

**MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE
FOR FOREIGN AND INTERNATIONAL
CRIMINAL LAW**

ILLEGAL DRUG TRADE IN RUSSIA

A Research Project commissioned by the UN Office
for Drug Control and Crime Prevention

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1. Introduction

Russia is today a country in which a variety of illegal drugs are produced, transited to final markets in Western Europe and Japan, and are consumed by a growing number of young people. The former USSR did not participate significantly in the international narcotics markets as a consumer or supplier of illicit substances. This pattern of relative self-sufficiency, however, drastically changed during the 1990s, at the same time as Russian drug demand consistently expanded and diversified.

To reconstruct the evolution of illegal drug consumption and trade in Russia, in 1999 the Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law (MPI) was entrusted with a research project by the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (UNODCCP). Under the leadership of Dr. Letizia Paoli, a research team was set up which was composed by the following researchers: Dr. Siegfried Lammich (MPI, Freiburg) and Dr. Eliko Ciklauri (Freiburg and Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia); the staff of the Research Institute of the Prosecutor General's Office (Moscow); Prof. Dr. Yacov Gilinsky, Yakov Kostukovsky, and Maya Rusakova (Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg branch); Prof. Dr. Ludmila Obidina (University of Nizhniy Novgorod); and Dr. Ludmila Maiorova (University of Krasnoyarsk). Smaller contributions were also provided by: Sergej Poliatikin from NAN (No to

Alcoholism and Drugs, Moscow), Sergej Saukhat from Anti-AIDS South (Rostov-on-Don), Ludmila Markoryan and Gennadiy Rakitsky from the Balakovo and Khabarovsk sections of NAN, and Yelena Zavadskaya from the Vladivostok AIDS-Centre.

Ever since the study began in October 1999, the MPI research team applied a variety of research methods, drawing information from a plurality of primary and secondary sources. It carried out 90 in-depth interviews with key observers (law enforcement officials, drug-treatment providers, members of relevant NGOs, and journalists) in different parts of the Russian Federation and 30 in-depth interviews with drug users in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Additionally, it analysed 50 judicial sentences, as well as all the relevant statistics, the Russian and international secondary literature, and articles published on the topic in the Russian press.

Besides collecting nationwide data, field research work was conducted in several Russian cities and regions where the members of the research teams were settled: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Nizhniy Novgorod, Rostov-on-Don, Balakovo, the Republic of North Ossetia-Alanja, Krasnoyarsk, Khabarovsk, and Vladivostok.

2. The Demand for Illegal Drugs in Russia

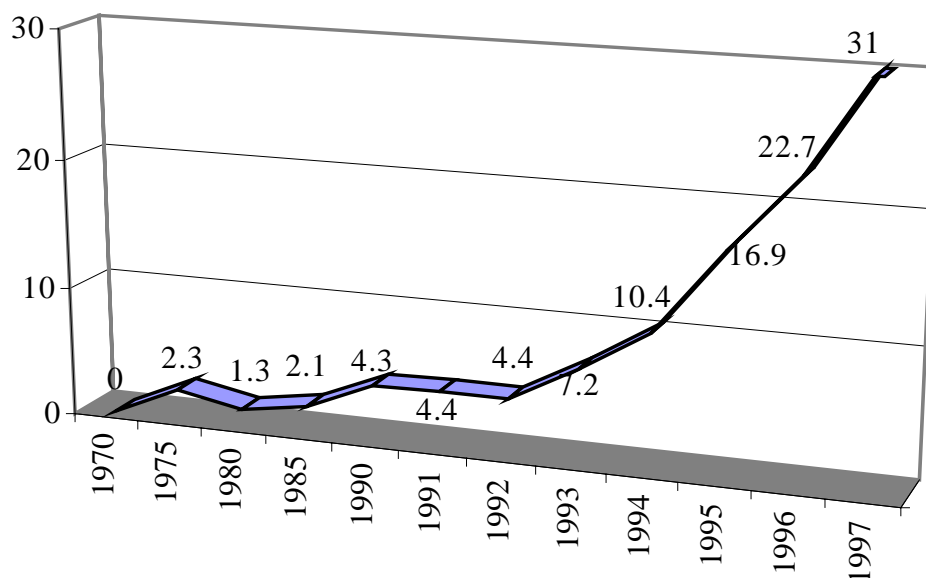
The 1990s registered a rapid growth of illegal drug use in Russia. Since the fall of the Soviet Union a true nationwide market for illegal drugs has developed, that now involves even the most remote areas of the country. This process has not only fostered domestic drug production but has also promoted Russia's integration into the international drug trade. Though large drug quantities merely transit through the Russian territory to reach final consumers in Western Europe and Japan, the domestic market today absorbs a growing and overwhelming portion of the illegal drugs that are produced, smuggled and sold in the country.

Since 1990 the number of registered drug users has increased almost 400 percent and in 1999 359,067 drug users were registered in state drug-treatment centres. According to most experts, however, the true number of drug users is eight to ten times that figure. The Russian Ministry of the Interior estimates that 2.5-3 million people regularly or occasionally use illegal drugs in the Russian Federation, representing 2.1 percent of the whole population (MVD, 1998: 3).

In absolute values, this figure is not staggering. In the United States, just to make a comparison, in 1999 14.8 million Americans (5.4 percent of the population) reported using an illicit drug at least once during the 30 days prior to the interview (SAMHSA, 2000). What is staggering in Russia is the sudden growth of drug use and, above all, drug abuse. The abrupt expansion of these phenomena

clearly emerges from the data collected by the United Nations Development Program about the first-time diagnoses of drug-related disorders in the Russian Federation. In 1975 2.3 cases per 100,000 inhabitants were recorded yearly. By 1991 their number had almost doubled reaching 4.4 (see Graph 1). During the 1990s, however, there has been a veritable escalation and in 1997 31 first-time diagnoses of drug-related disorders were made per 100,000 inhabitants (UNDP, 1999: 69).

Graph 1: Number of first-time diagnoses of drug and toxicant abuse per 100,000 inhabitants of the Russian population ~ 1970-1997



Source: UNDP, 1999: 69.

Though cannabis remains the most frequently used illegal drug in Russia as in most other countries, since the early 1990s there has been a veritable explosion of injecting drug use and, specifically, of heroin consumption. The latter substance became available in Moscow and other Russian cities in the second half of the 1990s and rapidly substituted the less powerful home-made opiates that were previously injected by Russian users. Today heroin attracts not only intravenous drug addicts, but also teenagers of all social backgrounds. Six percent of 15-16 year-olds interviewed in Moscow in 1999 admitted to having used heroin at least once in their lives. In none of the 21 other countries involved in the survey did the lifetime prevalence rate exceed two percent (Vishinsky, 1999).

Whereas heroin became widespread in Russia only in the late 1990s, the high prevalence rate of heroin use among Russian high school students points to a larger trend: the spread of injecting drug use among teenagers and young adults.

As a matter of fact, the latter constitute the bulk of injecting drug users in Russia. According to Médecins sans Frontières, which has carried out an outreach program in Moscow since 1996, the majority of injecting drug users are between 12 and 24 years old (Bijl *et al.*, 1999). In Nizhniy Novgorod, Russia's third largest city, most injecting drug users are under 30, according to public drug-treatment providers and private outreach workers (Obidina, 2000). In Khabarovsk in the Far East, almost 90 percent of the intravenous drug users are 16 to 30 years old. The users' average age is 22 (Rakitsky, 2000). Additionally, in Rostov on the Black Sea, Sergej Saukhat notes "troubling tendency toward a decreasing average age of drug users due to the increasing number of teenagers using illicit drugs" (Saukhat, 2000).

In Western Europe injecting drug use is usually widespread among low-class, marginalised youth. In Russia, on the contrary, no such straightforward association is possible and indeed, drug use, including injecting drug use, seems to involve young people belonging to all social classes and ethnic groups. Only cocaine, due to its high price, is still consumed prevalently within the tiny elite of the well-off 'new Russians'. Though street children also take part in local drug markets, cannabis, ecstasy and opiates, including heroin, are predominantly consumed by the children of middle-class families, most of whom are neither particularly disadvantaged, nor poor by Russian standards. Indeed, whereas in Western Europe heroin use is usually accompanied by social and economic marginalisation, several experts interviewed by MPI researchers openly made a contrary association. Accordingly, heroin, which became widely available in Russia only in the late 1990s, predominantly attracts children of well-off families (Gilinsky *et al.*, 2000: 15; Zavadskaya, 2000; Saukhat, 2000).

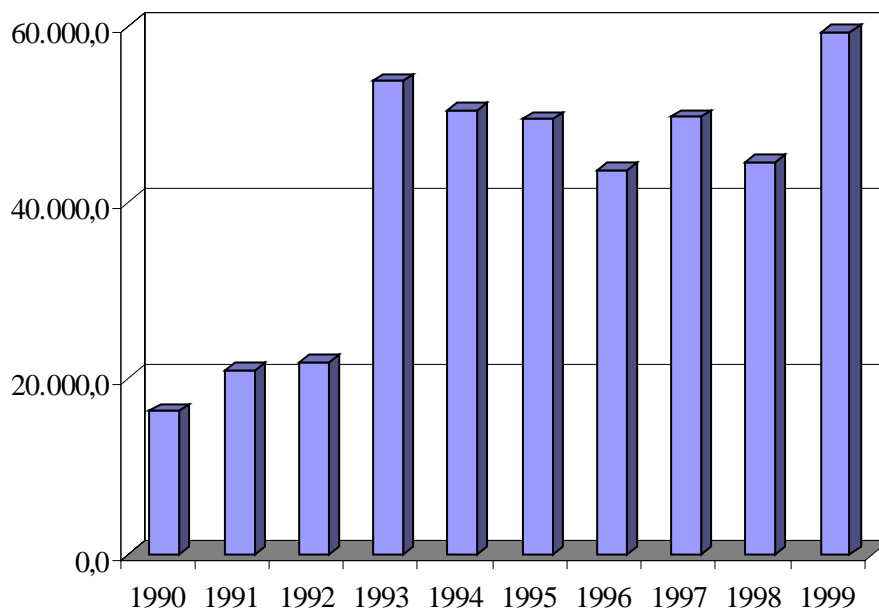
In the late 1990s, injecting use of heroin and other drugs has turned to be a formidable means of spreading HIV and AIDS. The World Health Organisation recently reported "an explosive increase in HIV infections" in Russia. In 1999, in fact, 14,980 cases of HIV infection were recorded – a threefold increase over the 1998 total and more than the total number of cases reported in all preceding years (Reuters, 2000a). As of May 2000, 37,400 cases of HIV infections were registered in the Russian Federation from the beginning of the epidemic (BBC Monitoring, 2000; UNAIDS, 2000).

The HIV epidemic in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is now largely due to needle sharing among intravenous drug users (Bijl *et al.*, 1999; Dehne *et al.*, 1999; see also Burrows *et al.* 1999). Up until 1997 most cases were restricted to homosexuals, but a noticeable shift took place in the following two years. Since 1999, most HIV-positive people are drug users, who now account for almost 90 percent of all known cases (Argomenty i Fakty, 1999: 2).

3. Drugs and Local Markets

The rapid increase of drug users by no means constitutes the only major change affecting the illicit drug market in Russia during the 1990s. The market itself expanded in both its turnover and geographic extension, so much that illegal drugs of some kind are available even in the most remote parts of the country. The drug supply, too, has diversified tremendously. In order to get their 'high' or forget their sorrows, drug users all over Russia are no longer obliged to rely on home-made products or derivatives of locally grown plants. If they can afford it, they can easily buy the same illicit psychoactive drugs that can be found in any Western European or North American city and that are imported from countries as far away as Colombia, Afghanistan and Holland. As one of our interviewees, a drug consumer herself, put it, "over the past ten years drugs have become accessible to whomever wishes to buy them".

Graph 2: Drugs seized in the Russian Federation by the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) (in kilograms) ~ 1990-1999



1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
16,260	20,832	21,886	53,726	50,514	49,425	43,528	49,625	44,491	59,343

Source: MVD, several years.

Though primarily reflecting the efficiency of law enforcement institutions, drug seizures represent the most immediate indicator of the expansion undergone by the Russian drug market in the 1990s. As shown by Graph 2 and the accompa-

nying table, the amount of drugs confiscated by the Russian Ministry of the Interior (MVD) grew 3.5 times during the last decade of the 20th century. In 1990, the MVD seized 16,260 kilograms of illicit drugs. In 1999, 59,343 kilograms of illicit drugs were intercepted.

The expansion of the Russian drug market has not merely affected its turnover, but also its geographic extension. Most illicit drugs are currently available in virtually all Russian regions, where they find a growing number of consumers. In a report on the drug situation in the Russian Federation published in 1999, the Drug Control Department of the MVD states: "Today there is no inhabited locality where there would be (sic!) no people misusing drugs" (1999b: 5). According to the MVD's estimates, in 1985 only four Russian regions hosted more than 10,000 illicit drug users. By 1998 there were 32 regions. Correspondingly, the number of regions with less than 1,000 illicit drug users decreased from 38 to eight (MVD, 1999b: 5-6).

In the Soviet era the most popular illicit psychoactive drugs in Russia were cannabis and opium derivatives, particularly poppy straw and synthetic preparations, such as morphine and codeine, which were diverted from drug factories and pharmacies onto the drug market. Due to the bottlenecks of the Soviet drug distribution system, in some parts of the country toxic substances, such as glue, acetone, and gasoline were also widely resorted to for lack of better alternatives. Powerful anaesthetics with hallucinogen effects were also frequently misused.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, toxic substances and anaesthetics have constantly lost popularity and are increasingly replaced by illicit psychoactive drugs, whose availability has rapidly grown everywhere. Though cannabis has retained its predominance, there is also a shift from home-made to ready-to-use preparations (Vishinsky, 1999; Barabanshikov and Konrad, 1999). In particular, in the late 1990s heroin spread very rapidly, attracting most of the users who previously injected home-made solutions drawn from poppy straw, opium, anaesthetics, and medical drugs.

Heroin's growing popularity is clearly shown by the seizures carried out by the Russian Ministry of the Interior. Heroin was largely unknown until 1992, when only five grams were seized in all of Russia (see Table 1). Since then heroin seizures have grown continuously, reaching 695 kilograms in 1999.

Table 1: Heroin seized in the Russian Federation by the Ministry of the Interior (kilograms) ~ 1990-1999

<i>1990</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>1992</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>1999</i>
-	-	0.005	4.4	8.8	6.5	18.1	40.3	192.8	695.1

Source: MVD, several years.

Following its increased availability, heroin prices precipitously decreased throughout the second half of the 1990s, above all in Moscow and in Russia's largest European cities. In 1997 a gram of heroin still cost US\$ 100-150, almost four times the actual price, and in 1996 it usually exceeded US\$ 200. Moscow's heroin prices are now similar to those of major cities in Western Europe (see Paoli, 2000). According to the drug users contacted, a gram of heroin now costs about 1,000 rubles (US\$ 35). If the user is ready to go outside of Moscow, in the so-called Moscow region, he can get a gram of heroin for as little as US\$ 30. On the street, however, the usual selling unit is the *chek*, a dose of 0.1 grams, which is now sold at about 200-250 rubles (US\$ 7-8.50).

From Moscow and St. Petersburg heroin has spread into other Russian cities, as the rapid multiplication of heroin seizures in different parts of the country well shows. In 1996 the MVD seized heroin in 14 Russian regions; in 1997 in 43; in 1998 in 67, and in 1999, heroin seizures were conducted in more than 70 different regions of the Russian Federation (MVD, 1999b: 16; 2000: 12).

Following the loosening of border controls and the liberalisation of trade, not only heroin but also other illegal drugs, such as cocaine and ecstasy, which were long popular in Western Europe, have become available in Russia. Due to its prohibitive prices, however, cocaine is still consumed by a tiny minority of 'new Russians', the only ones who can afford it. A gram of cocaine still costs around US\$ 150 (4,300 rubles), almost three times the Russian average monthly income (Gilinsky *et al.*, 2000: 19; Saukhat, 2000).

In the second half of the 1990s even ecstasy appeared on the Russian market and, according to the MPI research teams in Moscow and St. Petersburg, it can now be easily bought in bars, discos and cafés, where young people meet. At least in Moscow and St. Petersburg, ecstasy prices are now similar to those common in the West: in Moscow, for example, an ecstasy pill is sold at US\$ 15-20 (Gilinsky *et al.*, 2000; Morvant, 1996). As much as in Western Europe, the spread of ecstasy and other amphetamine products was fostered by techno and acid house music, which was imported to Russia in the early 1990s and became very popular in second half of that same decade (Parker *et al.*, 1998). In Russia, however, ecstasy soon lost its close link to the techno music and rapidly also gained popularity among Russia's mainstream youth.

4. Drug Production and Trafficking

Notwithstanding Russia's integration into the international drug trade, a considerable portion of the growing internal demand for illegal drugs is still satisfied with substances produced inside the country. According to the Ministry of the Interior, today about 50 percent of all seized drugs are still of domestic origin (MVD, 1999b: 10). In some areas, such as the Far East and the Caucasus region,

the demand for cannabis products is still almost entirely satisfied by local production (Zavadskaya, 2000; Rakitsky, 2000). All in all, however, there is a clear national trend favouring imported drugs *vis-à-vis* domestically cultivated ones.

Though still significant, even the domestic production of illegal drugs is declining. Although the number of clandestine laboratories discovered by the Ministry of the Interior steadily increased between 1994 and 1998, rising from 483 to 1,117, this growth seems to be largely attributable to an intensification of law enforcement activity. Furthermore, most of the laboratories discovered by law enforcement officials are rather primitive; most of them are run by the users themselves. On the point the MVD notes:

“In most of revealed laboratories, drugs were produced primitively, the laboratories were located in flats, private houses, garages, sheds, summer kitchens etc. 700 of the dismantled clandestine laboratories produced various opium solutions; over 200 of them produced such drugs as hashish or hashish oil from cannabis” (MVD, 1999b: 39).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, many Western law enforcement officers feared that Russia’s thousands of experienced chemists would start mass producing synthetic drugs, and above all, ecstasy, for the local and European markets. This hypothesis seems to have come true only to a minimal extent. Even ecstasy is largely imported from Western European countries, most notably the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent from Poland. As a high MVD officer put it, “there is no need to produce drugs that can be easily and cheaply imported”.

As in the case of ecstasy, the Russian drug market is increasingly supplied with substances of foreign origin. Whereas drugs of foreign origin account for about 50 percent of the Russian market, in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other major cities their proportion is about 80-90 percent (MVD, 1999b: 15-16). Globalisation, in fact, affects not only legal markets, but also the illegal ones and, indeed, due to the illegal status of their commodities, the latter can be even less protected by state authorities than their legal counterparts. Even more than in the Russian legal economy, in its large clandestine appendix market forces have been free to play at will following the liberalisation of trade and the opening of borders. As a result, illegal, in addition to legal commodities, tend to be imported from the countries that are able to offer them at the best price-quality rate.

In the illegal drug markets of all Russian cities, domestically-produced psychoactive substances tend to be increasingly substituted by more powerful and easier-to-use drugs from abroad. A considerable and probably preponderant part of the latter are imported from countries belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States. All in all, 84 percent of the hashish, 60 percent of the opium, and 53 percent of the marijuana seized by the Russian law enforcement authorities in 1998-99 came from former Soviet Central Asian republics (MVD, 2000:

13; see also Houben 1999: 9-12). As a matter of fact, smuggling illegal drugs into Russia from other CIS states is particularly easy and risk-free because most of the newly established borders are not effectively patrolled. Especially along the 6,500 km long border between Russia and Kazakhstan, drug smugglers can easily bypass official checkpoints and cross the border in the steppe.

Kazakhstan is currently the major supplier of raw opium and cannabis products, though these substances are also imported from other former Soviet republics. Tajikistan and, to a lesser extent, the other Central Asian republics, are increasingly transited to smuggle heroin into Russia from Afghanistan, which today accounts for 75 percent of the global opium production (UNODCCP, 2000: 34 and 1999).

Since 1993 the 1,200 km long mountainous border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan is patrolled by the Russian Federal Border Guards. Despite that, drug trafficking thrives as both countries are torn by civil war and are extremely poor. Afghanistan has known no peace since 1979 when the USSR invaded the country. Though the fundamentalist Islamic Taleban movement was able to seize most of the country in the mid-1990s, warfare goes on in Northern Afghanistan, from which the Taleban try to chase their opponents, most notably the army led by Ahmad Shah Masud. Both factions rely on opium cultivation and heroin trade to finance the ongoing war. While the legal economy has practically come to a standstill, narcotics trafficking is a major, if not the largest, source of revenue (CIA, 2000; OGD, 2000: 44-47).

In Tajikistan, civil war broke out in the early 1990s, when the country gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A peace agreement among rival factions was signed in 1997, but implementation has progressed slowly (see Atkin, 1997). Tajikistan has the lowest GDP per capita among the 15 former Soviet republics and its economy has been gravely weakened by six years of civil conflict and by the loss of subsidies from Moscow and of markets for its products (CIA, 2000). 65 percent of the population of six million live below the poverty line and at least half currently face acute undernourishment. According to high-ranking officials of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 35 percent of Tajikistan's gross domestic product comes from drug trafficking (Fitchett, 2000; see also OGD, 2000: 40-41; Birkenes, 1997; Reuters, 2000b).

Through Tajikistan and the other CIS states, Afghan heroin is also increasingly smuggled into Eastern and Western Europe along the old 'Silk Road'. The International Narcotics Control Board estimates that up to 65 percent of opiates intended for export from Afghanistan may pass through the porous Central Asian borders to Europe. In most cases, Russia is also transited by these heroin cargos.

Russia is also increasingly used to transfer large amounts of cannabis products, originating in Southern CIS countries and Afghanistan, into Western Europe. Contrary to the forecasts of many foreign and Russian law enforcement

officers, however, Russia has not become a major transit corridor for South American cocaine. Local drug markets in Western Europe keep on being supplied either directly from producing countries or through well-established entry points, *in primis* Spain and the Netherlands.

5. Traffickers and Dealers

The expansion of the Russian drug consumption and trade during the 1990s entailed the emergence of a nationwide drug distribution system, which brings illicit drugs from producers to consumers, and the consolidation of the professional role of the drug dealer. As much as in Western Europe and the USA up to the mid-1970s, the latter role did not exist in Russia up to the early 1990s. In Soviet times, drug users largely consumed psychoactive substances that were available in their region and often either harvested or produced the drugs themselves. It was not until the drug supply diversified and Russia entered into international drug trade that the ‘drug dealer’ as a professional role emerged to link producers to consumers and to regularly supply large urban centres with a variety of illegal drugs coming from distant regions.

In official reports, Russian law enforcement authorities present a very ‘organised’ picture of the drug trade. In its latest report on drug and organised crime, for example, the MVD categorically states that “drug crime is always organised” and the same view was repeated by several Russian law enforcement officers interviewed in Moscow. Furthermore, the MVD proposes a very top-down explanation of the expansion of the Russian drug market. As shown by the following quote, in fact, the latter is linked to the integration of Russian organised crime groups into large international drug cartels:

“A considerable part of Russian criminal societies have entered into an alliance with international drug cartels and have become an integral part of them. The consequence of this integration is the rapid growth of drug criminality, which is accompanied by a steady increase of drug users in Russia. Experts believe that nearly 1,600 criminal groups in Russia are engaged in the drug trade, which are composed of at least 6,000 people” (MVD, 2000: 5).

In their turn, the so-called “criminal societies” are described as follows:

“Criminal leaders actively develop united societies. The development of these societies, the management of their finances, and the division of their spheres of influence are carefully planned. These structures have centralised administrations with subordinate units and strict discipline of their members as well as intelligence and counterintelligence, technical maintenance and armed security services. This powerful support enables them to take root practically everywhere and influence important spheres of life in the Russian regions. It can be stated that organised crime dictates the terms of functioning to branches of the economy as well as

norms of social behaviour to different regions” (*ibidem*: 3; see also FSB, 2000: *passim*).

The idea that drug trafficking is dominated by large, structured criminal groups finds, however, scarce support even in law enforcement statistical data. As shown by Table 2, in fact, the crimes committed by “organised crime groups” represent less than one percent of the total drug offences reported in Russia and in 1999 accounted for only 4.1 percent of drug trafficking cases. The percent values are somewhat higher, if the crimes committed by “groups” are considered. The latter accounted for 4.7 percent of total drug offences in 1999, down from 6.5 percent in 1995. Their percentage is consistently higher, if the drug trafficking cases are considered: in 1999, in fact, 23.8 percent of drug trafficking offences were committed by a “group”.

Table 2: Drug offences reported in Russia, including those committed by a group and an organised crime group ~ 1995-1999

	<i>1995</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>1999</i>
Drug offences (total)	79,819	96,645	184,832	190,127	216,364
Drug trafficking (art. 228, p. 2,3,4; art. 234, p. 1,2,3)	11,448	19,982	28,979	33,562	42,883
- committed by a group	5,205	6,489	7,549	6,499	10,199
% of total drug offences	6.5	6.7	4.1	3.4	4.7
% of drug trafficking cases	45.5	32.5	26.0	19.4	23.8
- committed by an organised crime group	-	562	1,439	913	1,763
% of total drug offences	-	0.6	0.8	0.5	0.8
% of drug trafficking cases	-	2.8	5.0	2.7	4.1

Source: MVD, 2000: 15.

However, the concept of group criminality is very loosely defined in the Russian criminal code, as two people suffice to build such a group. Article 35, par. 1, in fact, states: “a crime shall be deemed to be committed by a group of persons, if two or more perpetrators without prior collusion participate in the commission thereof” (Butler, 1997: 23). The third paragraph of the same article sets forth the conditions under which a crime is considered committed by an “organised group”: “if it is committed by a stable group of persons, who combined beforehand to commit one or several crimes” (*ibidem*). Even in this case no quantitative parameter is set and the only two requirements entail cohesiveness and previous agreement. Even a blood family that deals drugs can thus be considered an “organised crime group”.

The 10,000 organised crime groups that, according to the MVD, are active in Russia, and the 1,600 of them that are involved in drug trafficking, can therefore be seen in a new perspective. Indeed, given the above definition, it is fair to assume that not all of them are large, highly structured and powerful criminal groups. The latter traits are, in fact, reserved to what the Russian Criminal Code defines as a “criminal society”. The fourth paragraph of the already quoted Article 35 states:

“A crime shall be deemed to be committed by a criminal society (criminal organisation), if it was committed by a cohesive organised group (or organisation) created for the commission of grave or especially grave crimes or by the combining of organised groups created for the same purpose” (*ibidem*).

According to the data reported by a high-ranking official of the MVD in September 1999 in a UN-meeting in Vienna, in Russia there are currently 98 such “criminal societies”, out of which 22 are of most serious concern (Kichanov, 1999). If organised crime is defined as a set of large-scale, stable criminal organisations entailing some sort of internal division of labour, the latter and not the 10,000 figure is the number to be taken into account. Unfortunately, no data are published on the involvement of Russia’s 98 “criminal societies” in illicit drug trade.

As the staff of the Research Institute of the Prosecutor General’s Office (RIPGO) noted, the analysis of law enforcement statistics leaves us in a “paradoxical situation”:

“On the one hand, the public opinion’s view, which is spread by the mass media, seems to be realistic. Accordingly, the Russian drug mafia is at work, as it results from the mass spread of illegal drug use. Offenders specialising in illegal drug trafficking could have promoted the spread of drug use even to those regions that previously never had had sociocultural experience with illegal drugs (such as the Northern and Central parts of Russia and Siberia). On the other hand, this activity is not reflected in statistical data, i.e. it does not come to light, is not exposed and is not punished” (RIPGO, 2000: 59).

Neither “criminal societies” nor large-scale organised crime groups emerge from the analysis of the 52 drug-related sentences that was carried out by the Research Institute of the Prosecutor General’s Office (RIPGO) together with the MPI.

The relatively ‘disorganised’ nature of drug trafficking and distribution in Russia is further proved by the fieldwork in several Russian cities. In all of them a multi-level drug distribution system developed and today users increasingly buy their drugs from the dealers, instead of cultivating or harvesting themselves. The latter’s demands, however, seem to be neither satisfied nor promoted by large, hierarchically-organised firms that monopolise local markets.

It is understandable that professional and non-professional observers hypothesise the involvement of a powerful 'Russian mafia' to explain the sudden expansion of illegal drug consumption and trade in Russia (see Ciklauri, 2000; Maiorova, 2000; Obidina, 2000; Wines, 2000). Nonetheless, the fieldwork as well as interviews with several experts provide no backing for such a hypothesis. The phenomenal growth of drug use can rather be attributed to the "invisible hand" of the market: the local drug markets of Russian cities are today largely supplied by a myriad of drug dealers who tend to operate alone or in small groups and often consume illegal drugs themselves. In many cases the latter do not even possess a previous criminal expertise and deal with illegal drugs to make a living or to supplement the meagre income they obtain from licit activities. As a Moscow police officer put it,

"there are no Colombian drug cartels here. There are instead many small groups that are made of people belonging to the same nationality or ethnic group. There is not one single river, but many streams that flow independently on one another".

The retail and wholesale levels of the local drug distribution systems are often occupied by dealers belonging to ethnic minorities, most notably members of the Roma community, Caucasians as well as Tajik and Afghan nationals. According to several sources, the lion's share of the booming heroin market is currently held by Tajik dealers. The latter, coming from a former Soviet republic, have no problems entering the country, usually speak Russian, and have either many contacts or even a residence permit in Russia. As the 19-year-old Anthone notes, "in Moscow there are a lot of Tajik dealers by now". As a rule, these are far from being experienced offenders, but instead are farmers and traders who resort to drug trafficking to make ends meet. The huge expected profits of heroin smuggling are a powerful lure for impoverished Tajik and Afghan citizens. A gram of heroin, in fact, costs as little as US\$ 3 (86 rubles) in Tajikistan and even less in Afghanistan (US\$ 1-1.5; see OGD, 2000: 41). In Moscow or any large Russian city, the same amount can be sold for at least 400 rubles (US\$ 10.50) at the wholesale level, or for 1,000 rubles (US\$ 35) at the retail one.

According to Moscow's police officers, groups of heroin smugglers from Afghanistan and Tajikistan are usually composed of five to ten people, which may on exception expand up to 20-25. Only when the whole smuggling network from Tajikistan to Moscow is taken into account, may the number of people involved reach 50. The strength and cohesion of most these (and other) illegal networks, however, should not be overestimated. Although long-term relations may develop among network members, the majority of them are arm's-length buyer-seller relationships, which are neither exclusive in any sense nor centrally organised.

Nevertheless, although the members of some ethnic communities may be overproportionally represented in the drug distribution system of many Russian cities, they are far from occupying it all. Illegal drugs are today produced and sold also by many people who cannot be easily classified in a precise scheme, because they belong to the mainstream Russian population. As Ludmila Markoryan from Balakovo, a city of 200,000 inhabitants on the river Volga, points out,

“it is not easy to refer the drug dealers of our city to specific social groups. Dealer might be a housewife, a jobless person, or a businessman. The age range of middle and high-ranking drug dealers also varies tremendously: there are young people as well as retirees. In the last few years we noted a tendency to engage adolescents aged 10-14 in drug use and dealing, since they cannot be legally prosecuted” (Markoryan, 2000).

This point was also recognised by some drug users, interviewed in Moscow and St. Petersburg. According to the 19-year-old Anthone, for example, “the production, transportation, and sale of illegal drugs is carried out by all social and national groups”.

6. The Drug Trade and Organised Crime

In the academic and international political debate, there is no unanimous definition of organised crime. Indeed the latter is an ambiguous, conflated concept, produced by a stratification of different meanings which have been attributed to the term ‘organised crime’ since the end of the Second World War (Paoli, 2001). Depending on the definition we select, the Russian drug trade or its participants can be regarded organised crime or not.

In the American and Northern European scholarly debate, organised crime is often equated with the provision of illegal goods and services: hence, for example, according to Block and Chambliss, “organized crime [should] be defined as (or perhaps better limited to) those illegal activities involving the management and co-ordination of racketeering and vice” (1981: 13). Organised crime is thus considered a synonym of illegal enterprise. If this definition is accepted, it is obvious that illegal drug production and trafficking, in Russia as anywhere else, represents a form of organised crime.

In the political and public debate, however, organised crime is not usually understood as a set of activities but it is instead identified with a set of actors. This second conception is well illustrated by the following definition: “organized crime consists of organizations that have durability, hierarchy and involvement in a multiplicity of criminal activities. (...) The Mafia provides the most enduring and significant form of organized crime” (Reuter, 1985: 175).

If this second definition is accepted, the answer to the above question needs to be changed. In fact, we have yet no grounds to affirm that drug production and trafficking in Russia are run by organisations fulfilling the criteria set by Peter Reuter's definition. Though there are contrasting opinions on this matter (MVD, 2000; FSB, 2000), this conclusion is backed by the analysis of judicial sentences and the fieldwork in several Russian cities. It is also confirmed by the statements of some Russian and most foreign law enforcement officials who were interviewed during the present research. As one of the latter put it,

"I hardly dare to tell it my colleagues back home, but for the moment we have no proof of a large-scale involvement of Russian organised crime in the illegal drug trade. Our investigations so far show that the latter is characterised by a low level of sophistication and organisation".

A 'disorganised' view of the supply side of the Russian drug market was also offered by the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB) in the southern Republic of North Ossetia, which borders on Georgia. On the basis of the preceding analysis his conclusions can also be extended to other Russian regions:

"The available information does not support the hypothesis that a narco-mafia exists on the territory of our republic. Narcotics are usually smuggled by single persons or group of people, that are not linked to one another" (FSB-North Ossetia, 1998; Ciklauri, 2000: 28).

The large criminal organisations, that are presented as the dreadful 'Russian Mafia' by the domestic and foreign press, are at the moment apparently not interested in the drug business, though some of their younger affiliates may deal drugs. As a matter of fact, not even these groups constitute unitary, hierarchical bureaucracies that can be compared to legal multi-national corporations. As a Russian law enforcement put it, these groups are "much smaller and more loosely organised than foreign journalists often maintain". No single group is composed of several thousand members, as is often stated in media reports, instant and scientific books alike (see, for example, Dunn, 1997; Roth and Frey, 1995). These organisations, be it the Solntsevskaya, Ismalovskaya or Kurganskaya in Moscow, the Tambovskaya, Malishev's or Kazanskaya in St. Petersburg, can be rather understood as loose confederations of a plurality of independent groups that are united either by the same geographic origin, by their location or by the recognition of the same leader.

The extraordinary enrichment chances offered by the transition to a market economy explain, according to some interviewees, their lack of interest in drug trafficking. As a law enforcement officer put it, "they have such huge opportunities to make money in the so-called legal economy, that it makes no sense for

them to deal drugs". In the late 1980s and early 1990s, in fact, the high-ranking leaders of the most prominent organised crime associations earned fabulous wealth in the no man's land that was left by the end of the planned economy. Though they also established protection rackets and organised fraud schemes, the bulk of their wealth came from the import and sale of perfectly legitimate goods and services. By using a variable mix of corruption, violence, and entrepreneurial skills, they merely supplied the Russian people with commodities they had long dreamt of, but which were still desperately scarce in the last phase of the Soviet command economy and its immediate aftermath: computers, autos, electronic equipment, and gambling.

The leaders and high-ranking members of Moscow's largest and most famous criminal groups have accumulated so much wealth during the 1990s in the legal and semi-legal sectors of the economy that they have now no interest to 'dirty their hands' with drugs. Indeed, they usually have the opposite problem: namely, how to legitimise their ill-gotten fortunes and gain a respectable reputation, as the case of Michailov, the one time leader of the Solntsevskaya gang (Hoffman, 1999). Whereas a new generation of organised crime groups may consolidate, those who amassed huge riches in the wild phase of Russia's transition to the market economy now want to become legitimate businessmen.

Despite the recent expansion and the increasing sophistication and professionalisation of drug suppliers, the threat of the illegal drug trade should hence not be overemphasised. Rather, this *contra legem* activity should be matter-of-factly assessed within the larger context of Russia's economic and organised crime. Illegal drug trade, in fact, still represents a relatively small part of the booming Russian illegal and semi-legal economy and it has not (yet) become the primary source of revenue for the galaxy of Russian organised crime. Though drug trafficking certainly has huge potential for growth, the largest fortunes in Russia are still collected in the wide 'grey area', where the distinctions between the legal and illegal economy are blurred.

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