



# A qualitative study of people who use new psychoactive substances and harm reduction services in eight countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia region

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- For the **community of people who use drugs and activists** working in the field of harm reduction and drug policy, who shared their experiences with new psychoactive substances.

# About research

- Research was conducted in partnership between the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA) and the School of Law, Swansea University, funded by **the Global Challenges Research Fund**.
- The objective - to create a more accurate picture of the use of NPS, which will subsequently be used both for political advocacy by national civil society organizations and as a contribution to the international data on the use of NPS.



# Country selection

The eight countries selected represent five distinct Eurasian sub-regions: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan **(Central Asia region)**; Georgia **(Caucasus region)**; Serbia **(South-Eastern Europe region)**; Belarus and Moldova **(Eastern Partnership neighbours)**; Lithuania and Estonia **(Baltics)**.

The study involved **desk-based research** and **structured interviews/focus groups** with **181** people who use drugs and **63** health and harm reduction service providers across the eight countries.

Interviews conducted between April 2019—December 2020.

<b>Country</b>	<b>People Who Use Drugs</b>	<b>Harm Reduction/Health Professionals</b>	<b>Sites of Interviews/Focus Groups</b>
<b>Belarus</b>	11	3	Minsk and Mogilev
<b>Moldova</b>	12	15	Chisinau and Balti
<b>Georgia</b>	23	9	Tbilisi
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	40	15	Temirtau, Karaganda, Almaty
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	20	5	Bishkek and Osh
<b>Serbia</b>	18	3	Belgrade
<b>Estonia</b>	20	5	Tallin, Tartu, Narva
<b>Lithuania</b>	22	9	Vilnius, Kaunas



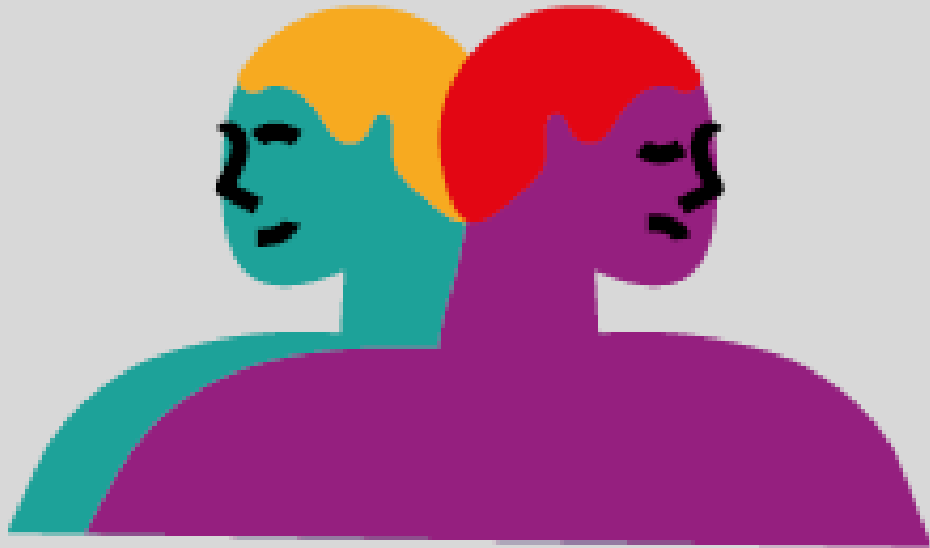
The research explored following **key topics:**

- Common types of NPS used
- Patterns of use
- Reasons for choosing to use NPS
- NPS markets, purchasing and distribution networks
- Impacts, risks, and consequences of NPS use
- Harm reduction services and NPS
- Overdoses and response
- Law enforcement and NPS

## Use of NPS

- **Prevalence of use varies** largely between countries in the region: considered low in Serbia, but predominant in Belarus, Kazakhstan.
- Mainly **synthetic cannabinoids** ('spice') and **cathinones** ('sol' | 'salts'), while Estonia and Lithuania stakeholders mentioned **synthetic opioids** ('fenta') as main category of NPS used.





## Main communities of people who use NPS in the EECA region

Two predominant groups:

- **Young people** (15-30 years of age) with no prior history of drug consumption.
- **Experienced** (and often older) people who have used traditional drugs (mainly opioids, such as heroin, fentanyl, or homemade opioid derivatives).

Other communities mentioned:

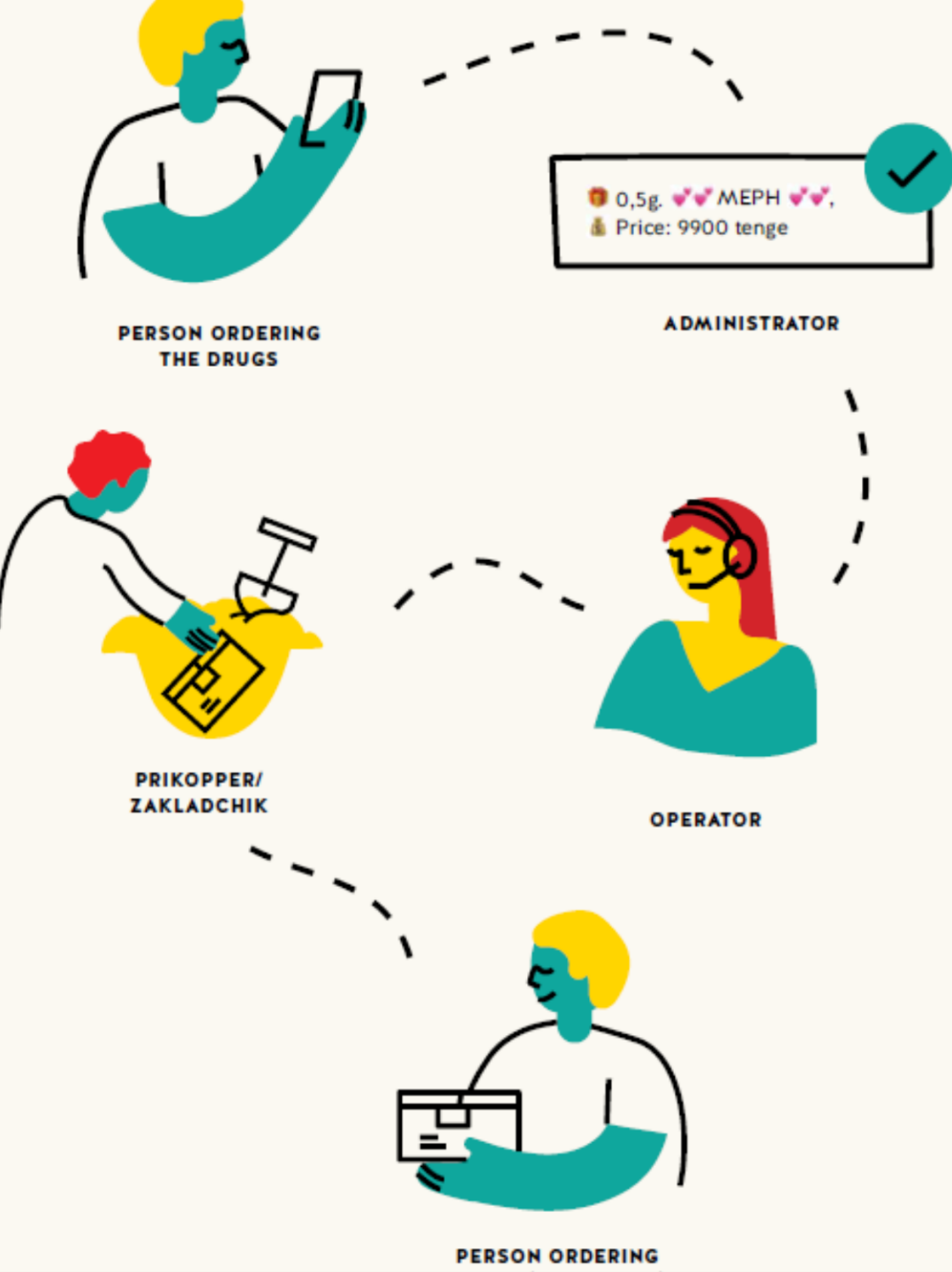
- People engaging in **long episodes of sex**
- **Sex workers** to better perform and cope
- **Incarcerated** persons



# Drivers for use of NPS in the EECA region

- Unavailability, bad quality, or high price of drug of choice
- Unintended use
- Context-driven motives (NPS difficult to detect in blood or urine)
- Consumer benefits, aggressive marketing, and innocent reputation of NPS
- Intentional use of NPS to enhance (sexual) performance
- Youth subculture (rebellious against traditions and other generations)

# NPS Market in the EECA Region



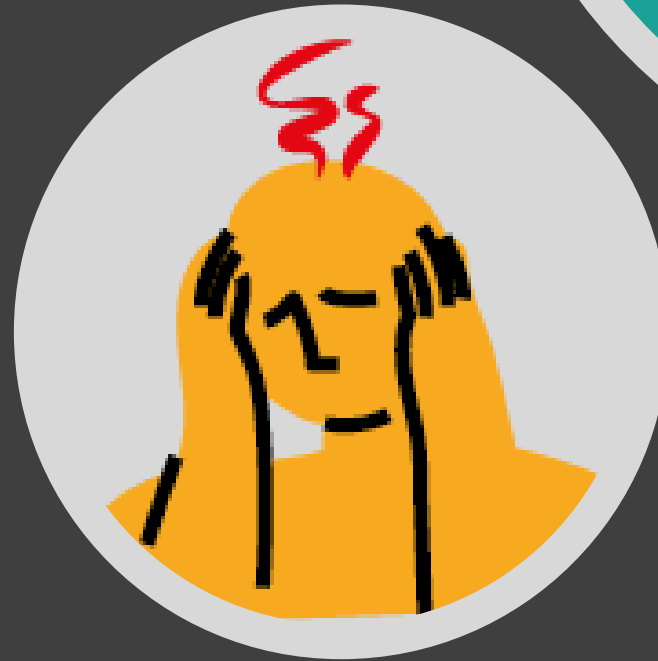
QR-codes and links to internet platforms (Hydra/Telegram) painted on walls of public buildings

Aggressive marketing in social media channels (Whatsapp, Telegram, Viber)

Street-level dealers (considered less risky in some countries, compared to internet sourcing)

# Risks and consequences of NPS use

- Unknown content of the substance (e.g. risk of overdosing, 'mismatch' with medication or medical conditions, or experiencing unexpected effects)
- Mental health issues (e.g. feelings of paranoia and depression, and psychotic episodes during and after consumption)
- Increased risk of transmission of HIV and HCV caused by multiple and unsafe injection practices
- Increased risk for contracting an STD caused by unsafe or unprotected sex





## Available treatment and harm reduction services for people who use NPS

- In the EECA region, no specific drug treatment is available for people with dependency issues from NPS use
- Existing treatment and harm reduction services remain focused on treatment of dependencies related to traditional substances (opioids)
- Clinical protocols exist in some countries, but not known whether they are used
- Registration in Narcological Register barrier in access to treatment



## Identified gaps in treatment and harm reduction and needs by communities of people who use NPS

- Need for low-threshold possibilities to analyse substances, to know the content (drug checking services)
- Need for harm reduction services to provide services related to use of NPS (Smoking paraphernalia (foils, pipes, etc.; additional materials for safer injecting and vein care; peer support; rights-based training; accurate NPS information; changes in service access
- Need for evidence-based information on NPS

# Outputs



Webinars on NPS



Report on NPS in Moldova



Report on NPS in Georgia



Report on NPS in Serbia



Report on NPS in Estonia



Regional report on NPS use



Report on NPS in Belarus



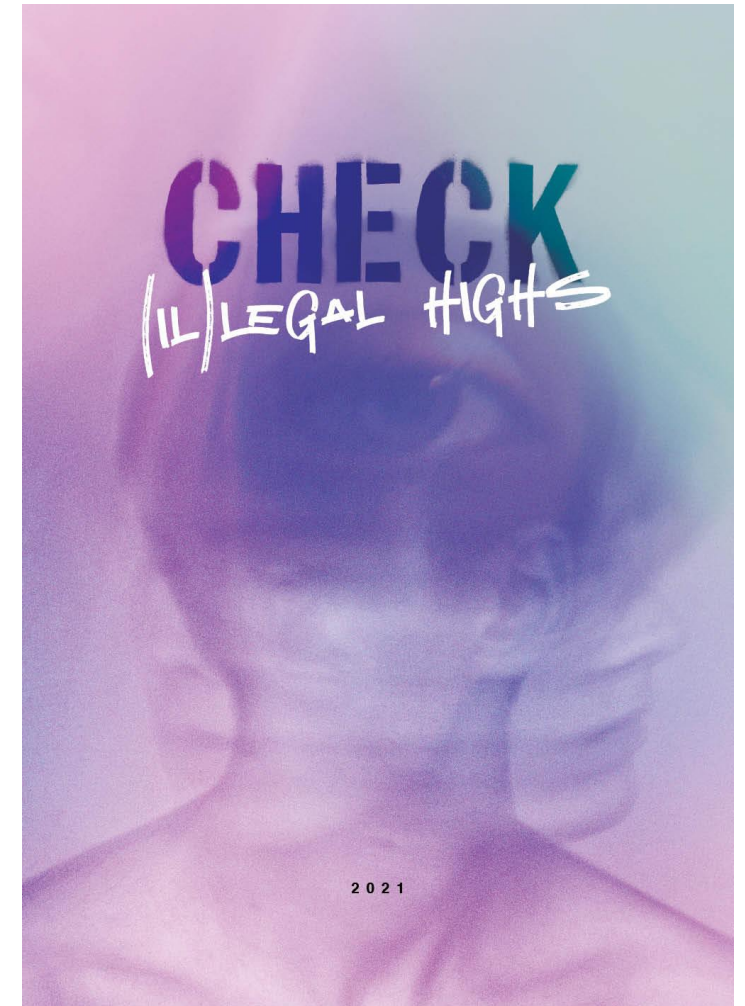
Report on NPS in Kazakhstan



Report on NPS in Kyrgyzstan



Report on NPS in Lithuania



# Changes in the region

- Development of **Clinical protocols** for the treatment of people with synthetic cannabinoid or synthetic cathinone dependency.
- Development of **harm reduction package** for NPS users (Moldova, Kazakhstan), **mental health services** (Kyrgyzstan)
- **Online peer counselling**
- **More regional researches** and **focus** on this issue:
  - UNODC researches on People Who Use NPS/Stimulants: Basic Needs and Barriers in Access to HIV Related Medical and Social Services in Moldova, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan
- **Emoji workshop** in EECA region - online communication among people who use drugs 🌈 ☁️ 🙄
- **Regional online platform/ website:** [nps-info.org](https://nps-info.org)



# THANK YOU!

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More information about NPS in EECA region:

<https://harmreductioneurasia.org/harm-reduction/new-psychoactive-substances>