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EUROPEAN UNION ILLEGAL DRUG MARKET: IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected our daily lives in many ways and has also had an impact on drug markets. There is a critical need to investigate the extent and nature of this impact to identify areas where rapid adaptations to operational responses and future policies are required. In addition, lessons may be learned from the past and current situations in terms of how we might better anticipate emerging threats and ensure that we act quickly to meet immediate and longer-term data needs to inform policy, decision-making and operational responses.

The objective of this analysis of EU drug markets is to increase understanding of ongoing developments and their impact on the internal security and public health of the EU in order to inform European institutions and partners in the EU Member States. This is of vital importance for formulating effective responses at the EU and national levels and could inform (future) priorities for collaborative responses.

As Europol reported in its baseline assessment, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have had little immediate impact on the wholesale trafficking of drugs [1]. Apart from some disruptions at the onset of the first lockdown, trafficking of cannabis, cocaine and heroin was observed to continue over the monitoring period. Drugs continued to be seized on arrival in shipping containers at main European entry points, in some cases in unprecedented quantities.

Wholesale traffickers have continued to arrange shipments and the effects of the pandemic appear to have been limited to mid-level supply and distribution networks based in the EU. Due to the downturn in the export of essential chemicals and precursors typically imported from China and used in the production of synthetic drugs, manufacturing of such drugs did slow down, however, it did not cease [2]. Some reports also indicated that producers of synthetic drugs had stockpiled the necessary chemical materials in order to ensure production and supply [3].

Due to OCGs' preparation for a temporary suspension of their trafficking activities, and some traffickers stockpiling drugs, at the end of the first quarter of 2020, there were some indications pointing to fluctuations in drug prices on the EU drug markets. As a result, for instance, cocaine prices were reported to have risen by 25% that underlined the impact movement disruptions had on the import drugs to Europe [4]. Due to the restrictions introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for certain drugs was also affected. With lockdown measures imposed, there was a notable drop observed in the consumption of MDMA, a drug that is usually taken in recreational settings.

Some criminals had adapted their *modus operandi* for the distribution of drugs in order to circumvent barriers. Europol received information that several dealers used falsified certificates, commercial vehicles and corporate vests, impersonating internet provider staff supposedly tasked to install optical fibres in order to deliver drugs [5].

There were also incidents reported of increasing violence as tensions between drug users, dealers and rival gangs intensified as a result of pressures on supply [6].

Localised shortages of some drugs have led to increased tensions between the OCGs (OCG - organized criminal group) supplying these drugs. In some cases, this has resulted in an increase in the number of violent confrontations reported between OCG members.

Experts from Denmark, Finland, France and Sweden replying to the EMCDDA (EMCDDA - European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction) survey reported an increase in the number of violent confrontations, while Austria and Portugal reported a decrease. In Denmark, COVID-19 restrictions have had an impact on the sale of cannabis in a certain part of Copenhagen, which has led to displacement of the trade to surrounding areas and increased feelings of insecurity in those communities. Although Denmark reported an increase in violent conflict between criminal groups, it was also stated that this is not unusual in the criminal milieu, so it may not be related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on drug markets. The Danish and the United

Kingdom expert mentioned that there have been some early indications of low-level acquisitive crime, tentatively linked to dependent drug users who have lost alternative sources of income through work or begging because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

Law enforcement authorities in Austria reported no change in the level of drug-related violence but noted that, in general, community harms have decreased as the majority of people, including drug users, are staying at home. Portugal also reported that the social distancing rules have led to a general decrease in levels of violent crime. General reporting to Europol also indicates that low-level violent crime has decreased in general but serious drug-related violence continues [7].

It is probably too early to properly assess the levels of drug-related violence in many countries. The restrictions on movement and the increased presence of security forces on the streets seem to have had a positive effect on low-level violent crime. The lifting of the restrictions, however, is likely to see a return of drug-related violence. Different cities or neighbourhoods are likely to experience different patterns of drug-related violence after the pandemic, and longer-term measurements are needed to understand these patterns. The expected economic downturn is likely to have a significant negative impact on dependent drug users, which may lead to increased levels of acquisitive crime until the situation stabilises.

In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in prisons, changes to prison rules have been made in some countries, such as restrictions on visits and other outside contacts [8]. This has indirectly led to a decrease in the availability of drugs in some prisons and this has sparked violent reactions from some prison inmates in France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom [9, 10]. Under these more restrictive conditions, new methods to smuggle drugs into prisons may appear; for example, the use of drones is expected to increase, as a recent incident near the perimeter of a prison in the United Kingdom suggests [11].

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, national governments across the EU have adopted a range of restrictive measures to slow down the spread of the virus. Some of the measures taken by EU Member States have had impacts on drug supply chains. Most EU countries have imposed some degree of border restrictions for all three modes of transportation: air, land and sea. To enforce the restrictions, staff have been re-deployed in certain areas and duties have been re-focused. The increased presence of law enforcement authorities in key areas and more frequent checks have led to many small drug seizures; for example, there have been

reports of seizures of drugs at COVID-19 checkpoints in France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom [12].

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on law enforcement authorities across the EU. A partial shift in the operational focus to public order policing has temporarily reduced the availability of personnel to perform investigative and intelligence work on serious and organized crime groups involved in multiple crime areas. However, despite a temporary decrease in international information exchange, high-risk OCGs and their leaders continue to be targeted and investigated by EU Member States. Within a constantly changing operating environment, Europol has continued to support these investigations, particularly against those high-risk OCGs involved in large-scale drug production and trafficking, by providing operational support on a 24/7 basis.

When the COVID-19 restrictions are relaxed, it will be apparent that the crime techniques used in the pre-COVID-19 period have changed. As drug producers, traffickers and distributors overcome the difficulties presented by the pandemic, for example by inventing new *modi operandi*, using new routes or moving business online, law enforcement authorities must adapt to face the new challenges. The ‘new normal’ operating environment, although resulting in challenges for law enforcement authorities, will also provide opportunities to enhance investigations against serious and organized crime in the EU and beyond.

Europol noted a decrease of 30 % in the number of messages exchanged between Member States and Europol during the first weeks of March as lockdown measures were coming into effect across the EU. However, the message exchange rates have since returned to normal pre-pandemic levels. The number of messages related to drug trafficking activities also decreased. However, investigations into criminal networks involved in the drug trade continued throughout this period.

The restrictions placed on the movement of citizens, including ‘lockdowns’ in many countries, have necessitated changes to how some drug-related business takes place. As noted in this report, this includes the use of home deliveries; less reliance on cash as a form of payment; less face-to-face dealing; and the potential for more individual drug transactions to take place online - on the darknet, on social media or using encrypted communications apps.

While the restrictions will gradually be lifted, it is very likely that some of the new practices will persist, as they may be a more convenient way to conduct business. An increase in the use of digital, communication and cyber-based technologies by drug trafficking organizations is expected.

The international movements of drug traffickers and high-level members of OCGs within Europe to source and transit countries are currently limited because of the travel restrictions. Despite this, largescale drug importations continue, presumably arranged through secure communication channels. In the post-pandemic period, there may be less reliance on face-to-face meetings at this level.

The longer-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to have implications for the laundering of illicit drug proceeds; the likely economic downturn may lower barriers for engagement in corruption and other practices facilitating the drugs business. For example, cash-rich criminal organizations may take control of financially troubled legitimate businesses to further their criminal activities, either immediately or in the long term [13].

Organized crime groups are likely to continue to adapt their transportation models and trafficking routes. The dramatic disruption to smuggling by air passengers may remain, with greater reliance placed on post and parcel services for drug distribution. Concealment methods are likely to evolve as part of drug distribution practices in future. The disruption to shipments of drugs such as heroin and cannabis resin across Europe using road networks is expected to lead to further maritime transportation of these drugs. There is a clear potential for online drug distribution to gain more traction and it may therefore be predicted that darknet markets, social media and secure communications channels will increase in importance.

There is some clear evidence of availability issues in some places, probably linked to difficulties in intra-EU distribution rather than importation problems. Similar to authorities learning that they need to be prepared for such scenarios in future, groups involved in drug distribution will learn from this experience that they may need to have more 'local' stocks of drugs in place to satisfy demand, especially for dependent users.

In this report we have discussed some of the immediate drug market changes that have occurred before and during the restrictive measures imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This information, although based on limited data, provides a window on the reactions of the drug market under these extraordinary circumstances.

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IMPROVING THE TRAINING OF EMPLOYEES OF THE NATIONAL POLICE OF UKRAINE ON ENSURING PUBLIC SAFETY AND ORDER DURING MASS EVENTS

One of the fundamental features of a civilized state is the legal protection of the individual. As a result, the demands of society on the professional activities of police officers are constantly growing in modern conditions. The current progress of Ukraine as a state governed by the rule of law, which wants to be a full member of the European Union, is directly related to the improvement of national legislation in terms of European values and the implementation of international standards, including law enforcement.

The National Police of Ukraine, since its inception, has been in the process of constant transformation and reform for four years, as a result of which it should become a European-style law enforcement agency, for which the main priority is public safety and human rights, quality services and high quality. level of trust in society.

The protection of public order has always been and continues to be the main task of law enforcement agencies of any state. It is the maintenance of public order that guarantees stable development in the country. One of the ways to ensure public order is to observe the rule of law and prevent riots during mass events.

Of particular interest to Ukraine is the experience of countries with a strong democratic regime, for which the main thing is to ensure a balance between the needs of law enforcement in the application of coercive measures and the need to ensure the rights and freedoms of citizens. But no