

Crime in Central Asia: A Regional Problem with Global Implications

Mark Galeotti

All the post-Soviet successor states have suffered an explosion of organised and disorganised crime, yet for all their ethnic and geographic diversity, the new states of Central Asia share five basic problems relating to their struggles against widespread criminality:

- **The drugs industry.** The production and traffic of drugs offers unprecedented opportunities for wealth and power to many. Narcotics are produced in the region, which is also criss-crossed by the routes through which drugs flow to markets in Europe and Russia. This is a multi-billion dollar industry, and in an environment of corruption and localism, can easily buy itself protection. As Turkey, Pakistan and Iran become more committed to fighting the drugs trade, these new states have become increasingly attractive: in the words of the Kazakh newspaper *Stolichnoe obozreniye* (15 June 1995), “*the once inaccessible region of Central Asia has become a dream come true for the narcotics businessmen.*”
- **A tradition of corruption.** Extensive corruption further undermines the authority of the region’s governments. This is common to all the states of the region, and is a legacy both of Soviet rule and earlier tradition.
- **The lack of a law-based political culture.** Clan, kin and regional loyalties remain strong, undermining the legitimacy of the new, largely unstable governments of nations whose boundaries were drawn for the convenience of Russian administrators rather than to reflect the ethnic topography of the region. To many Central Asians, the central government is a distant and alien force, and genuine authority rests instead with local patriarchs and warlords.
- **Economic crises.** While the proceeds of the drugs trade arm and secure the criminals, national budgets are already over-stretched. Law enforcement agencies are drastically under-funded. In 1995, for example, Kazakhstan had to commit itself to reducing the

central police staff by 25% and local offices by 15%.

- **Organised crime.** As a result of the above factors, as well as the moral decay of the late USSR, organised crime has become deeply rooted throughout the region. As it becomes more firmly entrenched, not only does organised criminality undermine efforts to protect the legitimate order, it increasingly penetrates and subverts that order.

Although there are considerable differences of geopolitical location, local political circumstance and the opportunities available to criminals, the countries of the region do share a common tradition and experience of Soviet rule and certain common problems.

Drugs

Narcotics are produced and traded throughout the region. The main centres of drug production are five: the Chu and Fergana Valleys (the first of which cuts from Kazakhstan into Kyrgyzstan, the second from Uzbekistan into Kyrgyzstan), the mountainous regions of Leninabad and Gornyi Badakhshan (both in Tajikistan) and Surkhandarya (in Uzbekistan). In addition, not only is Kazakhstan an increasingly important conduit for drugs from neighbouring countries, there are indicators that underground laboratories producing synthetic narcotics have been established around Alma Ata and Petropavlovsk. These narcotics are not only for export: the number of drugs users has grown by 50% in the period 1990-95, while in 1994 alone, drugs-related crime rose by 25% to over 8,000.

The drugs trade thrives on the lack of comparable economic opportunities and the lack of serious political commitments to combating what is, after all, a rich and powerful lobby. To take one example, in Kyrgyzstan an apparent campaign for law and order – discussed at greater length later in this article – is driven largely by political considerations. It has thus actually diverted

resources away from the battle against the drugs trade, despite the fact that Kyrgyzstan alone now exports more narcotics than either Burma or Thailand, including opiates both home-grown and imported from Afghanistan via Tajikistan. Dealing, moving, growing or processing raw opium has become the main livelihood for some four million people in and around Osh. The city's police chief had in early 1995 to transfer or dismiss his entire drugs squad, and replace them with only those men he felt he could trust, a mere 29 officers. Similarly, ministry's headed by Akayev's friends and clients have escaped investigation, even when the Prosecutor's Office has assembled full preliminary case files.

The government's failure to live up to its promises to the police – especially over the fight against the drugs trade – have led to public protests, just as its failure to provide alternate sources of livelihood ensure the trade's survival. Lt.-Colonel Alexander Zelichenko, deputy chair of the State Commission for Narcotics Control, admitted in January 1995 that “*whatever obstacle officers put up on the drugs route, poverty and hungry families make people take to the smuggling paths again and again.*” His prescription, though, of a programme to alleviate the poverty of the mountain villages which are the strongholds of the trade, fell on stony ground. Meanwhile, over 70% of all crime is linked with the use or trade of drugs.

The impossibility of sealing the long, rugged border with Afghanistan, as well as the economic opportunities provided by the drugs trade, have led to the rise of powerful and increasingly sophisticated drugs smuggling operations in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The economy of Gorniy Badakhshan, Tajikistan's poorest and most isolated region, is now entirely dependent upon this trade, while – much as in other countries such as Colombia and Thailand – drugs money has allowed criminal groupings to buy themselves a measure of political influence and military autonomy. Turkman President Niyazov and his inner circle have also been closely associated

with the Afghan warlord Dostam, a kingpin in that country's drugs trade. The country is a significant route for drugs from Afghanistan, mainly raw opium passing through to Iran or heading towards Daghestan and thence into Russia.

Corruption

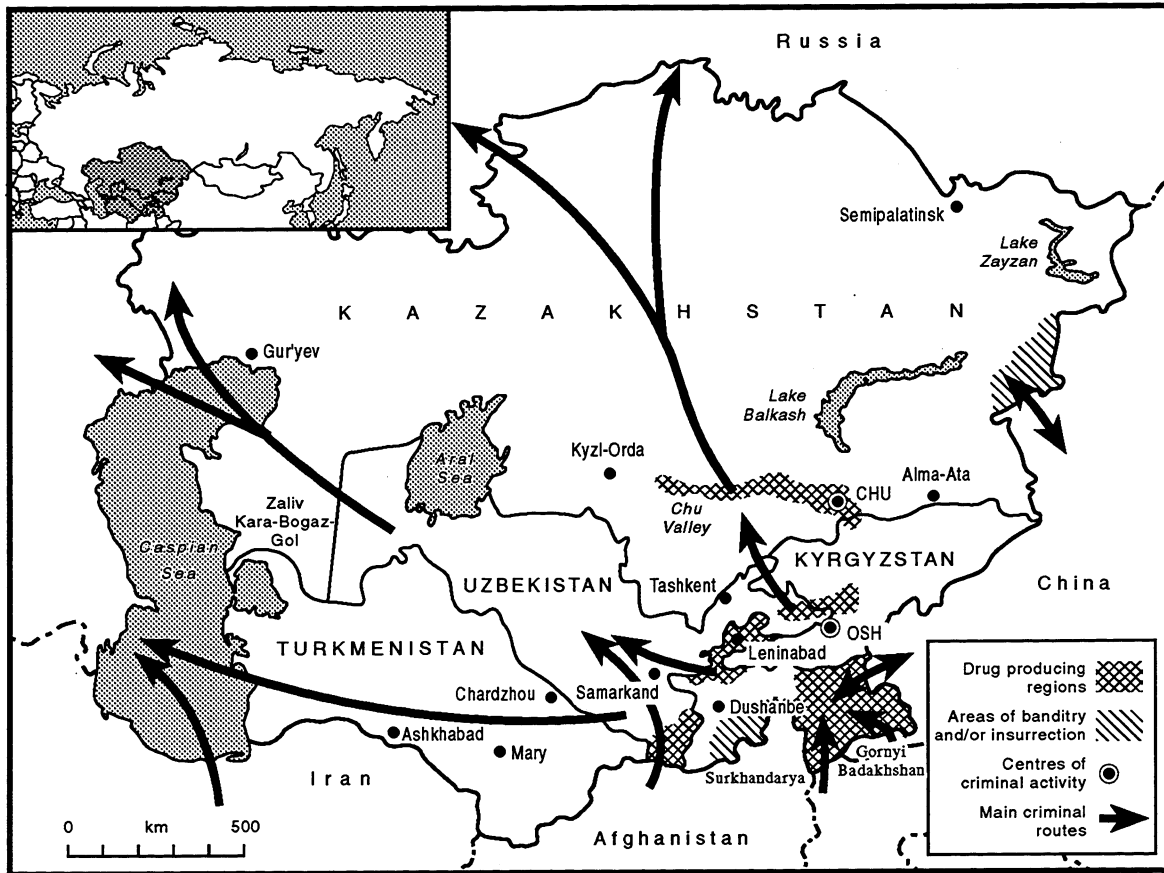
Corruption is widespread, and hard to combat when not only has it deep roots in traditions of rule but it pervades the very structures of law enforcement. In Kazakhstan, for example, 1995 has seen particular attention being paid corruption within the legal system and the military. Judges and the courts have come under increasing pressure as a result of a widespread belief in their venality. Most recently, the Deputy Prosecutor of East Kazakhstan was convicted on a series of corruption charges, while in the first seven months of the year, 15 judges had disciplinary proceedings instituted against them. President Nazarbaev has even alleged that there is an informal competition under way to secure the largest bribes! An independent opinion poll found only 15% of respondents prepared to express general approval with the behaviour of the courts, reflecting a general decay in public belief in the legal system. As regards the military, illegal sales of arms and equipment abroad led to the arrest of a number of officials, including Deputy Defence Minister Major General Valeryi Satbaev, who was sentenced to eight years imprisonment for his part in a fraud worth US\$2 million.

Kyrgyzstan's President Akayev has similarly placed particular emphasis upon the need combat corruption. He has associated himself closely with this campaign he announced the crack-down in a speech to regional police chiefs on 6 July 1995 which was broadcast live and he used presidential decrees to dismiss a series of highly placed officials. The first target of the campaign was corruption and embezzlement within the government and civil service. Several senior figures came under serious investigation, in particular within the Ministry of Transport. The minister,

Sample prices as 100kg of opiates travel from Osh to Moscow

Production: sold to wholesaler	Distribution: dealt through traffickers	End sale: street prices via pushers
Osh	Samarkand	Moscow
US\$ 500-700	US\$ 1,000-1,500	US\$ 11,000-12,000

Source: *Stolichnoe obozrenie*, 15 June 1995



Madybek Oblesov, was sacked in July, accused of presiding over an institutionalised operation to divert ministry funds to buying property for senior officials which in total embezzled 4,432,000,000 soms from the budget. Vyacheslav Zvekov, director of Kyrgyz railways, was then dismissed for authorising the use of trains for private transport contracts and barter trades.

The second main target of the campaign was businesses accused of bribery or tax evasion. A Presidential Decree issued on 11 August described this last as “one of the most widespread forms of crime” and “a direct threat to the economic security of the state.” The directors of the *Kant* petrochemicals supply company and the *Sokoluk* Trade Machinery works were dismissed and charged with tax evasion, while the heads of three further joint-stock companies were accused of the same. In the most high-profile case, the cabinet was forced to consider the dismissal of Kamchibek Kudayberenov, president of *Kyrgyzneft* (Kyrgyz oil). The situations in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are no worse than elsewhere in the region, although they have received greater attention as a result of the Presidents’ personal campaigns. Instead, they

illustrate the pervasive nature of corruption within the new Central Asian polities.

The Politicisation of Policing

A particular problem has been the extent to which there is no concept of law and policing as being separate from party – and personal – politics. Again, the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and illuminative.

In March 1995 President Nazarbaev established a cross-ministerial ‘headquarters’ to launch a new law and order campaign. This campaign proved primarily driven by domestic politics, though, reflecting both a fear that criminality could widen the division between the country’s north and south and the President’s increasingly personal grip on power. It thus had little correspondence to the problems facing the country. With its high-profile deployment of police on the streets, and yet a continued reduction in the resources available to the investigations branch, it led to a small reduction in street crime and further arrests of drug users, but did little to attack organised crime and their drug pushing networks. Even the new anti-corruption drive looks more populist than serious, while the

programme has little to offer regarding the North-South problem. Indeed, it may serve to worsen the situation: recent promotions have seen ethnic Kazakhs appointed to important police posts in the north. As the security forces are further paramilitarised, this might reverse the existing approach of keeping policing in the north relatively low-key so as to avoid antagonising the Russians.

Overall, President Nazarbaev has consistently sought to use law and order as an issue with which both to justify his campaign to turn Kazakhstan into a presidential state and also to consolidate his personal control over the internal security forces, including the National Security Committee, the political police agency. In February 1994, Nazarbaev established a Council for Combating Crime, largely out of his own staff's Law and Order Department. Having been presented as a consultative body, though, this council became steadily more powerful. In August, a presidential decree called for a reduction of central and local police and procuracy staffs of 15-25%, and this was used as the basis for a purge of office-holders deemed inefficient or independent-minded and a reshuffle in favour of presidential protégés.

When, following his dissolution of parliament, Nazarbaev took the final step of establishing this "nation-wide anticrime headquarters", it brought together the Ministries of the Interior, Justice and Defence and the Prosecutor-General under his direct personal control, with State Councillor (and trusted henchman) Kairbek Suleymenov handling day-to-day operations. The high-profile campaign, with its round-the-clock police patrols on airports, railway stations and markets, was essentially a piece of political theatre to convince the public of the new order's strength and determination. More significant, though, was the creation of new, mobile

police rapid-response forces, with sweeping powers and extensive budgets. Uniting elements from local and central police forces, as well as internal security and army assets, these units thus fall outside the normal chain of command and are essentially controlled by the president's new 'headquarters'.

As in Kazakhstan, though, it is hard to escape the suspicion that President Akayev's campaign in Kyrgyzstan is essentially a political gambit. It is significant that so far most cases have been dealt with by Presidential decree and public indictment rather than simple arrest. It has been claimed that this is to bypass lengthy and often difficult legal procedures. The presidential administration has also suggested that the courts are too corrupt to be relied upon to try such rich and powerful men. It does mean that Akayev can act without needing to prove just cause.

After all, high-profile campaigns against corruption are nothing new to Kyrgyzstan. Akayev launched one in November 1993, encouraged a smaller-scale purge of the Kyrgyz National Bank in May-June 1994 and called for a "war on corruption" in September 1994. This campaign has been presented as above all driven by the need to protect the government budget and the new Kyrgyz economy from corruption, monopolism and fraud. The campaign can provide a scapegoat for Kyrgyzstan's economic problems, including recent sharp rises in prices. These were blamed upon the machinations of a shadowy cabal of criminal gangs and corrupt officials who, in Akayev's view, control a tenth of the national economy, with an annual turnover of 371,000,000 soms (9% of GDP). The government claimed that whereas seasonal factors and the country's general economic state would have led to 5-10% inflation in the first 6 months of 1995, the

<i>Extranational Populations</i>		
<i>Who?</i>	<i>How many?</i>	<i>Where?</i>
Kazakhs	c. 800,000	Uzbekistan
	c. 1,000,000	China
Tajiks	c. 1,000,000	Uzbekistan
	c. 2,000,000	Afghanistan
Uzbekistan	c. 600,000	Kyrgyzstan
	c. 1,100,000	Tajikistan
	c. 1,200,000	Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey
Source: CSRC, <i>Central & Eastern Europe: today and tomorrow, 1995/96</i> (Carmichael and Sweet: 1995).		

40% hike in petrol prices and 30% increase in sugar and bread prices were the result of such 'sabotage'.

The campaign has also reaffirmed presidential power. One striking aspect of the campaign has been not so much the new vigour with which President Akayev acted so much as the apparent trouble he had enforcing his writ. The Kyrgyz constitution, after all, provides the president with sweeping powers of dismissal and investigation. Although he first demanded the resignation of Oblesov in a public speech in July 1995, he had to wait over a month before being able to force the transport minister's dismissal. While there is no evidence of any serious attempts to oust Akayev, he has clearly become concerned at the erosion of his power. His claim in his speech that "*criminal structures are directly merging with the state authority*" thus represents a rationale for a bid to reconcentrate power in his hands. Whether or not the dismissal of Oblesov is a blow for law and order, for example, it has allowed Akayev to replace him with Toktorbek Adykeyev, a political ally.

More generally, the campaign has also been intended to provide a vindication of the president's personal moral legitimacy. In 1994, Akayev's brother-in-law allegedly received credits from the National Bank in excess of a million dollars, which were never repaid. The case was dropped. In April 1995, Defence Minister Murzakan Subanov and Zafar Khakimov, Minister for Labour and Social Protection, were both charged with benefiting from their office, Subanov for pocketing proceeds from the sale of military surplus through the *Kanat* project, Khakimov for diverting state credits. Khakimov was found guilty, but allowed to retain his job by repaying the missing money. No attempt was made to deprive him of the profits the money had earned him while was in his hands. Khakimov bought his survival by sacrificing his deputy, Tabald Moldobayev, despite the fact that the initial allegations made no mention of him. In all these cases, investigation were held in closed session or run by the National Security Committee, which is closely controlled by the president.

Civil Wars, Regionalism and Irredentism

Boundaries drawn largely by colonial diktat, a nomadic tradition and the legacy of a policy of deliberate ethnic miscegenation in order to divide and rule raise the prospect of irredentism and

border tensions. Along with the presence of large extranational populations, this eases and encourages cross-border crime.

A constant problem in Kazakh politics is the divide between the more industrialised north, home to a dominant ethnic Russian population, and the Kazakh south. President Nazarbaev has proven very able in reconciling the demands of both populations, yet there is evidence to suggest that crime is both undermining his efforts to keep Kazakhstan together and a reflection of this national cleavage. Organised criminal groups in the north, predominantly made up of ethnic Russians, are establishing alliances with Russian gangs or, in some cases, proving simply to be local branches of them. In particular, Cossack political groupings campaigning for the transfer of the region to Russia have diversified into criminal activity. In doing so, they have come into conflict with ethnic Kazakh gangs. Nikolai Gunkin, for example, head of the Alma Ata-based *Semirechye* Cossack organisation, has been accused of running a smuggling ring in cooperation with Cossack gangs from Ekaterinburg.

The civil war in Tajikistan is essentially clan-based. The main contenders are the Khodzhen (Leninabad) clan in the north, the Kulyab clan in the south and the Badakhshanis of the east. The numerous smaller clans of the centre and the Kurgan-Tyube clan in the south-west tend to shift their allegiance as the tides of battle dictate. They have no lack of resources with which to prosecute this seemingly endless war. Even though in 1994 some 24 armoured vehicles and 1,000 firearms were voluntarily surrendered to the authorities, there are still some 15,000-20,000 illegally-owned firearms in circulation. As has happened in Yugoslavia, warlords and militias have turned to crime – and drugs in particular – to finance their wars, until this lucrative 'means' becomes an 'end' all in itself.

There is also a regional dimension to the cotton smuggling which is second only to the drugs trade in Tajikistan's criminal economy, and which has links with its much more powerful counterparts in Uzbekistan. According to official sources, in the first half of 1995, smugglers tried to take 3,500 tonnes of cotton out of the country, although this figure is based on seizures and almost certainly understates the situation. Nonetheless, it represents a 400% increase. A 'cotton mafia', largely based in the cotton-growing regions of the north, has been accused of being behind a recent series of attacks

on local leaders and customs officials, including Abdulmalik Solehov, a member of parliament and the governor of Shahrinav district.

Regional Summary

- **Kazakhstan.** In the main, Kazakhstan's situation is perhaps closest to that of Russia and Ukraine. In common with all post-Soviet states, Kazakhstan has a serious criminal problem, although less debilitating than that of many of its neighbours. Although still growing, the crime figures have shown a trend towards deceleration, from a 15% rise in 1992, through 10% in 1993 and 8% in 1994. Preliminary figures for 1995 suggest a figure of around 5-6%. Overall figures, though, mask specific problems of drugs, corruption and thus the rise of organised crime. Ironically, Kazakhstan has become a victim of its relative success in piloting the transition to capitalism. Deputy Procurator Anatolii Konstantinov has warned that "*organised crime is literally shattering the state*", noting in particular the extent to which the police and security agencies were becoming suborned by crime syndicates. Not only are there numerous indigenous gangs, but the country's stability has encouraged groups from elsewhere in Central Asia (notably, illegal drugs syndicates) to use it as a base and treasury. A particular problem is to be found in the north of the country, where ethnic Russians are linking up with far larger and more powerful gangs in Russia itself, and in the far south-east, where links with Chinese criminal groupings have developed in the past few years. Nevertheless, all this needs to be put into context. A start has been made in cleansing the government of corruption and the economy is healthier than expected a year ago. This is a crime-ridden state, yet one which is still functional.
- **Kyrgyzstan.** Kyrgyzstan has made great progress towards developing a free market and democratic institutions, yet of all the Central Asian states, it is perhaps least able to fund its security forces. In part, this has led to a willingness to consider unorthodox ways of supplementing state revenue (including legalising opium poppy growing) as well as a concentration of police efforts on a few, key objectives. Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan runs the risk of ignoring a growing criminal presence which could derail its transition to a mixed-market democracy.
- **Tajikistan.** Arguably the most artificial of the Moscow-constructed Soviet republics, Tajikistan has been torn by civil war since 1992 as different constituent clans compete for power. This has led to a near collapse of law and order. The crime rate doubled in the first quarter of 1993 alone, with the number of murders increasing nine-fold and ten times as many armed robberies. That year, there were perhaps twenty armed organised crime groups in operation, as well as numerous smaller and less sophisticated gangs. In response, the government rushed through a series of draconian penalties, for drugs-related crime in particular, and expanded the police force. Most of these new police officers, though, have been occupied with the operations against political opponents and have become paramilitary militias. With scarce resources available for the detection and apprehension of criminals, many of the new laws and penalties remain unused.
- **Turkmenistan.** Of all the Central Asian states, Turkmenistan appears the quietest, though to a large extent this reflects the way the government has reached a level of understanding with local interests, closing its eyes to a certain level of criminality so long as it does not become too serious or pose a political threat. When, in 1993, it became clear that Interior Minister Serdar Charyarov had been protecting one gang for three years, for example, this broke the accord. Charyarov was dismissed and the gang, which had used his patronage to expand beyond 'permissible' limits, was rounded up. There is moderate low-level criminality, although most of the more serious 'mafiya' activities are dominated by President Niyazov's circle or the most powerful Turkoman clans, the Maryi (who dominate the country's natural gas industry) and the Ahal-Tekke clan (which is currently dominant, allied to the president's personal following). Saparmurad Niyazov has built a Soviet-style cult of personality – which has culminated in his being awarded the grandiose title *Turkmenbashi*, 'Father of All Turkmen – within which many corrupt officials and criminal local warlords flourish.
- **Uzbekistan.** It is hard to escape the conclusion that Uzbekistan appears a state in which criminality and corruption have become

effectively institutionalised. Cartels funded by the drugs industry and privatised cotton monopolies dominate the country, with allies at the very highest levels of the government. For example, former Vice President Shukurulla Mirsaidov was sentenced to three years in prison for his part in concluding a corrupt cotton contract which cost the state US\$5.6 million. He did not have to serve out any of his sentence, though, being immediately granted a presidential amnesty.

world outweigh the advantages, while the Tajik authorities fully occupied by their civil war.

Dr Mark Galeotti is Lecturer in International History at the University of Keele, and author of *The Kremlin's Agenda* (Jane's, 1995), *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's last war* (Frank Cass, 1995) and *The Age of Anxiety* (Longman, 1995).

Conclusion

There may be some grounds for cautious optimism. Central Asian states are beginning to co-operate effectively in law-enforcement. CIS Interior Ministers continue to meet regularly and have developed regional and all-CIS fora to share intelligence. Following a summit in Erevan in October 1995, their conference was granted a status analogous to the existing Councils of Defence and Foreign Ministers. Of greater importance is the growing awareness in some states that corruption is not a harmless or necessary lubricant to the government machine, but a cancer eating at its legitimacy and very ability to govern. Nevertheless, beyond obvious problems such as a lack of resources for the police, there are three caveats to raise:

- Organised crime has become too deeply entrenched to be eliminated; at best it can be controlled and its resources and members slowly brought into the legal sector.
- Some sectors will remain prey to criminal activity. The drugs industry is too lucrative to be easy to combat, while communications routes – under-policed and packed with goods, traders and migrants – have proven valuable targets for organised bandits. In Kazakhstan, for example, Russians returning to Russia have been preyed on by criminals in militia (police) uniforms demanding tribute.
- Not all states are combating crime with the same vigour. Uzbekistan has shown itself to be tough on petty criminals, but has done little to restrict the activities of the drug and cotton godfathers and their allies and hirelings within the government. Turkmenistan is also undecided as to whether the dangers in repudiating its informal truce with the criminal