

Production and smuggling of synthetic narcotics by organized criminal groups in the Republic of Serbia¹

PhD Professor Nenad Radović²

The Academy of Criminalistics and police studies, Belgrade

Ilija Racić³

PhD student at the Academy of Criminalistics and Police Studies, Coordinator in the General Police Directorate of the Ministry of Interior

Abstract

Production and smuggling of synthetic narcotics are ranked among the five most profitable businesses of today, dealing with highly organized criminal groups characterized by tightness, hierarchical and strict division of roles and activity in international frameworks. Production of synthetic narcotics in relation to other types of narcotics is not geographically limited since the process does not involve the extraction of active ingredients from plants which must be grown under certain natural conditions. Though any analysis of synthetic narcotics in the market complicates the situation with the fact that the exact data of synthetic substances and precursors is limited, which prevents the assessment of the scope of such substances and precursors produced around the world. The Internet plays an increasing role in the process of production, smuggling and illegal trade in synthetic narcotics, which contributes to the usage of sophisticated methods by organized criminal groups. The long process of transition and socio-economic recovery, as well as the legacy of circumstances that prevailed during the conflicts in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, has influenced the development of certain forms of organized criminal activities and the strengthening of their ties in the Balkan region. In addition to Bulgaria, which represents a leader in the production of synthetic narcotics in the Balkans, Serbia is the only country in the Western Balkans where a case of synthetic narcotics production of the amphetamine and methamphetamine team was recorded, as well as the attempt of methaqualone production, which puts Serbia on a high scale of potential risks and threats from the emergence of new psychoactive substances.

Keywords: *synthetic narcotics, production, smuggling, illegal trade, precursors, narcotics*

1. Introductory remarks

At the end of the sixties, in Belgrade and then in other big cities, the first opioid addiction cases were reported. Initially, the users were from higher social classes – young intellectuals who were educated in West European and American Universities or

¹ This work is a result of NARCO-MAP project; HOME/2015/ISFP/AG/TDFX/8742; Improving knowledge on NPS and opiates trafficking in Europe; Project 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 programme. This work is also result of achievement of scientific-research project „Crime in Serbia and Tools of state's reaction”, which is financed and realized by the Academy of Criminalistics and Police Studies in Belgrade, round of scientific research 2015 to 2019.

² E-mail: nenad.radovic@kpa.edu.rs.

³ E-mail: ilija.racic5@gmail.com.

who traveled abroad and brought some new forms of entertainment. In time, the number of drug users rapidly increased, which led to the establishing of the first Counseling Center in the Belgrade Mental Health Institute in 1968. In 1971, the Institute for Alcoholism and Narcotics organized the first Symposium on problems of narcotics addiction. The massive use of heroin was gaining the importance during the 1980s, which in addition to marijuana and synthetic narcotics, today represents the most frequently used narcotics in our region⁴. The first register of drug users was established in 1980 in Belgrade within the Secretariat of Interior so the number of registered drug users was 726 during the following year.

Due to influence of the West and frequent departure of adolescents for education in the West European countries, including technological development, there has been a continuing increase in the number of drug users. Social crisis during 1990s, as well as the consequences of war events, have contributed to an increase in the number of criminal offences committed in the area of homicide crimes, where one of the causes appears to be market dominance between rival criminal groups dealt with the sale of narcotics and the theft of vehicles⁵. In the beginning, there was a small number of organized criminal groups involved in the sale of narcotics but, due to the large profits, their criminal activity was reoriented from the theft of vehicles to smuggling and sale of narcotics. Along with the formation of the first such organized criminal groups, their friendly ties have spread in the area of Western Balkans and Europe, which also had influence on formation of an “Albanian mafia” and Balkan organized criminal groups, which nowadays have the main primacy in the smuggling of cocaine from the area of South America to the area of Western Europe.

2. National picture of narcotics in the Republic of Serbia

Over the past two decades, the countries of the Western Balkans faced with significant security issues, including smuggling and sale of narcotics, which continue to be one of the most dangerous and profitable forms of organized crime⁶. One of the reasons is the constant demand for narcotics in the Western European market, which additionally encourages organized criminal groups whose members are citizens from Serbia, to continue or to intensify the intensity of criminal activity of smuggling and selling narcotics, both at international and local market. The money acquired through smuggling and sale of narcotics, organized criminal groups are placing them in legal cash flows by corruptive actions and thus mentioned groups damage the financial system. On the other hand, the profitability of narcotics related activities motivates new members of organized criminal groups to engage in these criminal activities⁷.

The policy aimed at reducing the supply and demand of narcotics in Serbia is manifested by the adoption of a strategic, legal and institutional framework. In addition to criminal offences related to the production and smuggling of narcotics, their misuse may, directly or indirectly, affect the occurrence of the commission of property crimes and criminal offences with elements of violence. Based on smuggling of narcotics,

⁴ T. Vasić, *Narcotic smuggling and narcotic addiction in Serbia*, magazine Security, 2001, 482-524 p.

⁵ V. Delibašić, *Suppression of misuse of narcotics from the point of view of Criminal Law*, Belgrade: Official Gazette, 2014.

⁶ UNODC, World Drug Report, 2017.

⁷ European Police Office, *The EU Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA)*, The Hague, 2017.

organized criminal groups generates huge profits, leading to a great competence and conflicts, which may result in the killing of members of competing organized criminal groups⁸. In the territory of Serbia, the competition of opposing organized criminal groups, in order to conquer the narcotics market, leads to the killing of its members. In addition to the security, implications arise in the areas of social and healthcare through increased treatment costs, as well as social care of a user.

The arrest of some members of organized criminal groups engaged in unauthorized placing narcotics on the market is not a guarantee for the cessation of their criminal activities, because the structure of organized criminal groups is such that they in the prison are still actively coordinating and organizing the production and smuggling of narcotics, which is characteristic of the production and smuggling of synthetic narcotics.

Rapid technological development, the application of modern technologies in communication and transport, has created greater opportunities for better cooperation with a lesser risk of detecting organized criminal groups. The number of potential opportunities for smuggling of narcotics has increased. Mentioned trends do not follow the speed of unification of legal framework which represents a major obstacle to cooperation and the degree of efficiency of police and judicial authorities. The main routes for smuggling of narcotics are permanently changed by adapting to the law enforcement activities, as well as by more intensive usage of new transport infrastructure. Distribution and sale of narcotics in the territory of Serbia gravitate towards major cities where a third of population is concentrated: Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš⁹.

3. Production and smuggling of narcotics in the Republic of Serbia

Production and smuggling of narcotics in Serbia is one of the most common forms of organized criminal activity. The primary impact on the production and smuggling of narcotics is the fact the Serbia is located in the central geo-strategic position in the region of the Western Balkans, as well as on the part of the external borders of Schengen and they are partly surrounded by the countries of the European Union. Other important factors are a long process of transition and socio-economic recovery but also the legacy of opportunities that prevailed during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, which had influenced the development of certain forms of organized criminal activity and the strengthening of its ties in the Balkan region¹⁰. The causes of such enormous increase in the number of users of narcotics in the last ten years should be sought in the great social changes occurring due to the dissolution of the country, war in the neighboring countries, the destruction during the 1999 bombing, the events that followed the end of NATO's aggression in Kosovo and Metohija – migration of the Serbian population from that area and others. All this had led to drastic social, economic, ethical changes and multiplication of all existing risk factors and the creation of new ones. Changes and demolitions of the previous traditional social, ethnical, cultural and family values and norms led to the escalation of feelings of isolation, insecurity, hopelessness, disorientation, especially in the younger generation. A value system disorder, general apathy, economic impoverishment are a natural consequence of the

⁸ The Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia, *Serious and organized crime Threat Assessment*, 2015.

⁹ MoI of the Republic of Serbia, *Strategic assessment of public security*, Belgrade, 2017.

¹⁰ EMCDDA – European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug addiction, 2017.

situation in which we find ourselves and it is conducive to the emergence of social pathology. Old models of behavior and relationships become inadequate and overcome and the new ones are not built.

Local market of synthetic narcotics in Serbia is supplied with illegal production in the country. Production (amphetamine and methamphetamine) is performed in rented residential and commercial buildings and also there is a tendency of relocating to rural areas. Members of organized criminal groups and criminal groups, engaged in the production of synthetic narcotics, skillfully conceal illegal activities – legal production of other goods¹¹. Also, they engage specialists in the field of chemistry who are not primarily members of organized criminal group, but persons who, for the purpose of financial compensation, perform production and train members of organized criminal group for the production of synthetic narcotics. People who are not chemists or possess knowledge are very often in the field of chemistry and they are educated by the members of organized criminal groups. Occasionally, specialists are persons from neighboring countries, mostly from Bulgaria. Serbia is the only country in the Balkans, except Bulgaria, where production of amphetamine and methamphetamine has been recorded. In the production of amphetamine in Serbia, organized criminal groups and criminal groups most often use a method known as “Leuckart”, characterized by home-made production (custom made), by producing in the majority of cases “BMK”, which is the basic precursor for the production of amphetamine¹². Illegal laboratories for the production of methamphetamine are most often classified as so-called ‘kitchen laboratories’ and commonly available equipment, such as refractory dish, heaters, glass kitchenware, plastic cups, buckets and others, are used for the mentioned purpose. Components for the production of methamphetamine are also very affordable and they are generally purchased in pharmacies and shops for paints and varnishes. Family and friends ties of members of organized criminal groups in other countries allow facilitated activity in acquiring new members, forming a network of smuggling and selling. For the period from 2015 to July 2018¹³, the increase number in the seizure of synthetic narcotics was continued, which can be seen in Table 1.

	Ecstasy (gr)	Ecstasy (piece)	LSD (gr)	LSD (piece)	Amphetamine (gr)	Amphetamine (piece)
2015	6.263,63	220.974	0	97	25.516,7	13
2016	14.624,56	10.316	0,49	255	23.894,82	77
2017	17.619,03	103.014	0	46	57.551,22	360
I-VI 2018	11.614,81	25.631	0,75	9	35.951,95	57
TOTAL	50.122,03	359.935	1,24	407	142.914,69	507

Table 1. Seizures of synthetic narcotics in Serbia

¹¹ MoI of Montenegro: *Serious and organized crime Threat Assessment* in Montenegro, Podgorica, 2013.

¹² S. Dresen, *Development and validation of a liquid chromatography. Tandem mass spectrometry method for the quantitation of synthetic cannabinoids of the aminoalkylindole type and methanandamide in serum and its application to forensic samples*, 2011.

¹³ Data obtained from the Ministry of Interior.

The tendency of permanent appearance of new synthetic narcotics, so-called 'designer narcotics' and components for their production at the world level, is also present in the local market in Serbia, evidenced by the significant increase in the number of new prohibited synthetic narcotics and precursors in the last five years (from 125 to 558). The poor economic situation, the availability of equipment and materials, leads to engagement of people into production at home, i.e. in illegal laboratories. During 2010, two laboratories for the production of synthetic narcotics (Dimitrovgrad and Niš) were discovered. In one of them, the production of amphetamine sulfate and benzyl methyl ketone (benzyl methyl ketone BMK). Both laboratories were established (installed) in primitive kitchen conditions with low capacities for the local market. As laboratories were close to the border with Bulgaria, the perpetrators planned smuggling from Serbia to Bulgaria. In 2017, the first laboratory for the production of ecstasy in Serbia, which was established (installed) in the surrounding area of Belgrade, was discovered. In this action, the police seized 96.000 ecstasy pills (total weight 42 kg), 10 kg of ecstasy ready for tableting and 80 kg of microwave cellulose intended for the production of ecstasy for the needs of the local market¹⁴.

4. Smuggling routes and frequency of usage of synthetic narcotics in the Republic of Serbia

The geographical position determines that Serbia is, in the most cases, a transit country, because it is located on the so-called central Balkan route for the smuggling of narcotics, which is also used for the smuggling of synthetic narcotics and precursors, both from the west to the east (from the Netherlands, across other countries of the European Union, Serbia to Asia) and from the east to the west (from Asia to the European Union). The position of Serbia allows that one part of the smuggled synthetic narcotics and precursors is kept on the local market, which increase its availability. 70% of the total amount of seized synthetic narcotics originates from the Western European countries, which is smuggled by the route: the Netherlands – Poland – Hungary – Serbia.

As the most common places in Serbia, where the consumption and the usage of synthetic narcotics and precursors are public meetings with musical content, such as: "Exit", "Beer fest" and "Guča", as well as night clubs where electronic music is performed. The purchase price of synthetic narcotics, in comparison with the price of heroin and cocaine, is low so the profit is quite high especially if the narcotics are exported to the countries of the Western Europe. It is very difficult to determine the market scope of the required amount of synthetic narcotics for the local market in Serbia, and therefore the profit which is achieved. Synthetic narcotics are used for street sale for the price that varies from 5 euros in bigger cities (Belgrade and Novi Sad) to 10 euros in smaller areas, while the amount of 3000 euros is required for one kilogram of amphetamine sulphate¹⁵.

During the lifetime, the frequency of using ecstasy and amphetamine in Serbia among people, aged between 18 and 64, is less than 1%, and the frequency of consumption in the previous month was 0.1%.

¹⁴ MoI – press release dated 28th of May 2018, source: <http://www.mup.gov.rs>.

¹⁵ MoI of the Republic of Serbia, *Serious and organized crime Threat Assessment*, 2015.

Substance	Usage ever during life	Usage in the previous 12 months	Usage in the previous 30 days
Ecstasy	0.7%	0.1%	0.1%
Amphetamine	0.6%	0.1%	0.1%
New psychoactive substances	0.1%	0.1%	0%

Table 2. Substances with the usage of synthetic narcotics¹⁶

The easy way of production with minimal investment, as well as the availability and low price on the market, has affected the tendency of the increase in production of synthetic narcotics intended for domestic market. The production of synthetic narcotics is performed in laboratories which do not have to be professional. After the production, the mentioned narcotics are stored in secret apartments, where they are measured, mixed and packaged. It is so-called 'the first hand' consisting of organizers of organized criminal groups. The next step is to engage couriers for transportation and smuggling of synthetic narcotics to smaller dealers. The mode of transport depends mostly on the imagination of courier, secrets cavities in vehicles, international shipments, corruption of civil servants, packaging in food, packaging in furniture etc. The last level is distribution to users through smaller or larger networks of local narcotic dealers on the street.

5. Internet, as a mean of selling synthetic narcotics

Internet plays an increasing role in shaping the way regarding the selling of synthetic narcotics and represents a unique challenge for discovering "new" and "old" synthetic narcotics. Manufacturers, suppliers, traders, websites and processing may be deployed in different countries, which makes it particularly difficult to control them. The growing usage of anonymous networks, so-called "dark web", related to synthetic narcotics sale, allows resellers and users easier access which poses a threat to this challenge¹⁷. The technology to access these sites is increasingly involved in consumer software solutions, making these markets accessible to more people. In addition, it seems that the sale of "legal highs" is open, so-called "Legality" on the Internet increased their availability. A recent phenomenon of products, based on synthetic cannabinoid, has added a new dimension to the cannabis market. During the last years, more than 130 different synthetic cannabinoids have been discovered¹⁸. It seems that most of them were produced in China. After the mentioned narcotic arrive in Europe in the form of powder, these chemicals are added to the plant material and packed for sale as "legal products for euphoria" (legal high). Based on technological development and expansion

¹⁶ Institute of Public Health, 'Dr Milan Jovanović Batut', National research on living lifestyles among Serbian population, 2014, pp. 21-22.

¹⁷ M.M. Schmidt, *"Legal highs" on the net – Evaluation of UK – based Websites, products and product information*, 2010.

¹⁸ S. Hudson, *Use of high-Resolution accurate mass spectrometry to detect reported and previously Unreported cannabinomimetics in "herbal high" products*, 2010.

of the Internet network in Serbia, new ways of selling synthetic narcotics and precursors are established by using the “dark net” services through online communication. Reducing the risk of detection: manufacturers, suppliers, merchants, website hosting services and services for payment processing, may be deployed in different countries which makes it particularly difficult to control them. Serbia has a Rulebook on establishing a list of psychoactive controlled substances¹⁹ which regulates the general form of illicit psychoactive controlled substances.

6. Conclusion

Narcotics, as the most negative part of narcotic addiction today, present a major problem, both for developed countries that perform significant measures in order to reduce them, and for those who do not pay too much attention to this problem. The number of fatalities is now increasing, which alerts that adequate measures must be taken to prevent such problems. Bearing in mind trends in Europe, our country is also affected by an increased number of users of synthetic narcotics, due to the availability of equipment and components for production, and in addition to the local market, activity will focus on production and precursors to the countries of the South East Europe and Asia. One of the reasons for this situation is the lack of strategic criminal policy of the country we live in, easy distribution and the poor sanctioning criminal policy. Nevertheless, this applies not only to synthetic narcotics, but to all other psychoactive substances, because the trend of growth of narcotics smuggling is present everywhere, regardless of the type of narcotics, geographical origin, language barrier or criminal background of organized criminal groups. The goal is clear, i.e. an increase in profits.

Taking into account the problem of synthetic narcotics and precursors, and based on the specific cases, it is concluded that modalities and locations for the production and smuggling of this type of narcotics will be established in these areas by organized criminal groups, in the “kitchen type” laboratory conditions. At the same time, illegal laboratories in the territory of Serbia, for the purpose of the production of synthetic narcotics, use chemical smuggled from countries of the Middle East and Western Europe. It is not uncommon to emerge, as a major chemist, persons from neighboring countries, mostly from Bulgaria. With the development of technology, the Internet will play an increasingly important role, as a mean of selling synthetic narcotics.

In order to solve the problem of synthetic narcotics smuggling, it is necessary to increase additional efforts to increase the intensity of targeted data collection and sharing of intelligence, which can be implemented through the full implementation of the Intelligence Led Policing²⁰ in the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia. It is necessary to intensify the delivery of intelligence to foreign partner services, which primarily relate to the early warning system and thus, the risks and threats from the emergency of new synthetic narcotics and precursors would reduce. As one of the measures, the strengthening of regional capacities of police and Custom cooperation, including international police organizations, can be applied.

¹⁹ Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 59/17.

²⁰ Intelligence Led Policing is defined in Article 34 of the Law on Police, as a modern way of managing police, based on criminal intelligence information.

Law regulation and compliance with international law and conventions play an important role in combating narcotics. In this respect, it is necessary to improve the National Strategy for combating organized crime, to develop Instructions on the conduct of police officers of the Ministry of Interior in combating narcotics, to regularly update and harmonize the list of prohibited psychoactive substances in line with changes in international and European acts and at the national level, and to conduct training for active participation in the national early warning system. Based on the adoption of amendments to the Law on Psychoactive narcotics it will contribute to more efficient prevention of misuse of narcotics and it will improve the early warning system, which will significantly improve the work of police on prevention and suppression of narcotics.

References

1. Carter, D.L. & Carter, J.G. (2009), *Intelligence Led Policing: Conceptual Considerations for Public Policy*, Criminal Justice Policy Review, 20(3), 310-325.
2. Delibašić, V., *Suppression of misuse of narcotics from the point of view of Criminal Law*, Belgrade: Official Gazette, 2014.
3. Dresen, S., (2011), *Development and validation of a liquid chromatography-Tandem mass spectrometry method for the quantitation of synthetic cannabinoids of the aminoalkylindole type and methanandamide in serum and its application to forensic samples*.
4. EMCDDA (2017), European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.
5. European Commission (2015), Special Eurobarometer 423 "Cyber security", European Union.
6. European Commission, Screening Report Chapter 24 – Justice, Freedom and Security, MD 46/14, 15.05.2014.
7. European Police Office (2017) The EU Serious and Organised Crime Threat Assessment (SOCTA), Hag.
8. Europol (2015) EU Drug Markets Report, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.
9. Hudson, S., *Use of high-Resolution accurate mass spectrometry to detect reported and previously unreported cannabinomimetics in 'herbal high' products*, 2010.
10. Institute of Public Health, 'Dr Milan Jovanović Batut', National research on living lifestyles among Serbian population, 2014.
11. Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Montenegro (2013), Serious and organized crime
12. Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia (2015), Serious and organized crime Threat Assessment.
13. Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Serbia (2017), Strategic threats of public security.
14. Nikač, Ž., *International police cooperation*, Belgrade, The Academy of criminalistics and police studies, 2014.
15. Schmidt, M.M.: "Legal highs" on the net – Evaluation of UK-based Websites, products and product information, 2010.
16. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Estimating Illicit Financial Flows Resulting from Drug Trafficking and Other Transnational Organized Crimes: Research Report*, Vienna, October 2011.
17. UNODC (2017), World Drug Report.
18. Vasić, T., *Narcotic smuggling and narcotic addiction in Serbia*, in Security, 2001, pp. 482-524.