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CONFLICT IN UKRAINE: KEY EVIDENCE ON DRUG DEMAND AND SUPPLY

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The outbreak of the armed conflict in Ukraine can have a significant impact on people who use drugs and on drug trafficking inside and around Ukraine. Reports of shortage of medicines and medical supplies pose a risk to the continued delivery of drug treatment services that are vital for people with drug use disorders among those currently living in Ukraine and those who are fleeing the country. The conflict may displace existing drug trafficking routes outside Ukraine, but it can also exacerbate the instability that makes drug trafficking and manufacturing flourish. The conflict is also likely to have an impact on future drug use. This brief describes research findings that characterize the drug situation in Ukraine before the current war situation.

THE CONFLICT IS LIKELY TO MAKE PEOPLE MORE VULNERABLE TO DRUG USE DISORDERS

The links between armed conflict and vulnerability to drug use disorders have been well documented in previous contexts. Exposure to trauma and lack of access to economic opportunities are one of the main risk factors of increased drug use among internally displaced persons and refugees.¹ These populations have quickly reached several millions in the Ukraine context.^{2 3} For example, findings of a drug use survey in Afghanistan indicated that the majority of injecting drug users initiated injecting when they were refugees.⁴ Other studies from Colombia found a high lifetime prevalence of drugs use and injecting drug use among persons who were displaced.⁵ Evidence further shows that in the context of armed conflict, drug use could significantly contribute to increases in the breakdown of health-care structures, including

difficulties in accessing treatment and higher levels of HIV transmission, resulting from increases in needle sharing.⁶ Providing access to drug treatment services to internally displaced persons and refugees are also major challenges, while precarious economic circumstances may push users to resort to more harmful drug use behaviours.

UKRAINE ALREADY HAS ONE OF THE HIGHEST PREVALENCE IN THE WORLD OF PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS AND ARE LIVING WITH HIV

In 2018-2020, the size of the adult population injecting drugs, mostly opioids, was estimated at 350,000 people or 1.7 per cent of the adult population.⁷ This is one of the highest prevalence observed in the world. Most of the opioids injected include heroin and methadone sold on illicit markets.⁸ An estimated 22.6 per cent of the people who inject drugs are living with HIV and more than half (55 per cent) are living with hepatitis C.⁹ The extent of people injecting and those living with HIV has remained unchanged since 2011.

WITH AN INCREASING TREND IN INJECTING STIMULANTS AND NPS

In recent years there has also been an increase in injecting stimulants (methamphetamine) and new psychoactive substances (NPS) stimulants. Since 2015, synthetic stimulants such as mephedrone, MPVP and other NPS cathinones have become more established among people who inject drugs. This shift is attributed to limited availability and access to opiates and “home-made” methamphetamine, and wider availability of synthetic stimulants in the market.¹⁰ Besides

¹ World Drug Report 2020, Booklet 5: Socioeconomic characteristics and drug use disorders (UNODC, Vienna).

² OCHA, *Ukraine: Situation report* (25 March 2022).

³ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> (accessed 4 April 2022).

⁴ UNODC and Afghanistan, Ministry of Counter-Narcotics, and Ministry of Public Health, “Drug use in Afghanistan: 2009 survey- executive summary (Kabul, 2009).

⁵ Guillermo Castano and others, “Trastornos mentales y consumo de drogas en la población víctima del conflicto armado en tres ciudades de Colombia”, *Biomédica*, vol. 38 (2017), pp. 77–92.

⁶ World Drug Report 2020, Booklet 5: Socioeconomic characteristics and drug use disorders (UNODC, Vienna).

⁷ UNAIDS, *Global AIDS update, Confronting inequalities – Lessons for Pandemic Responses from 40 years of AIDS* (Geneva, 2021), p. 340 and 347.

⁸ UNAIDS, *AIDS Info Data 2020 and Alliance for Public Health, Ukraine, 2020.*

⁹ UNODC, *World Drug Report 2021* (United Nations publication, 2021).

¹⁰ UNODC, “The short history of new psychoactive substances in Ukraine” 2020.

the more marginalized community of people who inject drugs, the use of different NPS is also commonly reported among people attending “techno-dance” events and rave parties. Different groups of users have access to NPS through different means, including social media applications, bulk-purchases on the darknet as well as street purchases.¹¹

The conflict is likely to affect the provision of existing evidence-based and innovative drug services

Ukraine was the only country in Eastern Europe where take-home naloxone was available

In Ukraine, the interventions for prevention of adverse health consequences among people who inject drugs were delivered mainly by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In May 2021, around 15,700 people who use drugs were receiving opioid agonist treatment, of which 16 per cent were women.¹² By February 2022 that number reached 17,210 people.¹³ The majority of people who were already receiving opioid agonist treatment in 2021 were men¹⁴; they were less likely to have left the country since the onset of the conflict. This was considered to be the highest number of people receiving such services in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.¹⁵ Ukraine was also the only country in Eastern Europe where naloxone, for overdose prevention and management, was available without prescription to people who use opioids.¹⁶

Innovation in service delivery for people with drug use disorders was introduced to overcome Covid-19 restrictions

During the COVID-19 lockdowns around 13,000 clients of opioid agonist treatment programmes were receiving up to 10 days’ supply of take-home medication, which was complemented by psycho-social support provided via online applications or telephone.¹⁷ Also, self-service programmes were introduced where people could access clean injecting equipment such as needles and syringes through vending machines.¹⁸ A new modus operandi – web outreach service delivery – was also established in Eastern European countries to offer HIV services to people who use NPS and stimulant drugs, including in Ukraine.

Cannabis the most used drug among adolescents but in decline and use of synthetic cannabinoids on the increase

In Ukraine, there is no quantitative information available on the extent of drug use in the general population. However, there are trend data available on the extent of drug use among secondary school students aged 15-16 years. In 2019, 10 per cent of boys and 7.4 per cent of girls in that age group reported the use of any drug (except alcohol and tobacco) in their lifetime.¹⁹ Cannabis and inhalants were the two substances commonly used by adolescents.

In recent years, the use of NPS, especially synthetic cannabinoids, has also become common with 3.2 per cent of students - more girls (3.6 per cent) than boys (2.7 per cent) - reporting ever using NPS in 2019. Overall drug use among adolescents has been declining since 2007.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² UNAIDS, *Global AIDS update, Confronting inequalities – Lessons for Pandemic Responses from 40 years of AIDS* (Geneva, 2021), p. 347.

¹³ Public Health Centre, Ministry of Health, Ukraine.

¹⁴ UNAIDS, *Global AIDS update, Confronting inequalities – Lessons for Pandemic Responses from 40 years of AIDS* (Geneva, 2021).

¹⁵ UNAIDS, *2021 UNAIDS Global AIDS Update – Confronting Inequalities – Lessons for Pandemic Responses from 40 Years of AIDS* (Geneva, 2021).

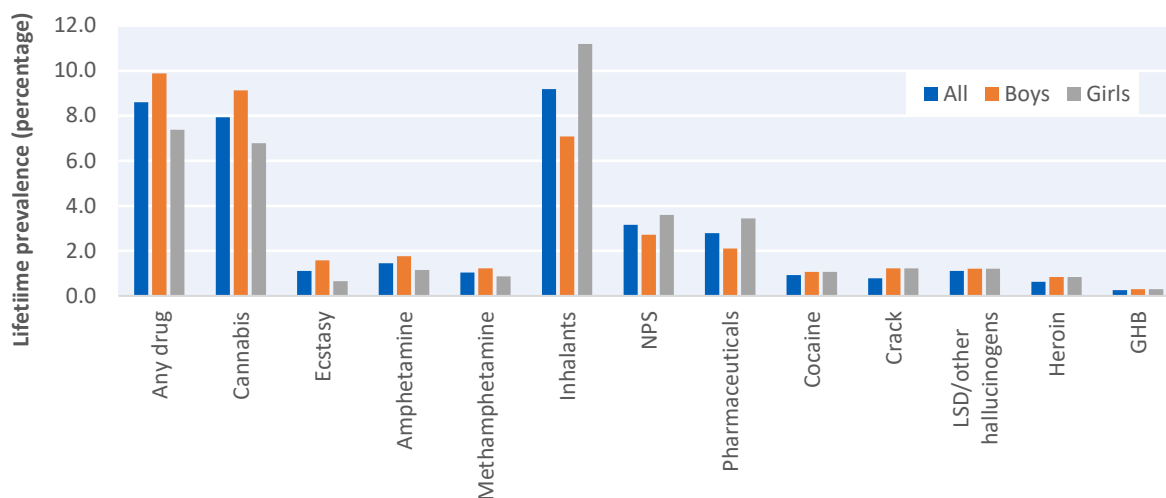
¹⁶ *The Global State of Harm Reduction 2020*, 7th ed. (Harm Reduction International, 2020).

¹⁷ United Nations, *World Drug Report 2021, Booklet 5: Covid-19 and Drugs: Impact Outlook*, World Drug Report 2021 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.21.XI.8, 2021), https://www.unodc.org/res/wdr2021/field/WDR21_Booklet_5.pdf.

¹⁸ *The Global State of Harm Reduction 2020*.

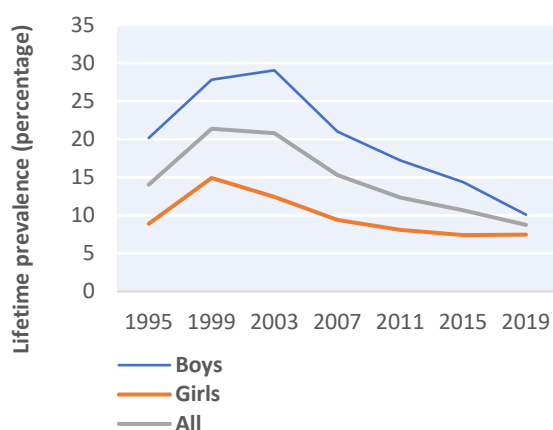
¹⁹ European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction., *ESPAD Report 2019: Results from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs*. (LU: Publications Office, 2020).

Figure 1. Self-reported use of different substances among students aged 15-16 years in Ukraine, 2019



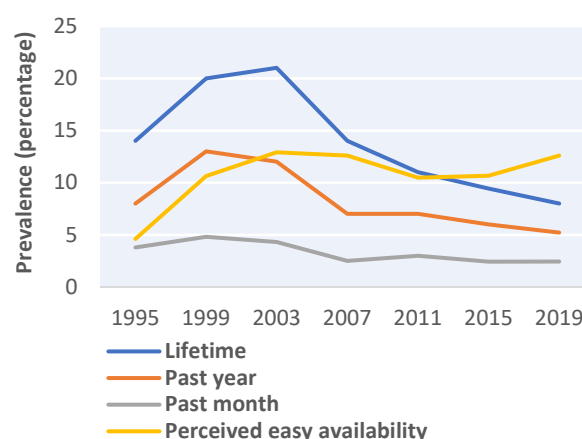
Source: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction., ESPAD Report 2019.

Figure 2. Trends in lifetime use of any drug among adolescents, 1995-2019



Source: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction., ESPAD Report 2019.

Figure 3. Trends in cannabis use and perceptions of availability among adolescents, 1995-2019



Source: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction., ESPAD Report 2019.

The use of cannabis, the most commonly used drug among adolescents, has been declining since 1999; by 2019, the use of cannabis, both in the past 12 months and in the past 30 days, had declined by half. In 2019, 2.4 per cent of students – more boys (3.3 per cent) than girls (1.7 per cent) – reported cannabis use in the past month. However, despite the decline in self-reported cannabis use, there has been an increase in the perceived availability of cannabis over time – 13 per cent of students perceived cannabis to be easily available in 2019 compared to 4 per cent in 1995.

The on-going conflict has the potential to change drug trafficking and manufacturing inside and around Ukraine

Past evidence shows that the conflict can potentially have two opposite effects on drug trafficking and manufacturing in Ukraine. On one hand, the growing destabilization of the conflict could increase impunity for the illicit drug trade and ultimately increase drug trafficking and production. In the context of the conflict in Syria, for example, drug seizure data recorded before and after the outbreak of the war suggest an increase after the outbreak of the conflict,

suggesting an increase in drug trafficking whereby traffickers were taking advantage of the instability in the country.²⁰ Under these conditions, the existing heroin trafficking through Ukraine could be strengthened and the country could become a large diversion route of the current Balkan route while amphetamine manufacturing could reach such proportions that it would supply other countries and regions.

On the other hand, trafficking through areas of high intensity military hostilities may become too risky for traffickers who may opt to divert opiate flows that previously transited through Ukraine to alternative routes. Drug traffickers can be risk averse when it comes to war. The territory of the former Yugoslavia, for example, in the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, used to be a major area for heroin transiting along the Balkan route reaching Western Europe. During the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) these routes were disrupted. For example, before 1991 the bulk of the heroin from Asia was trafficked from Bulgaria into Yugoslavia towards Western Europe. During the war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the route was temporarily interrupted until 1995, and alternative transit routes through Romania and North Macedonia were used instead.²¹ If the conflict in Ukraine follows the drug-context of the conflicts in the Balkans, heroin trafficking could increase along the “traditional” Balkan route in order to avoid Ukraine.

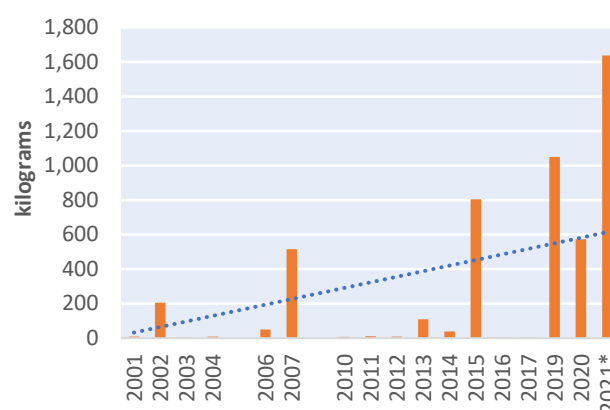
In a context of increasing seizures of heroin and a world record number of amphetamine laboratories dismantled

Heroin trafficking through Ukraine was likely increasing before the conflict

Seizure data suggest that heroin trafficking through Ukraine has been slowly increasing since the turn of the century, with some larger quantities seized after 2015. Data from the Drugs Monitoring Platform for 2019, 2020 and 2021 point to large shipments of heroin transiting the country with single seizures that have reached 0.5

and 1 ton of heroin. In 2015 Ukraine accounted for the 5th largest and in 2019 for the 4th largest heroin seizures in Europe after Turkey, Belgium and the Netherlands and ahead of France and Germany. Overall, the proportion of Ukrainian heroin seizures in European heroin seizures rose, from, on average, 0.5 per cent over the period 2001-2010 to 1.5 per cent over the period 2011-2020.²² Seizures of poppy plants also suggest that there are locally grown poppy plants in Ukraine.

Figure 4. Heroin seizures reported by Ukraine, 2001-2021



*Preliminary estimates, based on individual seizures reported to UNODC, Drugs Monitoring Platform

Source: UNODC, Annual Report Questionnaire.

The largest individual heroin seizures reported so far in Ukraine took place in western Ukraine in the city of Lviv (1,035 kg in January 2021) – the heroin was destined for the European Union market. Moreover, some significant seizures were also reported close to the Black Sea and close to the Republic of Moldova in 2021. Heroin transiting Ukraine is often smuggled from Afghanistan through the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Caucasus countries, notably Azerbaijan and Georgia, and then via the Black Sea. From there it was typically trafficked to Poland or to Romania in recent years (2018-2020). In previous years (i.e. prior to 2015) heroin transiting Ukraine was trafficked to the Republic of Moldova, Belarus and before 2010 heroin trafficking routes transited Hungary and

²⁰ Mustafa, M. et.al., “Increased drug seizures in Hatay, Turkey, related to the civil war in Syria, *International Journal of Drug Policy* Vol. 26, Issue 1 (2015), pp. 116-118.

²¹ Hajdinjak, M., *Smuggling in Southeast Europe: The Yugoslav Wars and the development of regional criminal networks in the Balkans* (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2002), p. 42.

²² UNODC, responses to the Annual Report Questionnaire.

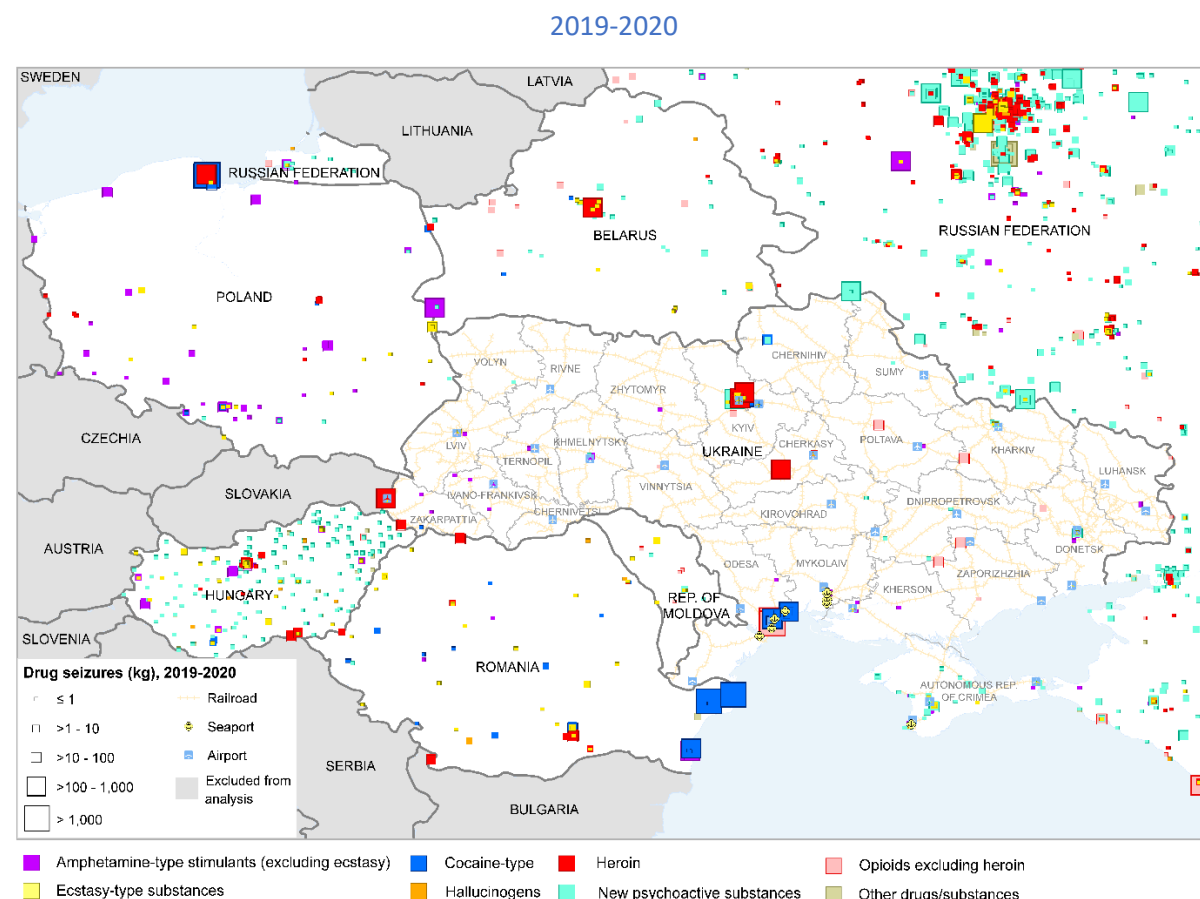
Czechia with some of the heroin shipments also arriving in Ukraine via Turkey and the Black Sea.²³

Ukraine is a transit country for Afghan heroin reaching Europe, but only as a “spin-off” of the more important Balkan route

The primary route for Afghan heroin to reach Europe remains the Balkan route. Ukraine has

emerged around 2006-2016 as one of the variations of the Balkan route: a sub-branch that transits the Black Sea through Ukraine, although much smaller amounts are trafficked as compared to those trafficked along the Balkan route.²⁴

Figure 5. Individual drugs seizures in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries, 2019-2021

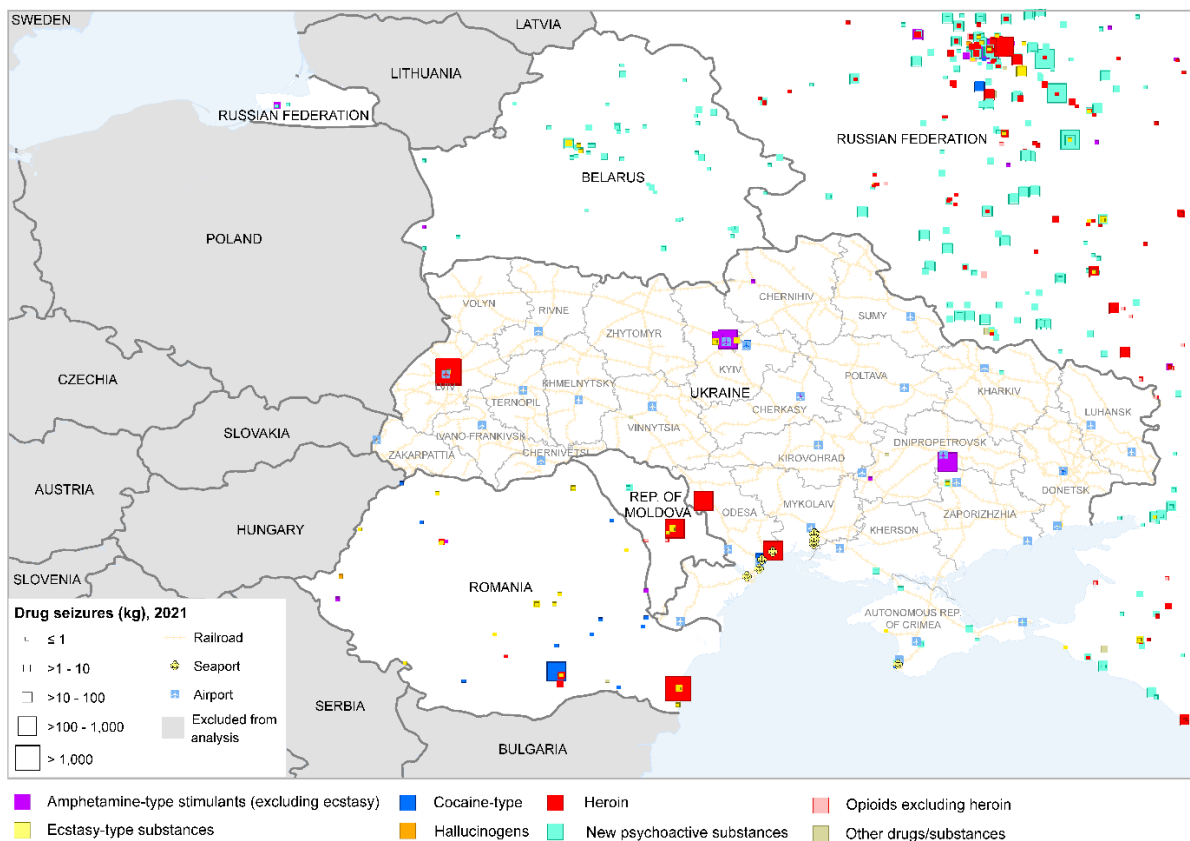


Note: Slovakia is not covered in this analysis due to lack of sufficient data.

²³ UNODC, responses to the Annual Report Questionnaire.

²⁴ UNODC, World Drug Report 2018, Booklet 3: Analysis of drug markets, opiates, cocaine, cannabis, synthetic drugs (Vienna 2018).

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The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Note: Individual Drug Seizure (IDS) data for the Russian Federation covers until the end of September 2021. Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are not covered in this analysis due to lack of sufficient data.

Source: UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform

A possible growing capacity to manufacture amphetamine in Ukraine

There was a significant increase in the number of reported clandestine laboratories between 2019 and 2020, rising from 17 dismantled laboratories in 2019 to 79 in 2020. The rise in the number of dismantled laboratories in Ukraine was mainly linked to the number of dismantled amphetamine laboratories rising from 5 in 2019 to 67 in 2020. The latter number was in fact the highest number of amphetamine laboratories reported dismantled worldwide in 2020 in a given country.

The number of methamphetamine laboratories dismantled in Ukraine rose from 1 in 2019 to 3 in

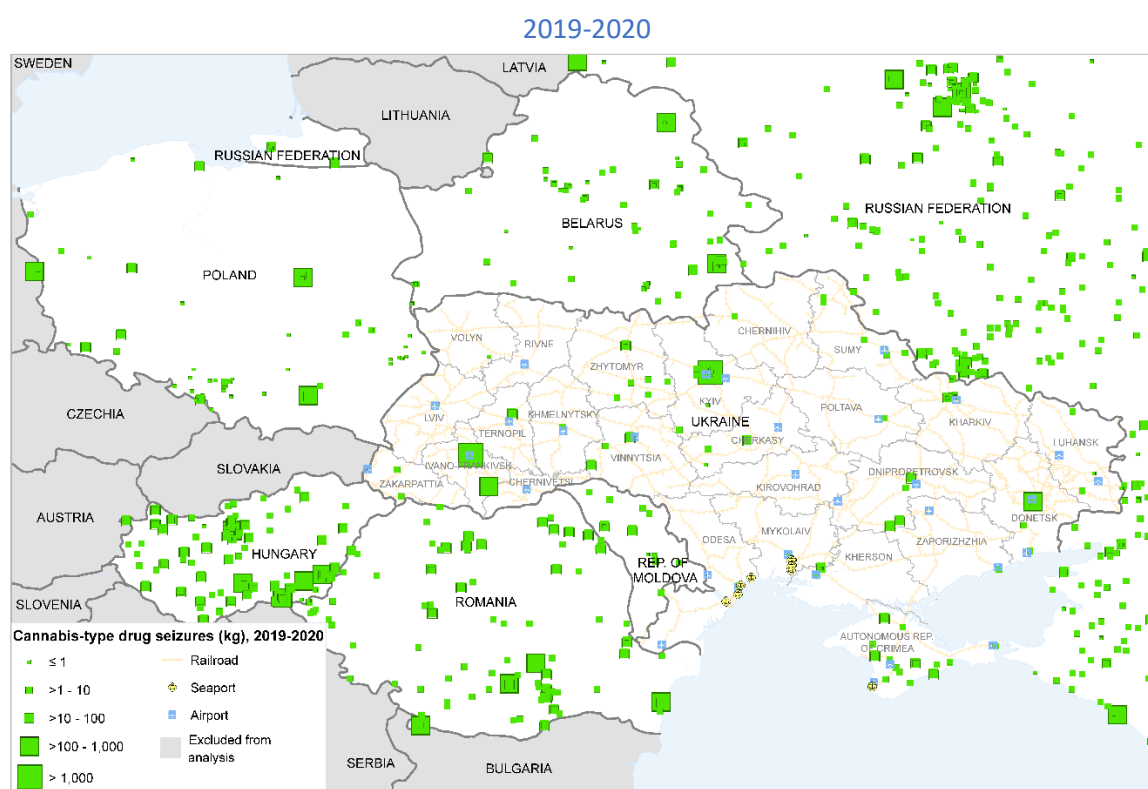
2020. In addition, 2 mephedrone laboratories (synthetic cathinone) were dismantled in Ukraine in 2020, as well as 1 ecstasy laboratory and 3 methadone laboratories. Despite some dismantling of labs, so-far Ukraine did not seem to play much of a role in illicit drug manufacture, seen from a global perspective.

Cannabis cultivation is also taking place in Ukraine

Cannabis is also an important drug trafficked and produced in Ukraine. The largest seizures over the last two decades were reported for cannabis (mainly cannabis plants and cannabis herb), followed by seizures of opioids and of cocaine.²⁵

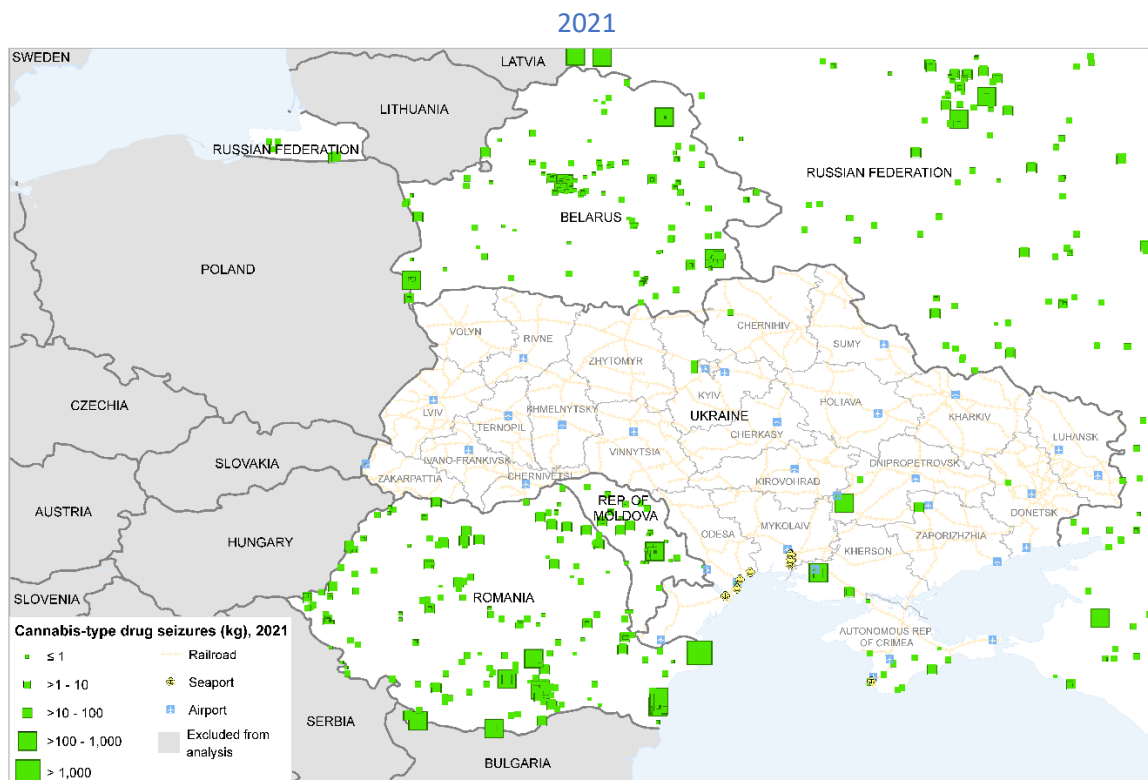
²⁵ UNODC, responses to the Annual Report Questionnaire.

Figure 6. Individual cannabis seizures in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries, 2019-2021



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Source: UNODC Drugs Monitoring Platform.

Pre-conflict diverging trends in offences related to personal consumption and trafficking of drugs

While most drug law offences reported by the authorities in Ukraine continued to be related to personal consumption, their number declined by

20% over the last few years. This stands in contrast to offences for drug trafficking, which increased by more than 80% during the same period.

Drug trafficking and drug use reported by the authorities in Ukraine, 2017-2020

	2017	2018	2019	2020
Unlawful possession, purchase, use, cultivation or production of controlled drugs for personal consumption, number of offences	19804	17697	18521	15775
Unlawful trafficking, cultivation or production of controlled drugs or precursors not for personal consumption, number of offences	4448	5098	6152	8096

Source: UNODC, UN-CTS.