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## Drugs on the front line

*The war in Ukraine is fuelling drug use among soldiers, particularly of synthetic substances*

Kateryna (name changed) is 45 and lives in Kyiv. Her brother Bohdan (name changed), 37, has been fighting the Russian army on the front line in eastern Ukraine for over a year. In late 2023, Kateryna received a call from a hospital in Dnipro. Her brother was in the emergency room, she was told. He was alive and relatively unharmed, but hysterical. He had overdosed on methadone.

The last thing Bohdan remembers is trying to save a wounded Ukrainian soldier by stopping the bleeding with tourniquets. He understood the futility of his attempts when the soldier fell to the ground and he was left holding only the soldier's hands, which had been completely torn off from his body. Bohdan's entire unit had been wiped out in a matter of days, he would later recall. He does not remember much after that, only that he went AWOL and sought drugs to help him cope. He knew exactly what to get, who to contact and how much the drugs would cost. 'It's really easy,' he said. After all, Bohdan had used drugs before.

As indicated by the [2023 Global Organized Crime Index](#), Ukraine's synthetic drug market has seen the largest increase of any drug market in the world. Between the 2021 and 2023 Indexes, the market grew by 4.50 points, largely as a result of the war. As with alcohol, drugs have become a huge problem on Ukraine's front line, which stretches over 3 500 kilometres and is currently home to hundreds of thousands of fighters. Fieldwork by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s [Observatory of Illicit Markets and the Conflict in Ukraine](#) reveals some key points about the extent of drug use on the Ukrainian front line.

First, drug use on the front line is widespread and growing. It usually starts with active or former drug users who are drafted into the army without proper medical screening and continue to find ways to support their addiction. Ignored and ostracized in some units, these soldiers quickly gain influence in others, becoming the go-to contacts for those seeking rest and recreation. There are a number of reasons why soldiers on the front line turn to drugs. Some soldiers use drugs as a means of escapism, some use them to get some rest after several sleepless nights under constant shelling. Others are simply bored. There are also those who use drugs to stay alert – you cannot close your eyes for even a second when the enemy is just a few metres away.

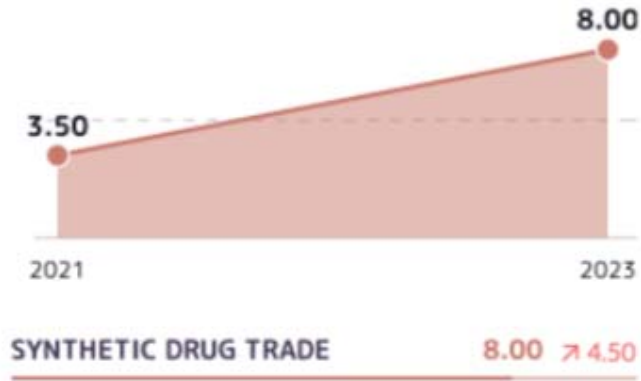
Second, the front line has become a profitable market for many people involved in the drug trade. Military personnel are paid more than the average civilian, and some troops are willing to spend the extra money on distractions – be it women, alcohol or drugs. This makes them an easy target for those involved in the drug trade – from locals growing marijuana in their backyards to organized groups looking to exploit the ‘wealthy’ fighters. These criminal groups are even moving their laboratories closer to the war zone to reduce transportation costs.

Third, there are a number of ways of transporting drugs to the front line. Small quantities are sent by post to nearby towns and villages, where they are stored for later sale. Larger quantities are often transported by volunteers – sometimes unknowingly – when they bring parcels and gifts from friends and relatives to soldiers, and by organized crime groups, who use bribes and protection from high-ranking military and police officers to get the drugs through the numerous checkpoints. Civilians are increasingly being recruited into the trade, such as taxi drivers, who help move and deliver narcotics, or even soldiers themselves, who may have old friends they can call for a cut. There are also hospitals where both legal and illegal drugs can be bought.

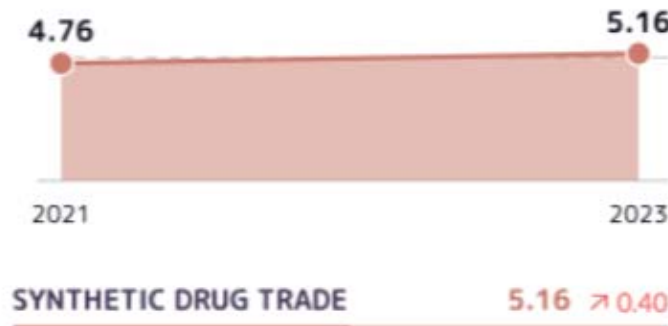
Fourth, drugs are often sold using online platforms, with the main distribution channel being the instant messaging service Telegram. The names of Telegram channels offering drug sales are written on walls and fences and outside shops. It is easy to find these channels, pay for the desired product and receive the details of the drop-off point. These days, if you are not satisfied with the product you receive, you can write a complaint or call a hotline. The system values its reputation, and it is straightforward and safe to use.

Finally, the drugs available on the front line are some of the cheapest. Heroin and cocaine have all but disappeared from the domestic market – down 1 and 2 points respectively since the [2021 iteration](#) of the Global Organized Crime Index. The most popular drug is now

cannabis, which can be found almost everywhere in Ukraine. However, synthetic drugs are on the rise and their impact is comparatively more pronounced, as evidenced by the [high score](#) for this market (8.0) in the 2023 Index, a dramatic increase from its 2021 score of 3.50. This increase of 4.50 points is particularly alarming when viewed alongside the continental average for Europe, where the synthetic drug trade increased by 0.40 between 2021 and 2023.



Synthetic drug trade, Ukraine, 2021–2023. Source: Global Organized Crime Index



Synthetic drug trade, Europe, 2021–2023. Source: Global Organized Crime Index

Methamphetamine is the most popular of the synthetic drugs. But as a forthcoming report from the GI-TOC reveals, it is rapidly losing ground to a new drug known as ‘bath salts’, which it visually resembles. This is a synthetic designer drug that is easy and cheap to produce. It is made using a highly versatile set of chemical formulas based on mephedrone. The ‘salts’ go by various names, including Alpha-PVP, Flakka, Blizzard and Lunar Wave, often based on the colour of the product. When smoked or injected, this drug can quickly cause severe physical and psychological damage. It is often mixed with other substances to make users addicted more quickly. Doctors in Kyiv told the GI-TOC of 14-year-olds brought into hospital with full-blown psychosis after just a taste of the substance. The [ongoing](#)

epidemic of suicides involving people jumping off buildings in Ukraine’s capital may also be linked to the use of ‘salts’. There are indications that these drugs are being supplied on a massive scale to the front line military, with major drug cartels such as Khimprom leading the way. The profits are enormous, so the networks are growing and spreading, involving more players and victims.

There are a number of worrying trends that are likely to exacerbate the drug situation. Not only is drug abuse on the front line increasing, but the Ukrainian government is not fully addressing the issue, with voluntary organizations and expensive private rehabilitation centres carrying most of the burden. A new law passed by the Ukrainian parliament authorizing random drug and alcohol testing of soldiers does not address the root of the problem, nor does it tackle its consequences. At the same time, Ukrainian drug cartels are becoming richer and more powerful, ramping up production and relocating not only closer to the eastern front line but also to the western border. They are also finding ways to sell their synthetic products elsewhere in Europe. The GI-TOC has even received data on Ukrainian drug groups setting up shop in neighbouring countries such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and selling their drugs there using Telegram and the darknet. The establishment of joint law enforcement efforts in Eastern and Central Europe must therefore be prioritized.

Bohdan has since been relocated to a military hospital in central Ukraine, where he is being treated for a series of physical and psychological problems. His addiction remains an unspoken issue. Kateryna says that her brother has managed to give up drugs before, but she fears that this time he will not. Drugs are the only thing that helps Bohdan forget the horrors he has seen on the front line; paradoxically, they are keeping him alive. At the hospital, he and others like him have continued to use illicit substances, but they are unwilling to reveal how they have been able to obtain them. Indeed, the hospital is packed with wounded and disabled soldiers, many of whom, having been treated for their injuries, will return home burdened by addictions. In their minds, they will still be on the front line, and they will continue to look for ways to escape the nightmare.

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This article is authored by The Observatory of Illicit Markets and the Conflict in Ukraine research team.

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**This analysis is part of the GI-TOC’s series of articles delving into the results of the Global Organized Crime Index. The series explores the Index’s findings and their**

**effects on policymaking, anti-organized crime measures and analyses from a thematic or regional perspective.**