

The main characteristics of the Romanian illegal drug markets

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Abstract

Narcotics trade has known a real transformation over time, which is also due to the great influence of globalization. Placed among the most profitable businesses in the world, the illegal drugs market has evolved very much on the Romanian territory in the last years. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the current situation of Romanian illicit drugs market, the symbiosis between supply and demand, the general prices of the main drugs, as well as the consumption problem and transit routes. Based on theoretical aspects, on recent surveys and investigation launched by UNODC, EMCDDA and ANA, the article provides some relevant answers regarding the Romanian illicit drugs market. Compared to the European countries, Romania remains a small costumer, cannabis and SNPP being the most consumed drugs among young people. Despite the political and economic situation, Romanian authorities are better prepared, a position that may help in dealing with further drug changes.

Keywords: drug trafficking, the Balkan Route, SNPP, cannabis, drug prices

JEL classification: E26

1. Introduction

Globalization has led the world to amazing developments, especially in technology, business area, the quality of workforce in the past decade, but despite all these growth factors, the other side is also recognized, the side where the international arena is placed in front of several new challenges like drug trafficking, human and weapons trafficking, oil smuggling and so on, challenges that are defined as strong diseases of our society.

In this context, illegal commercial activities have experienced a significant growth over time especially due to drug trafficking, the benefits and advantages offered by trade globalization being transformed into key points, like

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easy transportation, fast financial transactions or technological innovations, which on the other hand facilitated the access of organized crime networks across the borders. Furthermore, it is subtly suggested that the illegal drug trade will never end, and the market itself will always be linked to terrorism financing and the spread of AIDS. Without any constraint, this is not a small enemy of our modern society but a real monster that continues to grow fast enough to be considered a big business of our days. Source of billions of dollars, determined by the balance between profitability and large risks, the trafficking of drugs is definitely an unlawful process by which the main narcotic drugs such as cocaine, cannabis, opium, hallucinogens, amphetamines, barbiturates, tranquilizers, crack, ecstasy, ketamine, or other ethno-botanical plants known as SNPP or „legal highs” that, in the case of Romania, presented a serious increase among the young population after 2007, are easily produced, distributed and consumed outside scientific and medical control¹.

In recent years, illegal drug trafficking saw an unprecedented escalation in Romania due to the particular context of the markets liberalization or the movement of people and as a result of extending the phenomenon on new areas, both among producers and consumers. Assessments carried out show that Romania is mainly a transit area and only a part of the quantity of these drugs remains here for consumption. Meanwhile, Romania has become also a storage area, where drugs entered especially through the southern border are stored in different periods and are finally directed towards highly-consuming countries in Western Europe (Caunic, Prelipcean and Suciu, 2010, p.10).

The purpose of this article is mainly exploratory and is intended to address the issues of illegal drugs in Romania. Its aim is to provide some relevant answers regarding drug trafficking, supply and demand, the problem of consumption as well as the general prices of drugs on the underground Romanian market. Based on the current reports launched by UNODC, EMCDDA, and ANA, the paper pays special attention to the economic and sociologic dimensions in order to provide a basis for further study into illegal markets.

2. Romania - an active segment of the northern Balkan Route

Labelled as a complex enterprise estimated at more than \$300 billion a year (Sarrica, 2002, p.5), with a loyal customer who stands first in the image of the United States as one of the biggest consumers, followed closely by Europe, the illicit drug market is represented by an efficient mechanism connected with the world's main exporters of cocaine, located especially in Latin America

¹ See, Popa S. (2011), *România, țară de vise. Cu cât a crescut consul de droguri, din 2007 până acum*, accessed on February 2011, at www.adevarul.it/stiri/actualitate/romania-tara-vise-crescut-consumul-droguri-2007-acum.

(Columbia, Peru and Bolivia) with the best known suppliers of opium from Asia, that are recognized under the name of Golden Triangle and Golden Crescent countries (Burma, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Laos and Thailand), and the world's biggest distributor of cannabis, Morocco and Mexico (Biswas, n.d, p.20).

The existence of criminal networks in the wider South-Eastern European region has become a real issue for the economic and political environment of the European Union. Two primary routes that are used to smuggle heroin – the Balkan Route in the South-Eastern Europe, and the Silk Route on Central Asia – have currently been identified; also, the European authorities concluded that Balkan countries – Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia & Herzegovina – remain the major transit points and the main channels used by narcotics traffickers to move Afghan heroin and opium from Central Asia to destinations around Western Europe, an activity facilitated primarily by unstable political systems as well as by weak and corrupt institutions. By contrast, Romania is considered to be vulnerable to illegal flows of drugs, but is however an active segment of the northern Balkan Route that runs from Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania to Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and Germany (Michaletos, 2011).

The Balkan Route to Western and Central Europe started from Afghanistan, and continued with the Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey and South-East European countries. Generally based on traditional trade routes, and viewed under various branches, the illegal West transportation is actually a vicious circle and a widely used artery that carries high purity Afghan heroin and opium into every important market in Europe.

Historically, the Balkan route is the main overland connection between Asia and Europe. Every year, this route is taken by about 2 million lorries, 300,000 coaches and 6 million cars, without counting the domestic motorway traffic (Michaletos, 2012). The most common way to transport heroin is in relatively small quantities of 10 to 150 kilos hidden in a lorry. Considering the scale of legitimate commercial trade on the Balkan route, combined with the fact that it takes some hours up to a whole day to search a lorry, it is virtually impossible to counteract these activities through ordinary police and customs methods. For example, it is estimated that roughly only one out of 50 lorries is actually checked at the borders of most South-Eastern European countries (Michaletos, 2012).

Starting with 1990, a series of factors such as the geographical setting, the opening of the state borders and last but not least, the military conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia have turned Romania into an active segment of the “Balkan Route” for drug trafficking and precursors and in the past years, into a drug market (ANA, 2005-2012, chapter III).

An important gateway to the west, a powerful link between Orient and Occident and a transit point characterized by the European boom of tourism, Romania is considered to be one of those vital spots of action and important pillars of the Balkan Route. Given its location straddled between Europe and Asia, Romania acts as a Northern transit route for heroin trafficking, brought mainly from Iran and Turkey, by trucks, trains or buses. Therefore, being an active segment of the Balkan route, Romania comes together in a first phase with Turkey, Bulgaria, Austria, Holland and Great Britain. The second phase is given by the Eastern side of Romania, at the Moldavian border, where drugs are provided through Ukraine and then moved forward to Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, finally to be consumed by the entire European market.

A major quantity of narcotics crosses the North and East of Romania, but at the same time a hot spot is located at the Southern border with Bulgaria. Various transportation methods are used by drug traffickers, such as land transportation divided in both cargo and passenger vehicles or by the sea, which is a very common channel for the Romanian corridor, because it is usually helped by the advantages that the Black Sea and port of Constanta offer through commercial maritime ships. Including this maritime section, a new variant of the Balkan Route is created which starts in the metropolitan and cultural capital of Turkey, Istanbul, via Constanta, Bucharest and ends in Hungary.

Romania is targeted generally by international networks specialized in drug trafficking due to its geographical position, its population size and its economic and political climate which suffered serious changes in time, changes that are also reflected in the increase of criminality. At the first time, the strengths points that Romania showed to organized crime, to move forward this kind of drugs is due to west proximity and European laws. Despite this, Bucharest became an important business center with international airports that facilitated on the other hand, the organized crime activity. As a European capital with approximately 3 millions of inhabitants, described usually as a mix of culture, foreign investors, and nightlife, Bucharest helped to increase drug consumption both within Romania and outside its borders, in the last period.

Illegal drug trafficking both at the international and street level, in addition to drug addiction, began and developed in Romania as a result of a number of favorable internal and external factors and conditions (Drăgan, 1998, p.12):

- excellent geographic position, gate to European markets and member of the European Union since 2007;
- a useful bridge between Orient and Occident for commercial transports and touristic expansion;
- important country situated in the middle of the main traditional routes used very often by drug traffickers and narcotic dealers;

- the rights and liberties won by Romanian nationals following the 1989 Revolution; among these, the most important include free traffic and the opening of borders (Drăgan,1998, p.12);
- the unexpected growth of legal and illegal arrivals of foreigners, especially after the Revolution, in the education and business field;
- a major development of trade, achieved at border points, a fact that raised awareness among the authorities control;
- the lack of legislation in this field, the lack of technical tools needed to detect drugs, the relatively low number of specialists within Police Administration, Security border and also in the medical field which unfortunately are not prepared yet to manage the volume of narcotics that cross the country;
- a serious poor training of government institutions who have failed until this moment to release relevant solutions to fight against these phenomena, a whole system that was damaged due to corruption amongst its members;
- social and economic problems generated by deep changes within society (Drăgan,1998, p.13);
- increasing drug use among young population due to curiosity, overreaction and lack of knowledge concerning the dangers of narcotics abuse;
- the proliferation of terrorist networks interested in obtaining funds from illicit drug trafficking (Caunic, Prelipcean and Suciu, 2010, p.11).

The last years experience showed that new synthetic routes might emerge from the West (Holland, Belgium, Germany) Eastwards (Romania) but also from the North (the Baltic states, Ukraine) for synthetic drugs (amphetamines, MDMA, LSD and others) and might become active on the Romanian territory (ANA, 2005-2012, chapter III).

3. A short analysis of drugs consumption, seizures and trafficking in Romania

Due to limited information on trafficking routes and production of drugs in Romania, it is very hard to estimate the drug volume collected over the last period. For example, the heroin seized in European countries was mainly manufactured in Afghanistan, the hashish seized comes from Morocco, via Spain and Portugal, the supply of cocaine is basically shipped from Colombia, Mexico, Bolivia and Venezuela, and the large amounts of ecstasy and amphetamines originate in the Netherlands and Belgium (EMCDDA, 2012).

At the national level, there are several institutions charged with drug seizing in Romania: the Anti-drug service within the Romanian Police General Department, the Anti-drug Department within the National Customs Authority or

National Administration of Penitentiaries within the Ministry of Justice for prison units and DIICOT prosecutors (ANA, 2011a, p. 170). According to data provided by responsible institutions, the Romanian drug market is represented by constant prices and low purity even though there are some data which confirm the existence of a few cannabis crops, but which are not so representative as to influence the entire volume of illicit drugs.

Cocaine, cannabis and synthetic drugs (amphetamines, ecstasy, MDMA) continue to be recognized as drugs of large cities, such as Bucharest, Constanța, Timișoara, Cluj-Napoca, Râmnicu-Vâlcea, Deva, Sibiu, Iași and Brașov. With regard to the quantity of illicit drugs seized at the national level, it can be emphasized that through the DIICOT operations, the heroin volume increased from one year to another, followed by a constant growth of cannabis/ hashish and a considerable percentage in the case of amphetamines and other substances.

Considering these general aspects, little is known about drug consumption, or patterns of drug use in Romania. While there is intense media interest and speculation, studies of drug use are extremely rare or extremely specific in their areas of interest. In response, a project was established at the Institute for Health Services Management in Bucharest to undertake a preliminary assessment of injecting drug use in Romania. This project had the support of the United Nations International Children's Education Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Joint Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (Paleru, 1999, pp.145-146).

Obviously, from a simple drug transit country, Romania has turned out lately into a growing market of narcotics consumption, especially in terms of cannabis and "legal-highs" consumption. Considering its weaknesses, showed roughly at its borders, the Romanian territory has recently started to be used as a deposit area for drugs smuggled across the hot spots of action, and also recognized by its criminality dynamic that has suffered many changes, along with an increasing flow of different types of illicit drugs and psychoactive substances traded as "legal drugs or ethno-botanical plants". According to Hotnews, it is estimated that Bucharest gathers 18.297 permanent drug consumers with health problems, a situation that presented a slight increase in the last years². However, despite this awful number, it is considered that the Romanian capital is among those metropolitan cities of Europe with the lowest prevalence of the drug use problem.

² See Pantazi, R. (2011), *Drogurile în România: Rutele de trafic, prețurile și numărul victimelor. Sursa principală a etnobotanicelor este China*, accessed on May 2012 at www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-10703168-drogurile-romania-rutele-traffic-preturile-numarul-victimelor.htm.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, heroin has been an illicit drug associated with the highest level of drug-related problems. Most drug users taking heroin are injecting users. In 2008 and 2009, a multiplier method was used to estimate the number of problem drug users in Bucharest. The results indicated that in 2008, the number of problem drug users was between 11.855 and 32.600 (with 17.387 as a central estimate), while in 2009, it was between 16.343 and 19.464 (with 17.767 as a central estimate) (EMCDDA, 2012).

The problem of consumption is given also by the general characteristics of the drug user, which are reflected in the image of socially integrated young people with a good financial situation that lean towards different combinations of substances. Also, on this segment, a favorable location for drug dealers has transformed rapidly this country into a small collector of all kinds of narcotics, from cannabis, usually available in the forms of hash and marihuana (a substantial supply predominant in Europe and originating in Morocco, moves forward to the European center markets of Spain and Netherlands) to heroin that is made on the basis of opium poppies that are mainly produced in two areas: the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent.

Regarding the entire picture of illegal drug consumption, it is necessary to point out that more than half of the general population has heard at least once in their life about cannabis - 77,9%, cocaine - 89%, ecstasy - 59% and heroin - 91,1% (ANA, 2005-2008, p.12).

3.1. The cannabis position on the Romanian black market

Cannabis is the illicit drug most widely available in Europe, where it is both imported and produced. Both in herbal and resin forms, the European cannabis cultivation is widespread, and appears to be increasing (UNODC, 2011). Due to its availability, cannabis remains Romania's most widely used drug, the domestic market being fuelled both by the European drug producing countries (Moldova, the Netherlands, Belgium etc), and the domestic production (an increase was noticed in the indoor crops across the country (ANA, 2010, p.107). Although Romania is not considered a drug producing country, in the last years, authorities have discovered some cannabis crops; for example, in 2011, an important cannabis laboratory was found in Bucharest³. Additionally, another derivate of cannabis, which is hashish, is generally brought from Spain in regular bus links (through carriers or packages) or by air flights, mainly low costs (ANA, 2010, p.105).

The National Report on Drugs 2011, shows that 143,09 kg, of which 80,82 kg of marijuana and 62,278kg of hashish, were seized in 2010, with 39%

³ See M.Z. (2011), *Laborator de preparare a cannabisului, în locuința unui tânăr din Capitală*, accessed on May 2012 at www.antena3.ro/romania/laborator-de-preparare-a-cannabisului-in-locuinta-unui-tanar-din-capitala-134263.html#.

less than in 2009 (ANA, 2011a, p.173). In addition, almost half of the cannabis seizures were recorded in the Central Laboratory in Bucharest and the fewest in the Territorial Laboratory in Constanta (see Table no.1).

Table 1. Cannabis seizures at the central and regional level by laboratory during 2008-2009.

Year No. of seizures		Laboratory					Total
		Central Laboratory Bucharest	Regional Laboratory in Cluj	Regional Laboratory in Iasi	Regional Laboratory in Constanta	Regional Laboratory in Timisoara	
2008	Cannabis	274	155	105	41	21	596
	Cannabis resin	261	131	65	36	13	506
2009	Cannabis	328	178	128	59	84	777
	Cannabis resin	207	173	42	108	64	594

Source: Drug Analysis and Profiling Central Laboratory, IGRP

Furthermore, cannabis is consumed in all country regions, Bucharest being situated on the first place with 3,8%, followed by Transylvania with 2,8% and Oltenia with 2,1% (ANA, 2011a, p.11). Also, the preference for cannabis on the Romanian market shows a real discrepancy between the other types of illegal drugs, such as cocaine, heroin, ecstasy or SNPP (see Table no.2).

Table 2. Number of seizures and seized amounts by type of drugs, on the period 2006-2010

Drugs	2006		2007		2008		2009		2010	
	Seizure s	Amoun t	Seizure s	Amoun t	Seizure s	Amoun t	Seizure s	Amoun t	Seizure s	Amoun t
Heroin (kg)	642	32.636	984	129.9	1.055	385.23	1.038	85.046	962	108.19
Cocaine	36	10.714	62	46.695	91	3.91	103	1.282.9	72	2.57
Marijuana	276	1116.9	412	6.31	596	208.66	777	198.59	986	80.82
Hashish	145	10.097	338	2114.7 2	506	33.42	594	37.01	321	62.278
Synthetic drugs (pills)	94	17314	168	29280	225	55.455	58	12.730	80	3.709
LSD(sample s)	5	59	3	9	n.d	71	18	308	3	19

Source: Central Laboratory for Drug Analysis and Profiling-IGRP

Unfortunately, cannabis remains the most consumed illicit drug (1,6%) by Romanians citizens with age between 15-64, followed by ecstasy (0,7%), heroin

(0,3%) and cocaine (0,3%)⁴. Table no.2. highlights the extended availability of cannabis, competed only by heroin, while cocaine and synthetic drugs are less available, due to their scarcity on the market, to the current government laws, or because are very expensive.

The selling price of cannabis (wholesale and retail), has not shown significant variations in the last years. As Table no.3 describes, the wholesale price continues to be stable for cannabis, while the retail price presents minor variations on the sale market. Compared to heroin or cocaine, cannabis is an accessible drug especially among young people, regarding its price, and production channels.

Table 3. The wholesale and retail price of cannabis during 2009-2010

Type of drug	2009		2010	
	Wholesale price (Euro/kg)	Retail price (Euro/g)	Wholesale price (Euro/kg)	Retail price (Euro/g)
Hashish (cannabis resin)	4.000-7.000	15-20	4.000-7.000	14.25-19
Cannabis herbal (marijuana)	2.000-5.000	10-20	2.000-5.000	9.5-19

Source: Table adapted from EMCDDA, 2011, and ANA 2011

3.2. Heroin, cocaine and ecstasy - luxury drugs of the Romanian underground market

Despite the cannabis situation, heroin, cocaine and ecstasy are considered illegal drugs of large cities and university centers. Associated in general with public health and social problems, heroin accounts the greatest share of morbidity and mortality related to drug use (EMCDDA, 2011, p.72). Brought mainly from Afghanistan producers, the heroin seized in Romania is intercepted very often in the port of Constanta, a hot spot linked with the important actor on the global heroin market, which is Turkey.

With Iran as a starting point, opium is introduced in Romania in small amounts for the use of the Iranian community in our country. Opiate trafficking in Romania is influenced by the location of our country on a section of the Balkan route and close to the Black Sea Northern route as well as by the presence of crime groups connected with drug production or destination countries to which they pertain in most cases as well as to Iranian ethnics (ANA, 2010, p.105).

⁴ See *Locul României pe harta internațională a drogurilor*, accessed on May 2012, on www.semneletimpului.ro/stiri/Locul-Romaniei-pe-harta-internationala-a-drogurilor-4614.html.

Recognized in the first phase as a transit point, Romania has proved to be also a heroin consumption country, due to the help given by the Romanian citizens to organized crime to move forward significant quantities of drugs, a fact which enabled those "drug leaks" on the black market. Over time, Romanian authorities have faced different problems regarding heroin transportation, usually performed by cars registered here, and offered then as a payment to those persons which carry this type of drugs across the Romanian borders⁵. Considered as a spot of action, with the traditional Balkan route behind, this country continues to play a decisive role in heroin trafficking. Due to its geographic location, great amounts of heroin produced in East cross Romania towards Western Europe.

The heroin amounts seized at the national level was estimated at 108.19 kg in 2010, more than in 2009 when 85.046 kg were seized (ANA, 2011a, p.173. Known for its strong power, and named "the white death" due to its white powder, the price of heroin is very high as compared to the one of cannabis or ecstasy, 1 gram being equal with about 40€ (ANA, 2011a).

Table 4. The wholesale and the retail price of heroin during 2009-2010

Type of drug	2009		2010	
	Wholesale price (Euro/kg)	Retail price (Euro/g)	Wholesale price (Euro/kg)	Retail price (Euro/g)
Heroin	12.000-20.000	37-49	12.000-20.000	35.65-47.61

Source: Table adapted from EMCDDA 2011, and ANA 2011

The prevalence for heroin consumption is situated among persons with ages between 25-34 years (0,4% in 2010) and is consumed with a constant frequency by Bucharest and Ilfov citizens (1,7%) followed by West regions (0,5%) and Center regions (0,4%) citizens (ANA, 2011b).

Furthermore, the cocaine situation poses also great problems in Romania. Cocaine continues to be a drug of the large cities, without significant changes in the last years when the use of this drug was identified in Bucharest, Constanta, Timișoara, Cluj-Napoca, Râmnicu-Vâlcea, Deva, Sibiu and Brașov at a level of over 75%. (ANA, 2011a). Even so, the main market for cocaine is Bucharest with over 45%. Lately, a tendency of South-American traffickers of using the sea to transport large amounts of cocaine to Europe has been noticed. Constanța harbor is one option in the attempt to get large amounts of cocaine from South American countries to the European territory, which was also one of the reasons

⁵ See Pantazi, R. (2011), *Drogurile în România: Rutele de trafic, prețurile și numărul victimelor. Sursa principală a etnobotanicelor este China*, accessed on May 2012 at www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-10703168-drogurile-romania-rutele-traffic-preturile-numarul-victimelor.htm.

for the setup of the Service to Fight Organized Crime - Sea Ports Constanța in 2010 (ANA, 2011a, p.170).

Concentrated in three Andean countries, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, cocaine continues to be the second most commonly used illicit drug in Europe (EMCDDA, 2011). Moreover, Spain, the Netherlands and Portugal, and a part of Belgium, appear to be the main points of entry to Europe for cocaine. Within Europe, reports frequently mention Germany, France and the United Kingdom as important transit or destination countries (EMCDDA, 2011, p.63), and indirectly important suppliers of the Romanian cocaine market.

In 2010, 2.57 kg of cocaine were seized with 99,8% less than in 2009, when a record amount of 1,282.995 kg was seized on the Romanian territory (ANA, 2011a, p.173). In addition, the selling price (wholesale and retail price) presented a slight increase in 2010, compared with 2009, regarding the wholesale price (see Table no.5). Due to its reputation, cocaine is very widespread, and consumed by Romanians with ages between 15-64 years⁶.

Table 5. The wholesale and retail price of cocaine during 2009-2010

Type of drug	2009		2010	
	Wholesale price (Euro/kg)	Retail price (Euro/g)	Wholesale price (Euro/kg)	Retail price (Euro/g)
Cocaine	40.000-60.000	80-120	45.000-90.000	80-120

Source: Table adapted from EMCDDA 2011, and ANA 2011

In contrast with heroin, cocaine and cannabis, the position of ecstasy on the Romanian illegal drug market is also influenced by the movements in Western Europe, the main supplier of ecstasy. Known as a synthetic drug, along with amphetamines, ecstasy presents a high demand among Romanian drug consumers. Despite this, synthetic drugs originate in West-European countries and are destined for the Near and Middle East. Mail services, air transport and road transport (personal car) are used in synthetic drug trafficking while drug use has been mainly located in recreational settings- bars, discos, clubs (ANA, 2011b, p.171).

Bucharest continues to be on the first place regarding the ecstasy consumption with 1,3%, followed by Oltenia with 0,6% and Transylvania with 0,2% (ANA, 2005, p.12).

With a total amount of 3,709 tablets in 2010 (70.8% more than in 2009) (ANA, 2011a, p.173), the amphetamine type stimulants and derivatives are

⁶ See *Raport/ România, țara cu cel mai mic consum de droguri din UE. Italia -cel mai mare consum în ultimul an*, accessed on May 2012, at www.gazetaromaneasca.com/focus/romania/1989-raport-romania-ara-cu-cel-mai-mic-consum-de-droguri-din-ue-italia-cel-mai-mare-consum-in-ultimul-an.html.

labelled as recreational drugs, being consumed mostly by young people. Also, the selling price for ecstasy is quite accessible, being estimated at 9.5-19 €/g in 2010 (see Table no.6) presenting a slight decrease for ecstasy tablets as compared to 2009.

Table 6. The wholesale and retail price of ecstasy during 2009-2010

Type of drug	2009		2010	
	Wholesale price (Euro/kg)	Retail price (Euro/g)	Wholesale price (Euro/kg)	Retail price (Euro/g)
Ecstasy	3,700-7,500	10-20	3,560-7,130	9.5-19

Source: Table adapted from EMCDDA 2011, and ANA 2011

3.3. "Legal highs" - new psychoactive substances for Romanian drug consumers

During 2010, over 200 companies which market substances and products widely sold internationally under the generic name of "legal highs", were registered in Romania in over 400 shops, also known as "dream shops". The names of „ethnobotanical plant" or „ethnobotanical drug" are linguistic barbarisms. The correct definition for *ethnobotany* is: *the branch of botany concerned with the use of plants in folklore, religion etc.* (from the French word ethnobotanique- „ethnobotanical" used about drugs refers to the plant lore associated with shamanic, entheogenic or bio-agricultural practices). The so-called echo-drugs are plants which have been used for centuries by South and Central American populations for divination, religious rituals, and to contact supernatural forces (Gorun et al, 2011, p.75).

Overall, this new psychoactive substances have known an important expansion on the Romanian market in the last two years as emergent new derivatives. The so-called designer drugs or spice have emerged on the market with effects similar to synthetic drugs. An emerging phenomenon shows Romanian citizens are mainly used by West African networks (organized in cells interwoven on foreign territories across the world) as drug carriers between drug-production countries and different destinations (ANA, 2010, p.105).

Spice shops selling ethnobotanical plants like *Salvia divinorum*, *Mitragina speciosa*, *Amanita muscaria* and others have become very numerous in Romania, first of all because they are legal, second of all, because more and more young people are tempted to experiment new sensations. These plants can cause different psychiatric illnesses and their association with alcohol or drugs can also be fatal (Nagy et. al., 2011).

Ethno-botanical plants appeared in 2008 in Romania under the name of new legal drugs, which have raised immediately the interest of young population, causing a real phenomenon dimension in 2009 and 2010 (see Table

no.7). Not very expensive and quite accessible to every citizen, with prices starting at 35 RON for 22 euro/gram, the “legal highs” have brought with them the same old problem, a powerful addiction and the same symptoms associated with illegal drugs. Imported in large amounts from China, but also from Germany and England, this kind of dried and very flavored plants, were introduced in Romania through some courier companies, recommended by distributors as room fragrance, bath salts or more recently, as fertilizers and food supplements for pets, but behind this awful commercial mask, the customers did not hesitate to buy them as simple drugs and use them as such (ANA, 2011a).

In four years, online selling has become just one method to buy “legal drugs”: adult users could order “ethno-botanical” stuff for home delivery, buy them in the so-called “dream stores” or “smart shops”, a sort of coffee-shops – the Romanian version. The same trend was observed in other EU Member States, especially among Eastern European member states (Simionov, 2011).

Table 7. Lifetime prevalence of psychoactive substances (2004-2010)

	2004	2007	2010
SNPP - „legal highs” or „ethno-botanical plants”	-	-	2.0%
Cannabis	1.7%	1.5%	1.6%
Ecstasy	0.8%	0.3%	0.7%
Cocaine	0.4%	0.1%	0.3%
Heroin	0.2%	0.1%	0.3%
Amphetamines	0.3%		0.1%
LSD	0.2%		0.1%
Ketamine	-	-	0.1%

Source: ANA 2011

From the market point of view, the new psychoactive substances sold as “ethno-botanical plants” fall under two large categories:

- mixtures of plants and chemical substances intended for smoking – the “spice”- type products;
- mixtures of chemical powders that can be sniffed or injected - synthetic psychoactive substances that have energizing or hallucinogen effects, and are traded under different names and mixed with well-known energizers: caffeine, creatine etc (ANA, 2011a, p.43).

A large number of products designed for inhaling/smoking, branded as “spice” were detected: *Spice Silver*, *Spice Gold*, *Spice Diamond*, *Spice Arctic Synergy*, *Spice Tropical Synergy*, *Spice Egypt*, *Spice Maraciuca*, *Ganja*, *M6*, *Diesel* and *Katana* (ANA, 2011, p.176). According to a survey launched by the National Anti-Drug Agency in 2011, the main customers of this new substances

use "Spice" products (56.1%), while energizing mixtures recorded lower rates of use (43.9%) (ANA, 2011a).

The general profile of "legal highs" or SNPP consumer is built by: socially integrated young people with a good financial situation, who tend to use different combinations of substances; preferred areas of consumption, like the streets and personal home; the amount spent daily by regular users of SNPP, which ranges from 10 to 300 lei and so on (ANA, 2011a).

Genuinely attacked by the trade in the new psychoactive substances, Romania presented during 2010 a serious competition between the so-called legal drugs and illicit drugs. The National Anti-Drug Agency estimated for 2010, the following amounts of legal drugs:

- synthetic cannabinoids: 57.024 kg;
- cathinone: 50.091 kg and 324 tablets;
- piperazine: 6.506 kg and 15.094 tablets;
- pyrovalerone: 1.800 kg and 6 tablets (ANA, 2011, p.174).

To summarize, in line with legal provisions, the following amounts of drugs were destroyed only in the first semester of 2010, in Romania: 297.606 kg cannabis, 107.23 kg cannabis resin, 85.797 kg of cocaine, 522.234 kg of heroin, 218.525 kg of MDMA, 16.161 kg of amphetamines, 0.328 kg of morphine, 0.898 kg of opium, 850 tablets of barbiturates, 2.958 tablets of benzodiazepines, 30 vials of petidine, 2.451 tablets of methadone, 266 tablets of amphetamine derivates and 9.987 kg, 1.278 bags, 467 envelopes and 434 cigarettes of new psychoactive substances (ANA, 2011a, pp.173-174).

4. Conclusions

Currently, Romania is presented as a European country very vulnerable to organized crime activities running around the world. With a sick system unfortunately unprepared to deal with such a great global issue, also "helped" by institutions' indifference and corruption, Romania is certainly an easy target for crime networks, for terrorism financing, a small country that continues to feed the pocket of illicit groups' activities from South-Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Although compared to the other European countries, Romania continues to be a small customer and consumer of illicit drugs, it still holds an important role on the illegal drugs arena.

At the national level, the main trends concerning the emergence of this phenomenon are presented through:

- the unstable drug market, from large consumption of heroin and cannabis, to new drugs known as ethno-botanical plants used very often by young population;
- the surprising change regarding the trafficking routes;

- the increasing number of drug users, especially of those who prefer SNPP or legal highs;
- the spread of AIDS due to injecting users;
- the change of economic and social structure.

Despite this awful face of society, Romania is helped by specialized institutions to reduce the drug supply, to improve the equipment for drug detection, to prevent the organized crime activities, to cooperate with the state and, at the same time, to supervise Romanian drug users.

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