

# Drugs, International Challenges



## GEORGIA AND ILLICIT DRUGS: TRAFFICKING, USE AND PUBLIC POLICIES

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This thirteenth issue of *Drugs, International Challenges* is devoted to the prevailing situation in terms of drug trafficking, drug use and public policies in Georgia, a Caucasian country with a population of 3.7 million. This has a double impact on the European Union and more specifically on France. On the one hand, because of the heroin routes from Afghanistan which cross this country and which seem to be heading increasingly towards the European market, and on the other hand, because of a high level of immigration of Georgian nationals, particularly in France over the last fifteen years. Their presence appears to be linked to the geopolitical events that have taken place since the dismantling of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). It is also due to a difficult economic and social context, marked for years by low growth and massive unemployment, but also to the repercussions of the «war on drugs» waged against drug users in this country. This issue will first focus on Georgia's place in the geopolitics of drugs, and heroin

in particular, and will then give an overview of public policies on the issue of illicit psychoactive substances. The third part will deal with the situation of Georgian users in France and the latest developments concerning them.

### ■ On the Afghan heroin routes

Georgia is not one of the largest producers of illicit substances (EMCDDA and Europol, 2019). Although attempts to establish coca crops were observed in the 1990s in the regions of Adjara and Abkhazia, these were not sustainable (Labrousse, 2003). In the 2000s, cannabis cultivation developed somewhat, particularly in the east, in the regions of Kakheti and, in the south-west, Samtskhe-Javakheti (Labrousse, 2003), but today it remains marginal, confined to small-scale plantations, while limited attempts to produce opioids or amphetamine-type stimulants have appeared without persistence

## INTRODUCTION

International cooperation is a key element of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction's (EMCDDA) Strategy 2025, of which Georgia has long been a main partner. As early as 2015, the Director of the EMCDDA and the Minister of Justice of Georgia signed a cooperation agreement sealing their willingness to exchange information on the emergence and use of new substances, as well as best practices on drug data collection. Georgian experts have therefore been invited to participate regularly in epidemiological indicator meetings and the extended meetings of the European Information Network on Drugs and Drug Addiction (REITOX).

Furthermore, the EMCDDA and Georgia have deepened their cooperation by engaging in European regional programmes (EU4MD project), including funding a school survey (The ESPAD Group, 2020) and assessing the impact of COVID-19 on drug use and the drug market in Georgia.

The establishment of a National Drug Observatory in 2020 in Georgia is, in this sense, a stage in their cooperation with the EMCDDA. The bilateral cooperation project between the EMCDDA and Georgia (launched in early 2021) will aim to support the National Drug Observatory in its capacity to produce strategic analyses of health and security threats and to improve national health and social responses to drug problems in the areas of prevention and treatment.

In the face of a complex phenomenon affected by globalisation and technological developments, the collection of objective information, situated in a broader international context, must strengthen our ability to react rapidly to new threats.

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in most cases. A significant event, reported in November 2019 by the Georgian Central Counter-Narcotics Department, was the dismantling of a synthetic drug production laboratory. Some 20 kilograms of alpha-PVP<sup>1</sup> and precursor chemicals were seized, involving traffickers from Kazakhstan<sup>2</sup>.

**At the intersection of the Northern and Balkan routes**

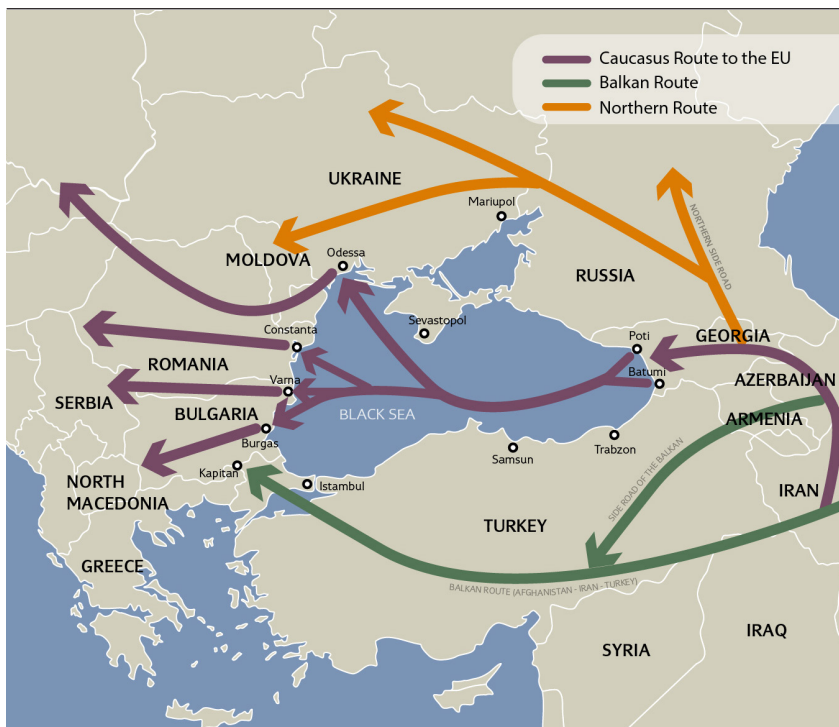
On the other hand, Georgia is at a crossroads on the heroin routes to Russia and the European Union. The instability of the South Caucasus or Transcaucasia (Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia), with a combination of weak states and such factors as the conflict zone between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>3</sup> and the Abkhaz and Ossetian secessionist movements in Georgia<sup>4</sup>, offers many opportunities for criminal organisations to use these transit zones that are not easily controllable by the States.

For the past 20 years or so, it has been one of the routes, albeit a secondary one, compared with those through the countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), known as the «northern» route, which supplies heroin to Russia and the Baltic States (UNODC, 2018). Starting in Afghanistan, the world’s largest producer of opium and heroin (UNODC, 2020), the road passes through Iran and branches off to Azerbaijan<sup>5</sup> and Georgia and then on to the Russian Federation, which is one of the largest heroin markets in the world, with an heroin addict population estimated at around 1.5-2 million people in 2010, according to the latest available data (UNODC, 2011).

**A trans-Caucasian heroin route to the EU?**

In addition to this well-known Northern Transcaucasian route (UNODC, 2019), another one crossing the South Caucasus and supplying the markets of Ukraine, Moldova and the European Union has been growing in importance in

**Regional heroin routes**



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recent years: “It is via this route that the opiates produced in the Golden Crescent are transported from Iran to Turkey, via Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The existence of this route has been revealed by three major seizures in 2014: 850 kilograms in a truck in Armenia, 2 500 litres of an unusual liquid mixture containing, among other things, 589 kilograms of heroin seized in Georgia and apparently destined for Moldova, and 70 kilograms of heroin seized in Azerbaijan” (EMCDDA and Europol, 2016). This passage through the South Caucasus allows traffickers to avoid the Iran-Turkey border controls, with heroin shipments re-entering the route via Turkey after a short diversion through Armenia and Georgia. However, it appears from a number of seizures in recent years that routes bypassing Turkey are also being developed in order to supply the European Union directly (EMCDDA and Europol, 2019). Heroin seizures made in Georgia, but also in Armenia and especially Azerbaijan<sup>6</sup>, confirm that there is an active heroin route through the South Caucasus and across the Black Sea (UNODC, 2019), providing traffickers with an

alternative to the main Balkan route (Afghanistan-Iran-Turkey): “Heroin is exported from Black Sea ports in Georgia to Odessa or European Union countries

1. Alpha-pyrrolidinovalerophenone, a powerful stimulant from the cathinone family.
2. At the same time, the Russian FSB reported the seizure of 440 kg of alpha-PVP and mephedrone intended for internet sale at various locations in the country.
3. Nagorno-Karabakh is a predominantly Armenian-populated territory that is the subject of a conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.
4. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are two regions of Georgia that are threatened by secessionist movements. They proclaimed their independence with the support of Russia in 1992. However, this independence has not been recognised by the majority of the international community. In 2008, the situation in South Ossetia led to a war between Georgia and Russia.
5. Russia now considers this country to be a key transit zone for the heroin that supplies its market.
6. Azerbaijan, unlike Georgia, is a member of the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre for Combating Illicit Trafficking of Narcotic Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and their Precursors (CARICC), an international cooperation body bringing together Russia and the various countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) to combat trafficking in narcotic drugs, particularly heroin. In the first half of 2019, Azerbaijan had the highest level of heroin seizures, even when compared with Russia: 746 kg compared to 290 kg (source: SSI, Moscou).

such as Romania or Bulgaria, where it rejoins the eastern Balkan route towards the Netherlands or other western or central European countries.” (UNODC 2019).

It seems that the Georgian commercial port of Batumi, with its lines of container ships and ferries that sail back and forth across the Black Sea connecting the port with Odessa (Ukraine), Varna and Burgas (Bulgaria), as well as Constanta (Romania), is a strategic target for traffickers. In 2016, a 100 kg shipment of heroin destined for the Netherlands was seized there (EMCDDA and Europol, 2019). Recently, several interceptions have substantiated claims of the growing importance of the Black Sea basin road, such as the Georgian police’s seizure of 40 kilograms of heroin in April 2020 in Batumi. This heroin, destined for the Dutch market, was supposed to reach Ukraine by sea and then the European Union by land. Three seizures of nearly 820 kilograms of heroin were made at the border of Azerbaijan in June 2020 on three goods trucks coming from Iran and destined, after crossing through Georgia, for Austria and Ukraine<sup>7</sup>. In view of all these elements, it seems that the crisis related to the Covid-19 pandemic has had little effect on the dynamics of trafficking in the region (EMCDDA, 2020).

### A precursor route?

Furthermore, while trafficking in heroin precursors seemed to be very rare in the region, recent cases suggest that the South Caucasus is becoming a transit point for precursors needed for heroin production, notably acetic anhydride (AA)<sup>8</sup> (Gandilhon, 2014). Thus, in February 2018, 20 tonnes of AA from

Germany were seized in Nakhchivan, an autonomous territory of Azerbaijan



Acetic anhydride packaged in shampoo bottles © SSI

on the border with Iran. One month later in 2018, two shipments of 4.7 and 10 tonnes respectively were intercepted in Georgia at the Black Sea port of Poti, having come from China. This precursor chemical was intended to be shipped to Afghanistan, most likely via Iran. A few months later, a seizure of 3 tonnes of the same precursor shipped from China, was made in Iran after it passed through Georgia, with the same packaging (colour shampoo bottles) as in the above-mentioned seizures. This seemed to confirm the existence of an identical route to the Afghan laboratories<sup>9</sup>.

## International organised crime

As in other countries of the Caucasus, a tradition of organised crime exists in Georgia, which has taken advantage of the weakness of the central state in order to persist (Radvanyi, 2002). In the 1930s, the country, annexed by the USSR in 1921, had to deal with the proto-Mafia phenomenon of the Vory v Zakone (Thieves in Law), a generic term designating a multitude of autonomous groups rooted in specific territories and sharing a specific code of honour. Today, specialists on the topic of this organisation estimate that a significant proportion of its leaders are of Georgian origin (Barbier *et al.*, 2019). The Thieves in Law, in Georgian *Kanoniuri Qurdebi*, took advantage of the break-up of the Soviet Union to develop their activities and set up operations abroad. This phenomenon accelerated between 2004 and 2013 as a result of the extremely repressive policy put in place under President Mikheil Saakashvili, who took exceptional measures against them. Now scattered throughout Europe<sup>10</sup> and particularly in France, these networks, which may recruit certain Georgian drug-using migrants, have a presence in the realm of shoplifting, burglaries and trafficking stolen cars (SIRASCO, 2019). Several major drug seizures

in recent years in Georgia and more widely in the South Caucasus and the European Union have highlighted the internationalisation of Georgian organised crime. As the activities of the Kutaisi and Tbilisi clans show, the Georgian mafia is active far beyond the country’s borders. This is illustrated by its connections with Iranian, Russian and Turkish organised crime<sup>11</sup>, as in the case of the “Carib Palm”, a boat arrested off the coast of France (Boulogne-sur-Mer) at the end of 2015, with 2.3 tonnes of cocaine on board. The boat’s captain was a Georgian working for a Turkish criminal organisation.

## Drug users targeted by zero tolerance measures

Poverty, unemployment, organised crime, state disorganisation, civil war and separatist conflicts in the context of the break-up of the USSR (Breault *et al.*, 2003) in the 1990s provided fertile ground for the increase in drug trafficking, but also for opiate consumption which had begun to develop in the 1960s. At the time, the medical prescription of opioid drugs was liberalised, leading to an increase in misuse and addiction: “Under Khrushchev,

7. Source: Internal Security Service, French Embassy in Georgia.

8. The ratio of heroin production is as follows: For 1 kilogram of heroin, the chemist needs about 1 to 2.5 kilos of AA. Thus, 15 tonnes of this precursor would make it possible to refine more than 7 tonnes of heroin.

9. Reference to the 53<sup>rd</sup> session of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Sub-Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Baku from 19 to 23 November 2018.

10. After the period of prison riots in 2008-2010, Georgian prisons were emptied, leaving a majority of inmates with the choice to leave the country or to be re-incarcerated for belonging to the Thieves in Law.

11. This trend is also illustrated by seizures of heroin from Turkey against a backdrop of logistical cooperation between associated Georgian transport companies and Turkish criminal organisations (UNODC, 2019).



Georgia, considered the troublemaker of the USSR, was the target of an experimental policy of liberalising the use of medical opiates. Throughout almost all of the 1960s, they could be prescribed and doctors did not deprive themselves of these opiates. The intelligentsia, the sector of the population that was causing problems in the Kremlin, was most affected. In the early 1970s, thousands of Georgians were addicted to opiates, which became illegal again, by administrative ruling, in 1968.” (Avril and Elias, 2006). With the opening of the borders, heroin from Iran appeared on the Georgian market, while production in Afghanistan was on the rise. This situation lasted until 2005, before temporary obstacles to trafficking were put in place at the instigation of President Mikheil Saakashvili, who came to power in 2004 thanks to the so-called Rose Revolution, and who advocated a zero-tolerance policy in line with the United States model, which was also strongly supported by the new government (Zarifian, 2012). Trafficking, like the use of heroin, which was the main substance on the market at the time, was systematically repressed. A law targeting organised crime activities<sup>13</sup> and drug use and possession in combination with an exceptionally severe justice system in the field of narcotics led a large number of Georgian traffickers and drug users to prison. At the time, the law allowed the police to carry out urine tests. A positive opiate test was punishable by a very high fine in relation to the standard of living, around 250 euros<sup>14</sup>, and a repeat offence in the same year, considered a crime, was liable to lead to up to one year’s imprisonment and a fine of 1 000 euros. In addition, a person in possession of an empty syringe with traces of illegal substances was punishable by five to seven years’ imprisonment, while possession of small quantities of drugs could be punished by up to 11 years’ imprisonment, and even 14 to 20 years for larger quantities (EMCDDA, 2013). Faced with this penal policy, the prison population exploded, reaching a maximum of 24 000

### The response of the Georgian State: developing international cooperation

Faced with the development of organised crime activities, particularly drug trafficking, the Georgian State has chosen to prioritise international cooperation. Three interministerial decrees of 28 November 2014 provided for the creation of a counter-narcotics trafficking group under the impetus of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the World Customs Organisation<sup>12</sup>. On 6 April 2015, an office called «Container Control Unit» was established in Tbilisi and a second one in Poti, on the Black Sea coast, involving customs, patrol police and criminal police. In the same year, an agreement was signed between the Ministry of Justice and the EMCDDA (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction) with a view to setting up a National Drug Observatory in Georgia. This initiative from the Ministry of Justice was supported by the EMCDDA and the Council of Europe, and resulted in the organisation of several conferences to present the different programmes carried out by the State. In 2017 and 2018, three operational agreements were signed with Europol, providing for the deployment of a liaison officer in The Hague. In March 2019, the agreement signed by the Minister of Justice, Thea Tsulukiani, with the President of Eurojust was aimed at finding new solutions in the field of international mutual assistance in criminal matters. A Georgian prosecutor was deployed to Eurojust headquarters in April 2020. Georgia also joined the Council of Europe’s Co-operation Group to Combat Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in Drugs, commonly known as the Pompidou Group, on 1 May 2020 as its forty-first Member State. Georgia’s Internal Security Service, the equivalent of the Ministry of the Interior, for its part, has launched operational cooperation initiatives by organising regional controlled delivery exercises involving the three South Caucasus countries (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and Ukraine and Moldova as well. France, thanks to the support of the Central Office for the Repression of Drug-Related Offences (OCRTIS), now the Anti-Narcotics Office (OFAST), contributed its expertise and operational experience to these initiatives financed by the Interministerial Mission for Combating Drugs and Addictive Behaviours (MILDECA) and the EU-ACT programme (EU Action against Drugs and Organised Crime). Finally, an agreement is being negotiated between the Georgian Ministry of Interior’s Criminal Police Directorate and the Iranian Anti-Narcotics Agency.

prisoners in 2010<sup>15</sup>. The perverse effects of this policy were numerous. First of all, prison paradoxically encouraged experimentation with and consumption of illicit drugs by placing drug addicts and petty criminals at the mercy of the criminal clans who controlled the prisons and the trafficking that took place there (Avril and Miollany, 2018). In addition, from 2006 onwards, the shortage of heroin caused by the repression and also by the fall in Afghan opium production<sup>16</sup> has led to a shift in consumption towards substances produced locally and on a smaller scale, which are potentially even more toxic.

12. Within the framework of the Global Container Control Programme (CCP).

13. Article 223-1 introduced into the Criminal Code in 2005 provides for sentences of between 5 and 8 years in prison for just belonging to Thieves in Law. Since April 2018, a new law has further tightened sanctions against the criminal underworld: membership of a criminal gang is punishable by 7 to 10 years in prison while belonging to Vory v Zakone can result in a sentence of between 9 to 15 years.

14. In 2005, Georgia’s GDP per capita was around \$2 500 (World Bank, 2020: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/georgia?view=chart>).

15. In 2018, despite the change in penal policy, Georgia still had a very high incarceration rate: 252.2 per 100 000 inhabitants compared with an overall rate in Europe of 102.5 (Space, 2019: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/prison/space>).

16. “Developments at the level of production centres in Afghanistan affected the trafficking of opium and heroin to neighbouring countries in 2005. Declining opium production in north-eastern Afghanistan has led to a slowdown in trafficking to Central Asian countries” (UNODC, 2006).

Among the products that have emerged is a product with stimulating effects, “Jeff”, composed of Actifed, a cold medicine containing pseudoephedrine, combined with potassium permanganate, which has since disappeared from the Georgian market, and “Vint”, often described as locally manufactured methamphetamine, classified as a stimulant drug, which appeared in 2008, followed by “Krokodil” in 2010–2011, a preparation based on the opiate drug desomorphine, the consumption and local production of which have since disappeared<sup>17</sup>. A drug called “Tsisvebi” has been reported more recently. Made from the ephedra plant, which is found locally in all seasons, it could be either methamphetamine or more likely ephedrine (Otiashvili *et al.*, 2017). These phenomena went hand in hand with massive misuse of buprenorphine (Subutex<sup>®</sup>), an opioid substitute medication imported by small-scale trafficking networks, particularly from France (Cadet-Tairou *et al.*, 2008)<sup>18</sup>. In 2005, 39% of patients seen in Georgian detoxification centres were treated for Subutex<sup>®</sup> misuse (Parfitt, 2006). These substances are usually consumed intravenously in a context where polydrug use is a very common phenomenon, involving alcohol in a large number of cases<sup>19</sup>. Today, together with the Russian Federation, Georgia is one of the countries in the world with the highest proportion of injecting drug users in the population (Tibi-Lévy *et al.*, 2020). The number of injecting drug users in Georgia was estimated at 40 000 in 2009, 45 000 in 2012, 49 700 in 2014 and 52 500 in 2016, equivalent to a prevalence of 2.24% for the 18–64 age group (Bemoni Public Union and Curatio International Foundation, 2017).

The scars of this war on drugs policy are still visible today. The latest figures published on 13 May 2020 show that 8 299 people are infected with HIV in Georgia and that 3 093 (37.3%) of them were infected through syringes used to inject drugs. In 2018, 16.2% of new cases

of contamination were related to syringes used to inject drugs. Georgia has the highest HCV prevalence rate in the world, with 5.4% of the population infected (Kikvidze *et al.*, 2018). The prevalence of the hepatitis C virus among injecting drug users is between 61% and 92% according to a study published in 2017 (Bemoni Public Union and Curatio International Foundation, 2017).

### New trends in use

Georgia has also been affected by recent trends in the use of new psychoactive substances (NPS), such as mephedrone, mostly imported from Turkey, and fentanyl<sup>20</sup> (Subeliani *et al.*, 2020). In 2018, several young people died of fatal overdoses linked to the consumption of “bath salts” in Tbilisi clubs, which turned out to be fentanyl. Investigations initiated by the Georgian police have included the mention of “suicidal behaviours” as an aggravating circumstance for the offence of selling counterfeit fentanyl. The resurgence of these opioid overdoses has led the Ministry of the Interior, on the recommendations of the Ministry of Health, to declassify naloxone from the list of narcotic products, as it is the only effective antidote for opioid overdoses. The number of cases of fatal overdoses recorded in Georgia has exceeded ten cases per year for the last two years. These new drugs are circulating, alongside MDMA/ecstasy, imported by Iranian traffickers, in the capital’s clubs<sup>21</sup> and the open-air electro-techno ‘rave party’-type gatherings regularly organised on the shores of the Black Sea. Offers for buying these drugs are widespread on the Darknet but also on social networks such as Viber or Telegram. It is often Russian nationals who are behind this, as shown by the dismantling of several networks since 2018. The police regularly report, during their seizures, the discovery of new psychoactive substances, labelled “organic”, with this name covering various molecules such as pregabalin<sup>22</sup>. These substances, produced in Iran, are mostly imported from

Turkey, but also from Azerbaijan.

### Changes in state policy

A first opioid substitution programme was launched in 2008 in the Georgian prison system<sup>23</sup>, under pressure from the World Health Organisation (WHO), which had condemned the unacceptable situation in prisons, leading to aggression and suicide among prisoners. From 2013, with the change in political leadership following the end of Mikheil Saakashvili’s term of office, a realisation came to light about the consequences of the policies implemented up to that point. Starting in 2015, amendments to the Georgia Criminal Code reduced sentences for drug possession from 7 to 14 years to 5 to 8 years. In 2014, an inter-ministerial decree was signed by the Ministries of Justice and Health to set up harm reduction programmes for HIV prevention, including the development of opioid substitution programmes in prisons. In 2019, the Ministry of Justice planned, as part of a reform, to universalise the treatment of drug-addicted prisoners in prisons with a medical service comparable to that found outside

17. The name “Vint” comes from Russia and would allude to the most negative effects of this substance the fact of being “glued to the spot”. “Krokodil”’s name refers to the scars (necrosis, abscess, gangrene) caused by injecting the product into the users’ skin (Hearne *et al.*, 2016).

18. Trafficking that continues today according to the Central Office on the Fight against Threats to Environmental and Public Health (OCLAESP).

19. Among the components that would be used for all these cocktails are iodine, petrol, sulphur, hydrochloric acid and all types of detergents.

20. A synthetic opioid 50 times more potent than heroin, causing the deaths of more than 37 000 people in the United States in 2019 (CDC, 2020: <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/opioids/fentanyl.html>).

21. In recent years, Tbilisi has become a regional hub of the techno and electro scene, one of the most active in Europe with a number of very famous clubs such as the Bassiani.

22. Marketed under the name Lyrica<sup>®</sup> in tablet form, a drug classified as a narcotic with sedative and analgesic effects.

23. This programme, implemented in two prisons, aims to achieve abstinence with decreasing methadone doses within nine months.

of prison. Today, there are 24 “rehabilitation centres” throughout the country, which offer other innovative programmes, such as art therapy, supported by a few specialised non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In addition, in 2017, 18 state-funded centres in Georgia’s major cities were providing opioid substitution treatment to 8 258 patients (Alternative Georgia, 2019).

**2020: a turning point?**

However, the changes in Georgian drug policy only occurred very recently with the rulings of the Constitutional Court and, to a lesser extent, the creation of a National Drug Observatory, a partner of the REITOX network, managed by the EMCDDA (see text box). In June 2020, it ruled on the sanctions applicable to drugs following two appeals, after a drug user was arrested in possession of a syringe containing 0.002 g of methamphetamine. The case was brought forward by an association and an NGO fighting for the decrimina-

lisation of drug use: White Noise and Gyla (Georgian Young Lawyers Association). Thus, individuals arrested for buying and possessing small quantities of drugs will no longer be sentenced to between five and eight years in prison, nor will those in possession of an empty syringe with possible traces of illegal substances. The Constitutional Court found that such sentences were disproportionate and contrary to the constitutional provision prohibiting the use of inhumane punishment. All individuals imprisoned for possession of “insignificant quantities of drugs” have been released since this ruling. In addition, people currently on probation can appeal to the Court of Appeal for a second review<sup>24</sup> of their case.

**Partial decriminalisation of cannabis use**

Alongside these new directions in the fight against drugs, the debate on the legalisation of cannabis has surfaced, led in particular by the opposition Girchi party, founded

in 2015. Today, the consumption of small quantities of herbal cannabis in private (in the absence of minors) by adults over 21 years of age is no longer an offence (it was previously punishable by a 170 euro fine) since a ruling by the Constitutional Court of 30 July 2018. In 2018, the Georgian government has even envisaged a project to produce cannabis for state-controlled therapeutic purposes for export. This proposal was met with an outcry from the Georgian Orthodox Church, forcing the government to abandon the idea at least temporarily.

**Georgian drug users in France**

Since its independence in 1991, Georgia has developed growing links with France<sup>25</sup>, due among other things to the increasing presence of Georgian nationals in France over the last twenty years<sup>26</sup>. Today, political and geopolitical instability, poverty and high unemployment offering few prospects for the future of young people are prompting more and more Georgians to migrate to Western Europe. Immigration to the West has accelerated sharply since 2012 as a result of a more flexible visa policy under the EU’s Eastern Partnership programme. In addition, since 2017, Georgians benefit from a visa exemption regime for short stays (90 days) after which some people apply for asylum. In 2018, out of the 123 625 applications registered by the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless People (OFPRA), 6 717 were made by Georgian nationals, a 256% increase compared to 2017 in

**Establishment of the Georgian National Drug Observatory**

While various initiatives had been carried out since the early 2000s, it was finally on 16 January 2020 that the Georgian government announced the creation of a national drug monitoring centre. It thus gives priority to the development of a drug policy based on scientific data. The main objectives of the Georgian National Drug Observatory are to monitor the consumption of illicit substances and the narcotics market in order to obtain as accurate an assessment of the situation as possible and to propose legal and institutional solutions based on the research, analyses and scientifically validated data obtained. This involves the collection and development of a wide range of indicators: epidemiological and statistical data on use with reference to the key indicators developed by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). The assessment of the medical and social damage caused by the illegal use of drugs will be enhanced through international exchanges. Joint research activities with the EMCDDA have already been launched, including trend studies, such as the impact assessment of the response measures to the Covid-19 pandemic on drug use patterns, harmful effects and reduction in supply, also in conjunction with the Georgian National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), or an Internet survey in collaboration with the Addiction Research Centre - Alternative Georgia.

24. The prison population, which peaked in 2010 with more than 23 000 people in prison, has steadily decreased to reach 9 300 in 2020.

25. Symbolised by the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed between the two countries in 1994.

26. Although there has been immigration dating back to the 1920s and 1930s as Georgians fled the Stalinist regime.



a context where asylum applications (from people of all origins) increased by 23%<sup>27</sup>. These migrations are not only motivated by strictly economic, societal or political reasons. Many drug users and patients suffering from HIV or HCV come to France in search of the possibility of treatment, which they are virtually

prohibited from doing in their own country because of the privatisation of the health system (Michel, 2015). Although basic health coverage exists, the poorest patients cannot afford the very expensive hepatitis C treatments<sup>28</sup>. A study of the profiles, practices and access to care of Russian-speaking drug users in the

Ile-de-France region, where more than 57% are Georgian nationals,

27. See the OFPRA website, asylum seeking data 2018: <https://www.ofpra.gouv.fr/fr/l-ofpra/actualites/les-donnees-de-l-asile-a-l-ofpra-en>

28. Standard hepatitis C treatment cost \$12,000 plus follow-up tests, all of which was entirely at the patient's expense.

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revealed a seroprevalence of hepatitis C (HCV) among almost 9 out of 10 drug users, a proportion which is twice as high as among French-speaking drug users (Jauffret-Roustide *et al.*, 2017).

The presence of Georgian drug users became visible to harm reduction professionals from 2004/2005 onwards, and was reported in particular by the OFDT's TREND (Emerging Trends and New Drugs) scheme (Rahis *et al.*, 2010) and Médecins du Monde (MDM) in Paris (Avril and Elias, 2006). Today, Georgian and, more generally, Russian-speaking drug users account for up to a third of the new outpatient admissions at the harm reduction facilities (CAARUD) in some urban conurbations (Tibi-Lévy *et al.*, 2020). Their living conditions, particularly for the new arrivals, are most often marked by extremely precarious situations and use in line with those observed in their country. It is from these populations that a significant number of morphine sulphate, Subutex® and even methadone injecting drug users are recruited. The French health system or harm reduction system allows them to take care of their health, without ironing out all the difficulties. These users can be a source of fear as they are often living in groups, sometimes violent

ones, that are associated, rightly or wrongly, with Georgian organised crime activities in France, and they do not always respect the principles of harm reduction<sup>29</sup>. (Tissot, 2019). Moreover, the fact that they are neither French-speaking nor English-speaking for the most part complicates communication and provides negative representations they may be subject to with some of the other users, or even with some of the professionals at the CAARUDs and the specialised drug treatment centres (CSAPA). However, this situation should not obscure the progress made in the level of care provided to these users. More and more harm reduction and health care facilities are using interpreters and many people have been able to get off the streets while completing a care and social integration process.

## Conclusion

Georgia is currently facing a number of challenges regarding the issue of illicit drugs in a tense geopolitical context<sup>30</sup>. First and foremost, safety is a major matter since Georgia is located at the crossroads of the Afghan heroin routes leading to the Russian Federation and the European Union and it has been undergoing an intensification of trafficking activity in recent years,

making it vulnerable to the activities of organised crime. Health issues also are challenging because of the high prevalence of HCV and HIV among its population as a result of the opioid epidemic and the toll paid by Georgian drug addicts due to the drug control policy pursued until recently.

Today, this country is at a crossroads and seems to have begun a break with the repressive paradigm inspired by its influential American ally. The development of opioid substitution and harm reduction treatments, a significant reduction in sentences for the use and possession of illicit substances and the partial decriminalisation of cannabis use are significant developments which, under the combined influence of an active civil society and closer links with the European Union, should be sustained in the coming years.

29. Although use practices differ (injection and more widespread use of opiates), those related to the sharing of injection equipment are not more frequent.

30. In addition to tense relations with the Russian Federation, the ongoing war in Nagorno-Karabakh is a factor of instability throughout the South Caucasus.

## DRUGS, INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGES

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