

Drug Trafficking, Violence and Corruption in Central Asia¹

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Summary

This research brief examines the links between illegal drug trafficking, violence, and corruption in Central Asia. We argue that drug trafficking is highly organised with major criminal and state actors participating in the illicit activity. Criminal violence is spread across the region, especially in urban areas, but the Central Asian states are capable of intercepting and preventing illicit activities. By analysing big data on violence, drug interdictions, and patterns of corruption in the region between 2015 and 2022, we explain the relationship between drug trafficking and key actors from the criminal underworld and state agencies in Central Asia. We also rely on expert interviews explaining states' involvement in the drugs economy. Our analysis of violence and policing dynamics in the region shows how patterns of organised crime change depending on state effectiveness and the presence of competition between traffickers. Each country exhibits a unique relationship between state actors and criminal syndicates in both interdicting and facilitating drug trafficking.

Our research comes at a time of an anticipated increase in drug trafficking from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, and of growing economic uncertainty in the wider region due to Western sanctions against Russia. In the policy realm, our research findings can help develop anti-trafficking strategies in the Central Asian region and improve our understanding of how drug trafficking can be curbed more effectively by identifying the main actors involved in this highly organised criminal process.

- 1 For the full research paper, see Marat, E. & Botoeva, G. (2022). *Drug trafficking, violence and corruption in Central Asia*. SOC ACE Research Paper No. 7. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.
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Background

The Central Asian region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) is a major route for the trafficking of drugs from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. Of the nearly 300 tonnes of heroin produced in Afghanistan (UNODC, 2021),⁴ up to 90 tonnes of heroin pass through the countries of Central Asia annually. For over a decade most labs producing heroin have operated in northern Afghanistan (UNODC, 2012).⁵ The region is also increasingly becoming both a transit zone and producer of synthetic drugs, with precursors trafficked from China. Demand for heroin continues to grow in both Russia and Europe, while addiction to synthetic drugs is increasing in Central Asia. Despite being a transit area for up to a third of heroin shipments through the 'northern route', the region rarely witnesses violence related to drug trafficking. As a major drug transit region, Central Asia differs from other similar areas in Latin America and Europe.

The criminal underworld and its connection to the state has changed over time across the Central Asian region. In the 1990s, both small and large mafia-like groups, at times consisting of Russian security service personnel, were involved in drug trafficking, and operated unobstructed. Especially in war-torn Tajikistan, criminal activities faced little pressure from the state. After the war's end in 1997, only criminal groups that had protection from the central government could continue their illegal activities. State protection from corrupt border guards allowed criminal syndicates to establish stable connections with counterparts in Afghanistan. Likewise, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, both small and large groups were involved in drug trafficking in the 1990s. But over time only those with connections to the state, including mafia-like groups headed by thieves-in-law, were able to survive. In addition, larger groups work with networks of drug dealers.

Since the creation of specialised counter-trafficking agencies with the help of Western donors in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Central Asian states developed capabilities for interdicting trafficking routes. Numerous small interdictions distracted attention away from large shipments protected by criminal groups and corrupt political actors and created an image of a state-led fight against drugs. As a result, drug trafficking shifted from rural areas and small-scale groups to major highways and rail roads, with the involvement of larger and better-organised actors among criminal syndicates and corrupt state officials.

Key findings

We find that patterns of organised crime depend on state effectiveness, the state protection of trafficking, and the presence of competition between traffickers. Illicit drugs flow through the region with the help of the security sectors and political elites, who share a long history of protecting and participating in drug trafficking. Most trafficking incidents involve several individuals coordinating the practice within one country or across borders. Criminal violence is infrequent, low visibility, and is rarely lethal, despite the emergence of small mafia-like groups. However, state violence is significantly more frequent and geographically widespread. When lethal violence occurs, the authorities prefer to conceal it from the public through media control. Most armed confrontations in Central Asia are reported as not relating to the drug-trafficking context.

Non-state violence is infrequent compared with overall reports of criminality. Violence is rarely used for communication purposes to intimidate the state or criminal actors. Drug trafficking is also unlikely to fund terrorist activities in the region. Rather, the opposite is true: non-state actors conceal violence

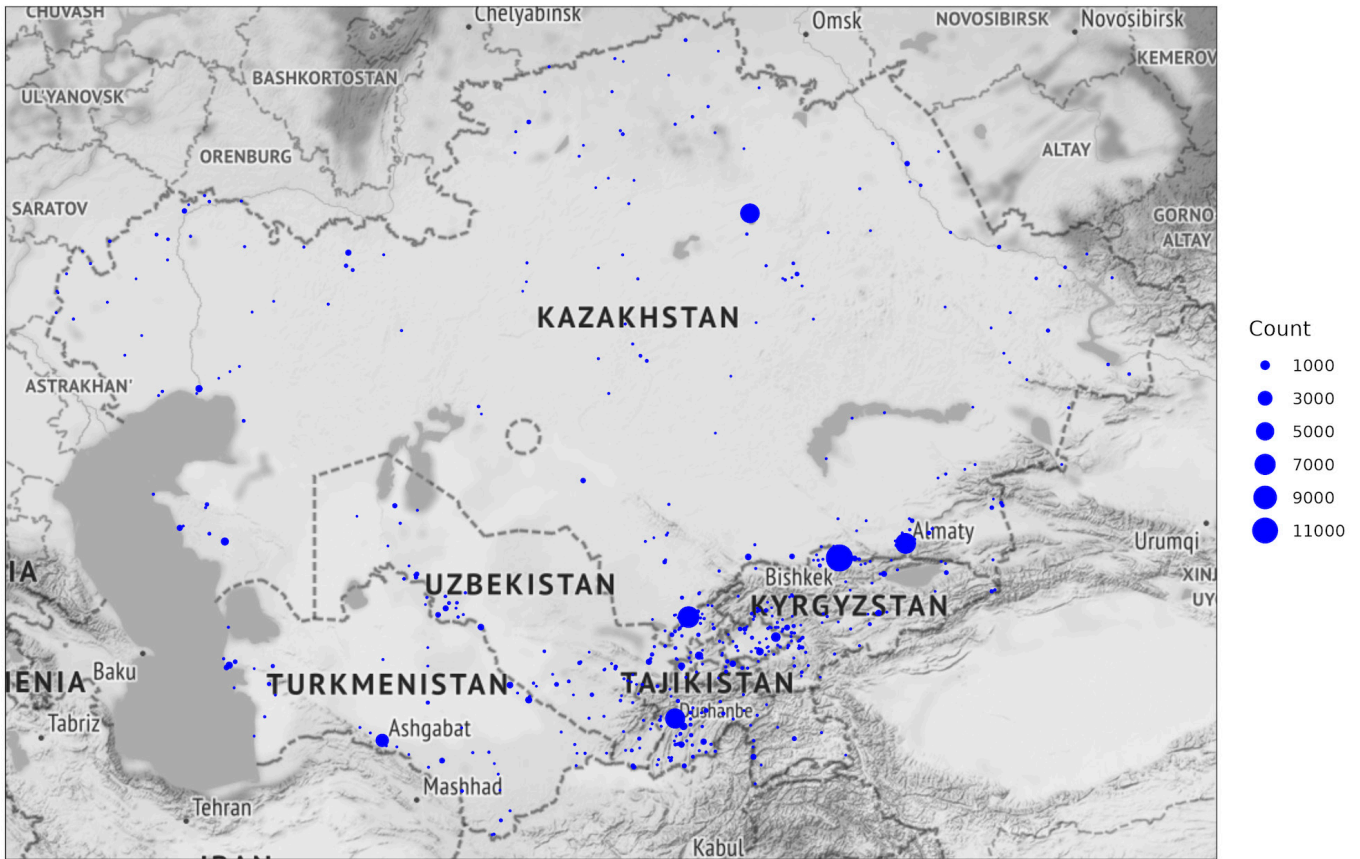
4 UNODC (2021). 'Drug Situation in Afghanistan 2021: Latest findings and emerging threats'. Research Brief. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_brief_Nov_2021.pdf.

5 UNODC (2012). 'Nezakonnyi oborot opiatov v severnoy chasti Afghanistana i Tsentral'noy Azii: Otsenka riskov' https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/UNODC_The_northern_route_russian_web.pdf.

from the state, while political regimes rarely admit that competition in drug trafficking causes violent incidents. Law enforcement agencies often uncover

drug trafficking and illegal arms in the same incidents, thus revealing a potential for violence in drug-related events.

Map 1: Reports of the number of incidents of state violence, 2015–21



Note: Smallest dots represent counts < 1000

Source: Adapted from Global Data on Events, Location, and Tone (GDELT)

We see two types of state involvement in drug trafficking. The first kind occurs among rank-and-file law-enforcement officers and mid-level bureaucrats. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan fall into this category. In Kazakhstan, the police are likely to both protect drug traffickers and at times directly participate in criminal activity. Thanks to its more diverse economy, Kazakhstan’s law enforcement officers can collect rents from other sources as well. The country has seen a spike in the production and use of synthetic drugs, especially in urban areas. In Kyrgyzstan, drugs are one of the major sources of rents for police, intelligence, and customs officers. Border guards coordinate trafficking routes before shipments enter their territory. Most large shipments move through Kyrgyzstan unobstructed. In southern

Kyrgyzstan especially, the heads of regional police offices and political officials have been involved in drug trafficking.

Second, the protection of drug trafficking happens among top regime officials and regime affiliates. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan fall into this category, albeit with important differences. In Tajikistan, the collusion between drug traffickers and the state is likely to involve higher-ranking officials. The president’s family and top-level intelligence officials are reportedly involved in illegal businesses, with the president’s three sons-in-law controlling the western trafficking route. In Uzbekistan, influential criminal authorities have previously been involved in the largest criminal enterprises.

We assume that differences in interdiction between heroin and opium may indicate the structure of non-state organised crime, as well as corruption in the incumbent regime structures. Heroin is more expensive, less voluminous, and easier to smuggle than opium. Heroin's interdiction signals the state capturing of a better-organised criminal chain than dealers trafficking

in opium or poppy straw. Most countries seize opium and other drugs in greater volumes than heroin. Heroin is likely to be trafficked in a less obstructed way and at a higher political level compared with other drugs. Rare reports of large shipments of heroin usually also suggest individual perpetrators or small cells.

Map 2: Reports of the number of drug-related incidents, 2015–21



Note: Smallest dots represent counts < 1000

Source: GDELT.

Physical infrastructure plays an important role in criminal activities in Central Asia. Infrastructure supporting overland migration continues to support drug trafficking. Most drug seizures take place along border areas, railways, on major highways, and in large cities. Both criminal and state forms of violence are more frequent in densely populated areas. As expected, the biggest hubs for trafficking and interdictions lie at the Tajik–Afghan border, in the densely populated Ferghana Valley, and on the Caspian coast in Turkmenistan. Areas outside the main routes

leading to Russia or across the Caspian Sea, such as eastern parts of Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan's large cities, are likely to include hashish and synthetic drugs consumed locally.

The rail network connecting Tajikistan and Russia via Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is dotted with state violence and reported interdictions of drugs. There is a railway that connects Dushanbe to Astrakhan in Russia via Termez and Karshi in Uzbekistan, while Kazakhstan's checkpoint at Beineu links

to Uzbekistan. Especially in Tajikistan, the rail network is used for large-scale trafficking schemes. As well as in the Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan also interdicts drugs at the railway border crossing near Urgench and along the route up to where the railway enters Kazakhstan.

Criminal violence and state violence are similarly located in areas with reports of drug interdiction. The discrepancy between drug-related activities and general criminal activity is largest in Kazakhstan. High levels of criminality in general may reflect better police capabilities at interdiction. Fewer reports of interdiction have been made along Kazakhstan's border with Russia.

Recommendations

This report argues that the Central Asian states are capable of interdicting illicit activities, but both security sectors and political elites share a long history of protecting and participating in drug trafficking. The international community should therefore focus on increasing the costs of corruption and rewarding good practices on the part of political incumbents and their non-state collaborators. Public awareness of how the illicit economy works and the main actors involved could further increase the quality of political processes in the region at the state and society levels. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, for example, civil society is involved in uncovering corruption and criminal schemes, compelling state agencies to respond to such reports more often than in other countries.

Governance:

- Expand conditionality in security-sector assistance to ensure external oversight mechanisms are in place to monitor spending, as well as protection of or involvement in drug trafficking.
- Engage with the transnational intelligence services to interdict networks facilitated by powerful political and criminal authorities.
- Impose travel sanctions and freeze the foreign assets of high-profile individuals involved in drug trafficking in Central Asia, the US, the UK, and the EU countries.

Society:

- Support civil society and journalistic efforts to uncover corrupt and criminal schemes. Investigations lead to greater public awareness of corruption in the upper echelons of power as well as among rank-and-file police officers collaborating with street-level criminals.
- Fund more academic and policy research on the links between criminal syndicates and state representatives involved in drug trafficking, as well as on transnational organised crime in Afghanistan, the Central Asian countries, and Russia.
- Expand public campaigns against the use of synthetic drug use. Adopt a public health approach to drugs use to avoid the criminalisation of drug users for police statistical purposes.
- Expand the network of citizen-informants reporting on suspicious activity related to synthetic drug production and distribution.

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