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Original Contribution

THE ILLICIT TRAFFICKING OF NARCOTIC SUBSTANCES AS A TRANSNATIONAL SECURITY THREAT

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Abstract: *The article examines the illegal distribution of narcotic substances as a complex transnational threat to security. The analysis focuses on the legal and conceptual foundations of drug control, the international and European regulatory framework, the main dimensions of drug trafficking as a security threat, and contemporary trends in production, trafficking and use. Particular attention is paid to new psychoactive substances, precursors, synthetic opioids, digital distribution channels, maritime routes and the changing structure of organized criminal networks. The role of the national administrative capacity, interinstitutional coordination and international cooperation is emphasized. The analysis shows that effective counteraction cannot be reduced to police and criminal-law measures and requires an integrated, proactive and risk-oriented approach combining law enforcement, customs, judicial, health, social and preventive measures.*

Key words: *Narcotic substances, Drug trafficking, Security, Organized crime, Transnational crime, New psychoactive substances, Precursors, Synthetic opioids, EUDA, International cooperation.*

1. Introduction

Illegal distribution of narcotic substances has evolved from a predominantly criminal - law and public - health issue into a multidimensional security challenge. Contemporary drug markets connect production areas, transit countries, ports, logistics chains, digital platforms and local distribution networks. Their activities generate criminal profits, facilitate corruption and money laundering, create pressure on public institutions and produce significant health and social costs.

The objective of the article is to systematize the theoretical and normative foundations of the problem and to identify the principal contemporary trends that determine the requirements for administrative and organizational security. The analysis is structured around three interconnected areas: the concept and classification of controlled substances and the international legal framework; drug trafficking as a transnational security threat; and contemporary changes in production, trafficking and use.

The study uses a documentary and analytical approach based on Bulgarian legislation, international conventions, European Union instruments and analytical materials cited in the source material. The emphasis is placed on the relationship between legal regulation, institutional capacity and the adaptive behavior of criminal networks.

2. Related Work

The existing regulatory and analytical framework demonstrates that drug control is based on several complementary perspectives. The World Health Organization approaches psychoactive substances from a health perspective, while the international drug-control conventions establish a system of classification, control and international cooperation. In the European context, the European Union combines criminal-law harmonization with operational cooperation, precursor control, monitoring and early-warning mechanisms.

The three principal United Nations conventions – the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, as amended by the 1972 Protocol; the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971; and the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988 – form the core of the international control regime [3–5]. Their combined effect is to establish controls over substances, criminalize illicit trafficking and facilitate confiscation, extradition and mutual legal assistance.

At EU level, Council Framework Decision 2004/757/JHA establishes minimum rules concerning illicit drug trafficking offences and penalties [6]. Regulations (EC) No 273/2004 and No 111/2005 provide a control framework for trade in drug precursors within the Union and with third countries [7]. The institutional architecture further includes EUDA, Europol, Eurojust, Frontex, CEPOL and EMPACT. This combination reflects the shift from isolated national enforcement towards intelligence-led and network-oriented cooperation.

3. Problem Description and Results

The study applies documentary analysis, comparative analysis of international and European regulatory instruments, and a security-oriented systematization of current drug-market trends. The analytical framework links the legal status of controlled substances with vulnerabilities in institutional processes, criminal supply chains and cross-border cooperation. This approach allows the problem to be examined not only through the volume of seizures or criminal cases, but also through the capacity of institutions to anticipate and manage emerging risks.

3.1. Concept, classification and legal framework

Under Bulgarian legislation, the concept of a narcotic substance includes narcotic and psychotropic substances included in the lists under the Law on Control of Narcotic Substances and Precursors (LCNSP) [1]. The law regulates production, processing, trade, use, storage, import, export, transit and transportation, as well as measures against abuse and illicit trafficking.

For the purposes of security analysis, three interrelated characteristics are relevant. The formal-legal characteristic determines whether a substance is included in the legally established lists. The medico-biological characteristic concerns dependence, effects on mental state and behavior, toxicity and health risks. The social-administrative characteristic reflects the public interest in protecting public health, public order and security. Weakness in any of these elements can create vulnerabilities, particularly when new substances appear faster than regulatory and scientific systems can assess them.

Bulgarian legislation uses three controlled-substance lists established through a Council of Ministers regulation. The three-level structure seeks to distinguish substances according to

risk and recognized medical use while maintaining strict control. The distinction between so-called ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ drugs, frequently used in public discourse, has no independent legal significance and may be misleading from a security perspective.

New psychoactive substances create a particular regulatory challenge because their chemical structures can be modified rapidly. Precursors are equally important: controlling the availability and movement of chemicals used in synthetic production can disrupt production before the finished narcotic reaches the distribution market. The source material reports a substantial increase in seizures of precursors for methamphetamine production in the EU, from 352 kg in 2022 to 7.8 tonnes in 2023 [10–12].

3.2. Drug trafficking as a transnational security threat

Drug trafficking is not merely an illicit commercial activity. It simultaneously affects public order, public health, economic stability and the resilience of state institutions. Its security significance can be examined through five dimensions.

Criminal dimension. Drug trafficking generates violence between competing groups, creates criminal revenue and can support other illicit markets such as trafficking in persons, weapons and excise goods.

Institutional dimension. High criminal profits create opportunities for corruption and infiltration, particularly where officials exercise discretionary control over inspections, investigations or administrative decisions.

Health dimension. Drug use produces overdose deaths, infectious diseases, mental-health consequences and substantial health and social expenditure. Synthetic opioids and other highly potent substances increase the risk of fatal overdose.

Economic dimension. Proceeds are laundered through legitimate economic sectors, potentially distorting competition and concealing criminal capital.

Political and international dimension. Trafficking requires cross-border cooperation, information exchange, mutual legal assistance and coordinated operational activity, making it simultaneously a domestic and foreign-policy issue.

Contemporary European drug markets are organized as interconnected chains involving global suppliers, regional distributors and local actors. Cocaine is strongly associated with maritime routes from Latin America; heroin trafficking has historically been associated with the Balkan route; and synthetic stimulants are produced to a significant extent within the EU. Precursors may originate from Asian markets. This structure confirms the transnational character of the threat and the need to analyze entire criminal chains rather than isolated seizures [9].

Organized criminal groups increasingly demonstrate network characteristics. Instead of a single hierarchical organization, multiple relatively autonomous actors may cooperate around particular transactions. This flexibility increases resilience and complicates traditional enforcement models. Accordingly, intelligence-led analysis, mapping of networks and identification of vulnerabilities along the supply chain become central elements of effective security policy.

The threat also has a pronounced corruption component. Criminal groups may attempt to influence officials at vulnerable points in the administrative process. Countermeasures therefore require integrity checks, transparent procedures, staff rotation at sensitive positions, whistleblower protection, disciplinary and criminal accountability, and sustained institutional capacity.

3.3. Contemporary trends in production, trafficking and use

According to the European drug-market data cited in the source material, the European market is simultaneously stable in its demand and dynamic in its composition, routes and distribution methods. Cannabis remains the most widely used illicit drug, while cocaine has become increasingly accessible in a number of European markets. MDMA and amphetamines remain significant synthetic stimulants [10].

Synthetic cathinones represent an important emerging trend. The source material reports seizures of at least 37 tonnes in 2023, compared with 27 tonnes in 2022 and 4.5 tonnes in 2021 [11]. Their rapid chemical modification illustrates the continuing adaptation of criminal markets to legal controls and creates pressure on early-warning and analytical systems.

Another major development is the increasing importance of maritime trafficking. The source material reports 419 tonnes of cocaine seized in the EU in 2023 and notes the particular vulnerability of ports, where a substantial share of customs seizures occurs [12]. The resulting security requirement is stronger risk analysis for containers, integration of logistics information and coordinated work between customs, law-enforcement authorities and port stakeholders.

The Bulgarian context is also affected by these developments. The material identifies large seizures at the Port of Burgas and reports the detection of methamphetamine laboratories in Bulgaria. These developments indicate that Bulgaria should be considered not only as a transit environment but also in relation to domestic production and distribution risks.

Synthetic opioids constitute another emerging risk. The source material highlights fentanyl and nitazenes as substances capable of producing severe overdose risks and notes increased attention to fentanyl-related cases in Bulgaria. From an administrative perspective, this supports the importance of early warning, laboratory capacity, specialized training and international exchange of expertise [13].

Digitalization is changing the distribution environment. Encrypted communication services, darknet markets, postal and courier deliveries and online contact between buyers and sellers reduce the importance of some traditional physical distribution points. Effective response therefore requires technological capabilities, appropriate investigative instruments and cross-border cooperation.

Finally, the health dimension is increasingly integrated into European drug policy. Prevention, early intervention, treatment, harm reduction and social reintegration complement law-enforcement measures. An integrated approach is particularly relevant for long-term security policy because it addresses both the criminal supply side and the social and health factors that sustain demand.

4. Discussion

The analysis indicates that the principal challenge is not the absence of legal instruments but the ability of institutions to adapt them to a rapidly changing environment. International and European rules provide common standards, yet their practical effectiveness depends on national administrative capacity, human resources, technology, information exchange and coordination [14].

Three directions emerge as particularly significant. First, control systems need stronger early-warning and analytical capabilities for new psychoactive substances, synthetic opioids and precursors. Second, security management must increasingly integrate maritime, customs, financial and digital intelligence. Third, the institutional response should be genuinely integrated, connecting law enforcement and judicial authorities with health, social, educational and local-government structures.

For Bulgaria, these requirements are especially relevant because the country is simultaneously exposed to transit, import, distribution and production risks. A reactive model focused mainly on individual seizures is insufficient for a networked and adaptive market. A proactive, risk-oriented model should identify vulnerabilities along the entire chain and allocate resources according to emerging risks.

5. Conclusion

The analysis confirms that the illegal distribution of narcotic substances should be treated as a multidimensional security threat rather than solely as a criminal-law or public-health problem. Its effects extend to public order, institutional resilience, economic activity and international security cooperation.

The international and European regulatory framework provides the necessary common standards for classification, control, criminalization and cooperation, but its practical effectiveness depends on the capacity of national institutions to adapt to rapidly changing criminal markets. New psychoactive substances, precursors, synthetic opioids, maritime logistics and digital distribution channels create vulnerabilities that require continuous monitoring and early warning [15].

For Bulgaria, the combination of transit, import, distribution and production risks requires a proactive, risk-oriented model of security management. Such a model should integrate law-enforcement and customs capabilities with judicial, financial, health, social, technological and analytical resources. Particular importance should be given to interinstitutional information exchange, protection of vulnerable administrative processes and identification of vulnerabilities throughout the entire supply chain.

A further research direction is the development of practical indicators for assessing institutional readiness to detect and respond to emerging drug-market risks, including risks associated with digital distribution, synthetic substances and maritime trafficking.

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