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THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ILLEGAL MARKET

Drug Consumption and Trade in Post-Soviet Russia

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A nationwide market in illegal drugs has developed in Russia in the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time as Russian drug demand consistently expanded and diversified, the country has become fully integrated in international narcotics exchanges. Relying on the results of a research project commissioned by the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, the article reconstructs the development of the illegal drug market in post-Soviet Russia. It describes the expansion of both drug demand and drug supply, analyses the organization of drug exchanges in Russian cities and investigates the local distribution systems.

A nationwide market in illegal drugs has developed in Russia in the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Illegal psychoactive substances were consumed even prior 1991, but they were usually produced and traded on a local basis. Due to travel and trade restrictions, the former USSR neither constituted a single drug market nor participated significantly in international narcotics exchanges as a consumer or supplier of illicit substances. However, this pattern of relative self-sufficiency drastically changed during the 1990s, at the same time as Russian drug demand consistently expanded and diversified.

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) to reconstruct the evolution of illegal drug use and trade in post-Soviet Russia. Under my leadership, a research team was assembled, which was composed of 15 Russian and foreign researchers. During the course of the project, beginning in October 1999, information was collected from a plurality of primary and secondary sources in nine different cities and regions: Moscow, St Petersburg, Nizhniy Novgorod, Rostov-on-Don, Balakovo, the Republic of North Ossetia, Krasnoyarsk, Khabarovosk, and Vladivostok. All in all, 90 in-depth interviews with key observers (law enforcement officials, drug-treatment providers, members of relevant NGOs, and journalists) were conducted in different parts of the Russian Federation and 30 in-depth interviews were carried out with drug users in Moscow and St Petersburg.[1] Furthermore, together with the Research Institute of the Prosecutor General's Office (RIPGO), the MPI research team analysed 50 criminal cases, as well as all relevant statistics, the Russian and international secondary literature, and topical articles published in the Russian press.

By drawing on the findings of the aforementioned research project (Paoli 2001), the present paper aims to reconstruct the development of the illegal drug market in Russia.

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[1] In addition to these interviews which were carried out on the basis of a common questionnaire, several scholars belonging to the research team had collected information from drug users and dealers during previous research projects and presented these data in their site reports.

The first section focuses on the demand, the second describes the quantitative and geographical expansion of the market and the diversification of the supply. The third analyses the organization of drug exchanges in Russian cities, whereas the fourth deals with drug production and wholesale trafficking. Dealers and traffickers are singled out in the fifth section. Some concluding remarks will follow.

The Demand for Illegal Drugs in Russia

The last decade of the twentieth century registered a rapid growth of illegal drug use in Russia. This development has not only fostered domestic drug production, but has also promoted Russia's integration into the international drug trade. Though large drug quantities may merely transit through the Russian territory to reach final consumers in Western Europe and Japan, a growing and overwhelming portion of the illegal drugs that are produced, smuggled and sold in the country, are absorbed today by the domestic market.

Since 1990, the number of registered drug users has increased almost fivefold. In 2000, 451,603 drug users were registered in state drug-treatment centres in comparison to 155,971 in 1995. According to most experts, however, the true number of drug users is five to seven times that figure. The Russian Ministry of the Interior estimates that 2.5–3 million people in the Russian Federation regularly or occasionally use illegal drugs, which represents 2.1 per cent of the total population (MVD 1998: 3; UNODCCP-Moscow 2001: 7–8).

In absolute values, this figure is not staggering. In 1999 in the United States, for comparison, 14.8 million Americans (5.4 per cent of the population) reported using an illicit drug at least once during the 30 days prior to the interview (SAMHSA 2000). What makes Russia's case so astounding is the sudden growth in drug use and, above all, drug abuse. The abrupt expansion of these phenomena is clearly shown in the data regarding drug users who were registered for the first time in state drug-treatment centres. In 1991, 3.9 cases per 100,000 inhabitants were recorded yearly. In the following years there has been a veritable escalation and in 1999 there were 42 cases per 100,000 inhabitants (see Table 1). The Ministry of Health estimates that the number of drug users entering treatment for the first time would have reached the rate of 48.5 per 100,000 people by the end of the year 2000 (UNODCCP-Moscow 2001: 8).

Though cannabis remains the most frequently used illegal drug in Russia as in most other countries, there has been a rapid growth in intravenous drug use, specifically in heroin consumption, since the early 1990s. The latter substance became available in Moscow and other Russian cities in the second half of the 1990s and rapidly became a substitute for the less powerful homemade opiates that were previously injected by

TABLE 1 *Number of drug users entering treatment per 100,000 inhabitants of the Russian population, 1991–2000*

1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
3.9	3.5	6.4	9.5	15.5	20.7	28.5	35.4	41.8	49.8*

Source: UNODCCP 2001: 8.
* Estimate made by the Institute on Drug Addiction of the Russian Ministry of Health.

Russian users. Today heroin attracts not only intravenous drug addicts, but also teenagers from all social backgrounds who initially smoke it, although many of them end up injecting it. Six per cent 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 EPSAD survey (European Project of School Research in Alcohol and Drug Use) did the lifetime prevalence rate exceed 2 per cent (Vishinsky 1999).

While heroin only became widespread in Russia in the late 1990s, the high prevalence 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 conducted an outreach programme 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 per cent of the intravenous drug users are 16 to 30 years old, with the average age being 22 (Rakitsky 2000).

In Western Europe, injecting drug use is commonly widespread among low-class, marginalized young and, increasingly, not-so-young people (Paoli 2000). In Russia, on the other hand, a straightforward association as such cannot be made, rather drug use, including intravenous drug use, seems to involve youth from all social classes and ethnic groups. Only cocaine, due to its high price, is 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, while in Western Europe heroin use is usually accompanied by social and economic marginalization, 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 shown to be an alarming means of spreading HIV and AIDS. The World Health Organization recently reported 'an explosive increase in HIV infections' in Russia. In 2000 46,438 new infections were identified, 90 per cent which are attributable to needle sharing among intravenous drug users. This number is almost twice the total of 29,000 infections recorded in the country between 1987 and 1999. However, even this massive rise understates the real growth of the epidemic. By Russian estimates, the national registration system captures just a fraction of the infections. According to the head of the Russian National Centre for the Fight Against HIV/AIDS, Mr Pocrovski, more than 1 million people could be infected with HIV by the end of 2001 (UNAIDS-WHO 2000: 6; UNODCCP-Moscow 2001: 9, 18; see also Bijl *et al.* 1999; Dehne *et al.* 1999; Burrows *et al.* 1999).

Market Expansion and Supply Diversification

The rapid increase in drug users by no means constitutes the only major change affecting the illicit drug market in Russia during the 1990s. The market itself expanded its turnover dramatically. Though primarily a reflection of 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 Table 2, the amount of drugs confiscated by the Russian Ministry of the Interior (MVD) grew 3.5 times during the last decade of the twentieth century. In 1990, the MVD seized 16,260 kilograms of illicit drugs. In 1999, 59,343 kilograms of illicit drugs were intercepted, whereas a 20 per cent decrease was registered in 2000. In that year, in fact, the Russian Ministry of the Interior seized 47,592 kilograms of illicit drugs (UNODCCP-Moscow 2001: 14).

The expansion of the Russian drug market has not only affected its turnover, but also its geographic extension. Most illicit drugs are currently available in virtually all Russian regions where they are bought by growing numbers 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' (1999: 5). According to the MVD's estimates, only four Russian regions hosted more than 10,000 illicit drug users in 1985, whereas in 1998 there were 32 regions. Correspondingly, the number of regions with less than 1,000 illicit drug users decreased from 38 to 8 (MVD 1999: 5–6).

The drug supply has also 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, users can easily purchase the same illicit psychoactive drugs that can be found in any Western European or North American city, imported from countries as far away as Colombia, Afghanistan and Holland. As one of our interviewees, a drug consumer herself, stated, 'over the past ten years drugs have become accessible to whomever wishes to buy them' (Interview H11).

In the Soviet era the most popular illicit psychoactive drugs in Russia were cannabis and opium derivatives, particularly poppy straw and semi-synthetic preparations, such as morphine and codeine, which were diverted from drug factories and pharmacies on to the drug market. Ever since the 1970s, poppy straw or, less frequently, opium itself were processed into a strong solution of opioid alkaloids (containing codeine, morphine, and heroin in varying proportions), which was then injected by users. This solution, which was home-produced virtually throughout the former USSR, is most frequently called *chornyi* (black) (Rhodes *et al.* 1999; Dehne *et al.* 1999). In the 1980s a methamphetamine solution, known by the street names of *vint* (screw), *belyi* (white) and *pervitin*, also become popular. As much as *chornyi*, *vint* can be prepared domestically by the users themselves: its active precursor, ephedrine, is extracted from the ephedra shrub and is part of many over-the-counter and prescription medications (Dehne *et al.* 1999: 740; Gilinsky *et al.* 2000: 20–1). Due to the bottlenecks in the Soviet drug distribution system, in some parts

TABLE 2 *Drugs seized in the Russian Federation by the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) (in kilograms) 1990–2000*

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
16,260	20,832	21,886	53,726	50,514	49,425	43,528	49,625	44,491	59,343	47,592

Source: MVD, several years and UNODCCP 2001.

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 (see Lee 1991; Morvant 1996; Kramer 1991).

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 throughout Russia. Although cannabis has retained its predominance, there has also been a shift from home-made to ready-to-use preparations (Vishinsky 1999; Barabanshikov and Konrad 1999). During the late 1990s in particular, heroin spread very rapidly, attracting most of those users previously injecting home-made solutions drawn from poppy straw, opium, anaesthetics and medical drugs.

Heroin's growing popularity is clearly demonstrated by the amount of 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 3). Since then, heroin seizures have increased continuously, reaching 984 kilograms in 2000.

Following its increased availability, heroin prices precipitously decreased throughout the second half of the 1990s, particularly in Moscow and in Russia's largest European cities. In 1997, a gram of heroin still cost US$100–150, almost four times the current price, while 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 those drug users interviewed in the research project, a gram of heroin currently costs approximately 1,000 rubles (US$35). If the user is prepared to travel outside Moscow, to the so-called Moscow region, a gram of heroin can be purchased 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 sold today for approximately 200–250 rubles (US$7–8.50).

Starting in Moscow and St Petersburg, heroin has spread into other Russian cities, as shown by the rapid multiplication of heroin seizures in different parts of the country. In 1996 the MVD seized heroin in 14 Russian regions; in 1997 in 43; in 1998 in 67; in 1999 in 70 and in 2000, heroin seizures were conducted in all the 79 regions of the Russian Federation (MVD 1999: 16; 2000: 12; UNODCCP-Moscow 2001: 12).

Following the loosening of border controls and the liberalization of trade, not only heroin, but other illegal drugs such as cocaine and ecstasy, already popular in Western Europe, have become available in Russia. Due to its prohibitive prices, however, cocaine is still only consumed by a tiny minority of 'new Russians', the sole ones who can afford it. A gram of cocaine still costs about 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 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. In Moscow and St Petersburg, at least,

TABLE 3 *Heroin seized in the Russian Federation by the Ministry of the Interior (kilograms) 1990–2000*

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
-	-	0.005	4.4	8.8	6.5	18.1	40.3	192.8	695.1	984

Source: MVD, several years and UNODCCP 2001.

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).

Open and Closed Marketplaces

Following the growth and geographic expansion of the Russian drug market and the increasing diversification of its supply, supplying oneself with various kinds of illicit drugs has become easier in all Russian cities. In St Petersburg, according a young consumer, 'you have the impression that you can buy drugs everywhere' (Gilinsky *et al.* 2000: 21). The growing drug availability involves not only the metropolises, but also the middle and smaller centres, where the changes may possibly have been even more spectacular. In the mid-1980s in Balakovo, for example, there were still only two or three places to buy drugs, according to local, experienced drug users. This city of 207,000 inhabitants, close to the border of Kazakhstan, was known by the police to have 176 dealing places in early 2000, and their real number was probably significantly higher (Markoryan 2000).

In most cities, public places exist where drugs are sold. In Moscow, for example, since the mid-1980s Lubjanka Square and the underground metro station have been the best-known meeting places for drug users, especially for those who inject. Even in Soviet times the square attracted users, due to the Apteka No. 1, the first state pharmacy, being located on it. Today, however, drugs are decreasingly bought there because of extensive police surveillance and the poor drug quality. Only inexperienced users, or those coming from outside Moscow, purchase drugs there. A few of Moscow's injecting users simply meet there to eventually make contact with a dealer or to pool their money together in order to buy drugs cheaper elsewhere (Interviews D6, H14 and H15).

In Moscow as in most other Russian cities, illegal drugs can usually be bought in open-air markets for food and clothing. According to local police officers, drugs are on sale at virtually all of Moscow's 26 food markets (Interviews A1 and A6). Likewise, in St Petersburg, illicit drugs can be purchased at the Pravoberezny Market on Debunk Street, the Nekrasovsky market, the market near the metro Prospect of Prosveshenia, and the metro station Vosstania Square in the middle of the Nevsky Prospekt (Gilinsky *et al.* 2000: 28). In Vladikavkaz, the capital of the Caucasian Republic of North Ossetia, even non-users are well aware that the central market, Alan, is a good place to supply oneself with illicit drugs (Ciklauri 2000: 21; see also Rakitsky 2000; Maiorova 2000).

In most cities, a few well-known meeting places exist for drug users, such as Lubjanka Square in Moscow (Interviews D6 and H7). *Vint* users in particular, often gather in small groups of 10–15 people to hang out and get high (Saukhat 2000). Nonetheless, scarcely any Russian urban centres have a veritable open drug scene, where drug users and dealers meet and spend most of their day, as is the case in many Western European cities (Paoli 2000; Ruggiero 1992). Though more and more retail drug exchanges are carried out in open-air food markets, most drug dealing still takes place indoors. This is partially due to the weather, which can be very cold in winter, and to the extremely low social legitimacy enjoyed by drug use, a practice unknown to most Russians up until a few years ago.

The high penalties foreseen for the possession of even very small quantities of illegal drugs also constitute a major hindrance to the development of veritable open drug scenes in Russian cities (see Paoli 2001: 113–41; UNODCCP-Moscow 2001: 19). It is,

however, not only police repression that causes a submersion of the local drug markets. According to all users interviewed in Moscow and St Petersburg, and to some Russian and foreign experts as well, the major constraint of open-air drug exchanges is represented by police corruption. In some areas, apparently, patrol officers have gone as far as to establish a veritable extortion regime, collecting a regular 'protection tax' from local dealers and even users, who want to spend some time at a specific location and execute their illegal transactions without being arrested. In the Lubjanka metro station for example, drug users sometimes have to pay 100 rubles a day, just to be allowed to be there. It is hence no wonder that no more than 50 drug users ever meet there (Interviews D6, H9, H11 and H14). According to interviews with local drug users, even some police officers in Rostov, a Southern city on the Azov Sea, systematically extort drug dealers. The latter are obliged to pay the former bribes in order to work undisturbed (Saukhat 2000).

Such institutionalized extortion regimes are probably the exception rather than the rule. In Moscow, St Petersburg and Rostov, however, most of the users interviewed recall paying bribes to police officers in order to avoid being arrested or to be released. As an interviewee in St Petersburg stated,

> if I have to describe all the occasions I gave money to the police, it is going to become a lengthy volume. If I am arrested when I have money or drugs, I always pay. If I have no money, I call my girlfriend or some other friend by mobile phone to come and help me. (Interview H18; Gilinsky *et al.* 2000: 31–2).

Two or three hundred rubles (US$7–10.40) seem to be the minimal amount drug users have to pay when caught with drugs. Depending on the amount of drugs seized and the economic means of the user, however, the amount of the requested bribe can rapidly escalate. If the negotiation takes place on the street, the user is likely to get away with a small 'fee'; if it takes place in the police car, the price will be higher; and if the arrestee has already been brought to the police station, significantly larger sums will be requested (Interviews H5, H2, H4, H6, H7 and H15). In Rostov and in St Petersburg, several interviewees recall having to pay up to US$300. According to users, between 30 and 90 per cent of patrolling police officers collect money from drug sellers and users. Some of the higher-ranking police officers interviewed in Moscow and St Petersburg also admitted to the existence of corruption in lower ranks, but tended to play down its extent (Interviews A1, A6, A3 and A7; see also Gilinsky *et al.* 2000: 19; Saukhat 2000; Ciklauri 2000).

To avoid both police repression and extortion, drug exchanges tend to take place in closed settings, such as in private flats, but also occur in schools, bars and discos, where the chances of being intercepted by the police are the lowest (Maiorova 2000; Saukhat 2000; Markoryan 2000; Ciklauri 2000). The common practice of selling drugs in private flats is also connected with the spread of *chornyi* and *vint*, which up to a few years ago were the most frequently used illegal drugs in the country after cannabis, still maintaining their pre-eminence in some contexts (Gilinsky *et al.* 2000). Through simple 'kitchen chemistry', both *chornyi* and *vint* are extracted from poppy straw or raw opium and from cough syrups or ephedrine respectively (Dehne *et al.* 2000: 739). The final customers either assist in the production of the *chornyi* and *vint* in the improvised lab, so as to get high together with a group of friends, or wait for the drug solutions in the surroundings of the flat itself. Regardless of whether a friendship relationship exists between the cook and the customers, the latter are usually allowed to inject the drugs in the former's flat to avoid being caught by the police. In fact, although consumption as such is prohibited yet not a criminal offence, minimal doses of *chornyi*, *vint* or more seriously, heroin, are

sufficient reason to be arrested by the police for illegal possession of narcotics on a large scale. Carrying a syringe alone is already a large risk: if found by police, the drug users may easily be subject to police extortion (Interviews D1, D5 and D6; Saukhat 2000).

High schools, university campuses and dormitories also frequently play host to the selling of illegal drugs. According to several users, drugs can be easily found on the campuses of the Patrick Lumumba University in Moscow, the students of which still largely originate from less developed countries, and the Russian State Humanitarian University, also in Moscow (Interviews H11, H14 and H15). In a survey of high-school and university students of Vladikavkaz (the capital of North Ossetia), 64 per cent of the respondents reported that illicit drugs are routinely on offer in the high-school and university buildings, adding that the dealers are well known to the police, who have close connections with them. As one student put it, 'whoever reports these facts to the police is thus in serious danger of his own physical safety' (Ciklauri 2000: 22).

As in Western Europe, ecstasy and synthetic drugs are usually purchased by final consumers in discos and night cafés. However, in order to avoid police interference, even hashish and marijuana are sold at indoor meeting places for youth, more often than in any Western European city (Saukhat 2000). In St Petersburg, according to Gilinsky *et al.*, many disco or café owners are often either directly involved in the distribution of illicit drugs in their clubs or at least tolerate it (Gilinsky *et al.* 2000: 23; see also Interviews H1, H2, H11 and H13).

Depending on the type of substance, contact between the final user and the dealer is increasingly made through the use of mobile telephones or pagers. After making an appointment, the drug exchange generally takes place at the arranged time and place, usually in the street or in a café. This practice, widespread in Western Europe (Paoli 2000), was, until present, limited to the most expensive drugs in Russia, namely cocaine, yet according to several drug users, is also becoming popular for other drugs, such as heroin, cannabis and ecstasy (Interviews H5, H11, H12 and H13; Gilinsky *et al.* 2000: 21; Saukhat 2000).

Drug Production and Trafficking

Notwithstanding Russia's growing integration into the international drug trade, a considerable portion of the growing internal demand for illegal drugs continues to be satisfied with substances cultivated and/or produced inside the country. According to the Ministry of the Interior, approximately 50 per cent of total seized drugs today are still of domestic origin (MVD 1999: 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). On the whole, however, there is a clear national trend favouring imported drugs *vis-à-vis* locally cultivated ones.

While still significant, even domestic manufacturing of illegal drugs is declining. Despite the Ministry of the Interior discovering a steadily increasing number of clandestine laboratories between 1994 and 2000 (a rise from 483 to 816 with a peak of 1,117 in 1998), 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. Referring to the labs discovered in 1998, 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. Seven hundred of the dismantled clandestine laboratories produced various opium solutions; over 200 of them produced such drugs as hashish or hashish oil from cannabis. (1999: 39; see also UNODCCP-Moscow 2001: 11)

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, especially ecstasy, for the local and European markets. This hypothesis seems to have only been realized to a minimal extent. Ecstasy continues to be largely imported from Western European countries, most notably the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent from Poland. As stated by a high-ranking MVD officer, 'there is no need to produce drugs that can be easily and cheaply imported' (Interview A9).

As is the case with ecstasy, the Russian drug market is being increasingly supplied with substances of foreign origin. While drugs of foreign origin account for about 50 per cent of the Russian market, in Moscow, St Petersburg and other major cities they account for approximately 80–90 per cent (MVD 1999: 15–6). Globalization affects not only legal markets, but also illegal ones, which are even less protected by state authorities than their legal counterparts because of the illegal status of their commodities. Even more than in the Russian legal economy, in its large clandestine appendix market forces have been free to play at will following the liberalization of trade and the opening of borders. Illegal, in addition to legal commodities, tend to be imported from countries able to offer them at the best price-quality rate.

As a result, in all Russian cities' illegal drug markets domestically produced psychoactive substances are being replaced by more powerful and easier-to-use drugs from abroad. A considerable and probably preponderant proportion of the latter are imported from countries belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States. Kazakhstan is currently the major supplier of raw opium and cannabis products, though these substances are also imported from other former Soviet republics (SCC 2000: 15; MVD 2000: 13; see also Houben 1999: 9–12). As a matter of fact, smuggling illegal drugs into Russia from other CIS states is made particularly easy and low risk due to the lack of effective patrolling at most newly established borders. Along the 6,500-km long border between Russia and Kazakhstan in particular, drug smugglers are easily able to bypass official checkpoints and cross the border in the steppe.

Tajikistan and, to a lesser extent, the other Central Asian republics, are increasingly transited to smuggle heroin into Russia from Afghanistan, the source of two thirds of three quarters of the global supply of illicit opiates in recent years (UNODCCP 2000: 34; 1999). Since 1993, the 1,200 km long mountainous border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan has been patrolled by the Russian Federal Border Guards, which seized a record amount of 2,304 kilograms of heroin in 2000 (UNODCCP-Moscow 2001: 17). Yet in spite of this, drug trafficking continues to thrive as an effect of the civil war and extreme poverty in both countries. Afghanistan has known no peace since the USSR invaded the country in 1979. Though the fundamentalist Islamic Taliban movement was able to seize most of the country in the mid-1990s, warfare still goes on in Northern Afghanistan, from which the Taliban try to chase their opponents, most notably the army led by Ahmad Shah Masud. Both factions have long relied 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: 44–7). From late 2000 on, however, the Taliban began to enforce a ban on opium production. This decision, which could disrupt the world geo-politics of the heroin trade, had yet to produce an impact on heroin trafficking when the fieldwork was carried out.

In Tajikistan, civil war broke out in the early 1990s, after gaining independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union. A peace agreement among rival factions was signed in 1997, yet its implementation has progressed slowly (see Atkin 1997). Tajikistan has the lowest GDP per capita among the 15 former Soviet republics and an economy severely weakened by six years of civil conflict and by the loss of subsidies from Moscow and of markets for its products (CIA 2000). Sixty-five per cent of the six million strong population 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 per cent of Tajikistan's gross domestic product is derived from drug trafficking (Fitchett 2000; see also OGD 2000: 40–1; Birkenes 1997; Reuters 2000).

Up until the mid-1990s most Afghan heroin reached final consumers in Europe through Iran and Turkey. Since then, however, an increasing portion has been smuggled through the former Soviet Central Asian republics and particularly through Tajikistan along the old 'Silk Road'. The International Narcotics Control Board estimates that up to 65 per cent of opiates intended for export from Afghanistan may pass through the porous Central Asian borders to Europe. In most cases, these heroin cargoes also transit Russia (INCB 2000).

Whereas tonnes of opium (and cannabis) and hundreds of kilograms of heroin were seized in several Central Asian Republics (most notably, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) (BKA 2000), the rapid expansion in heroin trafficking and Russia's growing involvement are also indicated by the quantities of drugs intercepted by customs at the Russian border. Between 1998 and 1999, heroin seizures increased sevenfold and opium seizures more than 3.5 times. The first seizure of massive proportions was intercepted in January 1999 at the seaport of Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea. Two hundred and twenty kilograms of heroin were concealed in an additional fuel tank of a truck, driven by two Turkish nationals and transported by ferry from Turkmenistan (SCC 2000: 24; INL 2000, pt 5: 20). According to Western law enforcement *liaison* officers, the 220 kilograms were bound for Western Europe, though neither the sender nor the final recipient of the load has been identified so far (Interviews B1, B4, B5 and B7).

Another relatively large seizure was made in December at Moscow's second international airport, Domodedovo. More than 10 kilograms of heroin were found in two watermelons carried by a passenger flying from the capital of Tajikistan, Dushambe. At the same airport a few days earlier, 6 kilograms of heroin were discovered in a sealed sack just arrived from Dushambe, which contained official correspondence of the Tajik State Courier Service (SCC 2000: 18; see also Saukhat, 2000). Another heroin seizure of 35 kilograms was made in February 2000 on the Kazakh border (Interview A7).

Despite a few large seizures, most of the heroin to be distributed in Russia is smuggled in small amounts. Particularly when the final destination is Moscow or another city of European Russia, heroin is increasingly carried by couriers who conceal the substance in their body or, less frequently, in their luggage. This method was first utilized by the Nigerians who imported the first lots of heroin in the mid-1990s. Since then, it has been adopted by Tajiks, who use it to smuggle heroin into Russia from their home country

(MVD 2000: 12; see also Interviews A7 and D6). In 1998, 13 so-called swallowers were detained by Russian customs; by 1999 their number had grown more than twelvefold to 165 (SCC 2000: 16–7).

Russia is also increasingly used to transfer large amounts of cannabis products into Western Europe from southern CIS countries and Afghanistan. In spring 1996, two shipments, each of more than 1,700 kilograms of hashish, were intercepted at the Russian-Latvian border. The drugs were hidden in two containers, which had been sent from Afghanistan and were bound for Holland by train (BKA 2000; see also MVD 2000: 24–5).

Contrary to the forecasts of many foreign and Russian law enforcement officers, Russia has not become a major transit corridor for South American cocaine. The seizure of one ton of cocaine at Vyborg on the Russian-Finnish border in 1993 had, indeed, fuelled many fears (see for example Handelman 1995: 195–6). For the most part, however, these worries did not materialize. Local drug markets in Western Europe continue to be supplied either directly from producing countries or through well-established entry points, *in primis* Spain and the Netherlands (Paoli 2000; DEA 1995; EMCDDA 1999: 60).

Traffickers and Dealers

The expansion of Russian drug consumption and trade during the 1990s entailed the emergence of a nationwide drug distribution system, delivering illicit drugs from producers to consumers, and consolidating the professional role of the drug dealer. The latter role did not exist in Russia prior to the early 1990s comparable to the situation in Western Europe and the USA up until the mid-1970s. 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 from distant regions.

In official reports, Russian law enforcement authorities present a very 'organized' picture of the drug trade. In its 2000 report on drug and organized crime, for example, the MVD categorically states that 'drug crime is always organized'; 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, the latter is linked to the integration of Russian organized 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 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 centralized 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 organized crime dictates the terms of functioning to branches of the economy as well as norms of social behaviour to different regions. (MVD 2000: 3; see also FSB 2000)

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 4, in fact, the crimes committed by 'organized crime groups' represent less than 1 per cent of the total drug offences reported in Russia and in 1999 accounted for only 4.1 per cent of drug trafficking cases. The per cent values are somewhat higher if the crimes committed by 'groups' are considered. The latter accounted for 4.7 per cent of total drug offences in 1999, down from 6.5 per cent in 1995. Their percentage is consistently higher if the drug trafficking cases are considered: in 1999, 23.8 per cent of drug trafficking offences were committed by a 'group'.

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, para. 1, 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 'organized group': 'if it is committed by a stable group of persons, who combined beforehand to commit one or several crimes' (ibid). Even in this case no quantitative parameter is set and the only two requirements entail cohesiveness and previous agreement. Thus, even a family that deals drugs can be considered an 'organized crime group'.

The 10,000 'organized 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. Given the above definition, it is fair to assume that not all of them are large, highly structured and powerful criminal groups. Indeed, this conclusion is backed by the very data provided by the MVD. The 1,600 organized crime groups involved in drug trafficking are said to be composed of 6,000 people—which means that their average size is 3.75.

TABLE 4 *Drug offences reported in Russia, including those committed by a group and an organized crime group 1995–99*

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Drug offences (total)	79,819	96,645	184,832	190,127	216,364
Drug trafficking (Art. 228, p. 2,3,4; Art. 234, paras. 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 organized 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.

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 specializing in illegal drug trafficking could have promoted the spread of drug use even to those regions that previously never had had socio-cultural 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)

It is understandable that professional and non-professional observers hypothesize the involvement of a powerful 'Russian mafia' to explain the sudden expansion of illegal drug consumption and trade in Russia. Nevertheless, neither proof of 'criminal societies' nor of large-scale organized crime groups emerged 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 (Paoli 2001: 94–113). The relatively 'disorganized' (Reuter 1983) nature of drug trafficking and distribution in Russia is further shown by the fieldwork conducted in the aforementioned nine Russian cities. A multi-level drug distribution system has developed in all of these cities, which has led to users increasingly buying drugs from dealers, instead of cultivating or harvesting themselves. The consumers' demands, however, seem to be neither satisfied nor promoted by the large, hierarchically organized firms that monopolize local markets.

The phenomenal growth of drug use can thus 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 dealers do not possess previous criminal expertise and deal with illegal drugs simply to earn 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. (Interview A6)

Both 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 a 19-year-old drug user notes, 'in Moscow there are a lot of Tajik dealers now' (Interview H7; see also Interviews H9, H12, D6, A1 and A6). As a rule, these are far from 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, for example, 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 wholesale level, or for 1,000 rubles (US$35) retail.

According to Moscow's police officers, groups of heroin smugglers from Afghanistan and Tajikistan usually consist 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 of 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 organized.

Nevertheless, although the members of some ethnic communities may be over-proportionally represented in the drug distribution systems of many Russian cities, illegal drugs are also produced and sold by many people belonging to the mainstream Russian population who cannot be precisely classified. As Ludmila Markoryan from Balakovo points out,

> it is not easy to refer the drug dealers of our city to specific social groups. The 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 trend was also recognized by some of the drug users interviewed in Moscow and St Petersburg. As the 24-year-old Anthone states, 'the production, transportation, and sale of illegal drugs is carried out by all social and national groups' (Interview H7).

Contrary to the common *doxa*, a 'disorganized' view of the supply side of the Russia drug market was also held by some Russian and most foreign law enforcement officials who were interviewed during the research for this project. As one of the latter put it,

> I hardly dare to tell it to my colleagues back home, but for the moment we have no proof of a large-scale involvement of Russian organized crime in the illegal drug trade. Our investigations so far show that the latter is characterized by a low level of sophistication and organization. (Interview B1; see also Interview B7)

Similar opinions were also expressed by the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB, the former KGB) in the southern Republic of North Ossetia, which borders on Georgia. On the basis of the project findings, 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 groups of people that are not linked to one another. (FSB-North Ossetia 1998; Ciklauri 2000: 28)

The large criminal organizations, portrayed by the domestic and foreign press as the dreadful 'Russian Mafia', seem to be presently uninterested in the drug business, though some of their younger affiliates may deal drugs. As a matter of fact, even these groups do not constitute unitary, hierarchical bureaucracies that can be compared to large-scale multinational corporations. These organizations, be it the Solntsevskaya, Ismalovskaya or Kurganskaya in Moscow, the Tambovskaya, Malyshev's or Kazanskaya in St Petersburg, can rather be 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. As a Russian law enforcement summed it up, Russian

organized crime groups are 'much smaller and more loosely organized than foreign journalists often maintain' (Interview A6).

According to several interviewees, the extraordinary enrichment chances offered by the transition to a market economy explain the lack of interest of the largest criminal groups in drug trafficking. As one law enforcement officer stated, 'they have such huge opportunities to make money in the so-called legal economy, that it makes no sense for them to deal drugs' (Interview B2). The high-ranking leaders of the most prominent organized crime associations have, in fact, earned fabulous wealth in the no man's land left by the end of the planned economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Though they also established protection rackets and organized 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, which were still desperately scarce in the last phase of the Soviet command economy and its immediate aftermath: computers, vehicles, electronic equipment, gambling.

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

Concluding Remarks

Although the sudden expansion of illegal drug use may have shocked most Russians, the development of the illegal drug market and trade is not the anomaly of contemporary Russia as such. In fact, illegal drugs are consumed and trafficked in virtually all developed and developing countries of the world (UNODCCP 2001). Russia's anomaly lies in the inextricable intertwinement of the legal and illegal sections of the economy. Between the two there is as yet no accommodation. On the one hand, as previously discussed, the leaders of many of the most famous Russian criminal groups made their fortunes by importing scarce legal goods and by exploiting loopholes in the national legislation. On the other hand, many of today's most successful entrepreneurs have built their fortunes using shady strategies. Crony capitalism has dominated the privatization process, under which 70 per cent of Russia's state-owned industry has been transformed into privately owned joint-stock companies (Glinkina 1997 and 1999; Shelley 1995; Black *et al.* 1999; Pleines 1998; Ledeneva 2000). Tax evasion and illegal export of capital remain widespread practices among many legitimate firms and members of the upper class (Busse 2000). Capital flight from Russia exceeded US$1bn per month in 2000, down from the annual US$15bn in 1999 and US$25bn at the height of the Russia's financial crisis in 1998 (Reuters 2000; see also GPAML 2001).

After almost two years of investigating the movement of billions of dollars through the Bank of New York, US federal law enforcement officers came to the conclusion that most of the money was not the product of illegal drug trafficking or any other typical

underworld activity, but basically involved capital flight and tax evasion by Russian businesses. In what began as one of the biggest money-laundering investigations in US history, law enforcement officers determined that the 'vast majority' of the US$7bn channelled out of Russia from 1996 to 1999 originated from tax evasion and tax fraud (Weiser and Bergmann 2000).

Despite the recent growth and the increasing sophistication and professionalism of drug suppliers, the threat of the illegal drug trade should not be overemphasized. Rather, this *contra legem* activity should be objectively assessed within the larger context of Russia's economic and organized crime. Illegal drug trade, in fact, still represents a relatively small part of the booming Russian illegal and semi-legal economy and is far from being the primary source of revenue for the galaxy of Russian organized crime. Though drug trafficking certainly has huge potential for growth, the largest fortunes in Russia are still collected in the extensive 'grey area', where distinctions between the legal and illegal economy are blurred.

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Note on Interview Codes

All interviews with Russian and foreign law enforcement officers, public drug-treatment providers, staff of drug-related NGOs, scholars as well as drug users themselves are kept anonymous and are referred to with a code (for example A1 or D5). The letter of the code refers to the specific background of the interviewee. In particular, A stands for Russian law enforcement officials; B for foreign law enforcement officers (including liaison officers interviewed in Moscow as well as several others interviewed abroad); C refers to Russian narcologists and state drug-treatment providers; D to the staff of Russian and foreign drug-related NGOs; E to Russian and foreign academic scholars; F to Russian and foreign journalists; G to the representatives of international organizations and H to drug users. Finally, to distinguish interviews with people of the same category, a progressive number has been added according to the interview's date.