

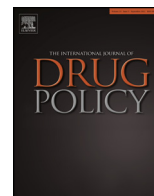


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Research paper

Beyond the drug-terror nexus: Drug trafficking and state-crime relations in Central Asia

Filippo De Danieli*

Independent Scholar, via Marin 16, Padova, Italy

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ABSTRACT

Background: In the wake of collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has transformed into a key hub along the Afghan opiates trafficking routes. Around 30 percent of the heroin manufactured in Afghanistan is estimated to be smuggled through Central Asian republics in its way to booming drug markets in Russia and Eastern Europe.

Methods: Building upon available evidence and extensive fieldwork research, the article seeks to confute mainstream analyses which emphasize connections between criminal and terrorist networks. The focus is on conducive factors for the establishment of drug routes in Central Asia, the characteristics of drug related networks, and the nature of political-criminal relations across the region.

Results: It is argued that in all five Central Asia republics strategic partnerships have formed between drug traffickers and state actors around the exploitation of drug rents and that mafias' influence on politics is stronger in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the region's poorest countries.

Conclusion: By moving the focus from narco-terror to the state-crime connections, the article provides a critical insight into political economy issues surrounding a complex and multifaceted phenomenon such as the drug trade.

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Introduction

Central Asia has been for long time the heart of the Silk Road, a network of commercial routes connecting Asia to Europe. Since more than 2500 years ago caravans laden with spices, luxurious fabrics and precious stones crossed the Ferghana valley and its oasis-towns of Samarqand and Bokhara. Recently, after the collapse of the USSR and the independence of the five Central Asian Republics, these historical commercial routes have started being used again. And alongside all types of "legal" goods, also illegal ones – especially narcotic drugs – are traded along the "new" Silk Road.

Central Asia is located between Afghanistan, the world largest producer of opium poppy, and Russia, – since 1991 the most important emerging market for opiates consumption. Large-scale smuggling of opium and heroin started soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Initially mainly opium was trafficked. Then, since late 1990s, heroin gradually penetrated the Central Asia drug trafficking market and now it is by far its most important commodity. The Central Asian drug trade has started gathering significant international attention in the aftermaths of 9/11. The threat that instability would spill over the northern borders of Afghanistan was seen as a major

security concern by the International Community. In the wake of the renewed attention to Central Asia, a number of analysts and academics started investigating the dynamics of drug trafficking in Central Asia from the perspective of the so called narco-terror nexus (see Björnehed, 2005; Cornell and Swanstrom, 2006; Makarenko, 2002). The central argument in this body of work is that the post-Cold War security environment is characterized by a merger of organized crime, the drug trade and terrorism (Makarenko, 2002). Such an approach is very problematic in terms of evidence and analysis. Drug related crime and terrorism are two very different phenomena. For terrorists the drug trade is a source of revenues, that is to say a mean that they use to wage warfare against governments. On the contrary, capital accumulation is the aim for criminal syndicates, and in pursuing profit they do not seek a direct confrontation against the state, but rather other forms of coexistence (Stepanova, 2010).

In the case of Central Asia, there is very limited evidence of strong connections between criminal cartels and radical Islamic groups. Drug operations carried out by Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan between 1999 and 2001 are taken by most sources as proof of the "narco-terror" nexus (Brill Olcott & Udaloova, 2000; Cornell and Swanstrom, 2006; ICG, 2001). But after 2001, the IMU left their bases in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and moved to Afghanistan (Nash, 2007). Since then activities of militant Islamic groups in Central Asia have reduced, and at the moment the risk of spill-over from Afghanistan is limited (Resa Kazani, 2013). Despite

* Tel.: +39 3273387020; fax: +39 0498788594.

E-mail addresses: dedafari@libero.it, autodeda47@gmail.com

this, the narco-terror approach is still at the centre of Western counter-narcotics policies and interventions in Central Asia. One of the major military assistance programme in Central Asia of the US government is denominated “Counter Narco-Terror” (CNT) and its main objective is to promote regional stability in the region (US Embassy in Tajikistan, 2008).

This article seeks to “go beyond” the narco-terror approach and analyse the phenomenon of Central Asian drug trade in its complexity, examining the actual causes, actors, dynamics and impacts. Building upon the work of authors like Marat (2006), Engvall (2006), Paoli, Rabkov, Greenfield, Reuter (2007), Latypov (2009), Lewis (2010) and Kupatadze (2008), the analysis will be focused on the symbiotic relationships that have developed in Central Asian republics between state actors and criminal syndicates around the exploitation of drug related rents. In other words, the paper seeks to move the debate on the Central Asian drug trade from the narco-terror to the state-crime nexus.

The methodological challenges of researching drugs

Data gathering represents the main challenge in researching drug related issues. In most contemporary societies, narcotic drugs and criminal syndicates are seen as alien phenomena. Drugs and crime belong to the underworld, to the realm of shadows. Setting aside all ethical and empirical considerations, this mainstream view of criminality has also a direct implication in terms of data gathering. No record exists of the hundreds of tons of cocaine that enter the US every year. No accurate estimate exists on the real size of the fortunes owned by the Italian Mafias' padrini. In most cases, the only quantitative data available on drugs and criminality are those produced by state agencies, but they are often influenced by political and criminal law concerns and objectives (Hobbs, 2000); researchers have to look at this data with scrutiny, combine them with alternative sources of information and adopt a variety of research methods to integrate the analysis. The issues of availability and reliability of data are particularly problematic in the case of the drug trade in Central Asia. National law enforcement agencies and the United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) regularly release reports on drugs-related crime. These reports mainly contain data and statistics on arrests and narcotics seizures, but they seldom go in depth into investigating drug related activities and networks.

Also data on seizures present its own limitations. Some countries, and especially Tajikistan, seize every year from one to five tons of heroin, while other countries usually report only a couple of hundreds kilos. Moreover, major fluctuations in the amounts of narcotics seized in single countries can be observed from one year to another, but these changes are not consistent with shifts in production trends in Afghanistan or in opiate use in Russia (UNODC, 2012; Lewis, 2010). Limited additional evidence exists on the drug related activities in Central Asia besides UNODC reports and data on seizures by law enforcement agencies. Apart from few exceptions, no major trial involving mafia groups has been conducted so far in the region, and therefore trial transcripts and pleadings, which elsewhere are the main source of data for evidence-based studies on criminality, are not available for Central Asia. Newspaper articles on arrests and seizures of narcotics usually report only basic information like quantities seized or names of detainees, without any further explanation or interpretation. Academic literature, as already mentioned, is highly policy oriented and most of it focuses on the “narco-terror” nexus. Some exceptions exist, for example the already cited works by authors like Marat (2006), Paoli et al. (2007), Engvall (2006) or Kupatadze (2008), which focus their analyses on crime-state connections and on political-economic aspects of the drug trade. More recently, a few studies have been produced on

retail drug trade and drug markets; based on interviews with drug users and drug dealers, these studies show the appalling levels of police involvement in drug trade (Latypov, 2011).

For the analysis elaborated in this paper, a combination of methods was used: field work research carried out by the author in the region since 2006; review of broad sets of literature, in particular literature on Central Asian transitions and on drugs and crime in Europe, Russia, the US and Latin America; analysis of grey material, such as reports by law enforcement agencies or international organizations and diplomatic cables by the US government representatives in the region.

Defining mafias

Drug related networks, as we said, are a very difficult subject to investigate. The lack of reliable information, together with the secrecy and violence surrounding criminal structures and activities, make it extremely difficult for researchers to gather relevant data. These difficulties are reflected in the academic debate on organized crime. There is no agreement in the academic community on how to define mafia as a specific type of criminal organization. For long time the stereotyped representation of mafias as vertically organized groups which seek to subvert order has been prevalent. This representation was put into question recently by authors who criticize the overemphasis on the organizational dimension of mafia-style groups (Briquet & Garrigues, 2010; Morselli, 2010). According to Morselli (2010), crime networks are self-organizing structures based on individual interactions, therefore central authority is not a necessary attribute of such networks. Moreover, in the last decades, vertically organized crime groups have demonstrated to be much more vulnerable compared to decentralized network structures. In centralized structures if the leadership is arrested, the group have to abandon the business, or to reorganize it differently. On the contrary, in decentralized networks direct involvement is more loosely distributed and thus flexibility and capacity to react to arrests and investigation is higher. The cocaine trade in Colombia is a case in point of this tendency: during the 1970–1980s, highly centralized and quasi-monopolistic syndicates, such as the famous Cartel de Medellin headed by Pablo Escobar, had been in control of the cocaine trade, but then, in the early 1990s, when the leaders were arrested or killed, these big organizations fell into pieces and lost their shares of the market in favour of groups which had simpler and more flexible organizational structures, the so-called cartelitos (Schirmer, 2010).

This organization is not the defining characteristics of mafias. Other aspects, like the willingness to find compromises with state actors and the tendency to impose monopolistic control over certain economic activities (both legal and illegal), differentiate mafias from other types of criminal organizations. In this paper, when referring to mafias, criminal syndicates or drug-related networks, they are considered as criminal organizations – with a certain degree of structural integration, either vertical or horizontal, and with their own internal rules system – which pursue capital accumulation, political power and social support through the control of illegal markets and through violence or the threat of it (Armao, 2000; Santino, 1995).

This definition allows to catch the twofold nature of mafias: mafias as entities, with their own structures, internal codes of rules, business activities and repressive apparatus, and mafias as political-economic actors, which interact with other players in the surrounding environment. In the following sections of the paper we will try to see how the different elements that come out from this definition apply to the case of Central Asia.

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