Introduction

1. Charting the Unknown: Understanding and Addressing New Psychoactive Substances in Central Asia and China

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The Evolving Challenges of New Psychoactive Substances in Central Asia and China

The global landscape is undergoing profound transformations across various sectors, including economics, politics, and society, and these changes are closely mirrored in the evolving dynamics of the fight against drug-related threats. As nations grapple with the complexities of modern governance and social challenges, the issue of narcotics and psychoactive substances has become more intricate, requiring innovative and adaptive strategies. While there has been significant progress in developing new approaches to treatment, rehabilitation, and harm reduction, the battle against these substances continues to demand an evolving and multifaceted response.

In the context of Central Asia and China, the emergence of new psychoactive substances (NPS) has introduced a formidable challenge to existing drug control frameworks. These regions, already vulnerable due to their strategic locations and socio-economic conditions, are witnessing a surge in the production, distribution, and consumption of these substances. The rapid proliferation of NPS, often designed to evade current legal controls, complicates efforts to mitigate their impact. This reality underscores the importance of flexible and dynamic policy responses that can keep pace with the rapidly changing nature of the drug trade.

NPS are marketed under various names, including 'legal drugs', 'herbal drugs', 'bath salts', and 'chemicals'. For the sake of terminological consistency, this book consistently uses the term 'new psychoactive substances'. This term refers to 'substances of abuse, either in their pure form or as part of a preparation, which are not regulated under the 1961 Convention as amended by the 1972 Protocol, or the 1971 Convention, but may still pose a risk to public health'. The word 'new' in the term does not necessarily imply that these substances have been recently created—some were synthesised as

far back as 40 years ago—but rather highlights their recent emergence in the market (UNODC 2017).

Drug use in Central Asian countries remains prevalent due to a variety of external and internal factors influencing their development. The Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan are part of the 'Northern Route', which is a key corridor for the trafficking of narcotic drugs from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. The Northern Route, historically known as the 'Northern Silk Road', has evolved into a significant corridor for drug trafficking, linking Afghanistan with Russia and Eastern Europe through Central Asia. Originally, this ancient trade route was not associated with the illegal drug trade. However, in the 1990s, traffickers began to exploit this passage as an alternative route. Today, it serves as the primary artery for the illicit flow of drugs between Asia and Europe. The route begins at Afghanistan's northern border, weaving through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan before reaching the Russian and European markets (UNODC 2018).

The functioning of the Northern Route is significantly influenced by the geopolitical situation in the region. For instance, the change of regimes and the rise to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan led to a sharp decrease in the volume of illegal opioid production. The Taliban has prohibited poppy cultivation, yet drug enforcement agencies in Central Asia report that drug production persists in clandestine laboratories (Fazl-e-Haider 2024). The latest information from law enforcement agencies in the Central Asian region indicates a gradual infiltration of synthetic drugs originating specifically from Afghanistan and Iran and the restoration of illegal capacities along the Northern Route. This route is now used not only for transporting heroin but also methamphetamine. This raises significant concerns when considering and forecasting future threats to the region (Faura et al. 2023).

Thus, just by examining the operation and life cycle of the Northern Route, one can observe the evolution of drug trafficking in the Central Asian region. The changing range of psychoactive substances produced in the territories bordering Central Asia is a key factor determining the spectrum of challenges facing the region. The influx of a diverse array of psychoactive substances, including NPS, flooding into Central Asia contributes to the diversification of drug markets, leading to the emergence of a wider variety of psychoactive substances available to potential consumers and customers of drug shops. Alongside this, there is a shift in marketing schemes, moving away from direct contact between potential sellers and

buyers, which presents a significant challenge in combating the supply of drugs, including new psychoactive substances (Faura et al. 2023).

Despite the fact that for a long time, the illegal markets of Central Asian countries were dominated by opioid drugs of plant-based or semi-synthetic origin, as well as plant-based cannabis, there is a steady shift towards synthetic analogues of these psychoactive substances, along with the active penetration of stimulant drugs into these countries.

The snapshot study conducted within the framework of the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) in March 2017 revealed a concerning trend of increased availability of NPS in Central Asia through online platforms. The study identified 160 online shops targeting the population of Central Asian countries, offering a wide range of synthetic and herbal substances with psychoactive effects. A significant number of these shops, 119 of them to be precise, specialised in synthetic substances, offering a total of 1,080 different drugs. Among these, synthetic cathinones and synthetic cannabinoids were the most prevalent, with mephedrone emerging as the most frequently offered substance (Grohmannová et al. 2018). The study highlighted the dominance of synthetic substances in the online NPS market in Central Asia, with synthetic cathinones available from 58 online shops and synthetic cannabinoids from 27. The diversity of substances, particularly within these two chemical groups, indicated a sophisticated and widespread online marketplace catering to various consumer demands. The easy access to these substances through the internet raises significant public health concerns, as synthetic drugs like mephedrone and synthetic cannabinoids are known for their unpredictable and often severe effects on users. This widespread availability of potent synthetic drugs underscores the urgent need for enhanced regulation and monitoring in the region (Grohmannová et al. 2018).

The findings from that study pointed to broader challenges for Central Asia, as the region grapples with the growing presence of NPS in the digital marketplace. The online nature of these transactions complicates efforts to control the spread of NPS, necessitating stronger regulatory frameworks and cross-border cooperation. Moreover, the public health risks associated with these substances call for comprehensive responses, including education and awareness campaigns targeting vulnerable populations. As the online sale of NPS continues to evolve, Central Asia must take coordinated action to mitigate the impact of these dangerous substances on its population.

The rapidly developing market and the formation of transnational groups involved in the production and trafficking of NPS in Central Asia raise the issue of the need for cross-border law enforcement operations to catch criminals. Modern realities emphasise the necessity of creating an early warning system for NPS, which would circulate information not only about the volumes seized but also accumulate a database of confiscated formulas and the risks associated with the circulation and use of specific NPS. Moreover, an important element of the system is ensuring access to information for interested scientists and specialists in the healthcare and social services sectors who provide assistance in the prevention, treatment, and harm reduction related to NPS. The issue of the need to establish an early warning system in Central Asia was first raised at the international level by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2017. For a long time, according to UNODC data, Central Asia remained a relatively 'closed' region for synthetic drugs of the amphetamine-type stimulant group (such as methamphetamine and ecstasy). Meanwhile, the neighbouring region of Southeast Asia, including China, was experiencing a significant increase in the capacity for the illegal production and trafficking of amphetamine stimulants.

As of 2017, there was a noted absence of systematic production of these drugs within the territories of five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan). However, even at that time, the region was identified as an important area for the routes used to transport not only opioids and cannabis but also synthetic amphetamine-type stimulants (UNODC 2017). In recent years, all Central Asian countries, except for Turkmenistan, have reported the emergence of NPS to the UNODC. Tajikistan was the first in the region to report NPS in 2013. Between 2013 and 2016, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan together reported 58 different NPS. Among these, synthetic cathinones made up over 43%, followed by synthetic cannabinoids at 38%, and phenethylamines at 10% (UNODC 2017).

Among other countries in the region, Kazakhstan was the first to experience a massive surge in the market and consumption of NPS. Initially, experts attributed this to the country's extensive shared borders with key NPS-producing nations, namely Russia and China. However, over the past four years, there has been a sharp shift in the nature of NPS supply on the domestic markets. According to law enforcement agencies, Kazakhstan is currently undergoing an active phase of NPS production in illegal laboratories scattered across the country. Prior to 2019, reports of NPS seizures

mostly involved small so-called 'kitchen' labs, where amateur chemists could produce only a few grams of narcotic substances. Nowadays, these illegal labs have evolved into well-equipped factories capable of producing dozens of kilograms of drugs per day. At the same time, the resources and industrial capacities of such laboratories are most often supported, according to law enforcement agencies, by funds from transnational criminal organisations. These funds cover everything from the professional training of chemists to the purchase of laboratory equipment and the import of precursors. These criminal groups rely on the services of Kazakhstani residents to find and acquire premises for laboratories and open financial accounts. They also recruit Kazakhstani citizens to distribute drugs through a network of couriers (Lykova 2024). In 2023, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kazakhstan, 41 drug laboratories were dismantled in the country. These laboratories are most often located near major transportation hubs to ensure quick and unobstructed distribution across the country (Turlybek 2024).

The emergence of new synthetic threats in the region has introduced distinctive and unique aspects to the issue of psychoactive substances, which are unlikely to have similar counterparts in other parts of the world and are more characteristic of post-Soviet countries.

Among these features is the active spread of NPS, particularly from the stimulant group, with substances like mephedrone and α-pyrrolidinopentiophenone (alpha-PVP) being especially popular. These two substances are less frequently seized worldwide compared to others as they were classified as illegal substances by the UNODC back in the early 2010s. In Central Asian countries, these substances are extremely prevalent, most likely due to the low production costs in illegal domestic laboratories. A distinctive feature of the NPS markets is the use of social messengers with encrypted messaging systems, such as Telegram, which is actively used to create platforms for drug sales. On the contrary, the globally popular Darknet space is not as actively utilised among clients in the Central Asian region. Additionally, the region has established a unique system of retail drug trade and delivery to customers through so-called 'dead drops'—small packages containing drugs that are left for buyers in public places such as parks, courtyards, and playgrounds (Kurcevič & Rick 2020).

An important characteristic of the region is the emphasis on tightening policies related to the circulation of NPS. Meanwhile, this undoubtedly impacts the other side of the fight against NPS—the battle against demand. Despite advancements in drug treatment and harm reduction strategies,

which have shown promise in reducing the demand for traditional narcotics, the rise of NPS demands a re-evaluation of these approaches. Over the last decade, an increase in demand for services related to treating addiction to NPS has not been observed. According to CADAP experts, this is due to changes in drug consumption patterns, the unpreparedness of treatment organisations to meet patient needs, and the low awareness among specialists of new approaches in providing services for people who use NPS (Faura et al. 2023).

Thus, it should be noted that despite the intensified efforts to combat the supply for psychoactive substances through strengthening law enforcement capabilities, active collaboration among border guards and security forces, the training of forensic experts, and the enhancement of technical resources, the development of solid, scientifically based resources for the treatment and prevention of addictions (demand reduction) is lagging behind.

Central Asia and China are now at the forefront of the global fight against these new threats, requiring not only domestic policy adjustments but also enhanced international collaboration. The fluidity of NPS markets, driven by technological advancements and global supply chains, means that no single nation can tackle this issue in isolation.

The complexities introduced by NPS necessitate a multidimensional approach that goes beyond conventional drug control measures. It involves integrating public health initiatives with robust legal frameworks and international cooperation to address both the supply and demand sides of the problem.

The fight against narcotic threats in Central Asia and China is evolving in response to both global and regional changes. The emergence of new psychoactive substances is a stark reminder that drug policy must be as dynamic and multifaceted as the challenges it seeks to address. Continued progress in treatment and harm reduction is essential, but it must be complemented by innovative policy responses and a commitment to international cooperation. Only through such a comprehensive approach can these regions hope to mitigate the growing threat posed by these dangerous substances and protect their populations from the ensuing harms.

Book Overview

This book offers a comprehensive examination of the emerging challenges posed by NPS in Central Asia and China, exploring the diverse ways in which different countries and communities are responding to this growing threat. With the rise of synthetic drugs across the region, the book delves into the unique challenges faced by nations like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Each chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the local contexts, including the public health risks, law enforcement strategies, and policy responses tailored to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of each country. From the legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms in Kazakhstan to the public health strategies in Kyrgyzstan, the book paints a detailed picture of the regional landscape of NPS use and the multifaceted approaches being employed to mitigate its impact.

In addition to country-specific analyses, the book also explores cross-cutting themes that transcend national borders, highlighting the broader societal implications of NPS. It sheds light on the intersection of NPS with various social groups, including the youth and LGBTQ+ communities, particularly within the context of issues such as chemsex in Central Asia. The focus on vulnerable populations extends to discussions on NPS use in prisons and the particular challenges faced by women and young people in Kazakhstan. These chapters underscore the complex social dynamics at play and the importance of understanding the diverse ways in which NPS affect different segments of the population.

The book also addresses innovative approaches to prevention, treatment, and harm reduction, emphasising the need for new strategies in response to the evolving nature of NPS. From primary prevention efforts among the youth in Kazakhstan to web-based outreach initiatives in St. Petersburg, the text highlights the importance of adaptive and forward-thinking solutions. Additionally, it critically examines the societal impact of compulsory drug treatment and legal penalties, providing a nuanced perspective on the effectiveness of current drug policies. By integrating these varied perspectives, the book offers a holistic understanding of the NPS phenomenon in Central Asia and China, making it an essential resource for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners working to navigate this complex and rapidly changing landscape.

This book is the result of the efforts of a panel of experts on a relatively new topic for this region. It is important to recognise the unique contribu-

tions of each author, not only in conveying factual information but also in their role in seeking solutions to the challenges facing the region.

The book can be divided into three sections: Country Overviews, Harms and Social Risks of NPS Use in Vulnerable Populations, and Demand Reduction. The country overviews include chapters on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and China.

The chapter 'New Psychoactive Substances in Kazakhstan: Challenges, Enforcement, and Policy Approaches', authored by Mariya Prilutskaya, Almas Kussainov, and Gulzhan Altybayeva, provides an in-depth exploration of Kazakhstan's multifaceted response to the escalating challenge of NPS. The uniqueness of the chapter lies in its comprehensive analysis of the legal, enforcement, and collaborative measures the country has implemented to combat the rise of NPS. It underscores the innovative legal frameworks, such as the expedited prohibition process for new drug formulas, which have significantly enhanced the country's ability to regulate and control NPS. Additionally, the chapter highlights Kazakhstan's focus on treatment, prevention, and harm reduction, illustrating a holistic approach to addressing the issue. The importance of international cooperation and the integration of best practices into Kazakhstan's strategies are also emphasised, showcasing the country's proactive stance in mitigating the risks associated with NPS. This overview not only reflects Kazakhstan's commitment to combating NPS but also offers insights into the evolving challenges and the need for continuous adaptation of strategies.

The chapter titled 'New Psychoactive Substances in Kyrgyzstan: Public Health Risks and Policy Responses', authored by Elena Molchanova, Sergei Bessonov, Zhyldyz Bakirova, Tatiana Galako, and Danil Nikitin, presents a comprehensive analysis of Kyrgyzstan's efforts to address the challenges posed by NPS. It uniquely highlights the nation's adaptability and collaborative approach in managing the complex public health risks associated with NPS, including the economic and societal impacts. The chapter underscores Kyrgyzstan's active role in global anti-drug initiatives, emphasising international cooperation in legislative development. Additionally, it provides recommendations for strengthening law enforcement, improving data collection, and expanding harm reduction services tailored to NPS users. This holistic approach reflects the evolving strategies necessary to mitigate the risks and harms associated with NPS in Kyrgyzstan.

The chapter titled 'Review of New Psychoactive Substances Use: Trends, Challenges, and Strategies in the Context of Uzbekistan', authored by Guzalkhon Zakhidova, Jakhongir Ravshanov, and Gulnoza Abdukakhar-

ova, provides an in-depth analysis of the evolving landscape of NPS in Uzbekistan. It highlights the rapid increase in drug trafficking offences and the emergence of clandestine laboratories manufacturing these substances. The chapter uniquely focuses on the challenges posed by NPS, including the sociocultural barriers, legal stigmatisation, and technical difficulties in addressing the issue. The authors emphasise the need for a comprehensive approach involving improved legislation, healthcare development, and social support to tackle the rising NPS problem. Furthermore, the chapter underscores the importance of international cooperation and the proactive role of Uzbekistan's government in combating this growing threat.

The chapter titled 'New Psychoactive Substances in the Republic of Tajikistan: The Latest Developments, Challenges, and Solutions', authored by Naimdzhon Malikov and Vladimir Magkoev, delves into the evolving landscape of drug use in Tajikistan, with a specific focus on the rising prevalence of NPS. It uniquely highlights the impact of Tajikistan's geographic and socio-political context—particularly its proximity to Afghanistan—on the drug trade and domestic drug use patterns. The chapter details the shift from traditional opiates to synthetic drugs, reflecting changing drug markets and the consequent public health challenges. It emphasises the lack of preparedness in the healthcare system and civil society to address the NPS crisis, calling for the development of new treatment protocols and harm reduction strategies. Additionally, the chapter underscores the importance of international cooperation and the need for targeted research to fully understand and combat the growing NPS problem in Tajikistan.

The chapter titled 'Unpacking NPS in China', authored by Haifeng Jiang, provides a comprehensive examination of the rise of NPS in China. It uniquely focuses on the country's dual role as both a supplier and recipient of these substances, highlighting China's complex challenges in controlling NPS. The chapter outlines the evolution of NPS in China from ketamine and methcathinone to a diverse array of synthetic drugs, reflecting the dynamic and rapidly changing drug landscape. It also emphasises the sophisticated nature of NPS-related crimes, involving highly educated offenders and advanced smuggling techniques. The discussion includes China's rigorous legal framework and its ongoing efforts to regulate and monitor NPS, despite the persistent challenges of fast-evolving substances and gaps in detection methods. This chapter sheds light on China's strategic responses, underlining the need for continuous adaptation and international cooperation to effectively combat NPS.

The chapter titled 'Primary Prevention of Synthetic Drug Addiction Among the Youth of Kazakhstan: The Public's View', authored by Zhandos Aktayev, offers a critical analysis of the rising synthetic drug problem in Kazakhstan, particularly among the country's youth. The chapter uniquely highlights the systemic challenges faced by government and public organisations in implementing effective drug prevention strategies, pointing out the inadequate legal frameworks, underfunded programmes, and fragmented institutional efforts as key obstacles. Aktayev underscores the role of digital ecosystems in facilitating the rapid spread of synthetic drugs, which are increasingly accessible through online platforms. The chapter also emphasises the importance of targeted, evidence-based interventions that are culturally and socially relevant to youth, proposing a shift from traditional methods to more innovative and integrated approaches. This chapter serves as a call for comprehensive, multi-stakeholder collaboration to address the complex and evolving issue of synthetic drug addiction among Kazakhstan's youth.

The chapter titled 'Synthetic Drug Issues in Kazakhstan: Emphasising Youth and Women's Involvement', authored by Mariya Prilutskaya and Valentina Mankieva, provides a critical analysis of the increasing involvement of youth and women in synthetic drug-related activities in Kazakhstan. The uniqueness of this chapter lies in its focus on the socio-economic and gender-specific factors driving this trend, highlighting how these demographics are disproportionately affected by the rise of synthetic drugs. It discusses the alarming rise in drug trafficking among young people and women, fuelled by economic pressures and the accessibility of these substances. The chapter also emphasises the lack of gender-specific prevention and treatment programmes, underscoring the need for more targeted interventions. Through comprehensive data analysis, the authors illustrate the growing health and social challenges posed by synthetic drugs, calling for urgent policy reforms and enhanced support systems to address this escalating issue.

The chapter titled 'New Psychoactive Drugs in European Prisons ', authored by Heino Stöver and Ulla-Britt Klankwarth, provides an in-depth analysis of the growing presence of new psychoactive substances (NPS) within European prison systems. The uniqueness of this chapter lies in its examination of how NPS has become a critical issue, posing significant health risks and challenges to prison management. It discusses the prevalence of NPS, driven by their undetectability and availability, and highlights the pressing need for better prevention, treatment strategies, and

cross-border cooperation to address this escalating problem. The chapter emphasizes the inadequacy of current prison interventions, advocating for the development of more comprehensive approaches to mitigate the health and safety risks associated with NPS use in these settings.

The chapter titled 'Exploring the Intersection: New Psychoactive Substances, LGBTQ+ Communities, and Chemsex in Central Asia', authored by Vitaliy Vinogradov and Nikolay Lunchenkov, provides a pioneering examination of the emerging phenomenon of chemsex within the LGBTQ+ communities in Central Asia. The uniqueness of this chapter lies in its focus on the intersection of cultural stigma, traditional norms, and the rising use of NPS among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM). It highlights the challenges faced by these communities due to societal pressures, religious beliefs, and patriarchal norms, which drive such practices underground, increasing health risks. The chapter also discusses the limited access to harm reduction programmes and the importance of tailored interventions in the region. This exploration is crucial for understanding the complex dynamics at play and for developing effective strategies to support the health and well-being of GBMSM in Central Asia.

The chapter titled 'New Psychoactive Substances: Understanding the Health Risks and Clinical Impacts', authored by Ainur Shukimbayeva, Aigerim Zhumasheva, and Mariya Prilutskaya, provides a comprehensive examination of the significant health risks associated with the use of NPS. Uniquely, this chapter underscores the unpredictable and potent nature of NPS, which often leads to severe and sometimes life-threatening health consequences. The authors delve into the multifaceted clinical impacts, ranging from respiratory failure to severe psychiatric disorders, highlighting the challenges in managing these effects due to the constant evolution of NPS variants. The chapter also emphasises the increased vulnerability of children and adolescents, who are particularly at risk of severe symptoms like psychosis, cardiovascular issues, and gastrointestinal problems. This work serves as a crucial resource for healthcare providers, offering insights into the complex health implications of NPS and advocating for enhanced awareness and targeted interventions to mitigate these risks.

The chapter titled 'Web Outreach and NPS: A New Aspect of Online Harm Reduction', authored by Alexei Lakhov and Nikolai Unguryan, provides an innovative exploration of the intersection between digital platforms and harm reduction efforts for people who use drugs (PWUD). The uniqueness of this chapter lies in its detailed examination of how

web outreach has evolved as a critical tool in addressing the challenges posed by NPS in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. It underscores the shifting drug trade landscape, with transactions moving from the streets to encrypted online spaces like the Darknet and social media platforms. The chapter highlights successful strategies employed by organisations such as the St. Petersburg Charitable Fund 'Humanitarian Action', illustrating the potential of web-based harm reduction in reaching otherwise inaccessible populations. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of adaptable and secure online interventions, which have become even more critical in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. This chapter is a pioneering look at how digital transformation can expand and enhance traditional harm reduction services.

The chapter titled 'Navigating New Drug Challenges: The Societal Impact of Compulsory Drug Treatment and Legal Penalties', authored by Zhanara Nurseitova, offers a profound exploration of the complexities surrounding compulsory treatment for individuals who use NPS. Uniquely, this chapter addresses the ethical and social dilemmas posed by compulsory treatment, contrasting it with traditional punitive measures and examining its effects on both individuals and society. The discussion highlights the tension between protecting public safety and respecting individual rights, emphasising the need for a balanced approach that combines legal consequences with humane rehabilitative strategies. Nurseitova also explores the broader societal impacts of drug addiction, including increased crime rates and healthcare burdens, and advocates for a comprehensive, standardised treatment model that prioritises rehabilitation over incarceration. This chapter serves as a critical analysis of current drug policies and proposes a more compassionate and effective framework for addressing the challenges posed by NPS in society.

All in all, the book offers a multifaceted examination of the evolving challenges posed by NPS across different regions and contexts, emphasising the need for innovative, compassionate, and integrated approaches to drug policy, treatment, and prevention. From Kazakhstan's focus on holistic strategies for youth and women's involvement to China's dual role in the global NPS market and the ethical complexities of compulsory treatment, these chapters underscore the critical importance of balancing public safety with the protection of individual rights. The insights presented highlight the dynamic interplay between legal frameworks, healthcare systems, and societal attitudes, advocating for a shift towards more humane, evidence-based interventions. Collectively, they call for enhanced international co-

operation, targeted research, and the development of comprehensive, culturally relevant policies to effectively address the global NPS crisis and its profound impact on public health and social stability.

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