landscape in Russia towards synthesized cathinones, knowing that every user who learns to be a chemist is helping feed and drive the popularity of these drugs, increasing sales and commissions.

What is less clear is whether darknet markets are producing their own drugs for sale. Ostensibly, these platforms are simply e-commerce markets for illicit goods. However, there are close relationships between platforms and some of their most favoured shops. These shops have high ratings, certified product ratings, and appear regularly in coveted 'top vendor' spaces on the front page of market websites. It is hard to say if this seeming favouritism is simply a coincidence borne out of shops' popularity and success or if markets are investing in specific vendors while claiming to be independent of them.

It appears likely that darknet markets drove consumption of these easy-to-make synthetic stimulant drugs – cheap substitutes for cocaine, amphetamines and MDMA – in a region where consumers could rarely afford the real thing. Since the 2010s, Western sanctions, trade restrictions and the war in Ukraine have combined to severely limit the ability of Russia's established organized crime groups to import and profit from traditional drugs. An investigation by Lenta.Ru concluded that drug imports were severely hampered in 2016 after the arrest of two of the most powerful people in Russian cross-border illicit trade.<sup>128</sup>



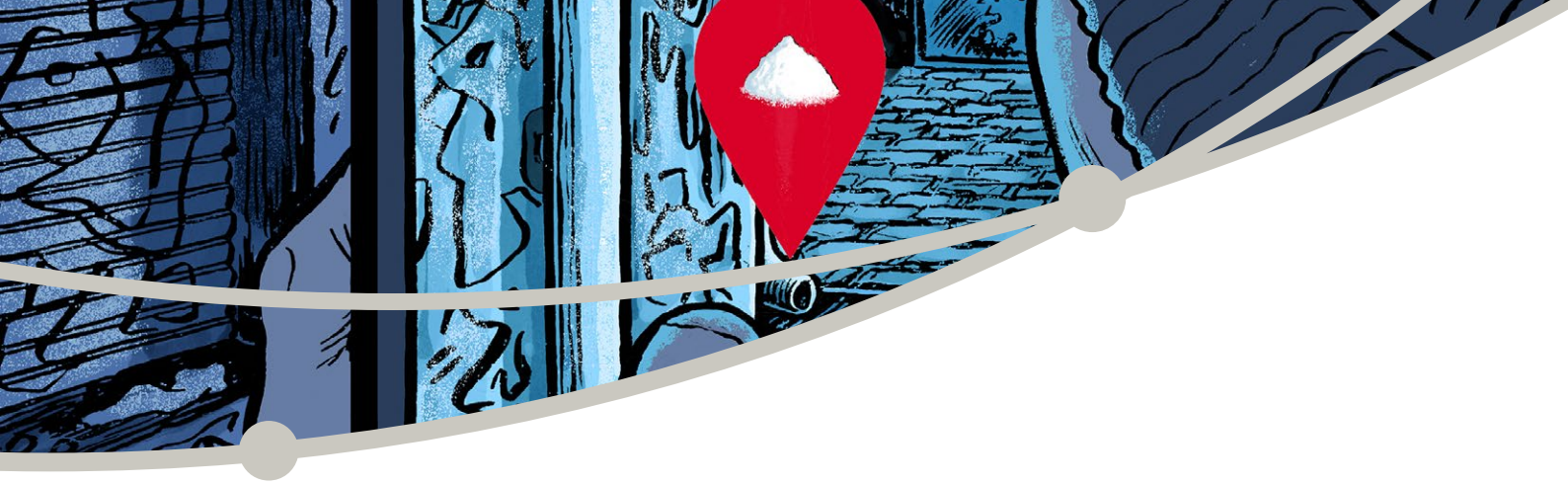
An advertisement posted on the surface web by a Chinese producer stating that the precursor to mephedrone is available from a Moscow warehouse. *Photo supplied*

The expansion of synthetic drug production in Russia necessitates an ample supply of the required precursor chemicals. As is the case with the Mexican cartels making fentanyl, most of the precursors imported into Russia come from factories in countries such as India and China.<sup>129</sup> According to one Russian journalist, for over a decade mephedrone precursors have been coming over the border from China and via Kazakhstan, which is in a customs union with Russia, meaning reduced border checks.<sup>130</sup> This is supported by previous investigations,<sup>131</sup> one of which found the chemicals have been smuggled in containers 'under the guise of fertilizers, insect control products [and] household and industrial chemicals.'<sup>132</sup>

The China link is further cemented by the fact that Chinese factories advertise mephedrone and alpha-PVP precursors to Russians on the clearnet and on darknet markets, and by reports to NGOs of the presence of Chinese precursors in Russian supply chains.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, synthetic drugs lend themselves well to the dead drop method of dealing. Hiring a chemist in the city allows vendors to reduce transport costs and have control over purity, an important factor for sales in a competitive market.

By providing certified production and drug testing, and advice on safer drug use, these darknet markets encourage customers to believe they care about harm reduction. However, this claim should be met with scepticism. Russian darknet markets have no problem with their vendors advertising for hired muscle to assault their own employees, nor do they seem to mind that young people are encouraged into dangerous jobs placing drugs all over cities. The claim that 'reducing harm' to drug users is at the core of their model, therefore, is somewhat doubtful.

However, these markets understand that improving drug quality will probably increase sales, and doing so under the guise of 'harm reduction' is positive PR. After Hydra was shut down, Mega's mascot, Moriarty, claimed the platform's 'testing service' was a scam to drive sales. Mega then launched a testing service of its own with a 'Mega Tested' badge that encourages users to buy specific products. It would seem Russian darknet markets are savvy in using tropes of harm reduction and purity to drive sales. But the harms this model of drug dealing creates are very real.



## THE HUMAN COST OF RUSSIA'S NEW DRUG TRADE: VIOLENCE, PRISON AND PSYCHOSIS

**E**ven though Russia's dead drop drug trade operates in a way that limits the conditions for turf wars and is highly anonymized, the darknet market is generating a new form of violence while sending thousands of young people to prison and fuelling a pernicious new drug problem.

### Violence

As mentioned above, Russia's drug vendor networks employ enforcers, or 'sportsmen', to maintain law and order in the drug economy. Couriers who are found to be unreliable or incompetent, who attract too many complaints when customers can't find their drugs, or who are suspected of stealing product can be subjected to serious violence.<sup>134</sup>

When a courier is targeted, they are either tracked down by sportsmen using the ID information they provided to the vendor network that hired them, or they are directed to pick up a dead drop where they are ambushed.<sup>135</sup> Many of these victims are forced to apologize and beg for forgiveness on camera, and 'brilliant green' – an antiseptic solution containing a dye that is hard to wash off – is poured over them to deepen their humiliation.

In videos of the violence, it is routine to see people being beaten with fists and metal bars and having their fingers broken. In extreme cases, thugs cut off fingers, set hair on fire, nail hands to trees or planks and sexually assault victims.<sup>136</sup> In at least one case, a courier died due to the severity of their injuries.<sup>137</sup>

Some Telegram groups feature up to 2 000 videos of such attacks, which have the dual purpose of punishing miscreants and warning others. The Russian courts have convicted numerous sportsmen for beating and torturing people.<sup>138</sup> In March 2024, the head of press for the Ministry of Internal Affairs released a video on Telegram which showed two young men writing 'Oleg, return the stash' on an apartment door in the city of Cheboksary, allegedly the home of a courier suspected of stealing drugs from a stash, before dousing it with petrol and setting it alight. It is alleged they were acting on behalf of a vendor network that paid them 10 000 rubles (about US\$100).<sup>139</sup> Videos on Telegram



claim enforcers will patrol areas known to be frequented by 'seagulls' to catch them and inflict similar beatings.

Sportsmen also operate in other countries with Russian-style dead drop markets, such as Belarus. In 2023, police in Belarus arrested a team of 14 sportsmen employed by a large online drug shop to punish couriers.<sup>140</sup> Charged with offences such as robbery, grievous bodily harm and sexual assault, the group, aged between 17 and 25, allegedly attacked couriers at the direction of shop owners who gave them passport details.<sup>141</sup>

The violence displayed in these networks – routine, organized and distributed through social media – is unique in the world of internet-facilitated drug markets. Western darknet markets have no comparable acts. In fact, defenders of the founder of Silk Road, Ross Ulbricht, make frequent reference to darknet markets facilitating non-violent exchange between customers and sellers of drugs. The Russian model appears to challenge this conventional wisdom about the relationship between darknet markets and violence.

## Incarceration

Like many working in the lower echelons of the global drug trade, Russia's dead-droppers exist between a rock and a hard place. Not only do they face being attacked by hired thugs, but the threat of a lengthy prison sentence looms large. There is growing evidence that significant numbers of kladmen, many of them young, end up serving lengthy sentences in an often-brutal prison system after being caught with small amounts of drugs.<sup>142</sup> As one Russian journalist said: 'It is important to understand that the Russian [drug market] model is not aimed at the convenience of drug shop employees. They are just consumables.'<sup>143</sup>

Russia has a track record of publicly stigmatizing drug users and subjecting them to harsh treatment within the criminal justice system.<sup>144</sup> The authorities view illegal drugs as 'symbolic pollutants of the country' and drug policy reform as a geopolitical threat from the West.<sup>145</sup> The policy emphasis is on punishment rather than public health and rehabilitation, so there are heavy sentences for possession and distribution. Couriers and customers are often charged under article 228 of the Russian criminal code, which covers possession, acquisition, storage and sale of drugs. The article is also known as 'the people's statute' because more people are imprisoned under this law than any other.<sup>146</sup> Jail terms of five to 10 years are common, with a maximum penalty of 15 years. Under this law, 2.5 grams of heroin and 1 gram of amphetamine are considered 'large' amounts meriting much longer sentences.

A quarter of the 467 000 people in prison in Russia before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine had been convicted of drug offences, higher than the European average of 17 per cent.<sup>147</sup> Between 2000 and 2017, the number of prisoners convicted for drug offences almost tripled.<sup>148</sup> Since the invasion, the prison population has shrunk massively due to the use of convicts on the front lines.<sup>149</sup> Reports from Russia show that young people sent to prison for non-violent drug offences have been killed in Ukraine after being recruited into military units with the promise of commuted sentences. Some have died in combat<sup>150</sup> and others were executed for desertion.

'More and more people are getting involved in this darknet drug business, they see it as the only option for them to make big money fast,' said a Russian journalist. 'For the youngsters especially, they see darknet drug selling as a very good way to build their career ladder. And of course, they go to jail, after all, because they often get caught.'<sup>151</sup>

A growing body of evidence suggests police performance quotas put pressure on civil servants to manipulate the amounts reported in cases to achieve higher sentencing thresholds.<sup>152</sup> Lawyer Arseny Levinson runs a legal aid service, Hand Help,<sup>153</sup> which specializes in helping young people arrested for drug offences.<sup>154</sup> According to his analysis of Russian Ministry of Justice statistics, more than half of those convicted of drug trafficking are 18–25 years old.<sup>155</sup> Data shows that 3 605 teenagers were jailed for drug offences between 2013 and 2020.<sup>156</sup> One courier who dead-dropped drugs was 18 when he was caught and sentenced to 13 years.<sup>157</sup> In an interview, his mother said he was now skinny, pale and sewed backpacks six days a week.<sup>158</sup> Another jailed courier was interviewed in Altai prison in Siberia by a local news site while serving a seven-year sentence for drug dealing.<sup>159</sup> He decided to become a dead-dropper after leaving the army and seeing a *kladman* recruitment advert while buying drugs online.

'Drug offenders are the biggest group because there's so many of them and they're sitting [in jail] for longer. It's harder to get out earlier for drug charges, like with terrorists and child molesters. But it's not only those hiding drugs that are imprisoned, but also those who pick them up: the dropmen and their customers,' Levinson said.<sup>160</sup>

## Health and drug dependence

Swathes of people in Russia have become regular users of the synthetic stimulant drugs that have become so prevalent since the rise of the darknet drug trade. As with other stimulant drugs such as amphetamine and methamphetamine, mephedrone use is linked to 'unpleasant comedowns, craving, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, paranoia and psychosis',<sup>161</sup> and according to one Russian doctor 'sleep disturbances, aggressiveness, panic attacks and a destabilization of the nervous system'.<sup>162</sup> One study concluded it has led to a rise in unsafe injecting of mephedrone, chemsex and the further spread of HIV in Russia.<sup>163</sup>

Alpha-PVP, known as 'flakka' in the US, is a more intense, potent cathinone than mephedrone and is reportedly most often used in Russia by people who inject drugs, former heroin users or people experiencing poverty.<sup>164</sup> It can cause mania, heart palpitations and hallucinations.<sup>165</sup> Data from the Russian Ministry of Health showed incidents of mental health episodes as a result of psychostimulant use – predominantly involving mephedrone and alpha-PVP – more than doubled between 2013 and 2017.<sup>166</sup>

Drug health data in Russia is patchy and unreliable. But what information there is points to a growing public health problem caused by the easy availability and rapid expansion in use and domestic production of synthetic cathinones. One harm reduction expert criticized the lack of data over the last six years on drug treatment, overdoses, drug dependence and HIV in Russia as a 'deliberate policy of silence', a statistical 'iron curtain'. The expert said stimulant drugs have usurped opioids to become the main cause of people seeking help for drug dependence, with a rise in cases of psychosis due to people bingeing on cathinones. He also reported that there is little help for young people who develop problems with cathinones.<sup>167</sup>

One Russian journalist said drug use has become more widespread. Almost half of Russians say it's easy to buy illegal drugs and the drugs are creating a hidden population of addicts.<sup>168</sup> He said he is seeing a rise in 'young professionals secretly addicted to mephedrone' after starting to use it recreationally, a trend that has remained behind closed doors because they seemingly lead normal lives. He said the consequences in 10 years' time of such widespread, heavy use of cathinones could be

**Alpha-PVP, a highly potent cathinone, has become linked to severe public health problems in Russia.**

*Photo: US Drug Enforcement Administration*



'very negative' to Russian society. Mephedrone has become a normalized drug among young people, with teenagers blogging about using it, young people wearing 'mephedrone' branded T-shirts and pop artists singing about the drug.<sup>169</sup>

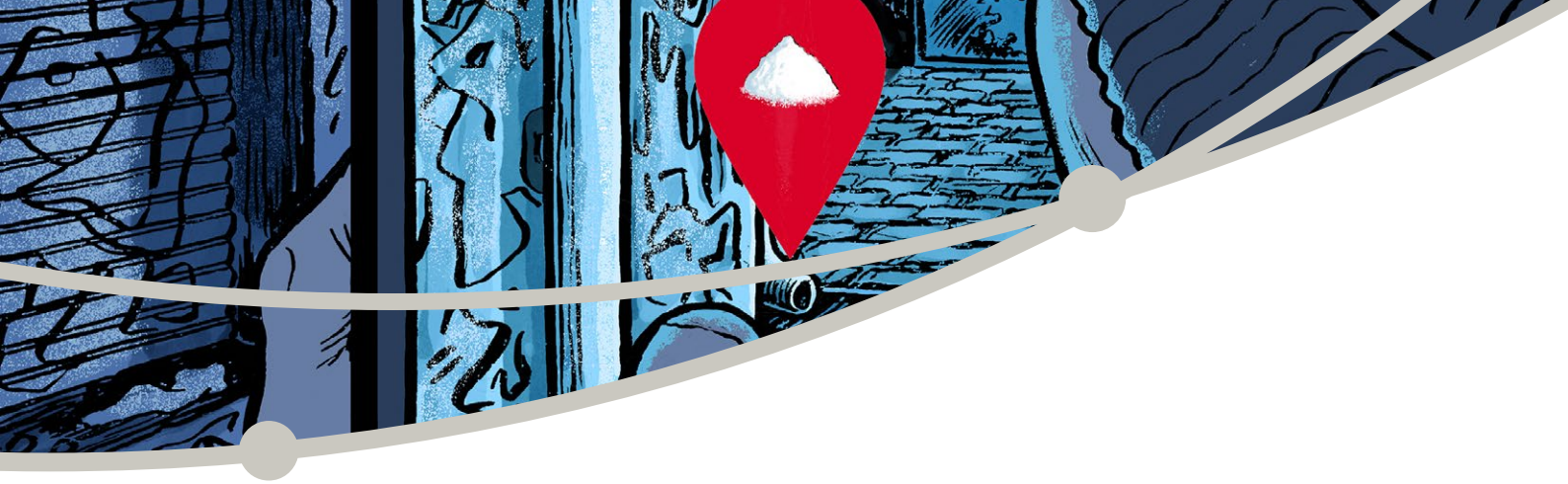
The drug market is also becoming increasingly deadly. Drug-related deaths in Russia doubled between 2019 and 2022, according to data from Russia's statistics office, Rosstat, and the signs are that this rise continued into 2023.<sup>170</sup> Among young people, the Ministry of Internal Affairs said drug-related deaths are reported by to have increased by a factor of 2.5 since 2017, with synthetic drugs – even though they may only have contributed to an overdose – being reported as a driver of this trend.<sup>171</sup>

In March 2024, the Russian representative at the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs discussed the impact in his country of the rise in novel psychoactive substances such as mephedrone and was reported to have confirmed an increase in drug-related deaths.<sup>172</sup> In neighbouring Kazakhstan, where darknet markets also operate, the number of children and adults registered as being 'addicted' to synthetic drugs increased by a factor of 17 between 2017 and 2023.<sup>173</sup>

While these figures should be treated with caution as both countries have strong prohibitionist approaches to drug policy that may shape reporting, they serve as data points that triangulate the increases in synthetic drug use and production that darknet markets have facilitated.

Finally, although not as alarming as the impact of violence, criminalization and drug dependence, several drug experts have raised the problem of how the dead drop system has affected everyday life in Russia. Despite the dangers to inquisitive children of powerful chemicals being hidden in public places, it is common for couriers to dead-drop drugs in large apartment blocks, of which there are many in and around the biggest cities.

This has created a problem for residents, whose entrance halls can be scoured by 'seagulls' seeking out hidden drugs. One drug expert said his communal hallway in St Petersburg had been 'wrecked' by people looking for drug drops and that this had become a common feature of urban life. As a result, many apartment block residents have WhatsApp groups where they discuss the threat of couriers and drug stash thieves using their blocks to hide and seek drugs.



## THE RESPONSE: HOW SUCCESSFULLY HAVE THE AUTHORITIES TACKLED THIS?

**H**ow have Russian authorities coped with this new manifestation of organized crime? As noted above, the general shift from hand-to-hand dealing to dead-dropping drugs does not appear to have hindered the police's ability to catch the most exposed, lowest-level actors in the drug trade – as is common across the world. According to a Russian lawyer, police regularly patrol popular dead drop sites, hoping for an easy arrest of a courier, a customer or a stash thief. Some wait on the outskirts of cities for people appearing with shovels.<sup>174</sup> But what about those higher up the chain, the shop wholesalers, operators and owners, and those running the platforms?

There is evidence that the police are catching more than just the couriers and drug users holding small amounts of drugs, and that the drug trade is facing increased 'heat', including from the Federal Security Service (FSB) in big cities such as Moscow and St Petersburg. 'Russian authorities are focused on catching the lower links of the chains - drug couriers, laboratory employees and those who transport drugs from one region to another,' said one Russian journalist. 'Sometimes there are raids that lead to a particular shop closing. But it is difficult to carry out such an operation against an entire marketplace.'<sup>175</sup>

Regular press releases on the Ministry of Internal Affairs website describe wholesale-level seizures and raids on drug labs. For example, in March 2023 a court in Leningrad Oblast jailed the organizers of a lab that produced three tons of alpha-PVP for between 17 years and life after stumbling across their network by accident while looking for stolen cars.<sup>176</sup> There are also successes online, with social media channels promoting drugs consistently being shut down by the authorities, only to reopen under a new guise.

The authorities have moved to combat the relentless PR machine, although getting darknet YouTube channels banned in Russia is not that effective as many young Russians access them using VPNs, as they do to visit Facebook and Instagram. Last year Ekaterina Mizulina, head of the Safe Internet League and a member of the Civic Chamber, raised the issue of bloggers being sponsored by drug dealers. One of them was found guilty of promoting drug propaganda and fined the equivalent of US\$1 100.<sup>177</sup>

'Such advertising can be placed in their groups or streams either by a person who is himself in an altered state, or by a puppet in the hands of drug shops, ready to do anything for the sake of immediate

profit,' said Mizulina, who had a long running public feud with the mascot of the Mega darknet market, Moriarty.<sup>178</sup> In June 2023, Moriarty sent flowers to Mizulina as part of a PR stunt for a video criticizing her anti-drug activism.<sup>179</sup> In response, she published a video of his flowers being dumped in a skip with the words, 'I don't accept flowers from enemies of Russia'.<sup>180</sup>

In the West, law enforcement devotes huge resources to targeting high-level drug market operatives and entire organized crime groups in multi-year investigations. 'If we compare it with the police of the USA or the Netherlands, who infiltrate drug markets, then what kind of fight is even going on in Russia?' one Russian lawyer remarked. He said he knew an investigator in the Ministry of Internal Affairs cybercrime unit who has never been asked to help with a darknet drug case.<sup>181</sup> It appears the Russian authorities have failed to get a grip on those running big shops and darknet markets. According to one shop owner, the police bust roughly five or six of the thousands of online shops every year. 'But the owners are almost never arrested.'<sup>182</sup>

Since the rise of Russian-speaking darknet markets over the last decade, none of note has been completely shut down by Russian authorities. Instead, as one report noted, Hydra was 'a large marketplace that was allowed to grow without interruption' for seven years.<sup>183</sup> When it was eventually shut down in 2022, it was US and German authorities that did so.

Why have the Russian authorities failed to tackle these online drug markets, which so openly taunt the authorities on the streets of Moscow, despite strict laws on the sale, discussion and even mention of drugs?<sup>184</sup> The answer to this question is complex and hard to pin down, but part of it could involve the attitude of the authorities. Many interviewees said shops often bribe police to 'resolve' arrests of their couriers or persuade officers to turn a blind eye to the trade. For example, a senior anti-drug trafficking detective was arrested in June 2024 for taking bribes from a local dealer.<sup>185</sup>

At a higher level, those running the major darknet market platforms and the big shops have isolated themselves from the law. According to one Russian journalist, this is because, 'firstly, the web infrastructure [of darknet markets] has obviously been moved outside of Russia. Secondly, all key employees of markets are also unlikely to live in the country.'<sup>186</sup> Bearing in mind Russia's standing in the world, it is likely that the country has found it difficult to execute the kind of lengthy, international joint policing operations needed to take down global organized crime networks, including the effort that closed Hydra.

The Russian authorities may also lack the expertise, top-down institutional authority and decision-making capability to build a long-term counternarcotics strategy, especially against those operating on the dark web. 'Russia has not developed a clear system of combating the drug mafia,' said the journalist. He pointed out that the government structure that dealt with this issue was disbanded in 2017. Its duties were transferred to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which he thinks 'reduced the effectiveness of the work', and Russia's security forces 'now have other priorities due to the war in Ukraine and other threats, including terrorist ones'.<sup>187</sup> The invasion of Ukraine has certainly left Russia's police overstretched.<sup>188</sup>

Drug networks' move online has raised another barrier to law enforcement success, according to one academic, because the authorities are not investing in the sophisticated, technically advanced undercover sting operations required to take down online shops or markets.<sup>189</sup> Unlike the US authorities, they do not have the technology to deal with anonymizing internet networks such as Tor, according to a Russian journalist.<sup>190</sup>

For one shop owner, the lack of success in shutting down online drug markets is not down to a lack of capability but a lack of desire, with those running the country having other priorities. 'I think [President Vladimir] Putin is more interested in war than his country.'<sup>191</sup> It is also possible that the authorities do not see darknet drug markets as an existential threat. They do not create the kind of media-friendly tit-for-tat gangland shootings that have plagued some drug markets outside Russia; and fewer drugs are being imported. Meanwhile, police are still able to meet arrest quotas and the public health consequences of mephedrone use have been largely ignored.

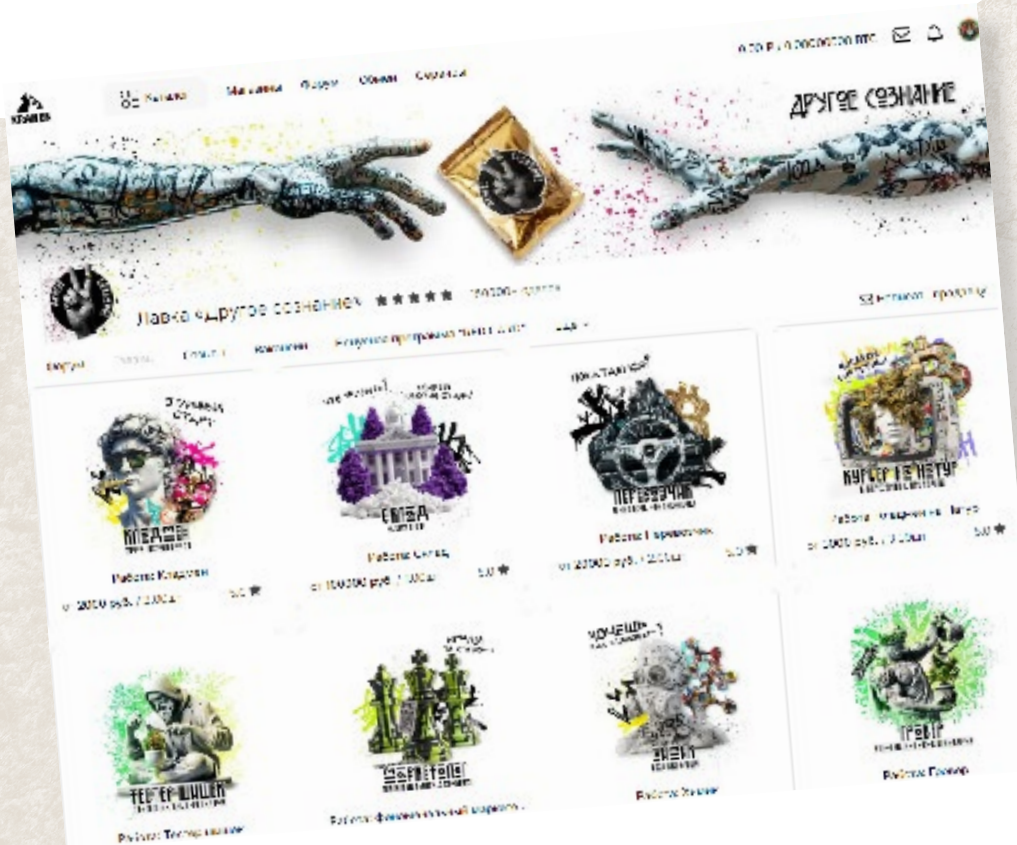
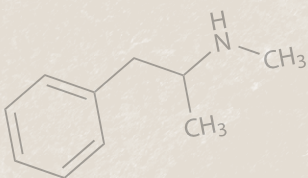
It's logical to assume that Russia's new, highly lucrative drug trade model has not gone unnoticed by the country's older organized crime groups. In most countries, organized crime views the drug trade as a crucial source of revenue. So how have Russia's high-tech organized crime groups, in the shape of powerful darknet markets such as Kraken and Mega which now dominate every aspect of the drug trade, managed to rise unchallenged?

Previous research by the GI-TOC has noted that Russia's traditional crime networks are in a state of flux as the traditional 'thieves world' subculture has made way for more 'entrepreneurial leaders' willing to engage with business and agents of the state.<sup>192</sup> As one police officer told the report's author: 'There are still the thugs, the gangsters, but they tend to operate at the lower end of the food chain and stand a good chance of being arrested and convicted. The major operators are now businesspeople, looking for quiet, long-term profit.' It is possible that those running the darknet markets and online drug shops may be part of this new criminal landscape.

Many interviewees said there were no obvious or provable links between darknet markets and what could be described as traditional organized crime in Russia, although some observers suggested Russian darknet markets represented a major shift in organized drug crime, not just in Russia but globally. 'Darknet markets are the new face of organized crime in Russia,' said one Russian journalist. He said the traditional crime gangs and the big darknet markets represent 'two worlds that are not connected', and that like the authorities, the old crime world is incapable of controlling the power behind the darknet markets.<sup>193</sup> To become a drug dealer in Russia now, there is no need to have links with traditional organized crime.

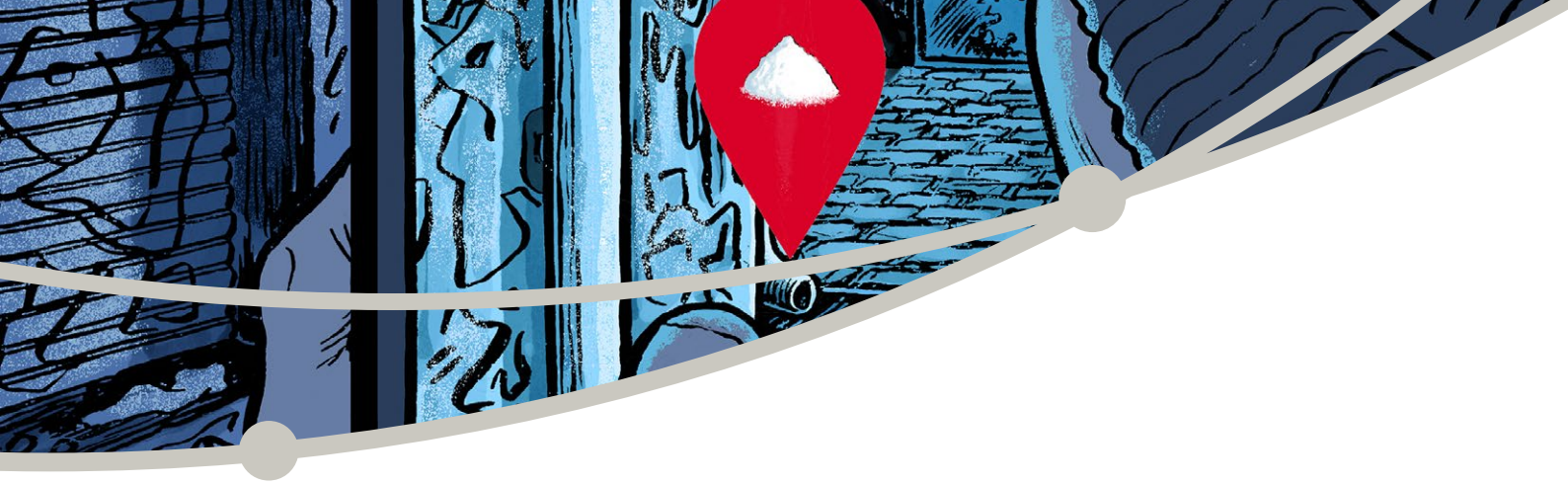


Russian drug vendors typically use high-quality graphic design and steal copyrighted imagery from existing brands. Photo: Kraken



Another Russian journalist said 'a completely unique, new generation of digital criminals has emerged in Russia ... To open your own drug shop on any marketplace, you just need to sit at home in a comfortable chair, buy a wholesale batch of drugs, and then hire two or three drug couriers who will pick it up, package it and sell it at a higher price.' He said the traditional 'thieves in law' organized crime groups whose speciality was violence 'simply do not have the opportunity to include themselves in this chain'.<sup>194</sup>

Some interviewees speculated that rather than being untouchable by law enforcement, there may be collusion between drug producers, vendors and police. Certainly, there have been numerous cases where police and other state officials have been found running online drug shops.<sup>195</sup> There is much speculation about why the Russian state has so far been unable, or unmotivated, to tame the new online drug cartels, but what is certain is that their power and profits continue to grow largely unchecked.



## THE GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS OF RUSSIA'S DRUG TRADE MODEL

Russia's new drug trade model does not exist in isolation. Its successful integration in Russia and elsewhere points to a potential for wider adoption globally, with the possibility of affecting large populations in South East Asia and China, for example. It has been claimed that before it was shut down in 2022, Hydra had plans to expand globally.<sup>196</sup>

Three main variables appear to make countries more likely to adopt the secretive Russian model of drug dealing: a strict anti-drugs culture, a strict anti-drugs sentencing regime and whether there is already an established system of delivering drugs bought on the darknet via the postal system.

Customers in societies where drug use is heavily ostracized may prefer to use anonymized networks and contactless delivery to avoid the stigma of being seen near a street-level drug dealer. Strict sentences increase the risks of street-level dealing, leading users to see dead drops as less hazardous and more desirable. Finally, drug users in countries that already have postal delivery darknet markets may not see the point in switching to a new model. Therefore, it is in countries where postal models have not yet developed that dead drop models may proliferate.

Over the last decade, the Russian-style online dead drop drug market has become established in Ukraine,<sup>197</sup> Georgia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan and Moldova. As detailed below, it has also started to gain a foothold further afield, in Asia and Western Europe.

In Ukraine, like Russia, the model has been used for over a decade and has become the dominant way of selling and sourcing drugs.<sup>198</sup> Cathinones have become increasingly prevalent in Ukraine, especially among young people seeking relief from the stress and trauma of the war.<sup>199</sup> Here, too, vendor networks employ teams of couriers and other staff and use the services of 'sportsmen', according to a Kyiv harm reduction expert. They also supply equipment for drug producers and produce their own cathinones in local drug labs. However, according to the expert from Kyiv, buyers use a network of online shops which operate primarily on Telegram and online forums outside the big Russian darknet markets.<sup>200</sup>

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian soldiers have used the darknet dead drop system to buy drugs in invaded territory, paying with Russian debit cards, as well as Telegram bots to buy stimulants and cannabis.<sup>201</sup> By June 2022, a shop called CaifCoin was searching for couriers in Mariupol, a month after the blockade of the city was lifted, and another shop, Republic, started giving out free samples via dead drops in occupied Kherson. By September, even though there were problems with access to necessities such as water, mephedrone and alpha-PVP were available via Telegram channels and dead



drops in Mariupol, Kherson and across Donetsk and Luhansk. These shops also offered subscribers about 17 000 rubles (US\$200) to beat up errant couriers.<sup>202</sup>

Research into Matanga, the main online drug marketplace serving Georgia, found that drugs worth more than 93 000 lari (US\$35 000), mainly MDMA, cannabis and cocaine, were dead-dropped around the major cities of Tbilisi, Batumi and Kutaisi on an average day in 2020.<sup>203</sup> Since then, according to a drug harm reduction NGO in Georgia, drugs are increasingly being bought via a plethora of Telegram channels which advertise using street graffiti.

These channels, set up by Russians who migrated to Georgia shortly after the invasion of Ukraine, according to the drug NGO in Georgia, have increased the use of dead drops and alpha-PVP, causing an uptick in mental health problems. One drug dependence researcher said Telegram and dead drops were now the main ways for young people to get drugs in Georgia and that it is common for young people's phones to be spammed by requests in Russian to buy drugs.<sup>204</sup>

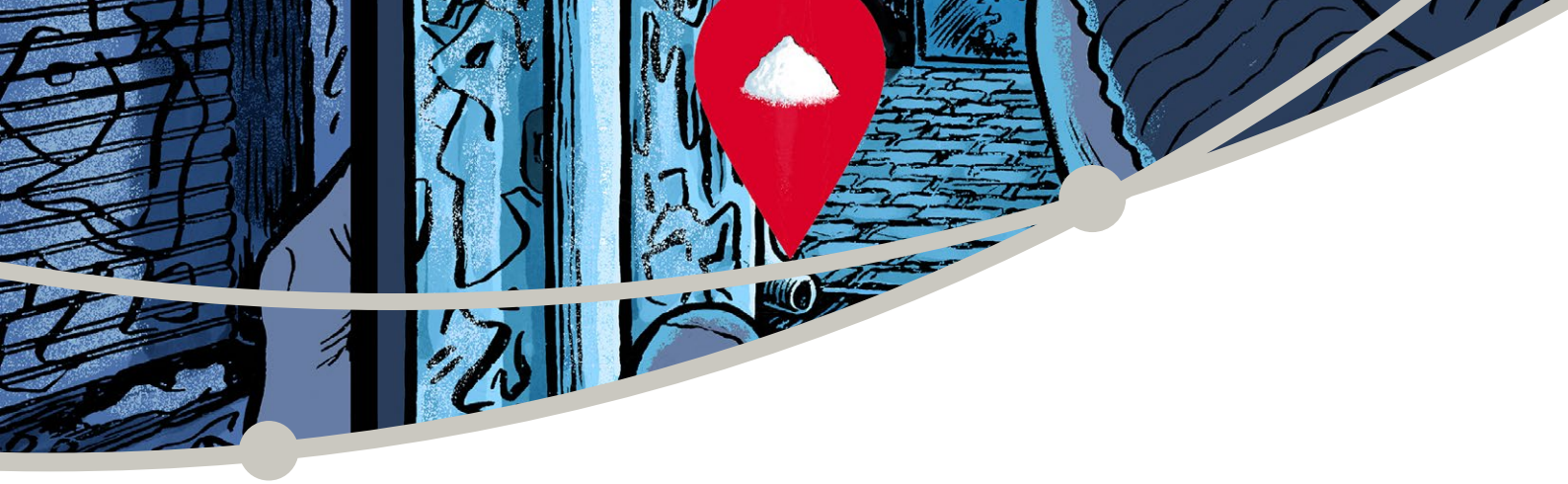
In Belarus, the Russian model has been the main way for people to buy new psychoactive substances such as mephedrone since at least 2021, according to a report by drug harm reduction experts in the region.<sup>205</sup> The United Nations Children's Fund in Belarus issued a report in 2024 warning parents about the rising numbers of teenagers either buying drugs via dead drops or being recruited online as couriers.<sup>206</sup> It said telltale signs of children being involved in the drug trade included having photos of dead drop locations such as 'benches, trees and playgrounds' on their phones; possessing dead-dropping equipment such as zip bags, electrical tape and small magnets; going for 'frequent walks in the evening in the forest or park'; and traces of graffiti spray paint, used to advertise drug shops.

Mephedrone, alpha-PVP and the dead drop system are all on the rise in Kyrgyzstan, according to a drug harm reduction expert in the country. A courier who had been mainly dead-dropping alpha-PVP and cannabis in Bishkek until a year ago said 'absolutely everything is done through Telegram, all the shops, platforms and chats are based on there, we have channels with job vacancies, crypto exchanges, and so on'. They said the shop they worked for sent them a guide on how to hide drugs and they were fined if dead drops were not found by buyers.<sup>207</sup>

There is growing evidence of a crypto dead drop market operating via Telegram channels in South Korea, which like Russia has strict drug laws. In August 2023, police in Seoul arrested more than 300 people linked to online drug shops. According to the police, most sellers used dead drops to distribute their drugs. 'Buyers allegedly paid in advance with BTC and altcoins, while sellers concealed drug-filled bags in public areas, such as apartment entrances.'<sup>208</sup> In June 2023, President Yoon Suk Yeol declared an 'all-out war' on online drug vendors after a string of teenagers were caught buying drugs online, including a 14-year-old girl found slumped in a public restroom after allegedly using cryptocurrency to purchase crystal meth.<sup>209</sup>

Online dead drop drug selling has also appeared in 2024 in Indonesia,<sup>210</sup> Thailand, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates,<sup>211</sup> India, Singapore and Cambodia – most of which have strict anti-drug trafficking laws. The model has also popped up in Serbia, Greece and Sweden. In a northern UK city, one of the authors of this report came across a stencilled art advert for Breaking Bad, a drug forum in English offering dead drop delivery in Europe. It has a video promoting the Russian-style dead drop system<sup>212</sup> and pays graffiti artists to spray its name publicly.

While the trend remains small, it is emerging in several geographies, raising questions about whether it will keep spreading to new countries. The online dead drop model allows for rapid growth since it is highly profitable, localized and fast, unlike postal darknet markets which have limited profit potential because their method of delivery is so much slower. The model is also dislocated from open sales, competing street gangs and traditional organized crime groups.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**T**he development in the last decade of an entirely novel way of running an illegal drug economy has implications for the future of the global drug trade. If the Russian model continues to spread, law enforcement, governments and harm reduction organizations will need to recalibrate existing policies and approaches aimed at traditional drug trade networks.

A unique mix of domestic and geopolitical factors has created the model. In Russia, surveillance, a poor postal system, strict criminal laws and cultural attitudes to drugs have necessitated a more anonymized workaround for drug users and dealers. Those involved in the drug trade have blended Russia's advanced online tech world with an element of spycraft to create a new way of buying drugs. In turn, the online platforms sourcing, selling and profiting from this new system have had to reconfigure the drugs they sell due to the closure of traditional supply chains. Massively reduced trade with the West and sanctions due to Russia's war in Ukraine have strangled the supply of legitimate goods and the drugs concealed within them. It was under these conditions that Russia's drug trade, and its profits, were hijacked by a new generation of organized criminals.

Russia's dead drop drug economy presents several challenges to what was previously known about darknet markets. Postal darknet markets in the West, such as Silk Road, have received a lot of media attention but remained small players in the global drug trade. Amid growing global concern about the nexus of drug sales and technology, the evolution of Russian darknet markets has largely gone untracked, except for a few important contributions.<sup>213</sup>

The result is that an entire country's process of drug delivery, and its preference for specific drug types, has been radically altered by darknet markets which have co-opted drug production and distribution. The transformative potential of darknet markets has never had a better case study, and the Russian model offers a stark illustration of how technology can redefine illicit economies.

The dead drop model's inherent resilience against traditional policing techniques raises questions about how law enforcement agencies globally should respond to this developing trend. Mass arrests of couriers and other interventions targeting low-hanging fruit are not making any impact on the trade, while drug market closures seem to have short-lived results, as shown by the migration of vendors to a new platform after Hydra was shut down.

Crucially, those profiting the most from these markets are tech-savvy, highly anonymized, and have been able to dislocate themselves from their own networks, traditional drug trade routes and known crime groups. While this trend started in Russia, dead drop dealing is now a regional phenomenon and may soon become an international one.

Does the dead drop model point to the future of the global drug trade? So far, it seems to have flourished in countries, such as Russia, with notably strict drug laws. It is not certain that this model will spread everywhere, or even what makes one country more susceptible to dead drops rather than postal dealing.

The Russian model, including the divisions of labour and the localization of synthetic cathinone production, is just one iteration of a model that may manifest differently elsewhere. It may be that dead drop systems elsewhere still rely on imported drugs or the job roles are differentiated. What is likely to be consistent, however, is the health risks of drugs hidden in public places, the issue of vulnerable people being tempted into well-paid, high-risk work as couriers, and the heightened anonymity of the industry's leading players.

The levels of incarceration and violence in the Russian darknet sphere are a clear warning to other nations that might encounter similar shifts in their drug economies. Addressing the socio-economic factors that drive individuals into these networks is crucial.

Meanwhile, after its 2022 closure by US and German authorities, the investigation into Hydra and the organized criminals behind it continues. In April 2024, Russian police seized hard drives, digital wallets and 350 million rubles (about US\$3.8 million) in cash and made one arrest.<sup>214</sup> However, two years after Hydra disappeared, there are now four lucrative, powerful darknet drug syndicates in its place. They are doing the same thing, with little indication that they face any real threat from law enforcement.

If the Russian government wants to address its darknet drug market problem, it needs to enhance its law enforcement expertise regarding the technical skills needed to effectively combat these highly successful markets and their complex infrastructure. Targeting low-hanging fruit rarely gets results against the drug trade, so there should be a shift away from low-level actors to targeting the owners and operators of large online shops and darknet platforms. It must recognize this model's efficiency at recruiting, coercing and exploiting young people, and its rapid expansion of DIY drug production.

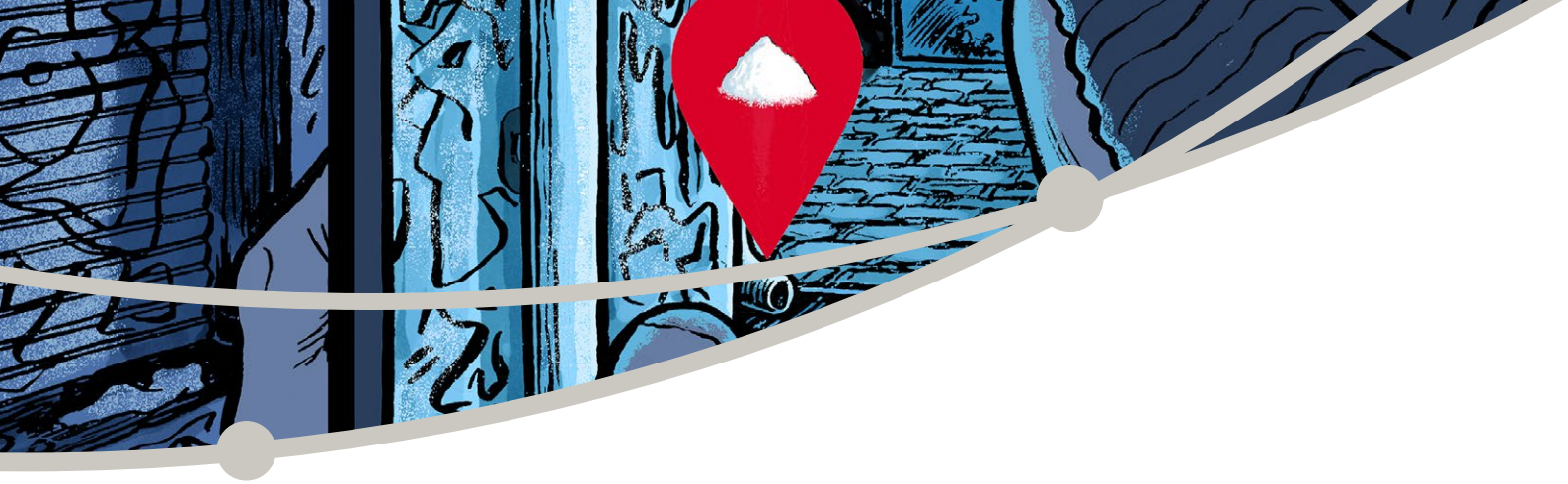
Many sources we spoke to warned of a potential public health crisis, particular among young people, driven by the widespread use of synthetic stimulants such as mephedrone and alpha-PVP. This needs to be addressed, alongside the implementation of harm reduction strategies, including improving addiction treatment services, particularly for young people affected by cathinone use.

Sources also warned of the large numbers of often young people being jailed because of being dragged into a drug trade they may have viewed as being innocuous. The government should review and reform harsh sentencing laws for drug offences to reduce mass incarceration, particularly of young people, and note that Russia's socio-economic challenges have driven young people into high-risk roles as drug couriers.

But this is not just a Russian problem. Global authorities should acknowledge the Russian darknet model as a potential global threat, and monitor the spread of this model, especially in countries with strict anti-drug regimes, such as South Korea, Thailand and parts of Europe. Financial flows linked

to darknet markets need to be probed. As illicit funds from Russian darknet markets enter and exit the legitimate economy, there needs to be a focus on uncovering how this money supports broader criminal activities, such as international money laundering, and how it destabilizes financial systems using cryptocurrencies and underground banking networks.

Bearing in mind the key role played by precursor chemicals in Russia's drug trade, the international community must continue to invest heavily in collaboration to track and disrupt precursor chemical supplies used in synthetic drug production, especially from China and India. Intelligence also needs to be shared across borders between investigators to share best practices and intelligence on combating dead-drop drug distribution networks.



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