

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – Research Report II

Tackling Transcontinental Drug Trafficking: Finding Pathways to Eliminating the Balkan Route

Introduction to the Topic:

Afghanistan is the source of the vast majority of the world's illicit opiates and, although Afghan opium cultivation and production declined in 2015, it looks likely to continue to be the case. Afghan opiates are trafficked to markets around the globe via a number of established trafficking routes.

The “northern route” (through Central Asia) supplies Afghan opiates to the Russian Federation, while the “southern route” (southwards through the Islamic Republic of Iran or Pakistan) is a connection of trafficking routes that facilitate southerly or northerly flows to the number of destinations including Asia and Africa.

As the main conduit, and possibly the most important heroin trafficking route of all, is the “Balkan route” (through the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey via South-Eastern Europe to Western and Central Europe).

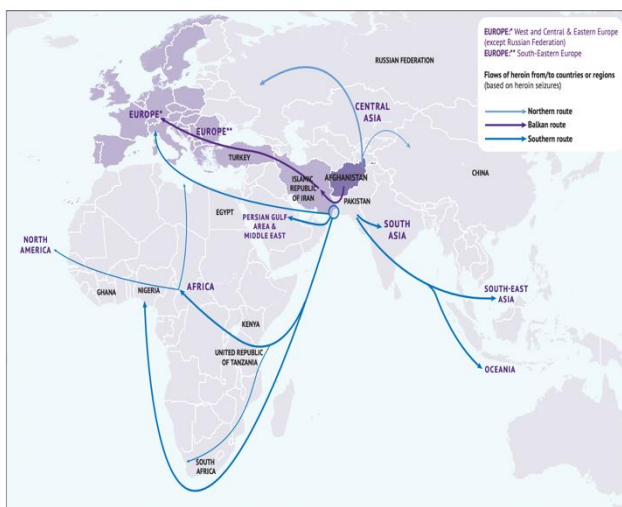


Figure no. 1 – The main trafficking routes of Afghan opiates (UNODC. (2015)). Drug Money: the illicit proceeds of opiates trafficked on the Balkan route. Retrieved from: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/IFF_report_2015_final_web.pdf



Figure no. 2 – The Balkan route countries (UNODC. (2015)). Drug Money: the illicit proceeds of opiates trafficked on the Balkan route. Retrieved from: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/IFF_report_2015_final_web.pdf

The Balkan route supplies illicit Afghan opiates to the following 32 countries/territory: Albania; Austria; Belgium; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Bulgaria; Croatia; Czech Republic; Denmark; France; Germany; Greece; Hungary; Iran (Islamic Republic of); Ireland; Italy; Kosovo; Luxembourg; Montenegro; the Netherlands; Norway; Poland; Portugal; Romania; Serbia; Slovakia; Slovenia; Spain; Sweden; Switzerland; Turkey; the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. These are collectively referred to as “the Balkan route” or “Balkan route countries”.

The Balkan route is a critical issue in global trafficking as it serves as the main corridor for smuggling heroin and other drugs from Afghanistan. As mentioned before, this runs through several countries, exploiting weak governance, corruption, and porous borders. This route exposes several key issues, like how it is approximately 60% of Europe’s heroin supply, fuelling addiction and relate social issues. It gives power to criminal organisations, which engage in other illicit activities such as human trafficking. It also promotes regional instability, such as corruption and violence that are linked to trafficking, which undermine governance and economic stability in the Balkan states. Lastly, it funds terrorism, as drug profits are linked to financing extremist groups, amplifying security risks.

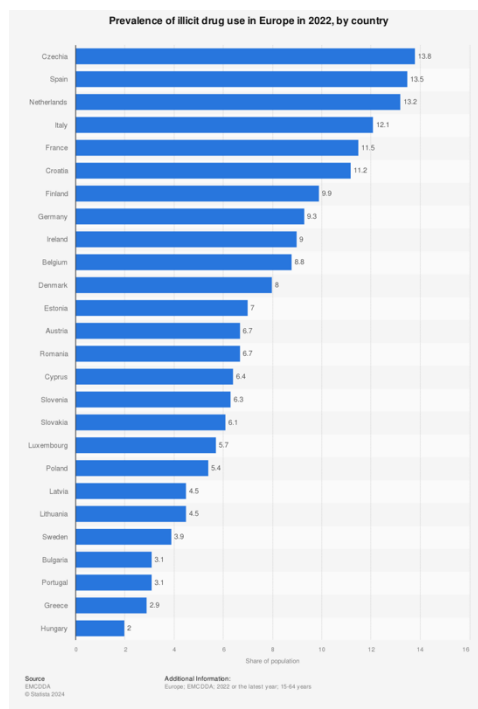


Figure no. 3 – Illicit drug use prevalence in Europe in 2022 (Stewart. C. (2024, December 20)). Prevalence of illicit drug use in Europe in 2022, by country. Retrieved from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/597788/problem-drug-use-prevalence-europe-by-country/>

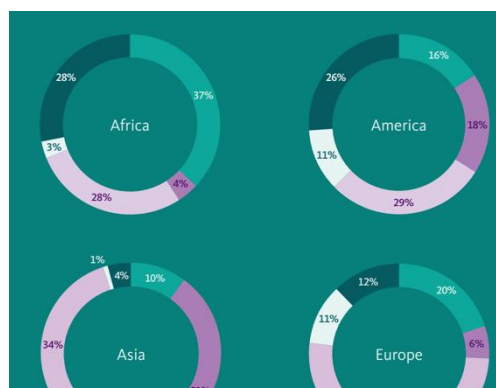


Figure no. 4 – Primary drug of people in treatment, 2022 (UNODC. (2024)) Special Points of Interest. Retrieved from: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2024/WDR_2024_SPI.pdf

Background Information:

The Balkan route has long been recognised, starting from the 20th century as a commercial route between Asia and Europe. During the 1970s, it also emerged as a heroin trafficking route along with an upsurge in production in Afghanistan. Traffickers began using the route to import drugs into Europe. This route has evolved throughout the decades of 1970s –1980s, coinciding with the strengthening of the Cold War, that caused the borders to start disintegrating and the political disorder helped with the smuggling in the Balkans. With this, Turkish crime networks took over the trade, using the route for heroin. In the 1990s, the civil war in the former Yugoslavia disrupted drug trafficking along the traditional Balkan Route. Accordingly, Balkan Route drug traffickers circumvented the war zone by exploiting the traditional Adriatic Sea smuggling between Albania and Italy. The same Adriatic smuggling routes used for decades to smuggle cigarettes by Italian Organised Crime are being increasingly utilised to smuggle heroin and other drugs. Drug smugglers also took advantage of the restructuring of drug law enforcement institutions in the former Communist nations of Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania. With the turn of the century, the borders tightened following the post-war reconstruction, resulting in the diversification of produce, with more synthetic drugs as well as cocaine entering heroin trafficking while criminal routes get more sophisticated.

The permanent influence of organised crime on the state structures, the cooperation between different criminal organisations and especially their collaboration with some extremist groups impact political stability in an extremely harmful way. The states in the Balkans have recognised the dangers for their peoples constituted by organised crime and have already taken a number of required legal, institutional and political measures in order to be able to successfully combat organised crime.

However, organised crime still constitutes the main risk to the new democratic states in the Balkans in spite of these measures. For that reason, combating organised crime may not be treated just as the task or responsibility of one single state but it needs to be understood as an obligation and responsibility of all the states in the entire region as well as of the European Union and the United Nations.

Recent Developments:

The Balkan route remains the main trafficking route for opiates. Overall, heroin seizures linked to Afghan opiates declined in 2022, possibly because drug traffickers anticipated the effect of the opium ban on prices and built-up inventories. At the same time, an increase in heroin seizures in Central Asia and Transcaucasia suggests an increase in trafficking along the northern route.

Drastic contraction of the Afghan opiate market with possible dramatic consequences in the country and beyond

- » In Afghanistan, the cultivation area and production of opium plummeted by 95 per cent from 2022 to 2023, following the 2022 drug ban. Afghanistan has long accounted for the vast majority of global illicit opium production, often upwards of 80 per cent, and shortages will be felt in the main destination markets for Afghan opiates if the ban is sustained.
- » The sharp reduction had immediate consequences for vulnerable rural communities in Afghanistan. Farmers' incomes, which came from selling harvested opium to traders, dropped by more than 92 per cent, falling from an estimated \$1,360 million for the 2022 harvest to \$110 million for the 2023 harvest.
- » Based on preliminary observations, opium production in 2024 may be slightly higher, but likely nowhere near pre-ban levels. It is also unlikely that existing stocks from Afghanistan or increased opium production in other countries will compensate for the shortfall in the long run.
- » As a result, heroin availability is expected to decline and the demand market is expected to adjust in different ways, depending on national circumstances. Demand for opiate-related treatment services is expected to rise, but if these services are insufficient, heroin users may switch to other opioids. New, more potent synthetic opioids could emerge in the market and significantly increase the risks of overdose.
- » It is less clear whether the drug ban announced in April 2022 also impacted Afghan methamphetamine production and exports. By the end of 2023, seizures in neighbouring countries – which report that most methamphetamine continues to originate in Afghanistan – did not indicate a slowdown in methamphetamine trafficking.

Figure no. 5 - Effects on the Afghan opiate market due to policy changes (UNODC. (2024))
Special Points of Interest. Retrieved from: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2024/WDR_2024_SPI.pdf

Focus of the Debate:

Delegates should focus on the role of economic vulnerabilities in the Balkans - unemployment, corruption, and weak governance enabling trafficking - and create solutions to aid anti-corruption initiatives that weaken drug trafficking networks, keeping their countries' best interest in mind.

Significant Parties:

Afghanistan: Afghanistan is the source of the heroin being trafficked along the Balkan Route and is also the world's largest opium producer.

Turkey: Turkey bridges Asia and Europe, serving as the main entry point for heroin into the Balkan Route. Organized crime groups operate extensively here.

Bulgaria: Bulgaria acts as the primary entry point for drugs moving from Turkey into the European Union via porous borders.

Serbia: Serbia is located at the heart of the Balkan Route, with well-established trafficking infrastructure and links to regional crime networks.

Albania: Albania is known for its role in smuggling heroin into Western Europe, with significant involvement of Albanian organized crime groups.

Italy: Italy is a major market for Balkan Route heroin with strong ties between traffickers and Italian organized crime groups.

Netherlands: The Netherlands is a key hub for heroin redistribution to other parts of Europe, thanks to its advanced logistics networks and organized crime presence.

Past UN actions:

- Conventions such as the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances have encouraged Balkan nations to align their laws with international standards. As a result, they improved the prosecution of drug traffickers and harmonized laws across transit countries.
- UNODC also collaborated with INTERPOL, Europol and the European Union to combat drug trafficking in the Balkans through cross-border operations, targeting trafficking networks, intelligence-sharing platforms and joint task forces.

Possible Solutions:

1. Proposal to deploy border security advisors in vulnerable areas, with the focus on advanced surveillance technologies like drones, and training programs for customs and border officials. This could be crucial as many Balkan borders remain porous, enabling traffickers to bypass enforcement.
2. Include monitoring of alternative routes such as the Northern Balkan Route through Romania or Adriatic maritime routes as traffickers quickly adapt to enforcement efforts by diversifying routes, necessitating broader surveillance.

3. Creating specialized units to target mafia and cartel-like structures linked to drug trafficking and offer legal protection for whistleblowers and witnesses in cases against trafficking kingpins. Dismantling these networks is crucial as organized crime is central to maintaining the Balkan Route.

Glossary and Key Terms:

Illicit: Forbidden by law, rules, or custom

Opiate: A drug derived from or related to opium

Opium: Addictive drug prepared from the juice of the opium poppy

Organized Crime: Criminal activities that are planned and controlled by powerful groups and carried out on a large scale.

Extremist Groups: A group of individuals whose values, ideals, and beliefs fall far outside of what society considers normal.

Smugglers: A person who moves (goods) illegally into or out of a country.

Drug Seizure: The act of law enforcement authorities confiscating illegal drugs.

INTERPOL: The International Criminal Police Organization.

EUROPOL: European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation.

Porous: Not retentive or secure.

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