

Blaming the Third Force

or the role of the narcotics trade in the Osh tragedy

As the one-year anniversary of the Osh drama approaches, with the still-fresh blood of its victims, the still-smoldering ruins, the still-roiling political battles and intrigue, a question rings ever-louder in our ears: Who is to blame?!

...My credo is “Being professional means being non-partisan”, so I will not name the real perpetrators, though I have my own opinion in this regard.

However, I will try to dispel one myth and do it specifically from the vantage point of a professional.

Bear with me. I'll start with some background ...

...Due to geopolitical and economic factors, Kyrgyzstan has for a number of years suffered the immense brunt of the Afghan narcotics trade. In recent years, the expansion of the drug trade has taken an increasingly aggressive turn, becoming the primary threat to the gene pool, fostering transnational organized crime, terrorism, extremism, unprecedented levels of drug-related crime. It has become one of the greatest threats to the Republic's national security.

The escalation of the drug trade has been aided to a large extent by the disbanding of the autonomous drug-fighting unit of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2008 followed by the dismantling of the Kyrgyz Drug Control Agency in October 2009. While a decree was passed in 2010 to reinstate the Agency and the status quo, it is true that the inaction of the security services, even for “objective” reasons, was responsible for a 50 per cent reduction, at the minimum, in the country's ability to fight drug trafficking.

According to one widely-held view, the Osh tragedy and other negative trends in Kyrgyzstan, were instigated by so-called “drug barons”, as run-of-the-mill drug dealers were called by political analysts and journalists in an echo of the Colombian drug trade, while the country had supposedly turned into a “drug State”. The hyperbole being peddled by both national and international press, expounded on at international conferences by political heavy-weights including heads of parliamentary committees at the State Duma and the Federal Drug Control Service of the Russian Federation, demonizes the government and wreaking irreparable damage to the political image of the Kyrgyz Republic in the international arena.

The corrosive effect of this approach on cooperation is aptly illustrated by the well-known fact that, in response to the extensive demonization and stigmatization of drugs, a neighboring nation at the front lines of the expanding Afghan drug trade was compelled to significantly cut back its participation in joint efforts to fight drug trafficking and, in particular, to withdraw from

participating in the rather fruitful practice of conducting “controlled deliveries” that were used to uncover the full criminal network.

In our specific case, there are three main scenarios for how drug trafficking tied in with the Osh tragedy:

1. It was initiated by the “drug lords” themselves, to take advantage of the resulting situation and havoc to intensify the drug trade;
2. The tragedy was scripted to reduce the power of Uzbek crime lords and thereby drive out that ethnic group from the drug trafficking business;
3. The over-production of Afghan drugs brought about an “arc of instability” in the region, which in turn led to the Osh tragedy.

A straightforward criminology analysis of these scenarios will allow for an objective understanding of what had taken place.

The so-called “drug lords” in our region are not some sort of dissociated, negative social element, but rather classic specimens of run-of-the-mill organized crime, which also includes transnational and even cartel aspects of the drug trade. As such, and similar to many other countries, they have long tried to influence the political process and infiltrate government agencies. Evidence of this can be seen in a series of criminal wrangling in recent years the victims of which included a number of deputies in the *Jogorku Kenesh*, the national parliament. At the same time, there were numerous attempts to subjugate the political process to criminal interests.

Revenue from drug trafficking and other resources at the disposal of organized criminal structures, were used by both sides of the Osh tragedy to purchase and deliver weapons and ammunition to the conflict zone along regular trafficking routes. Are the drug dealers alone to blame for the events of April - June 2010? Did they really need such wide-spread tensions and blood-letting bordering on an all-out war?

During the war of the 1990s, for example, the “Balkan route”, which was how up to 80 per cent of the opium trade made its way to Western Europe, was almost completely suspended. This author had researched the cause of that phenomenon, also typical of today’s Southern Kyrgyzstan, while working in the United Nations and OSCE peacekeeping missions in the Balkans.

...Following the investment of one hundred million dollars, drug lord X arranges the transport of his heroin cargo to the West. Once in the war zone, the caravan is attacked, the cargo disappears, and the guards are killed. Drug lord X conducts his own investigation and learns that “field commander” Y and fifteen of his henchmen had carried out the slaughter and confiscated the cargo.

A few more million dollars later, drug lord X brutally dispatches “outlaw” Y in the course of a “punitive operation”, but tons of heroin are lost forever, along with the millions of dollars they would have fetched. Obviously, drug traffickers off all calibers favor using stable, and,

unfortunately, rather efficient, corrupted trafficking channels than initiate, or even participate in, conflict.

Thus, the first scenario does not hold water, mainly because the drug *business*, like another other business, is founded on basic economic premises and can only grow in stable, at least relatively speaking, conditions. Any destructive actions are disruptive to it...

Corruption tied to drug trafficking, on the other hand, presents a special danger indeed. The extent of the negative impact it has on society is comparable to narcotics use. Today, drug trafficking-related corruption is in fact undermining the foundations of government.

Evidence abounds that the security establishment have gone beyond merely offering protection to the drug traffickers in exchange for dividends. They have become traffickers themselves: the so-called “red” heroin, or heroin belonging to the law enforcement structures, is a common expression in the vocabulary of local drug users. Arriving along corrupted supply routes, the narcotics are sold at rock-bottom prices at “red” “dens” in Bishkek, Osh and Jalal-Abad, and then shipped to Kazakhstan and Russia.

Countering this phenomenon, fearsome in its destructive power, is difficult but critical. Law enforcement measures are not enough. A law on countering the drug trade should be passed without delay, to delineate the responsibilities and scope of work for each ministry or government agency involved in fighting drug trafficking and to propose the creation of a kind of internal investigations unit at the Anti-Drug Trafficking Centre of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). The unit would be tasked with, first and foremost, the investigation of corrupt checkpoints that are allowing narcotics cargo across State borders. Specific mechanisms already exist for this purpose.

If we are to consider a *restructuring of the drug trade*, whereby Uzbek players were to be shut out, as the cause of the Osh tragedy, we must consider some key aspects of this process.

First of all, ethnic organized crime groups (OCGs) had been an established phenomenon since the days of the USSR. The groups are formed along blood lines and are generally more stable. Their clannish insularity and readiness to help and cover for one another make it exceedingly difficult to investigate any criminal activity in which they engage.

In Kyrgyzstan, criminal groups formed by Uighurs, Uzbeks, or members of the Caucasus or Slavic ethnic groups have existed since the mid-20th century and have played a key role in the development of the drug trade ever since opium was being grown in the Issyk-Kul Lake region.

History repeats itself and Uzbek OCGs were among the first to enter the ultra-promising Afghan drug trade of the early 1990s and, for a time, dominated it. However, starting in the early 2000s, by some estimates, the “balance”, so to speak, was restored.

Meanwhile, as was confirmed by Russian intelligence agencies, in 2008 and 2009, at least one of the ethnic Uzbek OCGs, comprising members from the South, dramatically increased its activity. The large scale of its operations astounded the imagination.

In July 2009, a successful operation by Kyrgyz and Russian special forces detained Kh.R. Kadirov and A.K. Rakhimov in Irkutsk Oblast, with nearly **two hundred** kilograms of opium. The value of the seized opium, as estimated by Russian experts, was four to five million euro.

The investigation determined that the owner of the cargo and the organizer of the delivery was Kh. Mamakhanov, a resident of Osh. His entire extended family was involved in drug trafficking including his brothers, sons and other relatives.

The investigators also learned that members of the Mamakhanov clan had evaded justice multiple times in the past. For example, in 2001, together with U. Mamakhanov, Kh. Mamkhanov had been detained in Kazakhstan with 50 kg of opium and even convicted, but set free just one year later.

The older brother, Khalil, had been sent to prison for 22 years by the Osh district court in 2001 for gun possession and for having a very large volume of narcotics (over **800 kg of opium!!!**) in his possession. Thirty-six months later he was a free man. This betrayal of justice was under investigation, but the perpetrators escaped punishment following the dissolution of the Drug Control Agency. They presumably amassed quite a fortune in the process ...

During this criminal investigation, our experts worked with the Russian Financial Monitoring Service to identify individuals involved in laundering profits derived from the sale of narcotics in Siberia. An analysis of the financial streams and evidence of the multi-million dollar sums involved in the drug trade indicated that the drug traffickers have the capacity to finance a variety of destructive undertakings, starting with ethnic OCGs, religious extremists and supporting terrorist cells.

The discovery of over 40 kg of Afghan narcotics and firearms, munitions and grenades in Osh on June 21, 2010 provided further evidence. This “narcotics arsenal” belonged, yet again, to Kh. Mamakhanov ...

But getting back to the topic at hand.

Acting on intelligence, Russian Federal Drug Control personnel thoroughly rummaged through a truck carrying 21 tons of onions in Omsk on April 24, 2010. The search was well worth the effort, yielding 50 kg of heroin. Imagine, thousands of onions stuffed with white powder and impossible to distinguish from “ordinary” bulbs lying next to them... The owner of that shipment was yet another Osh resident. We’ll call him Dilmurad.

As part of a sting operation, on August 7, 2010, State Customs employees in Bishkek searched a Volvo truck carrying 22 tons of onions to Novosibirsk. The search found 32 kg of heroin camouflaged as onions in 5 bags.

The owners of that shipment were also Osh residents. The narcotics had been loaded on August 5, 2010 at a private warehouse in the Nariman *mahalle*, or neighborhood. The investigation proved that in both cases the narcotics disguised as onions originated from the same loading spot in the Osh neighborhood of Nariman. Most of the individuals mentioned above also hailed from Nariman.

And here we come to the most interesting bit: there was a reason for the multiple mentions of that neighborhood. Let's review:

- given the well-organized sustained defense of that neighborhood, together with the above information, we conclude that it was indeed the site of major narcotics stores;
- this was why the residents of the neighborhood did everything to draw the attention of the media, international bodies and NGOs to so-called "ethnic cleansing": in view of the large narcotics volumes and the fact that it could not be transported out, outsiders had to be kept out of Nariman;
- the drug trade theory also explains the heightened attention paid to Nariman by some highly-placed law enforcement officials engaged in the "red" drug trade: despite being prohibited from doing so, they continued their attempts to get into Nariman. Were these the "outsiders" who were trying to bring the drug trade under their control and sought to get their hands on the *mahalle* using any means available?!

Intelligence shows that when special operations and routine searches turned up various quantities and volumes of narcotics, these were appropriated in most cases, rather than be confiscated in line with procedure.

These events and existing and incoming information indicate that as the events played out (and not at all as their primary cause), with the appetites wetted, a situation developed one year ago enabling the take-over of drug traffic controlled by ethnic Uzbek OCGs by ethnic Kyrgyz OCGs and organized law enforcement groups, as odd as that might sound, the very same ones that previously provided protection to the Uzbek drug lords..

Of course, the opportunity was ripe for taking over not only the drug trafficking trade but also perfectly legal businesses as well, and in large numbers, too. Ethnic Kyrgyz crime bosses and corrupted law enforcement bosses did not fail to turn the situation to their advantage.

The soundness of the *third scenario*, according to which the over-production of narcotics in Afghanistan is the primary reason behind both the Osh tragedy and the instability of the entire Fergana Valley, is put into question by the theory of how the "arc of instability" originally put forth by Zbigniew Brzezinski back in the early 1990s, which the Afghan drug trade expansion was in its infancy and over-production was a long way off. A rabid anti-Soviet and a brilliant strategist, Mr. Brzezinski saw very different explanations for the emergence of this highly volatile region. Consequently, while the drug trade may have played a certain role in its emergence, it was not an independent or a driving force, but merely a catalyst that joined with numerous other destabilizing factors (very high population density, the resulting land and potable and irrigation water shortages; festering territorial disputes; mass unemployment; low quality of life; encroaching religious extremists; runaway corruption, regional tyranny, etc.)

In conclusion, the following must be given special consideration.

The numerous attempts at the national and international level to explain the Osh tragedy exclusively through the lens of the drug trade are indicative of nothing less than the desire to *simplify the problem*, to accuse the infamous “third force”, thereby ignoring the long-standing inequalities in economic, political, educational and numerous other social spheres dating back to the Soviet era and the need to take urgent measures to overcome them.

We must resolutely resist this desire to over-simplify.

Aleksandr Zelichenko, PhD, History
Director, Central Asian Drug Policy Center
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