Drug Policy in Greece: A Balance between Enforcement and Persuasion

1. STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

At the end of the 1990s, there were more than 190 million drug users worldwide, of whom 140 million were using cannabis, 29 million amphetamines, 14 million cocaine, 9 million heroin and 4.5 million using other opiates. In the European Union, there are two to seven problematic users per 1,000 inhabitants, their total number exceeding 1.5 million. In Greece, 12.2% of the population uses or has tried narcotics, drug-related deaths have increased 4.5 times in the last decade, the number of people arrested and of prisoners has risen and the country has one of the highest hard drug user rates per 100 thousand inhabitants in the European Union.

Drug policy, like other public policy areas, reflects the way in which the political-administrative system responds to a specific (social) problem. It usually consists in a ‘compromise’ between the ‘best’ solution to improve the situation and the options that can be realised. Drug policy is an area, which the international conventions offer not only general orientations and instructions to cope with the problem but also the legal framework for participants to work within.

Drug policy is affected by several variables, the geographical location of the country, its political and economic stability, the availability of natural resources, the priority of the issue for the government and politicians – determined mostly by the visibility of the problem –, the emphasis given by the mass media, the public consciousness
and the sense of threat. Besides, historical, social factors and those relating to the
development of criminality in a country, as well as the dynamic of the interest groups,
shape these perceptions, determining, for example, whether drug control is primarily
a public health, crime law enforcement or social policy issue. Furthermore, every
attempt to improve or confront the situation may have side effects or can be neutralised
by unpredictable factors. Therefore, there are a lot of impediments for the formulation
of an effective policy. Moreover, life has shown that in social policy programmes,
ideals and desirable situations are often replaced by ‘adaptations’ in reality.

Greece has neither a tradition of drug use nor of trafficking networks. An exception
are the musicians from Asia Minor, who, after the Turkish expulsion of the
Greeks in 1922 from the region, brought the cannabis use culture to certain situa-
tions, corresponding in a way to that of jazz musicians in the USA. For their habits
the Greek authorities intensively prosecuted them. Drug use as a problem appeared
in the 1980s and gave rise, in 1987, to Law 1729 ‘for the fight against the dissemi-
nation of drugs and the protection of youth’. The law provides a definition of narcotic
substance (Article 4 para. 1, Law 1729/1987), determines the policy goals – preven-
tion, information, therapy/treatment, rehabilitation –, foresees the main institutions
for that purpose and regulates the punishment of drug use, possession and trafficking
of narcotics. In the following years additional legislation changed, reformed, and
complemented the initial text, ratifying international and European conventions as
well.

The developments show that the network of laws along with the policy they inspired,
have not succeeded in controlling the situation, while the collapse of the communist
regimes in the neighbouring Balkan countries and the unfavourable economic
conditions which followed, resulted in a massive inflow of illegal immigrants to Greece.
National conflicts, the lack of stability in the region and the absence of powerful states,
have strengthened active criminal networks and favoured the creation of new ones,
finding Greece unprepared.6 Furthermore, the strong social tissue is weakening more
and more, affecting the expansion of drug abuse to the youth.

2. METHODS OF CONTROL AND PREVENTION

Methods used for drug control are prevention and law enforcement. Law enforce-
ment in the form of repressive measures is usually associated with supply reduction,
while prevention with demand and harm reduction, and with the legalisation/regula-
tion of certain narcotic substances as well. However, the borders between them are very
thin.

The definition of narcotic substances and the intensity of drug use and abuse are
essential for the orientation of the policy followed by a country. The international
definitions of drugs have in common the harm they cause to health and the addiction
that ensues. Yet, not all injurious substances have been brought under control, and drug

in Council of Europe Member States – 1999 (Strasbourg) pp. 18–20.