

# Heroin Smuggling in Serbia<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Drug trafficking is a very lucrative criminal activity, with a growing number of organized criminal groups from the Balkans. According to Europol's report, about 5000 organized criminal groups are active in the European Union.<sup>2</sup> According to the results of the National survey on the lifestyles of the citizens in the Republic of Serbia in 2014, the use of psychoactive substances and games of chance and illegal drug use at least once during a lifetime was recorded at 8.0% of the total population aged 18 to 64 (10.8% of males and 5.2% of females), with greater prevalence (12.8%) in the younger adult population aged 18 to 34. The number of heroin users who inject drugs in Serbia is between 10 000 and 25 000. The main estimated number is 20 000 heroin users who inject drugs, i.e., 0.4% of the population aged 15 to 64. Based on the analysis of data on drug-related deaths, it can be noted that there has been a decline in the number of deaths in the past five years, and most of these cases are related to opiates.

In the territory of the Republic of Serbia, the production of heroin has not been recorded, and that gives trafficking a greater primacy, which is supported by the fact that high quality heroin is further trafficked in the form of a base that is mixed with other

<sup>1</sup> This work is a result of a NARCO-MAP project: HOME/2015/ISFP/AG/TDFX/8742 – Improving Knowledge on NPS and Opiates Trafficking in Europe; the project was developed with the financial support of the European Commission – Transnational initiatives to fight trafficking in drugs and firearms – DG Justice/DG Migrations and Home Affairs. The Narco-Map project is co-financed by the European Union under the ISF Instrument of Justice program.

This work is also the result of the achievements of a scientific-research project titled “Crime in Serbia and the Tools of the State's Reaction,” which is financed and realized by the Academy of Criminalistics and Police Studies in Belgrade. Its scientific research is being conducted in 2015 to 2019.

<sup>2</sup> European Police Office, The EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA), Hag, 2017.

Received: 7/10/2018. Accepted: 7/11/2018

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substances (paracetamol, caffeine, sugar etc.). In this way, such a high degree of purity of heroin allows the members of criminal groups to increase the quantity of narcotics by mixing substances suitable for this and, in that way, achieve greater profits.

The most commonly used illegal drug among the adult population is cannabis (marijuana and hashish), and the use of the mentioned drugs has been recorded at least once during a lifetime in 7.7% of subjects aged 18 to 64 (10.4% of men and 4.9% of women). The use of other illegal drugs is very rare; 1.6% of questioned individuals (2.5% of the population aged 18 to 34) have used other illegal drugs.<sup>3</sup>

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## Introduction

The trafficking of psychoactive controlled substances represents one of the most dominant, most dangerous and most profitable forms of organized crime in Serbia. The money acquired by and through the trafficking and selling of psychoactive controlled substances is put into legal financial institutions by organized criminal groups by means of corruption activities, and all this damages the financial system. The main routes for drug trafficking are constantly changing due to adjustments to law enforcement activities, with more intensive use of new transport infrastructures.<sup>4</sup>

Opium is illicitly produced in around 50 countries worldwide, with the main areas of production being located in three sub-regions. Countries in South-West Asia (mainly Afghanistan) supply markets in neighboring countries and in countries in Europe, the Near and Middle East/South-West Asia, Africa and South Asia, with small proportions going to East and South-East Asia, North America and Oceania. Countries in South-East Asia (mainly Myanmar and, to a lesser extent, the Lao People's Democratic Republic) supply markets in East and South-East Asia and in Oceania. Countries in Latin America (mostly Mexico, Colombia and Guatemala) mainly supply the United States of America and the more limited markets in South America.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "Using Psychoactive Substances and Games of Chance," *National Research on the Lifestyles of the Citizens of Serbia*, Dr. Milan Jovanovic Batut, Institute of Public Health of Serbia, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> *Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment*, Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, 2015, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> "Market Analysis of Plant-Based Drugs (Opiates, Cocaine, Cannabis)," *World Drug Report*, UNODC, 2017., p. 13.

Heroin is the most common opioid on the EU drug market, with an estimated minimum retail value of EUR 6.8 billion (with a likely range of EUR 6.0 billion to EUR 7.8 billion) in 2013. Historically, imported heroin has been available in Europe in two forms, the more common of which is brown heroin (its chemical base form), originating mainly from Afghanistan. Far less common is white heroin (a salt form), which in the past has come from South-East Asia but now may also be produced in Afghanistan or its neighboring countries. Other opioids available in illicit markets include opium and the medicines morphine, methadone, buprenorphine, tramadol and various fentanyl derivatives. Some opioids may be diverted from legitimate pharmaceutical supplies, while others are illegally manufactured. Afghanistan remains the world's largest illicit producer of opium, and most heroin found in Europe is thought to be manufactured there or in the neighboring Iran or Pakistan. Illicit opioid production in Europe has until recently been limited to homemade poppy products produced in some Eastern countries. The discovery of several laboratories for converting morphine to heroin in the Netherlands, Spain and the Czech Republic in the recent years suggests that some heroin is manufactured in Europe. This change may reflect the fact that suppliers are seeking to reduce costs by carrying out the last stages of heroin production in Europe, where precursors, such as acetic anhydride, are obtainable at lower prices than in the opium-producing countries. Manufacturing the drug close to the consumer market may also be aimed at reducing interdiction risks.<sup>6</sup>

The main trafficking routes of opiates out of Afghanistan remain the so-called Balkan route (via the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey to West and Central Europe), the southern route (from South Asia, Gulf countries and other countries in the Near and Middle East and in Africa) and the northern route (through Central Asia to the Russian Federation). Seizures of heroin and morphine made along these routes (plus seizures made in Afghanistan, Pakistan and West and Central Europe) accounted for 75 percent of the global heroin and morphine seizures in 2015. Seizure data suggest that the world's largest opiate-related trafficking activities continue to take place along the Balkan route. Overall, 37 percent of the global quantity of heroin and morphine seized were reported by countries heavily affected by the trafficking of Afghan

<sup>6</sup> *European Drug Report*, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, Luxembourg, 2018, p. 23.

opiates along the Balkan route in 2015, or 43 percent if the seizures made in West and Central Europe are to be included (most of the quantities seized in that subregion are related to trafficking via the Balkan route). A breakdown of seizures shows that of the 34 tons of heroin and morphine seized on the Balkan route in 2015, the largest quantities were seized in the Islamic Republic of Iran (24.4 tons), Turkey (8.3 tons) and the Balkan countries of South-Eastern Europe (0.9 tons).<sup>7</sup>

Roads used for trafficking drugs of natural origin – heroin, cocaine and cannabis – start from regions where they are produced and lead to areas where they are directly, illegally used. It can be said that nowadays, with the hyper production of narcotic drugs and the expansion of their abuse in all the countries of the world, trafficking channels and routes are so intertwined and complexed that it can be expected and assumed that these illegal activities are taking place on every international or regional road – land, water or air. Taking the estimated quantity of drugs that is trafficked through Serbia into consideration, it can be concluded that Serbia is, to a lesser extent, the ultimate destination but that it has the role of a logistics base for organizing and conducting the activities of organized criminal groups abroad. Serbia, is to a much lesser extent, the country of drug production, since production refers only to certain types of drugs (marijuana and synthetic drugs), mainly for the needs of the local market and, to a lesser extent, for trafficking to other markets.<sup>8</sup>

The drug trafficking market is dynamic considering the fact that the routes used by organized criminal groups in most cases are also used for the trafficking of weapons, excise goods and irregular migration.

According to the estimates of UNODC, 60 to 65 tons of heroin are trafficked through southeast Europe annually.<sup>9</sup>

## Heroin Trafficking Routes in Serbia

The quantities of seized heroin declined in the 2008–2013 period, while an increase was recorded in 2014. Due to such fluctuations, the heroin supply was reduced, and that led to an increase of its price on the local markets. No-

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Illegal Production and Trade of Drugs in the World and in Our Country,” Marinkovic, D., *Perjanik*, Year 2, No. 4, 2003, p. 7–8.

<sup>9</sup> *The illicit Drug Trade Through South-Eastern Europe*, UNODC, 2014.

wadays, heroin is sold at a wholesale price of 19 000–22 000 EUR per kg, while the street level price varies between 20 to 25 EUR per 1g. Roughly speaking, a heroin addict in Serbia uses two or three doses of a mixture bought on the street market on a daily basis. If we count that one dose, on average, weighs 0.2–0.25g (quarter) or 0.3 g (tera) and have in mind that retail price varies between 5–7 EUR, we may conclude that each addict needs a maximum quantity of 0.5–1 g per day (EUR 20–25), or 220–365 g per year.<sup>10</sup>

Due to the fact that the routes of the Northern Balkan and South Balkan heroin trafficking have been used more and more, the Central Balkan route of trafficking, which goes through the territory of Serbia, has become a less used one. This change in the frequency of using certain Balkan routes has occurred because of more intensive use of new transport infrastructure (Pristina-Durres highway) and maritime ports (Albania and Greece) on the South Balkan route. This also has influence on the more intensive and frequent heroin trafficking via the sea route from Asia directly to South and Western Europe, and the evidence for this are larger seizing actions in ports in Greece and the Netherlands, as they are Black Sea ports (the North Balkan route).<sup>11</sup>

All trafficking channels from Macedonia and from Albania through Montenegro join into and connect with the Central Balkan route, which goes through Serbia. The analysis of the seizures of drugs suggests that the current points of heroin trafficking in Serbia are still through the border crossing “Gradina” from Bulgaria, the border crossing “Tabanovci” from Macedonia and the border crossing “Mehov krs” from Montenegro. Due to the fact that the Central Balkan route has become less frequently used for trafficking, organized criminal groups in Serbia are increasingly focusing their activities on supplying the local market. They hire couriers who are either repeat offenders or individuals who do not have a criminal background. These individuals, upon the orders of members of organized criminal groups who have previously organized the complete trafficking channel, go to the countries of origin of heroin and, continuously, in quantities of 2 to 5 kilograms, smuggle it into Serbia by legal means and roads of transport.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Public Security Strategic Assessment*, Ministry of Interior Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, 2017, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> *Regional, Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment*, Ministry of Internal Affairs of Montenegro, 2016., p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> *Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment*, Ministry of Interior Serbia, op. cit., p. 33.

Organized criminal groups and criminal groups from Serbia who are active participants in heroin trafficking in the Central Balkan and South Balkan route toward Western Europe are ethnic Albanians from the south of Serbia and the autonomous regions of Kosovo and Metohija as well as persons from the area of the Raska region. In addition to the connection with similar groups in the country and abroad, the Albanian criminal groups are characterized by family ties, strict internal discipline, readiness to use violence and a strong sense of self-protection based on the pledge of silence. The role of Albanian organized criminal groups in the canals of trafficking varies, starting from the purchase of heroin in Turkey, the organization of transport and trading and dealing in Western Europe. In some cases, these organized criminal groups sell heroin to other Albanian criminal groups abroad or criminal groups dealing drugs in the streets of Western Europe. Analyses of heroin seized at border crossing points at the entrance to Serbia indicate that the heroin that is trafficked through Serbia, and which remains in Serbia partly for the needs of the local market, has a high degree of purity. Organized criminal groups and criminal groups operating in the Republic of Serbia are selling heroin after mixing it with other substances (paracetamol, caffeine, sugar etc.) to increase the amount and acquire more profit. A kilogram of trafficked heroin can be purchased at the local market at a price of 19 000 to 22 000 euros. Organized criminal groups and criminal groups that deal heroin on the streets offer a gram of heroin at a price of 20 to 25 euros.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

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## Heroino kontrabanda Serbijoje<sup>14</sup>

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### Santrauka

Prekyba narkotikais yra labai pelninga nusikalstama veikla, lydima augančio organizuotų kriminalinių grupuočių iš Balkanų šalių skaičiaus. Kaip teigiama Europolo ataskaitoje, Europos Sąjungoje veikia apie 5000 organizuotų nusikalstamų grupuočių<sup>15</sup>. Remiantis 2014 metų nacionalinės apklausos Serbijos Respublikoje duomenimis, bent kartą gyvenime psichoaktyviausias medžiagas ir nelegalius narkotikus yra vartoję ar azartinius žaidimus žaidę 8 proc. asmenų iš 18–64 metų amžiaus grupės (10,8 proc. vyrų ir 5,2 proc. moterų), didesnis vartojimas (12,8 proc.) užfiksuotas jaunų suaugusiųjų 18–34 m. amžiaus grupėje. Serbijoje heroino vartotojų, kurie leidžiasi narkotikus, skaičius yra tarp 10 000 ir 25 000. Pagrindinis tikėtinas dydis yra 20 000 heroino vartotojų, kurie leidžiasi narkotikus, t. y. 0,4 proc. visos populiacijos nuo 15 iki 64 m. amžiaus. Remiantis su narkotikais susijusių mirčių duomenų analize, galima matyti, kad per paskutinius penkerius metus tokių mirčių sumažėjo, o dauguma jų atvejų buvo susiję su opiatais. Serbijos Respublikos teritorijoje heroino gamybos atvejų nenustatyta, dėl to atsiranda dar didesnė prekybos paskata. Tai patvirtina ir tas faktas, kad aukštos kokybės heroinas toliau perparduodamas grynąją medžiagą maišant su kito-

<sup>14</sup> Šis darbas – tai projekto „NARCO-MAP: HOME/2015/ISFP/AG/TDFX/8742 – Improving Knowledge on NPS and Opiates Trafficking in Europe“ rezultatas; projektą remia Europos Komisija – Tarptautinės iniciatyvos, kovojant su narkotikų ir ginklų prekyba – DG Justice/DG Migrations and Home Affairs. „Narco-Map“ projektą kofinansuoja Europos Sąjunga pagal „Justice“ programos ISF priemonę. Šis darbas taip pat yra mokslinio tiriamojo projekto „Nusikalstamai Serbijoje ir valstybės reaguojimo priemonės“, kurį finansuoja ir vykdo Kriminalistikos ir policijos studijų akademija Belgrade, rezultatas. Moksliniai tyrimai šiame projekte atliekami 2015–2019 m.

<sup>15</sup> European Police Office, The EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA), Hag, 2017.

mis (paracetamoliu, kofeinu, cukrumi ir kt.). Didelio grynumo heroiną maišydamos su kitomis medžiagomis nusikalstamos grupuotės padidina narkotikų kiekį ir taip gauna didesnę pelną. Suaugusiųjų populiacijoje dažniausiai vartojamas nelegalus narkotikas yra kanapės (marihuana ir hašišas), vieną kurį iš šių narkotikų bent kartą gyvenime yra pavartoję 7,7 proc. asmenų iš 18–64 m. amžiaus grupės (10,4 proc. vyrų ir 4,9 proc. moterų). Kitų nelegalių narkotikų vartojimas yra labai retas; 1,6 proc. apklaustų asmenų (2,5 proc. 18–34 m. amžiaus grupėje) yra vartoję kitų nelegalių narkotikų<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> “Using Psychoactive Substances and Games of Chance,” National Research on the Lifestyles of the Citizens of Serbia, Dr. Milan Jovanovic Batut, Institute of Public Health of Serbia, 2014.