

I. Country Overviews

2. New Psychoactive Substances in Kazakhstan: Challenges, Enforcement, and Policy Approaches

Mariya Prilutskaya, Almas Kussainov, Gulzhan Altybayeva

In recent years, Kazakhstan has faced a significant challenge with the rise of new psychoactive substances (NPS). These substances, often designed to mimic the effects of traditional illicit drugs, have created a complex landscape for legal regulation and law enforcement. This chapter delves into the multifaceted approach Kazakhstan has adopted to combat the proliferation of NPS. It explores the stringent legal frameworks implemented, the proactive measures taken by law enforcement agencies, and the collaborative efforts between various stakeholders to mitigate the risks associated with these substances. For the general public, NPS are more commonly known by the collective term ‘synthetic drugs’, highlighting their novelty and distinguishing them from the more traditional drugs, heroin and cannabis. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev reported in September 2022 that the number of synthetic drug seizures in Kazakhstan has increased tenfold over the past three years.

Central to Kazakhstan’s strategy against NPS is a comprehensive policy framework that addresses treatment, prevention, and harm reduction. The country’s health policies focus on providing accessible treatment options for individuals struggling with NPS addiction, while also prioritising preventive measures to curb the initial use of these substances. Harm reduction strategies, such as needle exchange programmes and supervised consumption facilities, are integral components of Kazakhstan’s approach, aimed at minimising the adverse health consequences associated with NPS use.

Furthermore, the chapter highlights the importance of international collaboration in addressing the NPS crisis. Kazakhstan’s engagement with global partners has facilitated the sharing of best practices and resources, enhancing the country’s capacity to tackle this issue effectively. The chapter also examines the epidemiology of NPS use, providing insights into the patterns and trends observed within the population. Additionally, it underscores the critical role of specialist awareness and education, as well as the contributions of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in supporting individuals affected by NPS and advocating for evidence-based policies.

Legal Regulation and Law Enforcement Activities

The drug market has remained relatively stable for many decades, which has allowed the global community to identify and implement a number of effective interventions against drugs such as heroin, amphetamines, cocaine, and cannabis. However, the mid-2000s were marked by the emergence of new drug challenges, associated with both a dramatic increase in the number of new drug formulas and changes in their marketing channels. The emergence of NPS has become a worldwide trend, with 141 countries and territories across the globe reporting one or more of these substances. As of November 2023, the Early Warning Advisory of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has received reports on 1,230 different substances (UNODC 2024). The first mentions of new psychoactive substances in Central Asia were also recorded in the mid-2000s, although the region did not report seizures of synthetic drugs in official UNODC statistics until the early 2010s. The earliest reports began to register in the media, in the form of short news articles about previously unknown smoking mixtures that ‘alter mental states’ (Mednovosti 2010).

The issue of the dangers of new psychoactive substances has only been on the political agenda since the mid-2010s. In 2010, the Ministry of Health imposed a ban on the free trade of smoking mixtures such as ‘Genie’, ‘Smoke, relax your mind’, ‘Rush’, ‘Damiana chocolate’, ‘Effya’, and ‘Spice’ (Kosenov 2010). However, this measure did not work effectively because the decision of the Ministry of Health was advisory in nature (Vesti.kz 2011). At that time, amendments to the Law ‘On Narcotic Drugs’ were required. From 2014–2015 onwards, Kazakhstan’s parliament focused on the need to determine the legal state of NPS, considering a raising concerns initiated by media agenda. In the legal field of Kazakhstan, new psychoactive substances were presented under the term ‘analogues of narcotic and psychotropic drugs’. According to Law ‘On Narcotic Drugs’ from 2014, analogues are chemical substances not included in the ‘List of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances, and precursors subject to control in the Republic of Kazakhstan’, whose (i) chemical structure, (ii) effect on the body, and (iii) harm to public health is comparable to the psychoactive substances they reproduce. However, in December 2019, the definition of analogy was changed, and it is now sufficient to establish only the chemical component of the substance, rather than the three aspects previously required to determine analogy (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Updated, 2023).

This development has greatly simplified the process of controlling new formulas and listing them as hazardous. In addition, since December 2018, Kazakhstan has introduced a new mechanism for the accelerated prohibition of new drug formulas. Thus, before 2018, recognising a substance as narcotic required a law change at parliament level, which, due to administrative bureaucracy, took at least two years. Upon introduction of the new legal regulation, the government is now the body responsible for the drug control list and regulation of scheduled substances. That legal measure led almost immediately to a sharp increase in the number of criminal cases where trafficking in analogues was established and were brought to trial. The criminal justice and anti-drug trafficking system has been provided with a mechanism to respond more flexibly to the surge in new chemical formulas. This was noted in reports of both ordinary police officers and government officials (Weber 2020). Another important measure in the legal regulation of trafficking was the differentiated definition of the weight ranges of seized drugs (medium, large, and especially large), which is crucial to determine the severity of the offence. This measure was salient, given the high potency of NPS, which can significantly exceed the potency of classic drugs. Therefore, analogues/NPS cannot automatically be equated with the weight of classic drugs. For example, since 2021, the criminal liability for the sale of alpha-PVP starts at just one gram of the substance, whereas it previously started at 50 grams (Forbes Kazakhstan, 2021). As of April 2024, 18 synthetic stimulants and 112 synthetic cannabinoids have been classified as illegal psychotropic substances (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2019). Their trafficking is strictly prohibited in the country. The ‘List of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances, and precursors subject to control in the Republic of Kazakhstan’ also includes two of the most prevalent NPS, according to police information—mephedrone and alpha-PVP. In January 2024, law enforcement agencies dismantled an illegal laboratory with 200 kg of finished mephedrone worth 3.2 billion tenge (over USD seven million) (Zharbulova 2024).

Despite a number of ongoing government measures, the problem of the proliferation of synthetic drugs remains unresolved. The president’s statement in 2022 on the growing threat of synthetic drugs to Kazakhstan’s security has become an important message for anti-drug policy. The president noted that ‘the dynamics are sharply negative: over the past three years, the volume of “synthetics” seizures has increased ten times. Synthetic drugs are becoming cheaper and more accessible every year’ (Tokayev 2022). In

his annual message to the people of Kazakhstan, the president emphasised the need to develop a strategic plan to combat synthetic drugs.

In June 2023, the government approved the ‘Comprehensive Plan to Combat Drug Addiction and Drug Trafficking in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023–2025’. The descriptive part of this document indicated that in 2022, 15.9 tons of various psychoactive substances had been seized, of which ‘synthetics’ comprised 582.9 kg (3.6%). In 2021, 16.1 tons of drugs were seized from illicit trafficking, including 223 kg of ‘synthetics’. The main activities outlined in the plan include equipping border checkpoints with drug detection equipment, strengthening the material and technical base of forensic examination bodies, introducing screening to detect drug addiction at early stages, upgrading and opening treatment and rehabilitation centres, and eliminating clandestine drug laboratories. Overall, 53.1 billion tenge (over USD 118 million) were allocated for the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan. According to the Plan, the prevailing share of financial resources was allocated specifically to improving the technical equipment of law enforcement agencies. The programme notes that a significant challenge is the technical complexity of the drug business. The current growing NPS trend in Kazakhstan is associated with local production in clandestine drug laboratories using precursors and equipment of Russian and Chinese origin. At the same time, the smuggling of various concentrates, precursors, and ready-to-use substances continues, mainly from Russian territory through postal mail and transport and logistics companies (Decree of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2023). In 2021, 36 drug laboratories were dismantled and over 70 kg of ready-to-use drugs and more than 4.5 tons of their precursors were seized. During constant online monitoring, 1,628 sites involved in drug trafficking were identified and blocked by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in collaboration with the Ministry of Digital Development, Innovations and Aerospace Industry (National Information-Analytical Center on Drug Control under the Cabinet of Ministers Republic of Uzbekistan 2022).

Given that NPS is distributed by non-contact means, there has been an upsurge in various marketing platforms for stimulants and ‘spices’. Marketing and trade on such platforms are becoming increasingly diverse, requiring the involvement of various intermediaries and workers who maintain contact with customers, advertise products, and attract new clients. Annual official law enforcement reports show a continuous increase in the number of drug shops on Telegram. Most often, a courier—or *zakladchik*—hides drugs in various inconspicuous places around a city, photographs the loca-

tion, and records its geographical coordinates to be passed on to the buyer. These couriers come to the attention of the police more often than other people working at drug shops, which is why they can't be trusted with a large volume of drugs. The processor of large doses—known as a *skladmen*—is a person who keeps a large batch of drugs at home or elsewhere and leaves a small number of doses (100–200) once a week for a courier. This person is much more difficult to identify, as no one but the courier and the shop staff knows where he or she leaves drugs. Then there is the operator, a person who does not have any contact with the drugs but simply takes orders from customers on Telegram, takes payment from them, and gives them the photos and coordinates of the dropped drugs in return. The operator and all further staff members can be located anywhere, even abroad. Since drug shops usually have chat rooms where they gather people and advertise their services, they need chat room administrators. These people keep order and organise various roulette games in the chat rooms, giving a random participant a dose in exchange for a good report. Administrators can also search for new couriers and taggers. Taggers are those who graffiti the walls of buildings. This graffiti shows the operator's username in Telegram or the address of the website. Large shops have staff members responsible for HR and marketing, as well as an accountant. At the top, there is always the person who owns the shop, keeping everyone else under control. There are also so-called 'droppers'. The essence of their work is to provide their personal data to be used instead of that of criminals. This can include bank accounts and documents needed to launder money. Some people become droppers voluntarily and others by accident (Solntseva 2023). Very often droppers are recruited from socially disadvantaged populations (including people with substance use disorders). Couriers who distribute drugs on the streets are regularly victimised by criminals. If the goods are lost, they may be beaten or maimed as punishment. In some cases, the organisers of drug shops may divulge the identity of the couriers, exposing them to police sanctions or the retaliation of deceived clients. For the convenience of customers, stores offer the option of arbitration or purchase insurance against fraud, whereby the seller receives the money only after the buyer sends confirmation of the purchase. Only in this case can the transaction be considered complete. This type of drug distribution is so typical for NPS that other ways of obtaining a dose (such as directly from dealers) are hardly used. In some cases, an additional method of distributing drugs and attracting new clients can occur in a sexualised context. This involves attracting newcomers who try and buy drugs at private

parties in hotels or rented apartments. It should be noted that this method also supplies drugs to women who provide sexual services in exchange for a dose. Those who have experience using traditional drugs (often heroin) prefer to find intermediaries who search for the drugs online for them, enabling them to then pick up the packages left in parks or deserted areas. They use this method of acquiring drugs through intermediaries because they rarely have access to the online space and also fear being detained by the police on city streets.

Unfortunately, there are currently no in-depth and systematic studies on drug markets, the specifics of their sales, and the determinants of this business in Kazakhstan. However, it is worth noting that in the few studies conducted within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), in which the Kazakhstani market was analysed as part of a broader study to understand the larger market, its stable activity is highlighted, despite various processes due to geopolitical situations and pandemics (Grohmannová, Prilutskaya, Mravčík 2019; DrugStat 2020). From 2013 to 2016, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan reported a total of 58 NPS to the UNODC. Among these, over 43% were synthetic cathinones, followed by synthetic cannabinoids at 38% and phenethylamines at 10%. In the Central Asian region, only one NPS was reported in 2013 from Tajikistan and another in 2014 from Kazakhstan. However, the number of NPS reported in Central Asia increased to 31 in 2015 and 48 in 2016. This rise was mainly due to the growing number of NPS reported in Kazakhstan, which increased from one in 2014 to 21 in 2015 and 38 in 2016 (UNODC 2017). A study conducted by Grohmannová et al. (2019) in 2019, which followed the methodology of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), revealed over 160 online shops actively offering synthetic drugs across the entire Central Asian region. Among these, the most extensive market capacities were found in Kazakhstan. A total of 1,080 specific products were available from online shops. The most commonly offered synthetic drugs were from the chemical groups of synthetic cathinones and synthetic cannabinoids. Specifically, there were 254 synthetic cannabinoids available across 27 online shops and 175 synthetic cathinones available across 58 online shops. Among synthetic cathinones, mephedrone was the most frequently offered substance, available in 37 different online shops specialising in synthetic drugs (31% of all offered substances). Other widely available synthetic cathinones included alpha-PVP, found in 24 online shops (20%), and dibutylone (bk-MMBDB), found in 14 online shops (12%) (DrugStat 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic and anti-epidemic measures only imposed some limitations on the traffic and availability of drugs. To a greater extent, the pandemic contributed to an increased demand for synthetic drugs and also facilitated the onset of local production of synthetic drugs. Initially, the production took place in very small laboratories, the so-called 'kitchen labs', but gradually, large-scale production of NPS began to emerge in the country. According to the DrugStat study (2020), in Kazakhstan, the most frequently demanded substances on the darknet platform Hydra were mephedrone, alpha-PVP, and cannabis. In April 2020, the Covid-19 lockdown sharply reduced orders for alpha-PVP but had almost no impact on the supply and availability of mephedrone. This led the DrugStat experts to admit that local production of this cathinone had already emerged near the largest metropolis in the country, Almaty city. In the initial period after the state of emergency was declared, sales surged as people no longer needed to go to work or school. However, sales soon reverted to normal weekly levels. Once restrictions on movement were enforced, sales dropped sharply, reaching their lowest point in the first week of these restrictions. Following this, sales began to gradually increase again each day. The growth rate picked up after quarantine measures were lifted, with sales returning to pre-crisis levels within a few weeks. Sales of alpha-PVP significantly decreased during the pandemic, whilst its retail price increased. This indirectly indicated a reduction in the import of this NPS from abroad. However, following the end of the pandemic, alpha-PVP now holds the leading position in terms of the number of seizures in the country. This also indicates the beginning of its production in large quantities in Kazakhstan.

Based on reports and press releases from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, it is clear that the drug trade in Kazakhstan involves large transnational criminal organisations. According to the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, the individuals engage in illegal drug manufacturing are usually young people who had travelled to Russia and certain EU countries, like the Netherlands and Germany, to learn the craft from experienced 'chemists'. Eventually, Kazakh drug trafficking organisations acquired the necessary tools for domestic production by ordering precursor chemicals from China and Russia through the dark web and importing equipment by mail (Vorobyeva 2023).

The implementation of policies to combat drug-related crimes and prevent illegal drug trafficking in Kazakhstan is managed by two organisations: the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Department for Combating Drug Crime) and the National Security Committee. Alongside their other re-

sponsibilities, these government agencies provide statistical information related to efforts to combat the supply of drugs.

In 2023, the police dismantled 41 drug laboratories and suppressed the activities of twelve organised crime groups, including four transnational criminal organisations. In 2023, anti-drug crime units recorded 81 cases of drug advertising and 448 cases of drug sales via the internet. A total of 572 suspects were detained for selling drugs online and via social networks. This group included eight administrators and creators of chatbots, 160 operators, packers, and stashers, 356 couriers and distributors, and 16 individuals responsible for graffitiiing drug website addresses on buildings. Additionally, 6,062 websites and other online resources containing information about the distribution of narcotics and psychotropic substances were blocked (Turlybek 2024). According to data from the National Security Committee of Kazakhstan, in 2023, seizures of alpha-PVP from illegal laboratories, intended for sale in CIS countries, reached weights ranging from 100 to 200 kg. The area of such laboratories can reach significant sizes. For instance, at the end of July 2023, a drug laboratory covering 0.5 hectares was dismantled (National Security Committee 2023). A significant increase in the seizure of precursors also indicates active local drug production. In 2022, 1,419 kg of precursors were seized, and in the first nine months of 2023, 4,609 kg of precursors were seized. In December 2022, the street price for alpha-PVP was USD 32 per gram and for mephedrone, it was USD 53 per gram. In comparison, the street price for one gram of heroin ranged between USD 11 and USD 43, while cocaine was USD 400. This also demonstrates the availability of synthetic drugs, considering the higher narcogenic potential of one gram of synthetic cathinones compared to one gram of traditional drugs (UNODC 2023).

The growth of drug laboratories is also significantly influenced by political changes in neighbouring countries. According to the analytical report of the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Russia serves as a significant supplier of precursor chemicals for drug manufacturers in Kazakhstan. This trend has intensified since February 2022, following the relocation of some Russian drug trafficking organisations' production activities to Kazakhstan (Vorobyeva 2023). According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kazakhstan, Ukrainian citizens who relocated to Kazakhstan after February 2022 have also been detained in connection with the production of NPS in local drug laboratories (tengrinews.kz 2022). The report by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime mentions a large transnational criminal group—'Khimprom: a transnation-

al synthetics syndicate’—that has been producing synthetic drugs for the markets of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus since 2014, changing its operations base between Russia and Ukraine. Since the beginning of 2022, this organisation has started expanding its criminal activities to Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan (Vorobyeva 2023). Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that while the chemists who perform the synthesis and development of formulas are usually citizens of other countries, Kazakh residents ensure the establishment of financial mechanisms for obtaining funds through local banks and strengthen the local infrastructure for drug trafficking and sales.

Amidst the persistent flow of drug production and increasing reports of an active drug market in the country, the agenda for tightening sanctions and penalties for illegal drug trafficking is being strengthened. President K.K. Tokayev made a statement:

‘We must intensify the fight against drugs because tomorrow may be too late. Currently, we have quite severe penalties for drug trafficking. I propose to maximally increase the responsibility for the production of narcotic substances, equating it to the most serious crimes.’ (zakon.kz 2024)

A significant challenge for the country’s legal system is the fate of prisoners convicted of distributing synthetic drugs. The sentences for the sale of NPS are quite long and exceed those for traditional drugs. The reason for this lies in the aggravating circumstances of the offences. In 2020, on the instructions of the Head of State, inducement to use and sale of drugs via the internet were classified as ‘grave’ and ‘especially grave’ offences, respectively. The new offences of drug advertising and propaganda were also introduced. According to the Criminal Code, the distribution of drugs via the internet and social media entails additional years of restriction of liberty. The average length of imprisonment for crimes involving synthetic drugs ranges from five to 15 years (Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2014). The most frequent drug couriers who end up in the dock are women and young people. The penalty for selling drugs to minors ranges from 20 years to life imprisonment. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as of 2023, more than 1,200 convicts are serving sentences for offences related to synthetic drug trafficking. Of these, more than 700 people are first-time offenders (Nurullin 2023). It is clearly necessary to change the approach to providing social support to these prisoners and resocialising them after serving such long sentences. The situation is aggravated by the extreme

stigmatisation of such crimes, as well as the stigmatisation of the problem of synthetic drug use. To the best of our knowledge, there is currently no resocialisation programme for prisoners convicted of drug trafficking.

Thus, the above information indicates a surge in the supply of synthetic drugs (NPS) in Kazakhstan, which has been recorded over the last three to five years. Law enforcement agencies are actively promoting new policies to strengthen capacities for identifying drug production sites, advertising, and distribution channels. There is a consistently progressive course towards tightening sanctions for crimes related to the distribution of synthetic drugs. Alongside this, there remains a societal agenda emphasising the need to address the demand for these types of psychoactive substances. The next section will be dedicated to discussing policies on treatment, prevention, and harm reduction regarding NPS at a systemic level.

NPS-Related Policies: Demand in Focus

Questions concerning the reduction of demand for synthetic drugs fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health (provision of treatment and rehabilitation for people with substance use disorders). The responsibility for prevention is assigned to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Education.

Prevention programmes for NPS are fundamentally no different from those for traditional drug abuse prevention. In Kazakhstan, there is no unified national concept for prevention; there is no division into universal, selective, and indicated prevention as stipulated by international standards (UNODC and the World Health Organization 2018). Prevention issues are addressed in various documents and primarily concern youth and minors. However, the prevention of synthetic drug spread is more comprehensively outlined in the ‘Comprehensive Plan for Combating Drug Addiction and Drug Trafficking in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023–2025’ (Decree of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2023). However, most of the activities listed in this plan are not based on internationally recognised interventions and lack an evidence-based foundation, making them unsystematic. Among the universal prevention measures, the focus is on promoting a healthy lifestyle, informational campaigns, and lectures in schools and universities. There are no state-level interventions in schools, families, workplaces, or communities. Those that are conducted locally with the support of NGOs are often fragmented and short-term.

Among the other components of the approach to reducing the demand for NPS, treatment services are the most developed and resourceful. Treatment programmes for people with NPS addiction are available in all cities across the country, both free of charge and for a fee. It is worth noting that the therapy standards and approaches to medical and social rehabilitation are fundamentally no different from those developed for patients with traditional drug addictions. Since 2017, clinical protocols for the diagnosis and treatment of NPS addictions have been developed; however, they currently require updating and revision. There remains a need to develop treatment protocols for minors. Additionally, the country lacks state treatment facilities for adolescents abusing NPS. In 2016, a pilot study assessed NPS use among individuals receiving inpatient drug treatment in Kazakhstan. The study found that only 3.2% of patients nationwide were treated primarily for NPS addiction. However, significant regional variations were observed, with Almaty and Petropavlovsk reporting over 10% of the total number of patients in treatment for NPS dependence. Among those dependent on NPS across the country, 70% had injected cathinones at some point. In Petropavlovsk, the combination of injecting cathinones and other risk behaviours, along with increased HIV testing, correlated with a rise in HIV infections among problem drug users in 2017–2018. A key reason for NPS use was the lack of availability of traditional drugs.

The national trend assessment showed a significant increase in the number of hospitalisations due to NPS-related issues. In 2020, over 23% of patients seeking inpatient care exhibited signs of addiction to synthetic cannabinoids or synthetic cathinones (Prilutskaya et al. 2024). The same analysis revealed an increase in the proportion of people testing positive for hepatitis C and HIV. Positive seroprevalence for hepatitis C was 17.7% among patients with NPS addiction in 2018, and this figure rose to 21.4% in 2020. The proportion of HIV-infected individuals was consistently higher than the HIV rate among people who use injectable drugs. In 2020, the percentage of HIV-infected individuals was 9.7%. Among people who use injectable drugs, this figure was 8.3% in 2020 (Petrenko 2023). However, despite the increasing trend, the country lacks a sentinel surveillance mechanism for HIV infection among NPS users. People with problematic use of synthetic drugs are classified as key groups only if they use these drugs intravenously. According to data from clinics providing inpatient addiction treatment, no more than a third of NPS users administer these substances intravenously. The majority of HIV transmission occurs through sexual contacts (Prilutskaya et al. 2024). Despite the availability of inpatient treat-

ment services, the country lacks a system for evaluating their long-term effectiveness. There are no cohort assessments of remission quality among people with NPS addiction. Recovery and relapse prevention services are significantly fragmented and run by private counsellors or 'twelve-step' self-support groups.

Harm reduction, as a separate component of the approach to reducing drug demand, is increasingly gaining traction in Kazakhstan, thanks to international donors and the development of the non-governmental sector. At the level of state policies, harm reduction is established as measures to curb the HIV epidemic. HIV service organisations are the primary providers of these services. However, as mentioned earlier, policy improvements in this area have not yet been made in the context of the rapid spread of synthetic drugs and the increased sexual transmission of HIV. Non-governmental organisations working with NPS users have repeatedly expressed the need for education and capacity building in this area. They also note a pressing need to change the contents of harm reduction packages to include paraphernalia for non-injection use of NPS. Harm reduction should be expanded to prevent not only HIV but also complications such as hepatitis C, sexually transmitted infections, and psychotic disorders (Kurcevič & Lines 2020). One achievement in harm reduction for NPS is the provision of services in the online space—so-called web outreach—which has been available since 2019. Regular training sessions are conducted for activists on web outreach. Currently, six channels for online counselling are operational in four regions of Kazakhstan (Mankieva 2022).

Meanwhile, another equally important component of the approach to reducing the demand for drugs is the epidemiological assessment of the number of people who have used NPS over their lifetime, in the past year, and in the past 30 days. In this regard, systematic work in Kazakhstan has not been established (CADAP 2023). There are no standards for conducting surveys among the general population. To date, attempts to conduct epidemiological assessments have been sporadic and carried out with the support of international donors: the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund). The closest approximation to surveys among the general population are two surveys conducted among young people aged 18–34 on the streets of cities in Kazakhstan in 2019 (Prilutskaya et al. 2020) and in 2021 (Republican Scientific and Practical Centre of Mental Health 2022). The only study conducted among minors in Kazakhstan regarding awareness of psychoactive substances is the 'Youth Survey on Drug Use and

Health in Kazakhstan 2019' (Me et al. 2021). A critical aspect of NPS data processing is the early warning system, which should involve not only law enforcement agencies but also other interested departments, including the scientific community engaged in data analysis (CADAP 2023).

Conclusion

Kazakhstan has made significant strides in addressing the challenge posed by NPS. The country's comprehensive approach, combining stringent legal frameworks, proactive law enforcement measures, and collaborative efforts among various stakeholders, has shown promising results. The increase in synthetic drug seizures, the dismantling of illegal laboratories, and the tightening of regulations demonstrate Kazakhstan's commitment to combating this issue.

The adoption of a comprehensive policy framework that includes treatment, prevention, and harm reduction has been central to Kazakhstan's strategy. The focus on providing accessible treatment options and implementing harm reduction measures such as needle exchange programmes highlights the country's efforts to minimise the adverse health consequences associated with NPS use.

International collaboration has also played a crucial role in enhancing Kazakhstan's capacity to address the NPS crisis. By engaging with global partners, Kazakhstan has been able to share best practices and resources, further strengthening its response to the proliferation of synthetic drugs.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. The continuous evolution of NPS and the complexity of their distribution channels require ongoing vigilance and adaptation of strategies. The involvement of transnational criminal organisations in drug trafficking underscores the need for robust international cooperation and intelligence sharing.

Moreover, the societal impact of NPS, particularly on vulnerable populations, calls for sustained efforts in prevention and education. The stigma associated with drug use and the lack of comprehensive resocialisation programmes for prisoners convicted of NPS-related offenses highlight areas that need further attention.

It is essential for Kazakhstan to continue strengthening its legal frameworks to keep pace with the rapid development of new psychoactive substances. Simplifying the process for banning new substances and ensuring that law enforcement agencies have the necessary tools to act swiftly are

crucial steps. Enhancing law enforcement capabilities through advanced detection technologies and training will better equip personnel to identify and intercept synthetic drugs. Investing in technical equipment at border checkpoints and improving forensic capabilities are also vital components of this effort.

Expanding international cooperation is another key aspect. Fostering stronger ties with international organisations and neighbouring countries will enhance intelligence sharing and collaborative efforts. Participating in global initiatives and adhering to international best practices will bolster Kazakhstan's ability to combat NPS effectively.

Improving prevention programmes is also crucial. Developing and implementing a unified national prevention strategy that includes universal, selective, and indicated prevention measures will ensure a more comprehensive approach. The focus must be on evidence-based interventions tailored to different demographics, including youth and minors, and promoting community involvement in prevention efforts. Ensuring access to treatment across the country is essential. Regularly updating clinical protocols and developing specialised treatment options for minors will enhance the effectiveness of these programmes. Expanding support services, including counselling and rehabilitation, will facilitate long-term recovery for individuals struggling with NPS addiction.

Broadening the scope of harm reduction initiatives to address the specific needs of NPS users is vital. Providing paraphernalia for non-injection use, offering online support services, and incorporating harm reduction strategies into broader public health policies will help minimise adverse health consequences.

Establishing systematic data collection and analysis mechanisms to monitor NPS use and its impact is necessary in order to make informed policy decisions. Conducting regular surveys and studies will ensure that interventions are based on accurate and up-to-date information.

Creating comprehensive resocialisation programmes for individuals convicted of NPS-related offenses will support their reintegration into society. These programmes should focus on reducing stigma, providing education and job training, and facilitating a smooth transition back into the community.

Launching sustained public awareness campaigns will help educate the population about the dangers of NPS and the importance of seeking help. Utilising various media platforms to reach a wide audience and involving community leaders in spreading awareness will amplify the message.

Continuously evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies and programmes, and being prepared to adapt strategies based on new trends and emerging challenges, is critical. Establishing a feedback loop involving all stakeholders will ensure that policies remain relevant and effective.

In conclusion, while Kazakhstan has made commendable progress in combating the NPS crisis, it is imperative that the country continues to evolve and strengthen its strategies. Ongoing efforts to improve legal regulations, enhance treatment and harm reduction programmes, and foster international cooperation will be key to effectively addressing the challenges posed by new psychoactive substances. The commitment of the government and the collaboration of all stakeholders will be crucial in ensuring the health and safety of the population in the face of this growing threat.

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