

May 2022

Drug Trafficking, Violence, and Corruption in Central Asia

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Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the data analyst Gagan Atreya for his work in processing the big data and creating the data visualisation, as well the research assistant for their help with the literature and mass media review. Federica Cilio helped to create the map of major railways in Central Asia. We also thank Professor Heather Marquette and Dr Zenobia Ismail for their support of the project.

Suggested citation

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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SOC ACE is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, & Development Office. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CADAP	Central Asia Drug Addiction Programme
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
DCA	Drug Control Agency
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GBAO	Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region
GDELT	Global Data on Events, Location, and Tone
GI-TOC	The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime
GKNB	State Committee for National Security
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SOC ACE	Serious Organised Crime – Anti-Corruption Evidence
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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Summary

This paper 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, and with rarely visible but periodic changes occurring among the involved parties. Our analysis of violence and policing dynamics in the region shows how 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. Criminal violence is spread across the region, especially in urban areas, but the Central Asian states are capable of intercepting and preventing illicit activities. Drug-related violence is less frequent and less visible compared with the overall level of criminal activities.

Based on our research, we recommend that the international community should focus on increasing the costs of corruption and on rewarding good practices by political incumbents and their non-state collaborators.

1. Introduction

The Central Asian region 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), 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). 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 both in 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 directly related to drug trafficking. As a major drug transit region, Central Asia differs from other similar areas in Latin America and Europe

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 the anti-trafficking strategy in the Central Asian region, including through better understanding of how drug trafficking can be curbed more effectively by identifying the main actors involved in this highly organised criminal process. In the academic realm, other scholars will be able to use our findings to explain state decline, corruption patterns, and the rise of intrastate violence in the region.

The paper includes eight parts. We begin with a general overview of political and security developments in each Central Asian country. The next part analyses the literature on drug trafficking, violence, and corruption across the globe and in Central Asia. This is followed by a summary of major developments in the criminal underworld in the region. We then present our research methodology and proceed with the analysis. To paint a comprehensive picture of the drug trafficking and interdiction patterns in Central Asia, we bring together the big data analysis of media reports covering the 2015–21 period and the expert interviews. We conclude with a set of recommendations for policymakers and suggestions for future research.

2. Country briefs

This section offers a brief background of political and security developments in each Central Asian country. It outlines the major political actors, their mode of reliance on security structures and response to organised crime, and situations where major criminal actors infiltrate the state.

Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's former long-serving President Nursultan Nazarbayev prided himself on creating robust institutions, economic prosperity, and social stability. The regime built on an inter-elite consensus for redistributing economic resources, as opposed to coercion, and so it could spend resources on soft power instead of the security apparatus. Amid the economic prosperity, however, high-level corruption permeated throughout the presidential family and the regime affiliates (Tutumlu & Rustemov, 2021; Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017). Nazarbayev stepped down in March 2019, naming Kassym-Jomart Tokayev as his successor, who then easily won the presidential elections. His presidency coincided with years of slow economic growth and an increasingly evident gap between the top elites, who were able to enjoy the country's wealth, and most of the population, who barely sustained a livelihood – especially in the oil-rich, western parts of Kazakhstan. After months of sporadic protests across the country, Kazakhstan saw a nationwide collective uprising in January 2022. Peaceful protests were hijacked by criminal groups who attacked law enforcement officers and set government buildings on fire. Tokayev ordered a shoot-to-kill policy and requested help from a Russian-led regional military alliance – the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. Police forces shot dead 227 people, including children, and dozens were tortured in police detention facilities after the violence.

Kyrgyzstan. Compared with its neighbours, Kyrgyzstan has a more open political environment with strong independent voices in the mass media and civil society. But Kyrgyzstan also underwent violent regime changes in 2005, 2010, and 2020. In the latest iteration of political changes, Sadyr Japarov – who was released from prison amid public protests – declared himself the acting head of state (Doolotkeldieva, 2021). The criminal underworld has always played a role in supporting both the government and opposition forces in Kyrgyzstan (Bakiev, 2021). Political leaders turn to criminal actors to help them prevail in a competitive political landscape, and individuals with corrupt and criminal backgrounds often try to enter the formal political process to shield themselves from prosecution. Soviet-style professional thieves still play a central role in Kyrgyzstan's criminal underworld. In 2006, Russian criminal circles reportedly recognised Kamchy Kolbayev as the chief criminal authority in Kyrgyzstan (Regnum.ru, 2006). But in 2010 he quit the 'Slavic' network of transnational criminal organisations and joined the 'Georgian' network instead (Siegel & Turlubekova, 2019, p. 172). He has since influenced the political forces in the country. But since the change of leadership in 2020, the country's law enforcement agencies have dominated the criminal underworld once again.¹

¹ A journalist and expert on peace and conflict resolution from Kyrgyzstan, interviews in February 2022.

Tajikistan. In Tajikistan, after the 1992–97 civil war, President Emomali Rakhmon consolidated political power by extending his presidential term and alienating his political opponents. Nonetheless, pockets of armed resistance continued to operate throughout the late 2000s. In the country's remote areas especially, the loyalty of the police forces continued to be divided between the president, local elites, and non-state opposition groups. By the 2010s Rakhmon had consolidated his power, while his son Rustam and eldest daughter Ozoda had taken over the major state positions. These two siblings and other family members control key parts of Tajikistan's economy. For decades, the head of the State Committee for National Security (GKNB), Saimumin Yatimov, was also Rakhmon's powerful ally. Tajikistan became a major drug trafficking route as early as in the 1980s during the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan is the most closed-off country, not only from the international community but also from its Central Asian neighbours. It is an autocratic regime created by its first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, and it has total control over the lives of its citizens. Little has changed since Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov took the presidency in 2006. Due to restrictive information at the local, national, and international levels, it is hard to gather information on any social and political issues and especially on anything related to crime, drugs, and corruption. In March 2012 Berdymuhamedov transferred power to his son Serdar in a largely falsified national election.

Uzbekistan. Nearly three decades of autocratic leadership by President Islam Karimov expanded Uzbekistan's security apparatus. Karimov was meticulously involved in the security sector's operations. In the mid-1990s, Karimov eliminated most of the criminal leaders active at the local or national level. However, he spared a few entrepreneurs who had established contacts with security officials, and this act gave them greater freedom to manoeuvre in their business activities. Such entrepreneurs, government officials, and criminal leaders are involved in drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Russia and European countries. After Shavkat Mirziyeev came to power in 2016, his regime permitted two criminal entrepreneurs and Salim Abduvaliev to be affiliated with the government (GI-TOC, 2021). Influential criminal authorities in Uzbekistan are reportedly closely linked to their counterparts in Russia, including the Russian tycoon of Uzbek origin, Alisher Usmanov (Synovitz, 2018).

3. Understanding drug trafficking

3.1. Global research of drug trafficking

It is notoriously difficult to study hidden activity like drug trafficking, especially in autocratic countries. Three proxy indicators developed in other empirical contexts help us understand the dynamics of drug trafficking and the state's ability to respond in Central Asia. First, from studies of the Latin American context, we know that patterns of violence are an important indicator of whether drug trafficking is divided between competing drug cartels and whether the police are effective in containing drug trafficking (Lessing, 2017; Bergman, 2018; Yashar, 2018; Cruz, 2016; Trejo & Ley, 2020). In the Colombian and Mexican cases, Duran-Martinez (2018) shows how violence is both frequent and visible when drug cartels compete over drug routes. Homicides and violent showdowns between cartels and police occur in densely populated areas. The visibility of violence declines if at least one of the two following conditions are met: a dominating drug cartel emerges, or policing is effective in preventing criminal activity. A lack of visibility and the low frequency of violence may not mean low rates of drug trafficking and may instead indicate the presence of more robust drug cartels capable of corrupting police forces. These findings help us understand drug trafficking and serious organised crime in Europe as well. A recent report found an increasing number of violent crimes related to cocaine trafficking in the EU. It found that the greater the number of criminal syndicates participating in drug trafficking, the greater the levels of 'assassinations, shootings, bombings, arsons, kidnappings, torture and intimidation related to the trade in cocaine' (UNODC & Europol, 2021).

Second, the distinction between mafia-like groups and networked crimes is helpful as well (Koivu, 2016). The primary function of mafia-like groups is to purchase and sell protection for economic activity (Gambetta, 1996; Koivu, 2016; Varese, 2001). Networks rely on trust and reputation, while mafia-like groups are hierarchical structures that also rely on trust (Von Lampe & Johansen, 2004), but are more likely to resort to violence and coercion to resolve disputes. Weak states unable to regulate markets or hold their monopoly over the use of violence lead to the emergence of mafia-like structures (Arlacchi & Steinberg, 1983; Blok, 1974; Volkov, 2016). Mafia-like groups can emerge in countries with weak local government but a strong central state, like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Since networks rely on trust and reputation to maintain cooperation, they tend to be less violent as well. Networks are more fluid, and if some actors fail to deliver, exit, or are arrested, other actors are available to replace them. Networks are also more difficult to police and are likely to emerge in areas with robust state structures. The use of violence against competitors can be costly within networks because it may undermine trust and attract state attention. Here again, examples from the Latin American context helpfully show how criminal syndicates in Mexico and Columbia control swathes of territories, preventing state interference to smuggle cocaine and other illicit drugs, as well as licit goods, such as cobalt or avocados.

Finally, the literature analysing the extent of collusion between the state and the criminal underworld is also useful for this research. The relationship can be placed on a

spectrum ranging from parallel enterprises to collusion and cooptation (Reno, 1998; Bailey & Godson, 2001; Shaw, 2015). The relationship between state structures and organised crime in developing states can be categorised along the continuum of two generic types. Depending on the state's ability or wish to exercise control over the activity of organised criminal groups and their leaders, the state and the underground world may coexist as two separate yet interacting organisations, or they may be strongly merged. The two types of state-crime relationship have different impacts on state functioning. The first type of organised criminal network is connected through underground links, and it has a strong parallel authority outside the official state structures. In this state-crime relationship, some state structures, such as border guards and the police, may be involved in organised crime; however, they will operate without regard for the central state's regulations.

The second generic type emerges under government control and it penetrates all state structures. It is a top-down construction that begins at the highest ranks of government and extends down to local governments. The system produces rent-seekers who are interested in the continuity of the political regime under which they can benefit economically and politically (Ismailbekova, 2017; Heathershaw & Cooley, 2017; Doolot & Heathershaw, 2015). The state essentially turns into a mafia-like criminal organisation itself.

When the state is a mafia-like organisation that controls major trafficking routes, there are no incentives for either high-visibility or frequent crime. Instead, when the state is involved in drug trafficking, its key players are also more consolidated. In Guinea-Bissau, control over the lucrative drug trafficking enterprise helped to bridge divides among military and political officials (Shaw, 2015). Yet, with the criminalisation of the state, economic sectors do not relate to the main source of revenue decline. Venezuela shows how its mafia state, created by President Chavez, which Maduro expanded, created a loyal military, but eroded institutions and stifled oil production (McCarthy-Jones & Turner, 2021). Similar outcomes describe the current structure of criminal enterprise in Tajikistan.

3.2. Drug trafficking in Central Asia

If we combine all three proxy dimensions of drug trafficking – patterns of violence, mafia-like and networked crimes, and state involvement in organised criminal activity – the dynamics of drug trafficking in Central Asia become clear as well. This section reviews major research in the region. It shows that drug trafficking dominates illicit economies of Central Asia, but varies in how it is organised, how it is linked to violence, and the degree of state involvement in trafficking.

The link between political violence and drug trafficking in Central Asia is still debated in both the policy and academic literature. While some studies link the root causes of drug trafficking to terrorism in the region (Sharipova & Beissebayev, 2021; Alymbaeva, 2013; Makarenko, 2002), other studies argue that actors in the illegal drug market operate for various reasons, including religious extremism (De Danieli, 2010; Omelicheva & Markowitz, 2019). Tajikistan's role as transit country is of particular interest because of its long border with Afghanistan (Khuseinova, 2021; Mirzoeva, 2020;

Mirzoev, 2014). Drug trafficking in Tajikistan expanded during the civil war of 1992–97; both the political opposition and the former apparatchiki (political leaders) resorted to drug trafficking to fuel their own combat capabilities. Competition over drug trafficking routes continued in the post-war period between former warlords and central government (De Danieli, 2010; Levi-Sanchez, 2021). The relationship between the former warlords and the central government has been shifting ever since but can be grouped into three types: a partnership, an independent-but-cooperative relationship, or an anti-government relationship. However, in its attempt to monopolise the security sector and illegal economy in the region, the central government attacked opposition leaders in Khorog in the post-war period (Levi-Sanchez, 2021; Lemon, 2015). Similarly in Kyrgyzstan, most studies agree that criminal actors infiltrated the state during the presidency of Kurmanbek Bakiev (2005–10), which led to violent showdowns between political incumbents and the criminal underworld (Bakiev, 2021; Kupatadze, 2015; Marat, 2006). Markowitz and Omelicheva (2021) concluded that criminal violence is less visible in Central Asia during periods of political stability and escalates during political turbulence and conflict.

But violence *between* criminal organisations is rare, especially in relation to the drug trafficking economy. In the 2000s, members of criminal organisations in Tajikistan were occasionally kidnapped and taken to Afghanistan because of payment delays (Latypov, 2011). The shift from disorganised and small groups to more organised groups on both sides of the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan has also led to a decline in the level of violence (De Danieli, 2010; Matveeva, 2009). Less violence signalled criminal organisations' consolidation of power, with stronger links and an increase in trust between groups (De Danieli, 2010). In Kazakhstan, criminal groups affiliated with national and local political authorities compete with each other at times. Members of the group known as Four Brothers, who formed in the 1990s and were influential in western Kazakhstan, were assassinated and attacked on various occasions. But the group specialised primarily in looting oil products and racketeering, not in drug trafficking. When violence broke out during mass protests in Kazakhstan in early January 2022, the Kazakh authorities blamed criminal groups with political connections for inciting chaos.

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, only criminal groups that had protection from the central government could continue their illegal activities (De Danieli, 2010; Paoli et al., 2007). 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 (Kupatadze, 2014; Turlubekova, 2020). In addition, larger groups work with networks of drug dealers.

Most scholars agree that across Central Asia, state actors provide protections to drug trafficking routes. Both low- and high-level law enforcement officers participate in the drug economy, blurring the line between law enforcement and criminal functions

(Botoeva, 2021; De Danieli, 2014; Kupatadze, 2014; Marat, 2006; Paoli et al., 2007). Rank-and-file police officers both protect and participate in drug dealing at street level (Latypov, 2011; Turlubekova, 2020), while high-ranking officers are usually responsible for collaborating with large criminal groups and facilitating transborder shipments (De Danieli, 2014; Kupatadze, 2014; Levi-Sanchez, 2021). Drugs play a more central role in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan where political incumbents use state structures to profit from the illegal drug economy. What remains unclear is how well non-state traffickers are organised and whether – besides providing protection – the corrupt state agencies also compete with them.

4. Politics and crime in Central Asia

Early drug trafficking routes through Central Asia overlapped with migration flows from the region to Russia. In the early 1990s, drug traffickers used labour migrants as mules, hiding drugs in cars, trucks, and in legal products transported from Central Asia to Russia. Traffickers also used small paths in the mountains and river crossings further away from border posts (Amanbekova, 2019).² Because of the high poverty rates and omnipresence of drug trafficking, the residents of some regions in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan accepted the informal leadership of certain criminal groups. In Tajikistan, criminal groups in Viloyati Mukhtori Kūhisoni Badakhshon (commonly known as GBAO or Badakhshan) enjoyed legitimacy among the population as informal leaders.³ They have supported youth sport clubs, community centres, educational programmes, drug addiction treatment programmes, and families in need within their mahallas, and were therefore accepted and supported by the local people (Levi-Sanchez, 2021). In Kyrgyzstan, criminal kingpins like Kamchy Kolbayev were popular in their native villages for having distributed medical supplies at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the creation of specialised counter-trafficking agencies with the help of Western donors in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the 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 routes, with the involvement of larger and better-organised actors (Botobayev, 2014; Burnashev, 2007). In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, some shipments are transported with an informal government escort (Caravan.kz, 2020).⁴ According to the UNODC, traffickers in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan experimented with sending drugs to Russia on aeroplanes after receiving shipment from Afghanistan (Demirbuken et al., 2012). In Kazakhstan, drugs coming in on flights from Afghanistan or Pakistan travelled on to China (Demirbuken et al., 2012). In Kyrgyzstan, law enforcement officers seized heroin on flights from the cities of Bishkek and Osh on direct flights to Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Novosibirsk in Russia and Urumchi in China (Demirbuken et al., 2012).

The present-day thieves-in-law, who have retained the well-known name of ‘vory v zakone’ from Soviet times seem to still operate within the criminal hierarchies of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Thieves-in-law used to be ‘crowned’ in Russia

² Interview with a journalist from Tajikistan in January 2022.

³ Interview with a journalist from Tajikistan in January 2022.

⁴ Aleksandr Zelichenko, director of the Central Asian Drug Policy Center and ex-police officer involved in developing the drug control department within the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Kyrgyzstan – interview in February 2022.

and abided by an internal code of conduct.⁵ However, in the period of economic and political transition in the 1990s, even ‘vorovskoi mir’ (thieves’ world) was transformed and codes of conduct that used to govern ‘vory v zakone’ changed too (Siegel and Turlubekova, 2019). Some thieves-in-law entered legal businesses, which used to be prohibited (Siegel, 2012). There are records of violent conflicts between ‘Georgian’ and ‘Slavic’ networks of thieves-in-law, which affected the structure and power relationships of organised criminal groups in the Central Asian region too (Siegel and Turlubekova, 2019).

In Kazakhstan, crowned thieves-in-law like Serik-Golova (Serik Dzhamanayev) or Lekha Maymysh (Lekha Maimyshev) have operated since the mid-1990s (Caravan.kz, 2020). In January 2021, Serik-Golova was sentenced to 19 years in prison, while Lekha Maymysh was arrested after nationwide protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022, along with Wild Arman (Arman Dzhumageldiyev). Some thieves from the older generation are addicted to heroin. Other types of criminal authorities include influential groups that at times compete over illicit market shares. A union of criminal organisations, power structures and the police (Gilinsky & Siegel, 2019, p. 163) seems to coordinate major trafficking shipments with counterparts in Russia.⁶

In the past, Kyrgyzstan’s Ministry of the Interior and the GKNB used to provide protections to those involved in organised crime. But over time, they, too, became directly involved in criminal activity, including drugs trafficking. The involvement is limited to local security structures and political officials in southern Kyrgyzstan.⁷ Some members of parliament may also benefit from the support of criminal syndicates. Competition between criminal authorities in Kyrgyzstan has been increasing over the last five years, elevating the risk of deadly violence. In the past, for instance, Kolbayev rose to prominence after another criminal leader from southern Kyrgyzstan, Almambet Anapiyaev, was killed in Belarus in 2015 (Niayzova, 2015). Another criminal kingpin named Djengo (Kadyr Dosonov), is currently in jail on charges of drug trafficking and is a competing authority to Kolbayev (Azattyk, 2021). Djengo is a criminal authority reportedly outside the Russia-dominated thieves-in-law circle.

In Tajikistan, the Peace Accord reached between Rakhmon’s government and the opposition in 1997 reduced the level of violence, but arrests and assassinations of local leaders in Badakhshon continue today. Rakhmon succeeded in arresting and eliminating leaders in the Gharm region (Markowitz & Omelicheva, 2021) and some leaders of organised groups in the Badakhshon region (Levi-Sanchez, 2021). His regime used Western technical and military aid and assistance, provided in the aftermath of 9/11, to eliminate competitors in the drug market in the Badakhshon region as well (De Danieli, 2014). Confrontations in Khorog (the Badakhshon region) and border villages between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in autumn 2021 were allegedly initiated by Yatimov to resist

⁵ Galeotti offers an extensive exposé on the inside world of thieves-in-law. See: Galeotti, M. (2018). *The Vory*. Yale University Press, 2018.

⁶ For instance, Batukayev from Kyrgyzstan and Lekha Maymysh are known to be addicted to heroin. Interview with an expert on organised crime in the Eurasian region in February 2022.

⁷ Interview with a journalist in southern Kyrgyzstan in March 2022.

the president's attempts to marginalise him.⁸ Today, both policy and academic research agree that high-ranking government officials are involved in drug trafficking (INL, 2014; De Danieli, 2010, 2014; Kupatadze, 2014; Paoli et al., 2007).

Previous research has revealed that criminal networks in Tajikistan were organised around three trafficking routes from Afghanistan. First, the Kulyabi route resembled a pyramid-like hierarchy and was responsible for most drugs trafficked through Tajikistan in the post-war period. Up to 20 groups each with 40-50 members operated along the route. Second, the Badakhshon route emerged during the war period with the drug traffickers organised into 'families'. Each family was responsible for overseeing the entire process of trafficking, which started in Afghanistan, before transiting across the Pamir Highway, and exiting to Osh in Kyrgyzstan. Five or six groups each with about 20-30 members dominated the route (De Danieli, 2010). Finally, the third route passed along the Rasht Valley (Gharm) with two or three Islamic militant groups made up of 20-30 members each operating there in 1999 and 2000. The Tajik government later eliminated most groups as part of a crackdown on the opposition elite, who had stakes in the illegal economy. By 2011, the government had established control over most of the Badakhshon region as well (Markowitz & Omelicheva, 2021).

As control over the drugs economy in Tajikistan grew more centralised from the early 2000s onwards, trafficking routes also consolidated into two main networks.⁹ The first was the Uzbekistan route, which connects Lower Panj, Shurobod, Dushanbe, Chanak, Ayni, Panjakent, and Samarkand – this was allegedly controlled by Ozoda Rakhmon. The second was the Kyrgyzstan route, connecting Iskashim, Khorog, Mughan, and Batken, which was allegedly controlled by Yatimov.¹⁰ According to multiple sources, the president's family tried to centralise control over drug trafficking throughout the 2010s, and especially in the 2020s ahead of Rakhmon's planned power transfer to Rustam.

In 2012, competition among political players in the drug trafficking economy led to the assassination of the deputy head of the GKNB, General Abdullo Nazarov. He was attacked near Khorog, reportedly by criminal syndicates over disputes related to increased informal taxation of trafficked drugs (Ozodi.org, 2012). Thanks to his Soviet education, Nazarov shared strong connections with the Russian intelligence services.¹¹ One of the last remaining informal leaders in Badakhshon was Mamadbokir Mamadbokirov, who in the post-war years was able to move from the illegal realm to the legal agropastoral business of breeding yaks. However, he was still accused by the Tajik authorities of involvement in organised crime and political dissent.¹² As of February 2022, his supporters still protected him from government arrest (Ozodi.org, 2022).

Recent changes in the drugs market in the wider Central Asian region include the emergence of synthetic drug production and consumption in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan,

⁸ Interview with an academic researcher on Tajikistan in March 2022.

⁹ Interview with an academic researcher on Tajikistan in March 2022.

¹⁰ Interview with an academic researcher on Tajikistan in March 2022.

¹¹ Interview with a journalist from Tajikistan in January 2022.

¹² Interview with an academic researcher on Tajikistan in March 2022.

and Kazakhstan. The director of the Central Asian Drug Policy Centre in Bishkek, Alexander Zelichenko, linked the increase in production of synthetic drugs in Afghanistan to the ascent of the Taliban regime. Criminal groups specialising in synthetic drugs expanded due to the Taliban's fight against opium production and trafficking inside Afghanistan. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, mostly small groups are involved in producing synthetic drugs. But larger groups may be emerging as well. Most labs interdicted in Bishkek were small, but some showed more sophisticated forms of organisation – they rented large facilities, had security cameras, and used drones.¹³ In Almaty, because of the strong smell generated in the production process, most labs are on the city's outskirts.¹⁴ Small-scale dealers in synthetic drugs use Telegram and other instant messaging apps for advertising and selling drugs. They transact in cryptocurrencies that allow greater anonymity. Instead of meeting clients face to face, dealers use a system called *zakladki*, where they agree with the client on a place where the drugs will be hidden.

Drug trafficking occurs alongside other smuggling activities.¹⁵ In Tajikistan, organised criminal groups involved in illegal drug trafficking also smuggle gold and precious metals. Likewise, in Kazakhstan thieves-in-law are also involved in smuggling legal goods (Turlubekova, 2020). Smaller groups may be linked to larger groups either within Central Asia, in Afghanistan and Russia, or in the South Caucasus. For instance, heroin trafficking in the southern city of Shymkent in Kazakhstan will probably link to networks in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan reports the arrests of Tajik, Kazakh, and Afghan citizens smuggling drugs.

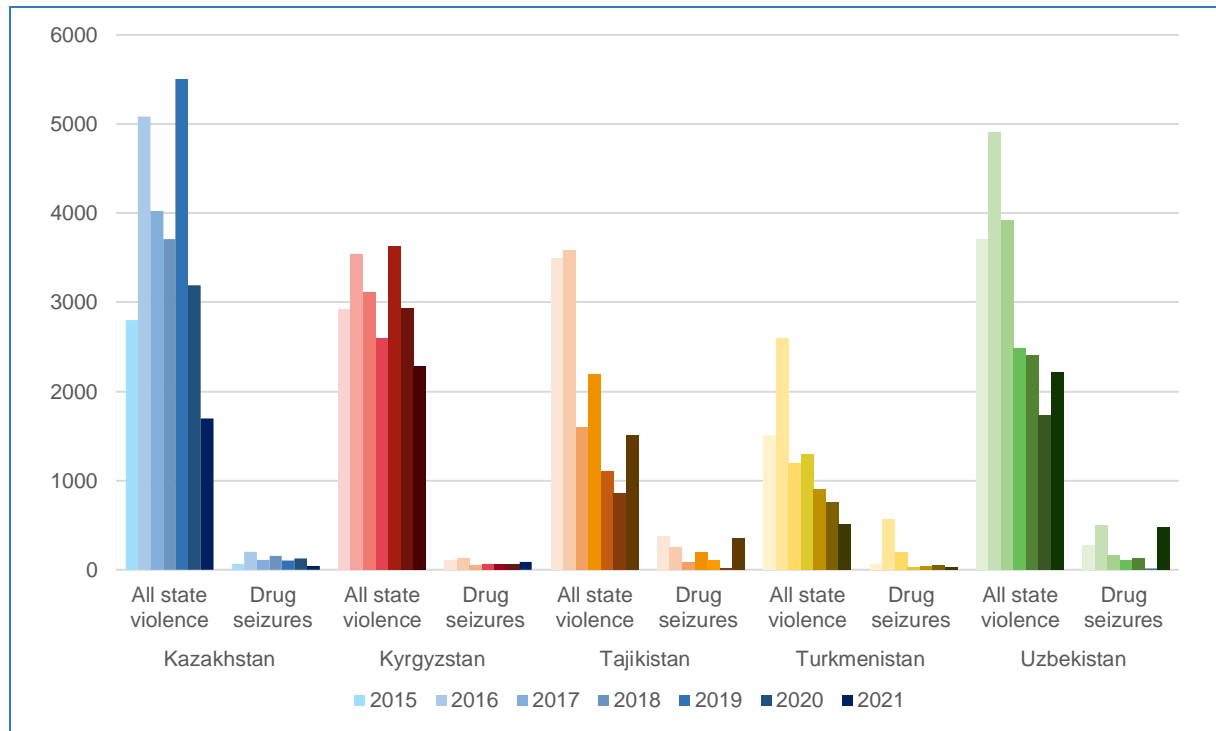
Both state violence and drug seizures declined throughout the 2010s across Central Asia (Demirbuken et al., 2012; Turlubekova, 2020) and increased again in 2021 (Graph 1). Reports of shadow economy incidents increased in Kazakhstan in 2017, most likely in relation to the government's programme to fight small and serious crimes as part of an ambitious police reform (Marat, 2018). All countries reported the lowest numbers of drug-related events in 2020. The dips in drug reports were more dramatic than the dips in reports of the general criminal environment in each country. The change can be attributed to a slowdown in economic exchange between countries, less law enforcement, and less media reporting of illicit activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The decline in drug interdiction in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan can also indicate the further consolidation of trafficking groups. Qualitative evidence confirms that the decline in drug interdictions is indicative of both a decline in drug trafficking and more sophisticated methods of transportation.

¹³ Interview with Zelichenko in January 2022.

¹⁴ Kazakh activist on preventing the production of synthetic drugs, interview in January 2022.

¹⁵ Interview with a journalist from Tajikistan in January 2022.

Graph 1: Reports of the frequency of state violence and drug seizures, 2015–21



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

Table 1: Drug seizures frequencies

		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
Kazakhstan	All state violence	2,802	5,083	4,024	3,712	5,503	3,190	1,699	26,013
	Drug seizures	65	203	110	154	107	129	47	815
Kyrgyzstan	All state violence	2,924	3,539	3,112	2,592	3,628	2,934	2,279	21,008
	Drug seizures	106	124	48	60	64	57	92	551
Tajikistan	All state violence	3,498	3,586	1,597	2,191	1,105	857	1,507	14,341
	Drug seizures	378	255	86	196	107	22	351	1,395
Turkmenistan	All state violence	1,510	2,597	1,200	1,295	900	755	508	8,765
	Drug seizures	59	569	193	35	42	53	28	979
Uzbekistan	All state violence	3,707	4,910	3,919	2,485	2,407	1,732	2,220	21,380
	Drug seizures	276	501	163	109	124	16	481	1,670

Source: GDELT.

5. Methodology

To investigate the structure of crime in drug trafficking, we build on our past research of organised crime in Eurasia, conducting analysis of big data on violence, drugs, and state behaviour, a qualitative review of news reports, and undertaking expert interviews. First, we focused on the media report available as part of the GDELT (Global Data on Events, Location, and Tone) project for the 2015–21 period. The GDELT dataset offers an open-access index of global human activity by means of machine-coded heterogeneous media data, including online, print, audio, and video reports, as well as academic literature. We have chosen this dataset to collect quantitative data on drug trafficking, violence, and corruption in Central Asia as it offers large amounts of logged data since the mid-2010s. It includes reports by domestic media in all local languages. Limitations of the dataset include a lack of sufficient data prior to 2015.

We coded five categories containing keywords related to drug reports, violence by non-state actors, state violence, the general criminal context, and corruption. Certain keywords overlap both within one code and across codes. Our sources included over 1,500 outlets, including those not based in Central Asia. To ensure quality control, we removed duplicated events and limited the confidence in each source to > 75% when applicable. We also removed the JSTOR depository that features secondary sources to avoid duplication. If certain keywords (such as ‘extremism’) produced results that were too broad for our analysis, we removed them. Altogether, we’ve captured 176,236 events along the five categories.

In our codes we define state violence as a combination of both legal uses of violence, like arrests, and illegal means, including torture. We coded ‘torture’ as state violence based on our expert knowledge of torture as mostly perpetrated by the state. We coded ‘assassination’, ‘kidnap’, and ‘armed conflict’ as non-state violence because in the period we analysed there were few reports of state-perpetrated armed violence against civilians.¹⁶ Finally, to explore the relationship between the codes, we ran a regression analysis on 30 variables.

Second, a qualitative review of media reports revealed details of drug-related reports, violence by non-state actors, state violence, the general criminal context, and corruption. We used keywords to extract articles from the Integrum Archive covering drug trafficking and organised crime. The database includes media sources from former Soviet republics since the early 1990s. Whereas quantitative review revealed frequencies of violence, qualitative assessment allowed us to assess the level of visibility of violent incidents.

Finally, we conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom with a dozen experts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. They included representatives of organisations that work on drug prevention and treatment programmes across Central

¹⁶ For instance, in January 2022, when Kazakhstan’s police and security services killed over 227 people.

Asia, the former officers of drug control agencies, journalists focusing on issues related to illegality, and NGO representatives. The questions posed varied according to each expert's background, and they included topics on drug trafficking routes, the main actors involved in trafficking, any differences in trafficking dynamics, and links between criminal actors and law enforcement agencies. We only provide the country of origin and date of interviews for those experts who requested confidentiality.

6. Analysis: Drug trafficking, violence and corruption

This section presents a combined analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data. We first explore the relationship between the visibility and frequency of criminal violence and state violence before using induction to explain how drug trafficking is organised in the region. We then map activities along the five codes to show the various patterns of drug trafficking, violence by non-state actors, state violence, organised crime, and corruption. Finally, we examine how corruption facilitates drug trafficking in the region.

6.1. The structure of non-state drug trafficking

Quantitative analysis shows that most trafficking incidents involve several individuals coordinating the practice within one country or across borders. Mentions of the drug trade and cartels are moderately correlated in media reports, which suggests that drug trafficking in Central Asia often resembles mafia-like activity (Table 2). 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 (Maps 1-2). 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.

Developing an understanding of state responses to crime is key. Drug trafficking makes up only a fraction of state enforcement against criminal activity. For instance, of the total 32,825 reports of 'seized' goods in 2015–21, only 5,410 related to drugs. Most interdictions are also small in volume. Small-scale interdictions reflect the structure of the non-state criminal market and serve to showcase the overall fight against drug trafficking. In Kazakhstan and Tajikistan for instance, the police need to meet statistical targets (Latypov, 2011; Turlubekova, 2020). Such targets focus not on the volume of drugs seized, but on the number of drug dealers arrested. More state violence in non-drug-related criminal activity, as well as a myriad of small-scale interdictions, all point to the authorities' relative tolerance of large shipments.

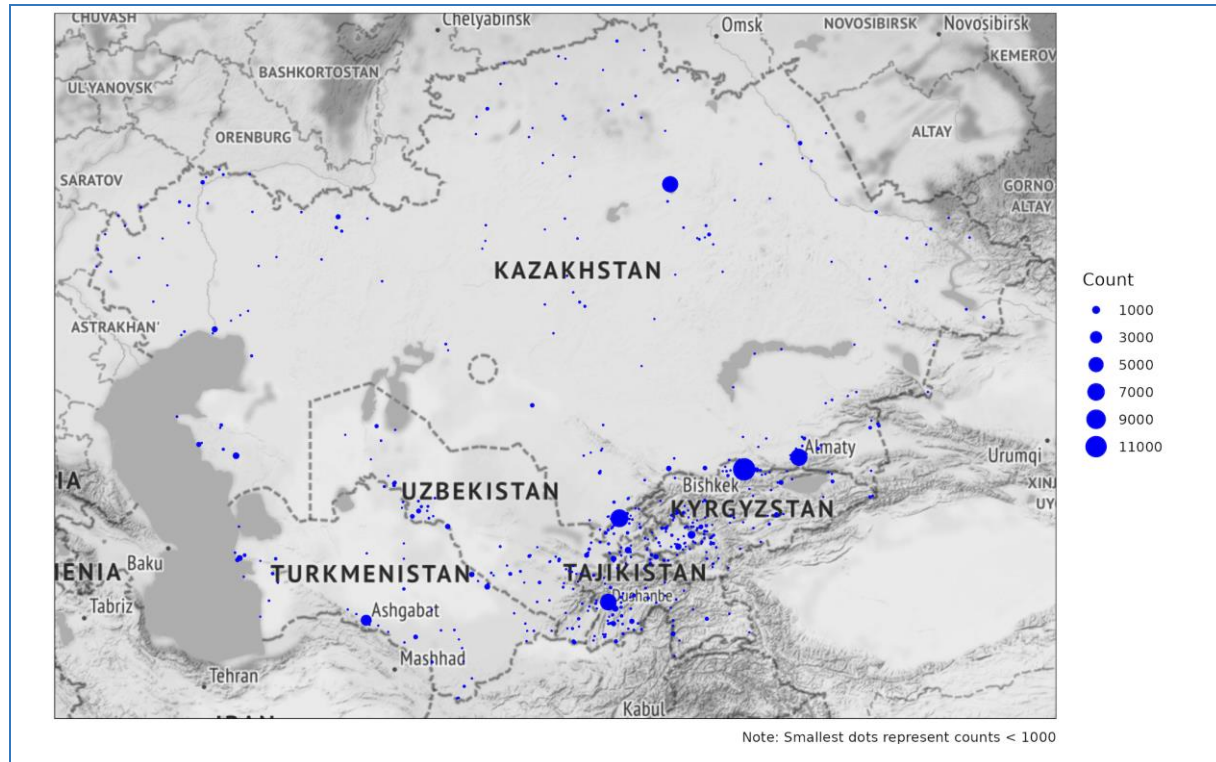
Table 2: Drug trade, law enforcement, and violence

	Cartels	Drug trade	Drugs & Narcotics	Armed conflict	Organised crime ¹⁷	Arrest	Persecution	Seize	Torture	Police Brutality	Anticartel Enforcement	General crime	Terror group
Drug trade	0.511***	-											
Drugs & narcotics	0.478***	0.753***	-										
Armed conflict	0.271***	0.489***	0.624***	-									
Organised crime	0.236***	0.171***	0.196***	0.176***	-								
Arrest	-0.207***	-0.232***	-0.218***	-0.050***	-0.066***	-							
Persecution	-0.038***	-0.040***	-0.001	0.067***	0.031***	0.087***	-						
Seize	0.008***	0.136***	0.245***	0.281***	0.043***	0.069***	0.042***	-					
Torture	-0.014***	0.076***	0.243***	0.373***	0.120***	0.174***	0.182***	0.209***	-				
Police brutality	-0.020***	-0.015***	0.058***	0.093***	-0.013***	0.064***	0.019***	0.097***	0.131***	-			
Anticartel enforcement	0.098***	0.010***	0.009***	0.090***	0.127***	-0.034***	0.039***	0.024***	0.034***	0.003	-		
General crime	0.017***	-0.009***	0.013***	0.071***	0.299***	0.271***	0.046***	0.053***	0.160***	0.064***	-0.013***	-	
Terror group	-0.002	0.001	-0.013***	0.003	0.001	-0.009***	-0.004	0.014***	-0.004	-0.001	-0.002	-0.012***	-
Organised crime ¹⁸	0.444***	0.695***	0.925***	0.577***	0.322***	-0.234***	-0.006**	0.226***	0.235***	0.051***	0.007***	0.058***	-0.014***

Source: GDELT

Values represent Pearson correlation coefficients. N = 176,507; ** = p <.05; *** = p <.01.

Map 1: State violence reports, 2015–21



Source: GDELT.

¹⁷ Discussion of gangs, mafia, organised crime, and so on.

¹⁸ World Bank code in GDELT.

The 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 (*koknar*). 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.

Table 3: Drug seizures in Central Asia for 2019, in kg

	Heroin	Marijuana	Hashish	Opium	Other drugs	Hemp	Cannab. straw	Poppy straw	Synth. drugs	Psychoactive subs.
Kazakhstan	1,152	9,690	709	0.78	0.45	-	-	-	-	-
Kyrgyzstan	54	1,141	170	3.5	3.2	14,324	466	0.15		5.2
Tajikistan	172	61	2.4	788		223,802	-	-	8	
Uzbekistan	41	736	112	225	23.8	-	-	63		0.20

Source: <https://dataunodc.un.org>

Map 2: Incidents of criminal violence reports, 2015–21



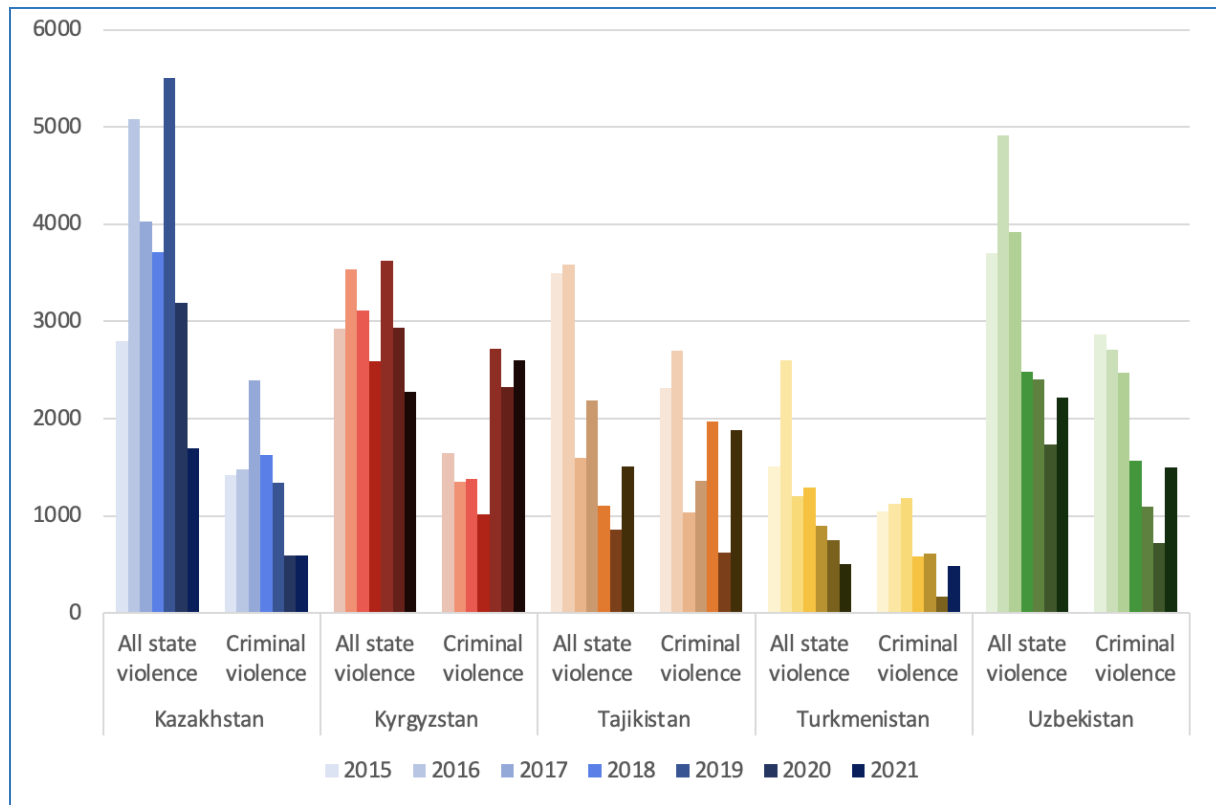
Source: GDELT.

There are, however, important variations within and among states in both how groups are organised and how states interdict them. In Kazakhstan individuals or small groups (six to ten people) operate across the country and divide functions effectively among

themselves.¹⁹ Kazakh law enforcement institutions regularly conduct special operations in several provinces simultaneously. Within a few days, such operations interdict tonnes of drugs, uncover thousands of crimes, and arrest hundreds of individuals (Total.kz, 2014). Kazakhstan reported more instances of heroin trafficking in the 2000s and early 2010s. In recent years, synthetic drug production for the domestic market has been on the rise too.

Like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan reports small groups (over three people) and individual perpetrators, some of them from neighbouring countries (NCDC.uz, n.d.; Podrobno.uz, 2013). Most interdictions take place in the Surkhandarya, Tashkent, and Ferghana regions bordering Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (NCDC & UNODC, 2020). Uzbekistan also reports low levels of heroin and synthetic drug interdiction, but higher volumes of opiates and marijuana. However, official reports from Uzbekistan suggest a smaller volume of interdicted drugs on an annual basis than in Kazakhstan.

Graph 2: Reports of the frequency of state and non-state violence, 2015–21



Source: GDELT.

Levels of violence fluctuate over the years and indicate that drug trafficking patterns change as well. Kyrgyzstan is the most telling example. The country is the regional outlier in that non-state violence supersedes state violence in recent years (Graph 2). Other countries in the region see a closer ratio between reports of drugs and non-state violence.

¹⁹ For instance, ‘Uchastnik transnatsional’noy OPG zaderzhan v Aktobe’, Kazinform, 27 January 2022, and ‘Specoperaciya proshla v pjati regionah Kazahstana’, Zakon.kz, 14 December 2021.

Non-state violence has increased since 2019, while drug reports have decreased. The spike in non-state violence could be due to the consolidation of mafia-like organisations, much in line with Zelichenko’s assessment. The better-organised criminal syndicates compete among themselves and with state agencies. While state violence increased in 2019–20, it declined in 2021, indicating law enforcement’s less effective response to spikes in the criminal underworld.

6.2. The role of the state in drug trafficking

Whereas quantitative analysis shows that states interdict small-scale possession of drugs in large numbers, expert interviews indicate that large-scale drug trafficking is protected by state actors and consistently goes unreported. In other words, criminality is high, but states are infiltrated by actors protecting or participating in drug trafficking. The Organised Crime Index ranging on the scale of 1 to 10 shows how state resilience scores are low, especially in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, amid moderate criminality scores (Table 4). In both countries, illicit economic activities, including drug trafficking, are embedded in the highest levels of state structures.

Table 4: Criminality and resilience score

Countries	Criminality score	Resilience score
Kazakhstan	4.27	4.71
Kyrgyzstan	5.33	4.17
Tajikistan	5.62	2.67
Turkmenistan	4.62	2.17
Uzbekistan	4.97	3.79

Source: Organised Crime Index <https://ocindex.net/>.

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. According to Zhanna Nurseitova, who works for a project focused on drug prevention and treatment in Kazakhstan, wholesale dealers use *zakladchiki* (people who hide drugs for customers) and sometimes tip off police officers about their locations in exchange for state protection services.²⁰ But when drug prevention NGO Narkostop informs the police about synthetic lab locations, authorities outside Almaty tend to ignore their reports. More direct police involvement in drug trafficking was prevalent in Kazakhstan in the 2000s but reports of police managers’ involvement in the drugs trade continue to surface in the media today (cf. Dobrota, 2003; Azattyk, 2018; Informburo, 2021). Thanks to its more diverse economy, Kazakhstan’s law enforcement officers can collect rents from other sources as well.

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

²⁰ Interview in January 2022.

territory.²¹ 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 (cf. Vesti.kg 2016).²² Such allegations usually mention public officials' involvement in other illicit activities as well. Officials usually provide political cover for organised criminal groups or even, allegedly, directly participate in the drug trade. On rare occasions, violence related to drug trafficking in places of police detention demonstrates how organised criminal syndicates compete with Kyrgyzstan's law enforcement agencies (Makanbai kyzy, 2021). Law enforcement officers torture and extort confessions from individuals accused of drug trafficking. Drug seizures in Kyrgyzstan are the lowest compared with other forms of enforcement (Table 3).

Map 3: Reports of drug-related incidents, 2015–21



Source: GDELT.

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 (GI-TOC, 2021). 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.²³ Rakhmon's circle of affiliates includes thousands of people, 200 of whom are extremely rich. Showdowns

²¹ Interview, with an expert on peace and conflict resolution from Kyrgyzstan, in February 2022.

²² Interview with a journalist from Kyrgyzstan in March 2022.

²³ Interview with a journalist from Tajikistan in January 2022.

between individuals and groups involved in drug trafficking from the alleged president's circle are hidden, even when large volumes are involved. This finding also corresponds with Zelichenko's assessment that criminal actors usually avoid attention.

High rates of interdiction cases but a lower volume of seized drugs in Tajikistan confirms that the government spends more resources fighting low-level trafficking, while also facing competition between different political factions. The discrepancy may also be exaggerated by the Tajikistan media's greater focus on reporting drug trafficking compared with other countries. From the total figures on state violence in Kazakhstan, we assume that many more interdictions are related to drugs as well.

Authorities in Central Asia occasionally interdict large shipments such as 230 kg of heroin in Uzbekistan in February 2022 or 440 kg of heroin in Kyrgyzstan in May 2021 (Kadyrov, 2021). Such interdictions highlight disagreements among key players in the political and criminal underworlds. The interdiction in February 2022, along with two previous seizures of large shipments, revealed a competition between Yatimov and Ozoda Rakhmon, who allegedly control that trafficking route.²⁴ Allegedly, Yatimov tried to show his might against Ozoda in favour of Rustam. Both Rustam and Ozoda reportedly compete over political influence in Tajikistan. But Yatimov instead angered the siblings. Soon after the interdiction in Uzbekistan, Rustam reportedly shot at Yatimov and forced him to resign (Charter97.org, 2022). For months, Tajik media were silent on whether Yatimov remained in his position. Such blows to large shipments rarely result in open violent confrontations and the authorities curtail reports of showdowns.

In Uzbekistan, like other types of criminal activity, drug trafficking takes place under state patronage with the involvement of long-time criminal authorities. Both our interviews and the Organised Crime Index report (GI-TOC, 2021) suggest that influential criminal authorities – Gafur Rakhimov and Salim Abduvaliev – have previously been involved in the largest criminal enterprises. Abduvaliev reportedly has influence over the criminal authorities in neighbouring Central Asian countries as well.²⁵ Uzbekistan-based smugglers are in close contact with their Tajik and Kyrgyz counterparts.²⁶ Thanks to their close contacts with the Russian Ministry of the Interior, traffickers in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan would use national aviation operators and railways to smuggle Afghan heroin.

In summary, across the Central Asian region, police and political officials provide protection to some drug traffickers, while creating a different public impression by criminalising drug addicts, low-level drug dealers, and their runners (De Danieli, 2010; Latypov, 2011; Turlubekova, 2020). Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan report more drug seizures than other countries, including Tajikistan. Turkmenistan's reports of drug seizures are the lowest in the region, but we can assume that the country's security apparatus is capable of interdicting illicit drugs. Rare reports of large-scale interdictions that indicate sophisticated transnational planning have emerged in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Fergana, 2021; Ria.ru, 2014).

²⁴ Interview with a Tajikistan scholar in March 2022.

²⁵ Interview with a US-based expert on organised crime in Eurasia, February 2022.

²⁶ Interview with a Tajik journalist in January 2022.

6.3. State and non-state violence

In Central Asia, reports of non-state armed violence are infrequent compared with overall reports of criminality. Violence is also rarely used for communication purposes to intimidate the state or criminal actors. None of the variables related to state or non-state violence correlate with reports of terrorism (Table 2). Rather, the opposite is true: non-state actors conceal violence from the state, while political regimes rarely admit that competition in drug trafficking causes violent incidents.²⁷ Law enforcement agencies often uncover drug trafficking and illegal arms (see ‘armed conflict’ in Table 2) in the same incidents, thus revealing a potential for violence in drug-related events.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan report a higher share of drug interdictions as part of all types of state violence (up to 20%) compared with other countries. Tajikistan formally claims that its law enforcement interdicts the same volume of drugs as the rest of Central Asia combined (NCDC & UNODC, 2020). Sources in Tajikistan also posit that in recent years, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have interdicted fewer to no large shipments of drugs in transit from Tajikistan. This contradicts the quantitative findings. Significant increases in drug trafficking in both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, including as a share of the overall state violence, indicates a major recalibration of the drug trafficking market between major actors.

In Tajikistan, non-state violence is reported at high levels compared with neighbouring countries, but state violence and reports of corruption are lower compared with other countries (Graph 2). This finding corresponds with the qualitative findings that competition between high-ranking government officials exists: Rakhmon’s family members and regime loyalists are allegedly competing among themselves and with non-state actors over major drug trafficking enterprises, as well as other large-scale smuggling routes.

Declining state violence in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan can hint at the consolidation of trafficking routes in the hands of powerful state or state-affiliated actors. By contrast, increases in state violence in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan indicate a higher share of organised non-state drug trafficking.

In some cases, violence by non-state actors may not be reported on in the mass media due to a governmental cover-up of the partnership schemes between law enforcement agencies and criminal groups. For instance, the details of the murder in 2013 of the head of the drug control unit in the Osh region, Tolkun Shonoev, were not widely reported in the media (Regnum.ru, 2013). The police officer was probably assassinated after he received a kickback payment but failed to provide protection to criminal groups and imprisoned a Django.²⁸

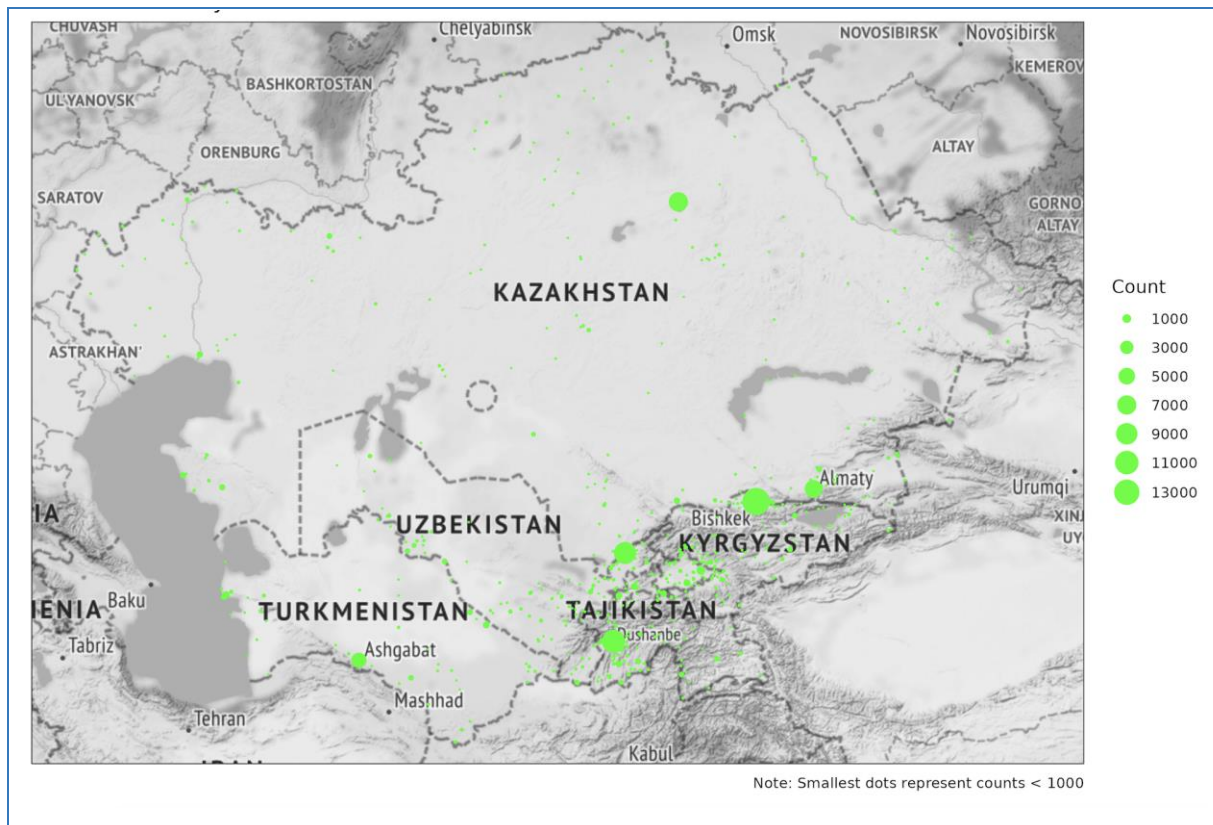
²⁷ In measuring violent crime, we excluded the variable of domestic violence, which had a relatively high tendency in the overall range of non-state violence.

²⁸ Interview, journalist based in Kyrgyzstan, February 2022.

State representatives also use drugs to blackmail opponents. In 2006, the Kyrgyz opposition leader Omurbek Tekebaev was arrested at Warsaw airport on allegations of heroin smuggling in his luggage (Azattyk, 2006). More recently in January 2022, Kyrgyz GKNB detained the independent journalist Bolot Temirov and the poet Bolot Nazarov on allegations of possessing hashish. They both spoke out against corruption schemes in the state-owned petroleum refinery in southern Kyrgyzstan (CPJ, 2022). Both Kyrgyz and Kazakh law enforcement frequently use similar tactics against street-level criminals.

Unlike other parts of Central Asia, cases of high-visibility violence in Tajikistan are likely to be related to drug trafficking more directly, but not mentioned as such in media reports or in the formal state's general political discourse. For instance, drugs may be implicated in a prison break that occurred in Tajikistan in 2010. Following a prison riot, 25 prisoners fled, among them Tajik and Afghan citizens who fled to Afghanistan. Formal reports never referred to the involvement of drug trafficking in the prison uprising, but expert opinion points at a likely connection. Violence in a prison relatively near Dushanbe broke out at least twice in 2018–19, suggesting a confrontation between Rakhmon's proxies and his regime opponents (Putz, 2019).

Furthermore, the dynamic of violence is different in Badakhshon. Unlike in other parts of the country, it is visibly more lethal. The authorities usually refer to violent events in their efforts to eliminate members of organised criminal groups or political extremism in the region (Mastonshoeva, 2022). Violent flare-ups are usually followed by a government shutdown of the internet in the region. From interviews with Tajik experts, we assume that some incidents are linked to the Rakhmon regime's attempts to suppress political opposition in Badakhshon. The Tajik government routinely refers to such actors as representatives of organised crime or as militant Islamists (Aripov, 2021).

Map 4: Shadow economy reports, 2015–21²⁹

Source: GDELT.

Kazakhstan reports a higher number of drug-related events compared with Kyrgyzstan, suggesting that the level of interdiction may be higher, but not as high as in Uzbekistan. Furthermore, the total amount of seized drugs for the sample year of 2019 was significantly higher in Kazakhstan than in Tajikistan (Table 3). We can conclude that a large portion of drugs that cross Tajikistan or Uzbekistan can pass unobstructed through Kazakhstan's territory, but Kazakhstan still interdicts higher numbers of large shipments than its neighbours.

In Uzbekistan, state violence supersedes the number of reported crimes. This contrasts with other countries where there is an inverse relationship. Since Karimov's regime, Uzbekistan has had a robust police presence across the country.

²⁹ Shadow economy includes any reports related to the following codes: discussion of general crime like pickpocketing, robbery, street crime, informal economy, human trafficking and smuggling, sexual slavery; any mentions of arm deals and weapons sales, smuggling, terror groups, and discussion of violent unrest; on organised crime, counterfeit goods, crime networks, illicit financial flows and money laundering. See Index 11.4 on GDELT codes.

6.4. The geography of drug trafficking and interdictions

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 (Map 5).

Map 5: Number of drug seizure reports in 2021



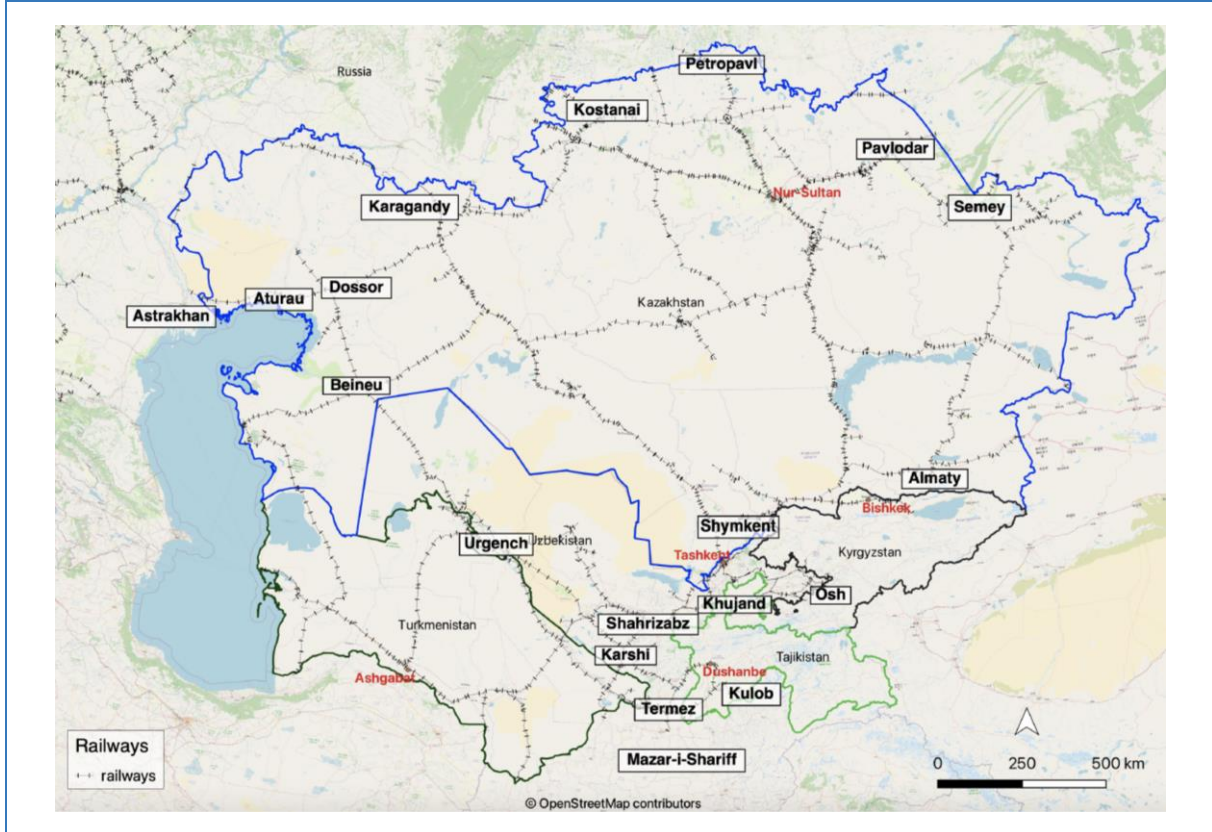
Source: GDELT.

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. 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.

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 railway 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 (Map 6).

Map 6: Map of railways in Central Asia



Source: OpenStreetMap.

Drug-related events have been reported along the major border checkpoints with China as well: in Karakul and Murghab in Tajikistan, in Torugart in Kyrgyzstan, and in Khorgos and at the many smaller land crossings in Kazakhstan. Finally, interdictions have been reported around the Turkmenistan-Iran border, which is also connected via a railway, especially along the south-east part of the border.

6.5. Corruption

Drug trafficking between the Central Asian countries and Russia relies on corruption at all levels of power, ranging from high-level government and law enforcement organisations providing protection to criminal organisations, to smaller scale protection schemes between mid-level police and customs officers, to low-level bribing of relevant state officials. Government posts in the law enforcement and customs control agencies are usually obtained through bribery (Engvall, 2014). In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, official posts along trafficking routes are also the most expensive. Officers who can pay for such placements can then collect rents from criminal actors. Criminal organisations, in turn, can work with any bureaucrats without the need to build long-term relations with a few state representatives. According to an expert from Tajikistan, a position at the Sherhkan-Bandar border crossing costs up to \$200,000, whereas on the Kara-Karum

road, the cost is \$100,000. A position for a customs officer at the Tursunzoda border crossing (formerly Regar) on the border between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan costs around \$100,000. Most of the posts are allocated for only one to two years. Police officers in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan pay between \$30,000 to \$100,000 depending on the rank and location. In southern Kazakhstan, police officers reportedly make monthly payments of \$10,000 per month to their superiors. These payments are either recovered through extortion of money or provision of protection to criminal organisations (Nurgaliev et al, 2015).

Map 7: Reports of corruption, 2015–21



Source: GDELT.

Reports of corruption, including any mentions of misappropriation of funds and kickbacks on the GDELT database, are unevenly spread across the region. Generally, the more autocratic countries report fewer cases of corruption, with Turkmenistan reporting the least. Corruption is poorly correlated with any type of non-state or state violence. It is likely to be reported in contexts that do not involve drug interdictions. Although we know that law enforcement officials and political power holders both perpetrate and protect drug trafficking, such reports in media outlets are extremely rare. Reports of corruption increased in Kyrgyzstan in 2019, mostly among civil society activists pointing at vast corruption deals by the former deputy chair of the customs control, Raimbek Matraimov.

7. Conclusion

Both the quantitative and qualitative review of criminal and state violence show that drug trafficking is organised among non-state networks, small non-state drug cartels that specialise in other criminal activities, and state actors. The competition in the non-state drug market is high, but violence is low in both frequency and visibility. Violence is more likely in areas with high levels of drug seizures. But even there, violence is rarely reported by the media due to its clandestine nature. Low levels of violence and low visibility testify to the fact that the Central Asian states are cohesive in their response to non-state criminal activity.

But state structures are corrupt and provide protections to the largest drug shipments across the region. When large shipments of hundreds of kilograms of heroin are interdicted, governments do not disclose the criminal syndicates that were involved in the trafficking. This suggests that high-ranking political incumbents and influential criminal authorities are participating. Both state and non-state major actors involved in drug trafficking are likely to be embedded in transnational networks beyond Central Asia, including in Russia, Afghanistan, and Iran. Thieves-in-law probably collaborate both with domestic political authorities and criminal groups in Russia.

State involvement also differs. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, it is most likely that low-ranking police and security officers are involved in providing protection to traffickers. Higher-ranking officials are at times suspected of protecting organised crime as well. In Tajikistan, high-ranking security officials and political-regime affiliates are probably responsible for major shipments. And in Uzbekistan political-regime affiliates known for their criminal past allegedly control trafficking routes. Rare flare-ups in violence hint at competition and disagreement between organised criminal groups and with state agencies. In some cases, state actors resort to violence to take control of illegal markets. Such competition destabilises local and regional security.

Going forward, we need to monitor three areas of emergent trends in the region that may result in a reconfiguration of the current balance between criminal and state actors. First, the expansion of synthetic drug trafficking, production, and its use is swift. Due to its decentralised modes of production in clandestine labs, it may result in greater corruption among rank-and-file officers and the synthetic drugs market can also turn more violent. Second, power transitions in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan will probably lead to reconfiguration in both security structures and control over drug trafficking markets. Such transitions may lead to violent showdowns. Finally, if the Taliban and other groups in Afghanistan expand the drugs economy, including that of opiates, synthetic drugs, and cannabis, trafficking via the northern route will expand as well, contributing to high-level corruption and organised crime.

This research project is based on a big data analysis, review of the literature, and expert interviews. It has sketched out the broad and complex dynamics between violence, corruption, and the organisation of drug trafficking in Central Asia. Further research could focus on better understanding when and why state actors compete and collaborate between each other domestically and with counterparts in other countries;

how state actors and criminal groups interact in protecting drug trafficking; and how criminal actors in Central Asia conspire with syndicates in Russia, Afghanistan, China, Iran, and the South Caucasus. Finally, a deeper understanding of the synthetic drug market in Central Asia and the overlap between drug trafficking and other smuggling activities has been important. To achieve this, our research methodology would need to expand the use of in-depth interviews with law enforcement and government officials, NGO experts, and academics in each Central Asian country. We would also conduct a more thorough quantitative analysis of the type of interdictions and criminal behaviour occurring in Central Asia.

8. Policy recommendations

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 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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Appendix

List of interviewed experts

- 1 Journalist, Tajikistan
- 2 Aleksandr Zelichenko, director of the Central Asian Drug Policy Centre, Kyrgyzstan
- 3 Zhanna Nurseitova, Narkostop project, Kazakhstan
- 4 Human rights expert, USA
- 5 Journalist, Kyrgyzstan
- 6 Peace and conflict resolution expert, Kyrgyzstan
- 7 Expert on organised crime in Eurasia, USA
- 8 Former Drugs Control Agency officer, Tajikistan
- 9 Academic researcher, USA
- 10 Corruption specialist, Uzbekistan
- 11 Public health specialist, drug prevention, Tajikistan
- 12 Ernest Robello, Director of CADAP
- 13 Regional security expert, Kyrgyzstan

GDELT codes

Category	Variable	Details
Drug-related reports	CRIME_CARTELS	Primarily focused on mentions of drug cartels, drug corridors, etc. Does not currently have a list of cartels, just captures general discussion of them
	CRIME_ILLEGAL_DRUGS	Mentions of illegal drugs
	DRUG_TRADE	General discussion of the drug trade in broad terms – broader than the other categories
	TAX_CARTELS	Returns any mention of a major recognised drug cartel
	WB_2446_CARTELS	
	WB_2456_DRUGS_AND_NARCOTICS	
Violence by organised criminal groups	ARMEDCONFLICT	Primary discussion of armed conflict, from ground assaults to air raids
	ASSASSINATION	Actual discussion of assassination
	KIDNAP	Someone being kidnapped, abducted, hostages, etc.
	ORGANISED_CRIME	Discussion of gangs, mafia, organised crime, etc.
Violence by the state	ARREST	Discussion of someone being arrested, detained, jailed, imprisoned, etc.
	CONFISCATION	Actual mention of confiscation in the text
	PERSECUTION	Actual mentions of 'persecution'
	SEIZE (all)	Something being seized (often drugs, illegal materials, etc.)
	SEIZE (Drugs related)	Illegal drugs being seized
	TORTURE	Just mentions of the term 'torture', not actual torture techniques like waterboarding
	UNREST_POLICEBRUTALITY	Police brutality
	WB__ANTICARTEL_ENFORCEMENT	
Contextual review of shadow economy	BLACK_MARKET	Actual mentions of 'black market'; not related terms
	CHECKPOINT	Security checkpoints
	CRIME_COMMON_ROBBERY	Discussion of general crime like pickpocketing, robbery, street criminals, etc.
	ECON_INFORMAL_ECONOMY	Informal economies
	HUMAN_TRAFFICKING	Human trafficking, sexual slavery, prostitution, human smuggling, etc.
	MIL_SELF_IDENTIFIED_ARMS_DEAL	Only actual mentions of 'arms deal', 'weapons sale', etc. – does not determine that a sale of AK47s is an arms sale; it requires the text to explicitly label it as such
	SMUGGLING	Smuggling of anything, including arms trafficking
	SOC_GENERALCRIME	Relating to general criminal activity
	TAX_TERROR_GROUP	Returns any mention of a major recognised terror group around the world
	VIOLENT_UNREST	Discussion of violent unrest, from rubber bullets, firing into a crowd, clashes with police or soldiers, violent rioting, etc.
	WB_2453_ORGANIZED_CRIME	
	WB_2454_COUNTERFEIT_GOODS	
	WB_2455_CRIME_NETWORKS	
	WB_2073_ILLICIT_FINANCIAL_FLOWS	
WB_2076_MONEY_LAUNDERING		
Cases of corruption	CORRUPTION	Corruption, kickbacks, embezzling, profiteering, etc.

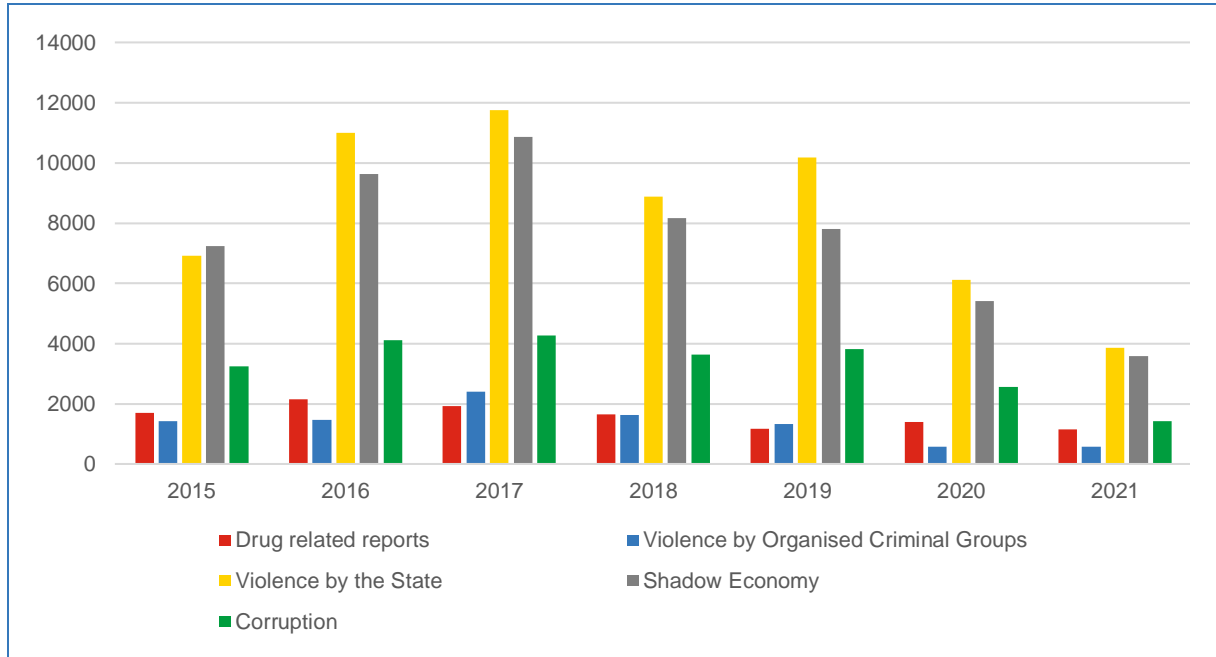
Integrum codes

Category	Keyword (English)	Keyword (Russian)

Drug-related reports	Heroin	Героин
	Hashish	Гашиш
	drug lords	наркобароны
	Kingpin	
	opiate/opium	опиум
	Marijuana	марихуана
	cannabis	каннабис
	Drugs	наркотики
	drug trafficking	наркотрафик
	drug trade	наркотогровля
	drug dealer	наркотогровец
	Cartel	картель
	synthetic drugs	синтетический наркотик
Violence by organised criminal groups	Extortion	вымогательство
	Murder	убийство
	Skirmish	перестрелка
	Kidnap	похищение
	organised crime	орггруппа
	criminal group	
Violence by the state	Smuggling	контрабанда
	drug-control agency	Агентство по борьбе
	Detention	задержание
	confiscation	конфискация
	seizure	захват
	Torture	пытки
	persecution	преследование
Contextual review of shadow economy	Arrest	арест
	Crime	преступление
	Border	граница
	shadow market	теневой рынок
	informal economy	неформальная экономика
	black market	черный рынок
	Smuggling	контрабанда
	human trafficking	трафик людей
	criminality	преступность
	Robbery	кража
Cases of corruption	violence	насилие
	Corruption	коррупция
	Bribe	взятка

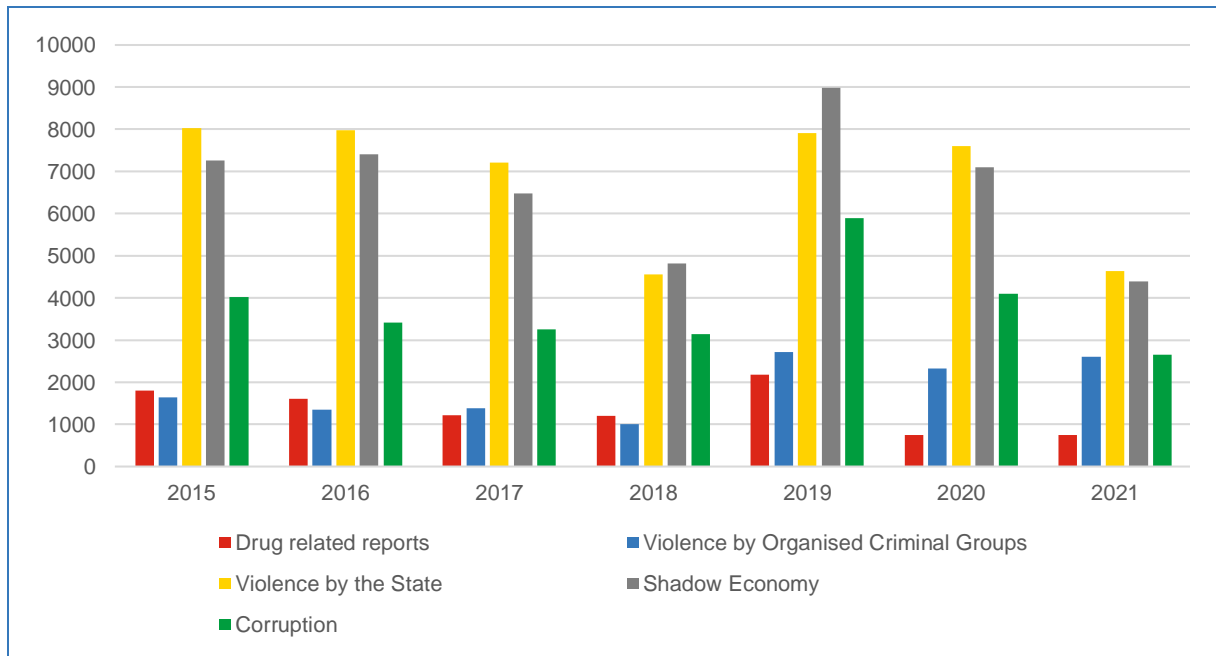
Country trends (GDELT)

Graph 3: Kazakhstan, 2015–21



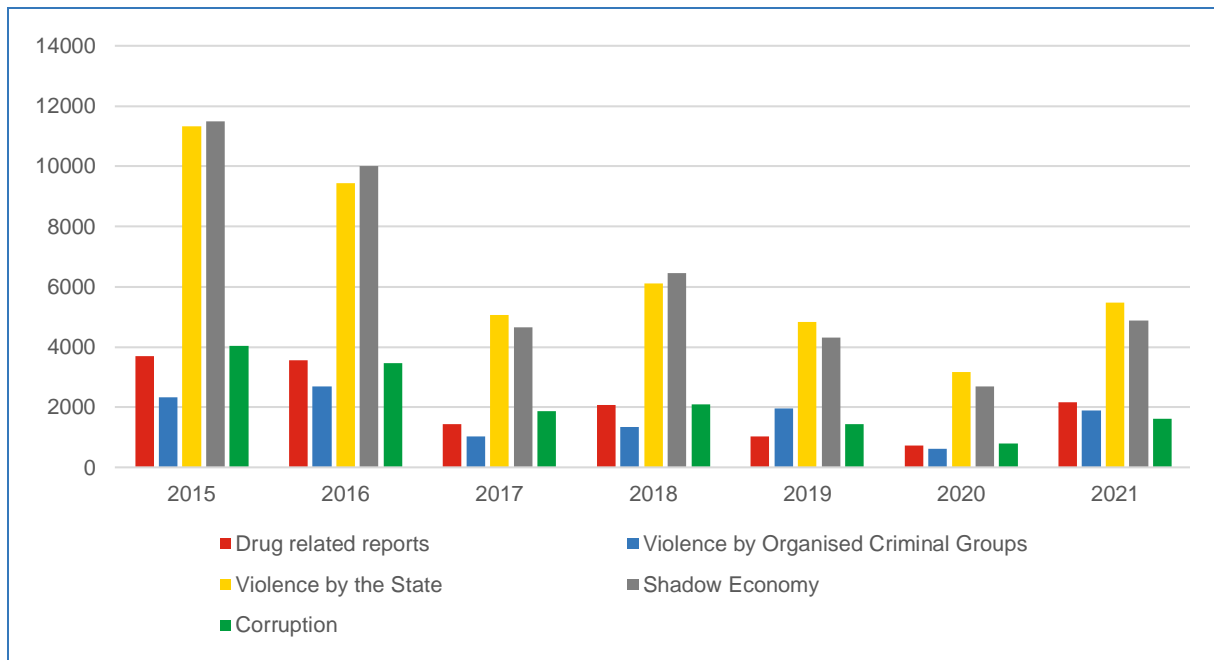
Source: GDELT.

Graph 4: Kyrgyzstan, 2015–21



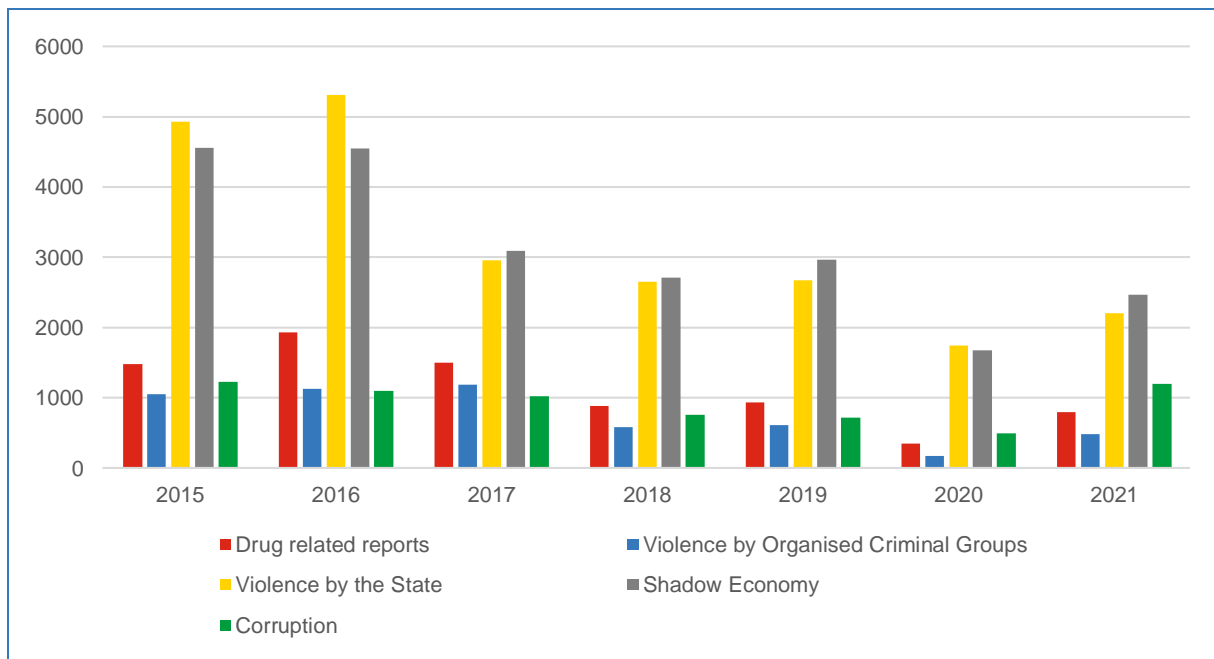
Source: GDELT.

Graph 5: Tajikistan, 2015–21



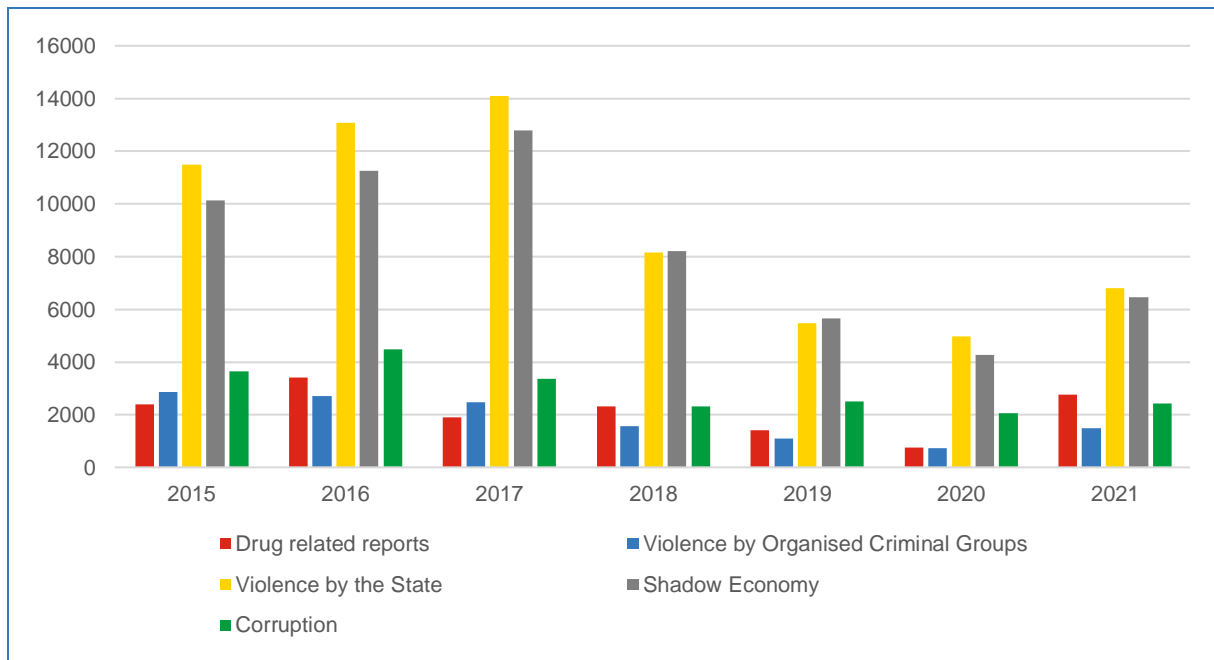
Source: GDELT.

Graph 6: Turkmenistan, 2015–21



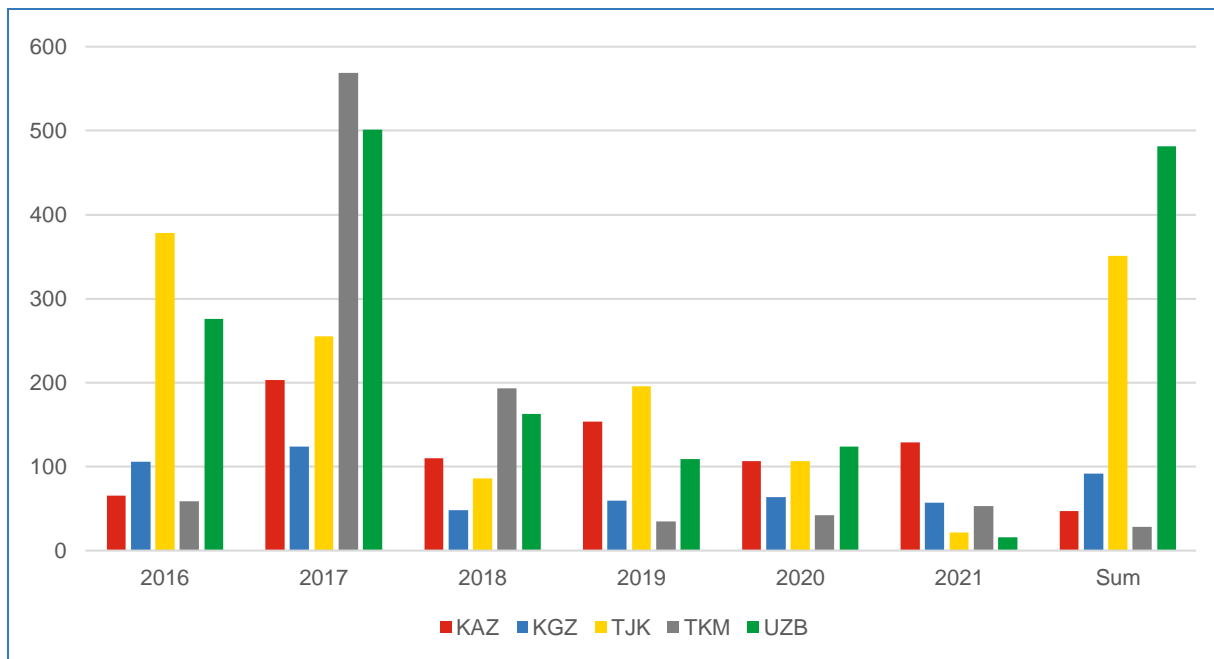
Source: GDELT.

Graph 7: Uzbekistan, 2015–21



Source: GDELT.

Graph 8: Drug seizures, 2015–21



Source: GDELT.