



# PERILS OF THE DRUG TRADE: IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF CENTRAL ASIA'S "NORTHERN ROUTE"

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*The international trade in Afghan drugs is one of the most significant transnational threats emanating from Central Asia. Exacerbated by weak border management, corruption, and lack of income-generating alternatives, the "Northern Route" is a scourge not only for the Central Asian states but also Russia and Europe, undermining a vision of a Eurasian community based on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, as well as posing attendant health risks. International efforts have so far failed to adequately come to grips with the problem. It is clear that there is no quick fix and that hope rests in a mixture of instruments, not least promoting long-term socio-economic development in the region, stemming pervasive corruption, engaging in human rights dialogues, as well as promoting more effective international cooperation—in particular involving Russia.*

Drug trafficking on the "Northern Route" out of Afghanistan is booming. While a decade ago only 10 percent of heroin from Afghanistan was estimated to be trafficked through Central Asia to Russia and, to a lesser extent, onward to Northern and Eastern Europe, this figure now stands at 25 percent. Indeed, with Tehran having made robust efforts to stem the "Balkan Route" from Iran to Turkey and Southern Europe, the Northern Route has become increasingly important. The drugs produced and trafficked in and from Afghanistan via the Northern Route are predominantly destined for the Russian market. It is estimated that as much as 90 per cent of the opiates in Russia originate from Afghanistan and have been trafficked through Central Asia; Tajikistan is a particularly weak link in the chain with 85 per cent of all trafficked opiates thought to go through the country. An attractive market, the price of heroin in Russia is reported to be 15 to 20 times higher compared to Tajikistan or Afghanistan, with supply aided by the fact that traffickers can easily recruit couriers among the impoverished Afghan and Central Asian populations. The trade is lucrative: annual profits by Central Asian drug traffickers were recently estimated at US\$1.4 billion.

## The Drugs Scourge

One of the most direct consequences of the increased quantities of Afghan opiates trafficked into Russia has been an increase in drug abusers and addicts. Due to the still affordable street-price of heroin, young people in particular are being increasingly drawn toward using the drug. Some experts argue that the prevalence of drug abuse in Russia exceeds that of other European countries and, as a further consequence of the rise in intravenous drug use, Russia is now reported to have one of the fastest growing HIV/AIDS epidemics in the world.

In addition to the threat that the drug trade poses to Russia's national health, there are several serious security implications, most importantly in the form of drug-related crime and corruption. The growing number of drug addicts, especially among the youth and unemployed, are increasingly involved in violent as well as acquisitive crime, as well as prostitution. Particularly noticeable in the states of Central Asia has been the rampant corruption facilitated by the drugs trade. Profits accrued through the trade are acknowledged to instigate corruption at all levels of society. This serves to



undermine democracy and the rule of law.

Furthermore, a worsening of the situation might also facilitate radicalization and the financing of terrorist movements—although, with the exception of Afghanistan, there is, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), no observable proof yet of a direct connection between the drug trade and the rise of militant insurgent groups in Central Asia. Nevertheless, it is a worrisome specter post-2014 with the withdrawal of the NATO-led ISAF force from Afghanistan. It is also possible that Central Asia will soon enter into a period of increased instability due to generational shifts in the leaderships of some of the countries.

## Border Management, Poverty, and Corruption: A Three-fold Challenge

The small amounts of drugs being seized by Central Asian authorities on the Northern Route indicate a fragile border management and law enforcement capacity in the region. Despite continued efforts by the international community in this area, border management remains a serious concern and a complex challenge, not least due to the near impossibility of securing all the relevant borders, which are long and traverse sparsely inhabited territory. Indeed, the problem may even become worse as, in 2010, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus agreed to a Customs Union, making Kazakhstan—and perhaps, worryingly, in the future even Tajikistan—the last customs check before EU borders. Another development that could further weaken border management is, again, the withdrawal of coalition forces from Afghanistan.

Border management aside, Central Asia remains a region of poverty for large parts of the population, who are therefore susceptible to the income-generating opportunities offered by drugs. While most of the profits are transferred out of the region, there are a large number of people in Central Asia who are more or less sustained by the trade in narcotics—either indirectly through remittances sent from relatives residing abroad, who make additional money through the drug trade, or directly through their own involvement in growing or trafficking drugs. Law enforcement measures alone will therefore not be enough to counter this challenge. Alternative development solutions are hard to identify but nonetheless are central to combating the trade.

According to UNODC, the attention that the local authorities direct toward the need to combat insurgency groups

serves partly to obscure the deep complicity in the drugs trade of corrupt government officials and businessmen. Whether these countries can extricate themselves from this situation on their own is questionable, especially in light of the high corruption levels as underlined by Transparency International and the World Bank. Furthermore, promoting good governance in this regard is not only difficult but dangerous for those involved including international assistance workers, domestic media, and NGOs.

## International Efforts: Too Little

Several international organizations are active in the region, among them the OSCE, UNODC, CSTO, EU, and Council of Europe. The OSCE and UNODC have consolidated their presence in Central Asia since the mid-1990s, the OSCE having opened its first office in Tajikistan as early as 1994 and UNODC in 1993 in Uzbekistan; they have since expanded their presence to all the Central Asian states. Meanwhile, the EU presence in the region is still developing. A recent visit of the High Representative to the region and the appointment of a new EU Special Representative promise further enhanced EU attention to the region. It is clear, however, that EU efforts need to go beyond support to border management (BOMCA) and drugs data collection (CARICC).

The CSTO, the organization preferred by Russia in dealing with the issue of drugs, has been engaged in training and other efforts for a number of years. Its main priorities with regard to international cooperation are twofold: to fight the drug trade mainly on Afghan soil, downplaying the usefulness of international cooperation that focuses on Central Asia, and, secondly, to favour robust interventions including eradication operations. At the same time as Russia typically describes transnational threats as an area of potential common ground with the West—high-ranking Russian diplomats also lead the work on transnational threats within UNODC as well as the OSCE—in substance Russia has hesitated to move beyond declarations in the role of the latter organizations on Central Asian soil.

Current international attention accorded to the problem is insufficient and not properly sustained: attention given to issues related to drug trafficking from Afghanistan by UNODC—as institutionalized in the Paris Pact Initiative—is mainly on a periodic basis. Although it has proven to be a



very useful and important tool to address the threat of drug trafficking in the region, this periodic effort suffers from a lack of continuity in terms of focus throughout the year, as well as a lack of continuous engagement with relevant international state and non-state actors.

## Can Anything More Be Done?

This gap is exactly where the OSCE through more enhanced efforts can complement the work of UNODC—by means of its ability to facilitate much needed continuous efforts and multi-level dialogues. Indeed, there is a need for not only a greater international coordination of efforts, but also enhanced clarity on what the possibilities for international cooperation are to combat drug trafficking—and transnational threats in general—more comprehensively, which is something that may be most pressing for Russia itself.

The EU argues that in order to effectively address the drug trafficking issue in the region, a mixture of instruments is needed, combining security and law enforcement measures with efforts to create viable economic alternatives, enhancing the levels of democracy, promoting respect for human rights and the rule of law, as well as improving good governance to deal with corruption and the abuse of power. In its progress reports, the EU recognises that although it has made improvements in its efforts in the relatively short period it has been directing its external action toward Central Asia, it has also encountered significant challenges.

These challenges inter alia relate to the difficulties the EU faces with organizing effective human rights dialogues. Such human rights dialogues are argued to be vital for establishing the necessary stability and economic and social development to counter the drug trade, because human rights play a crucial role in countering one of the most pressing issues in this context: corruption. A country needs whistle-blowers to effectively draw attention to and raise awareness about the issue of corruption and hold corrupt officials ac-

countable for their complicity in the drug trade. However, in states without a free media, this is not possible.

It is clear that while the EU's diagnosis of a mixture of instruments is the right one, the practical implementation of such measures is significantly constrained by ineffective international cooperation and the unconducive domestic political and social environments of the Central Asian states. Yet failure by the international community to assist in redressing this issue will only result in the drug trade on the Northern Route continuing to boom with all of its associated risks—both to the region and further afield.

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