

Drug trafficking corrupts Kyrgyzstan's politics and underworld

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Kyrgyzstan has become a drug-smuggling powerhouse between Afghanistan and Russia. In this report, Princeton University researcher Alexander Kupatadze argues whether Kyrgyzstan's drug trade is intertwined with its politics making it a "narco-state." Credit: Woodrow Wilson School

Kyrgyzstan, a landlocked and mountainous country in Central Asia, serves a powerful role in the Eurasian drug trade by playing the "mule" that carts heroin and other opiates between Afghanistan and Russia. Many researchers theorize that this lucrative industry has taken root in Kyrgyzstan – a country with few natural resources and industries – with significant support and leeway from its government, making it a "narco-state."

In the first examination of its kind, a researcher at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School writes in the *International Journal of Drug Policy* that government and crime are more likely to become intertwined when resource-stripped countries such as Kyrgyzstan have little economic activity outside of the drug trade. Based on more than 70 personal interviews with government officials and underworld figures in Kyrgyzstan, researcher Alexander Kupatadze argues that when organized crime becomes an unofficial national industry, state officials may be less likely to enforce drug policies because doing so would eliminate the livelihoods of corrupt government officials.

"The less resources a country has, the less motivated the government appears to be enforcing drug policies. In fact, 'no policy' is the policy," said Kupatadze, a visiting research scholar at the Wilson School's Niehaus Center for Globalization and Governance. "In a country like Kyrgyzstan, drug trafficking has completely changed the nature of organized crime."

Known as the "Switzerland of Central Asia" due to its mountainous terrain, Kyrgyzstan is bordered by Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west, Tajikistan to the southwest and China to the southeast. Because of its geopolitical location, insecure borders and extensive corruption, Kyrgyzstan has become a tunnel through which drugs produced in Afghanistan—the world's dominant opium producer—are transported to Russia, which is among the world's largest consumers of

illicit drugs. These factors, coupled with Kyrgyzstan's total lack of natural resources and industry, has turned the country into a robust conduit for drug smuggling. An estimated 20 percent of opium and heroin produced in Afghanistan makes its way through Kyrgyzstan to Russia. However, there are no data regarding how much income the drug trade generates for Kyrgyzstan, nor how much of that might be kept locally or laundered abroad.

Analysts have therefore argued about whether Kyrgyzstan is a narco-state with drug lords, politicians and police working in tandem. Others say the state's radical-Islamic gangs and organizations dominate the country's drug trade. Nonetheless, there has been a lack of complete and accurate information about the scale and value of trade, the groups involved and the role of drugs-related money in politics, Kupatadze wrote.

Kupatadze scrutinized both theories through a series of interviews he conducted while serving at the National Institute of Strategic Studies under the prime minister of Kyrgyzstan. These 70 semi-structured interviews were not recorded nor transcribed. Speaking with high-ranking [law enforcement officials](#) and [drug users](#), Kupatadze focused on such issues as drug-trafficking organizations, the methods and tactics of criminal activity and the link between the drug trade and politics in Kyrgyzstan. Kupatadze also obtained memos and reports compiled by government institutions including the Ministry of the Interior, Supreme Court and the Drug Control Agency, and he also reviewed newspaper articles and other documents to triangulate some of the information from the interviews.

Law enforcement officers, both retired and active, were eager to cooperate with permission "from above," Kupatadze said. The interviews revealed that [law enforcement](#) officials consider the drug trade the most significant threat to national security. Overall, law enforcement officials

would argue that most of the drug smuggling is disorganized. The officers did speak of petty drugs smuggling by way of camels and trucks. But everyone else – former police officers, experts studying drugs trade and nongovernmental organizations – agree that most of the smuggling is carried out by organized groups including criminal gangs protected by police. One official revealed details about a drug-trafficking hub in southern Kyrgyzstan where heroin is stashed in a mosque, and anyone can take the drugs to do business. If the drugs are not sold or returned by the would-be seller, his relatives are killed, the official said, although Kumatadze could not corroborate this claim with other sources.

Interviews with drug users revealed that they, too, believe that drug money has changed the landscape of Kyrgyzstan. The traditional code of professional criminals – the leaders of the Soviet and post-Soviet underworlds – outlaw the involvement in the drug trade. However, traditional rules have been changing over the past decade as the organized crime groups move toward commercialization, Kumatadze writes. In one interview, an inmate said, "Now, it's all about the money," and reported that even the most unexperienced drug traffickers – with no gang affiliation – are welcome in the "upper echelons of the criminal world" so long as they pay the appropriate fees.

When it comes to police involvement, many drug users spoke openly about the "werewolves in epaulettes," a term often used to describe criminalized policemen. Kumatadze provides several cases of policemen caught with a large quantity of drugs. In 2011, the quantity of heroin confiscated from four security officers was larger than the entire amount of heroin seized in all of Kyrgyzstan in that same year.

"In summary, drug money has corrupted politics as well as the traditional underworld," Kumatadze said. "Given the lack of other licit or illicit resources, drugs money has become one of the key sources of corruption and plays an important role in elections. This has led to the

criminalization of the state that reached its peak under [former] president [Kurmanbek] Bakiyev."

Kupatadze said it is believed by many that Kyrgyzstan most resembled the status of a narco-state while under Bakiyev's rule, which lasted from 2005 to 2010 when he was ousted by protestors. Under Bakiyev's leadership, the criminalization of the state reached its peak, and close relatives to Bakiyev were involved in the drug trade.

"The criminalization of the state penetrated so deeply during this time that corrupt interests undermined formal law enforcement institutions," Kupatadze said. "In Kyrgyzstan, there are near monopolists in the market who rarely interfere in each other's area of influence. This is reinforced by the corrupt interest of politicians and law enforcement officials."

In terms of [drug policy](#), Kupatadze doesn't think the government is interested in enforcing policies. His impression is that if the drugs don't travel through Kyrgyzstan, they will travel elsewhere, legitimizing acceptance or co-opting in Kyrgyzstan because the drug trade cannot be brought to a complete halt. And while there isn't accurate data in terms of how much drug money is injected into the local economy, he said it is visually obvious.

"You can see the evidence when you travel to the country. You can see constructions of private lavish houses and expensive cars in regions that lack any industry or other sources of income," said Kupatadze. "Clearly, if you cut drug trade, then one of the key – and in some regions, one of the only – sources for peoples' livelihoods will disappear."

Puzzlingly, while organized crime is on the rise in Kyrgyzstan, Kupatadze said it hasn't had an impact on crime-related violence.

"Drug-related violence is unusually low in Kyrgyzstan compared to

Honduras or El-Salvador, its Central American counterparts that lie on cocaine transit routes from Latin America to the United States," Kupatadze said.

More information: The paper, "Kyrgyzstan – A virtual narco-state?" first appeared online Jan. 31 in the *International Journal of Drug Policy*.

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