

Newsletter

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Drug Policy Network South East Europe



During its annual meeting in Vienna in March 2012, the Drug Policy Network in South Eastern Europe decided to publish a quarterly Newsletter for a more regular communication between the Network organisations.

The Newsletter is prepared and published by the Diogenis Association, Drug Policy Dialogue in South East Europe.

Members of the Drug Policy Network feed into the newsletter, focusing on the following topics:

- Criminal justice
- Social and health programmes
- Human rights
- Events of interest

Each edition of the newsletter will focus on 2 or more countries.

The newsletter will be posted on the Diogenis website.

Reactions, contributions can be sent to: drugpolicy.see@diogenis.info

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Organisations of the SEE Drug Policy Network

- NGO Veza, Serbia
- Romanian Harm Reduction Network (RHRN), Romania
- Aksion Plus, Albania
- Initiative for Health Foundation (IHF), Bulgaria
- Healthy Options Project Skopje (HOPS), Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
- Juventas, Montenegro
- The "South Eastern European and Adriatic Addiction Network", SEEAN
- Udruga Terra Association, Croatia
- NGO Victorija, Banja Luka, Bosnia Herzegovina
- Association Margina, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Association Prevent, Novi Sad, Serbia
- Association DIOGENIS, Drug Policy Dialogue in SEE, Greece

ALBANIA

New National Drug Strategy

Aksion Plus has been a member of the technical working group which prepared the National Drug Strategy 2012-2016, launched on 26th June 2012, on World Drug Day. The National Drugs Strategy is drafted by a working group established upon the Order no 125 of the Prime Minister, of 9th June 2010. This working group is composed of experts from all of the institutions involved in the fight against drugs and benefits from the precious contribution of non-for-profit organisations and the expert international organizations operating in Albania.

The Strategy is based on four main areas: Strategic coordination; Supply reduction; Demand reduction; Harm reduction.

The mission of the strategy is to protect public safety, the life and health of individuals and communities through minimising the risks and harms deriving from drugs via a national coordinated action.

The main National Anti-Drug Principles derive from the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, the UN Conventions, national legislation on drugs and from the objectives our society has to meet in its membership process to EU.

The main principles are:

- Lawfulness;
- The respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- The principle of life security, safety and health of individuals and communities,
- The implementation of an integrated and balanced approach, based on responsibilities and partnerships.

The overall objectives of the Strategy are: to establish a safe environment for society via reduction of supply and access to drugs for illicit use, to prevent drug use through public awareness on the risks and negative consequences of drug use, to minimise drug use in society by ensuring the provision of appropriate treatment, rehabilitation services and reducing the harms associated with drug use, to offer a coordination and management policy in the fight against drugs and establish efficient communication systems.



Parliament Discussion

On 15th February 2012, members of Aksion Plus were invited by the Committee of Law of the Albanian Parliament to attend a hearing regarding drug policy and changes to the Penal Code. We presented our views of the amendments of the existing Penal Code and proposed to define a fixed quantity threshold for personal use and a removal of sentences for young marijuana users. To date, young people have been sentenced to prison for a single joint of marijuana. This is an absurd situation that should be changed as soon as possible. Even in the case of heroin users, they should not be punished for minor crimes when under effects of substance. Contacts with members of the Parliament and the Committee of Law are ongoing and we hope that something will be achieved, although the political situation is a bit uncertain as the elections are coming closer. More advocacy and lobbying should be developed in order to prepare the ground for expected changes and amendments.

6th ADRIATIC DRUG ADDICTION TREATMENT CONFERENCE

8th SEEA net (South Eastern European and Adriatic Addiction Treatment Network)



SYMPOSIUM ON ADDICTIVE BEHAVIORS, June 21st – 23rd, 2012, Hotel Tirana, Tirana, Albania



SEEA net 2012 was a very important and useful meeting that was attended by professionals, care givers and policy makers from across the region.

The main conference topics focused on treatment of young drug users, patients with comorbidity and cooperation with existent drug prevention and treatment services, medical, social and other services and NGOs in the region, treatment of Hepatitis C, different praxis through the region and treatment in custodial settings.

It was an excellent conference programme developed by our conference planning committees and coming together at informal meetings, such as the Welcome reception, the Awards party and other social events.

The SEEA net Conference was officially opened by the Chair of the Parliament of Albania, Mrs. Jozefina Topalli, representatives from the Pompidou Group, the EMCDDA and other prominent personalities.

For more information, please visit the website: www.seea.net



Global Fund 2-year programme in Albania

Albania will benefit from the Transitional Funds of the Global Fund on AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria for two more years. From the Round 5 that was allocated to Albania only two of the most important components will be supported: MMT for drug users implemented by Aksion Plus and ARV for people living with HIV/AIDS. During the next two years, we will strive to ensure the sustainability of the MMT project by approaching the central and the local government. Our strategies include: benefiting from the local municipalities' funds for social services (so far we were able to raise some funds from the Vlora municipality, a small city in south of Albania where A+ has opened a MMT centre). With regards to the central government, we are working to raise funds confiscated from illicit narcotics traffickers and other money laundry activities. In the meanwhile we are collecting small fees from MMT clients in order to sustain the project. Until now the project has been considered to be successful, and this progress is due to close collaboration with several actors in the government, civil society actors and other care providers. A+ was able to built a new facility where services are significantly improved and other types of services have been introduced, such as art and drama against drugs.



GREECE

THE "DRUGS CODE" BILL.

Government proposal/Public Consultation

An important initiative regarding changes in drug legislation was the governmental initiative of August 2001 which recommended significant changes in existing laws with the basic aims being:

- **Decriminalisation of use** and more lenient punishment regarding supply and possession of drugs and cultivation of cannabis plants for personal use only.
- **Fairer treatment of minor drug dealers**, especially addicts, proportionate to the measure of demerit of their actions, the circumstances under which the offence was committed, and whether or not they are addicted to drugs.
- **Avoiding the imposition of disproportionately long or short prison sentences** for the same offences.
- **Regulation of the law** to ensure that drug dealers who commit serious trafficking crimes no longer avoid the threat of the imposition of the harshest penalty (life imprisonment). This will be achieved with the abolition of the lenient handling of the real wholesale dealers who are assessed according to objective criteria and who will no longer receive favourable treatment even if they plead addiction to drugs.
- **Safeguarding the right to therapy.** The basic starting point in dealing with drug dependence is the consensual therapeutic approach. The recommended legislation deemed that the consistent attendance and completion of a therapeutic drug treatment programme is an essential factor of anti-criminal policy against drugs and upheld that the dependent users who enter into therapeutic programmes must have the adverse consequences of their criminal convictions reduced.

The bill was released for public consultation where the majority of those who took part considered the bill positively and recommended its adoption by parliament.

Debate in the Greek Parliament/Adjournment of the debate



The Minister of Justice tabled the bill to the Parliamentary Committee in January 2012 where it was passed by a majority of the members..The bill was expected to be submitted to the plenary session of Parliament for adoption a week after it was approved by the Parliamentary Committee. However, the newly-established interim coalition government, which was temporary in nature and dealt with all matters prioritising the safeguarding of financial assistance from the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank as well as fixing a date for parliamentary elections, found itself in a difficult position due to the strong opposition of the conservative parties who participated in the transitional coalition government. The conservative parties threatened to withdraw from the government if the Justice Minister presented the bill to the plenary session of Parliament. In the Parliament a majority of the members would vote for the approval of the bill.

A week earlier the same parties had threatened to withdraw from the government over another bill which concerned the early release of convicts with sentences of up to 3 years providing they had served 1/10 of their term as well as of convicts serving terms of up to 5 years who had served 1/5 of their sentence. This law was intended to reduce overcrowding and create prison space for those convicts who have still to serve their sentence. The Justice Minister supported the bill with conviction, stressing that "the content of this bill is determined by numbers. When a state does not have the means to build new prisons it must hold as many prisoners as the

system can take. In this case, a fixed configuration is needed so that in order for someone to go into prison, he who is closest to release must be released." The Justice Minister said he would return to the problem of overcrowding in prisons with additional measures during the debate in plenary about the "Drugs Code", adding that also the Prime Minister was concerned about "those poor 7,000 out of the sum total of 12,700 prisoners." Parliament voted in favour of this bill, against the will of the conservative parties of the coalition government..

The danger that the two conservative parties of the government would withdraw and cause a political crisis was by then clearly apparent. The conservative parties could not accept a second defeat within one week. The bill on the "Drugs Code" has not been submitted to the plenary and the debate for its approval has been postponed.

The new Government/ The bill will be forwarded to Parliament

Three parties are cooperating in the new government which was formed following the elections of 17 June 2012; New Democracy (conservative/liberal), PASOK (social democrats) and The Democratic Left (democratic socialists). Following a recent visit to Korydallos prison in Athens, the new Justice Minister, Mr Roupakiotis, announced that one of the concerns of his ministry was to forward the bill on narcotic drugs to Parliament, as well as the new Penitentiary Code which would contribute to the humanisation of the prison system. There were positive reactions from both the press and relevant organizations to this announcement. It is a matter of time before the debate on the bill resumes in the Greek Parliament.

THE EFFECTS OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS ON CITIZENS' HEALTH

It is generally accepted that uncertainty, a drop in income, job loss, youth unemployment and social unrest are factors seriously affecting the physical and psychological health of citizens. Resorting to the use of narcotic substances is one reaction to the crisis. Greece has been facing an unprecedented economic crisis since 2010 and the consequent social upheaval is leading to depression, pessimism and a lack of prospects for the future. In the health sector all the indicators are negative. There is a worrying increase in suicides, a

steep growth in the use of narcotic substances and a degradation of health care services due to drastic cuts in the budgets of service providers. The youth unemployment rate has reached 54% and young people are searching for employment opportunities in other countries. The migration of young people to Western European countries, Australia, the USA and Canada has increased dramatically over the last two years. In difficult economic and social circumstances, drug users frequently resort to dangerous practices, using adulterated substances which many times are fatal.

Upsurge in HIV/AIDS



For the past two years, mainly in the Athens region, there has been an upsurge in HIV. Cases of HIV have increased from 2010 to 2011 by 57%. 65% of this increase represents cases of intravenous use of narcotic drugs. The increase in HIV infections among people who inject drugs comes from the shared use of needles and syringes and the lack of condom use. In addition, the insufficient availability of substitution treatment and clean syringes may have contributed to the rise in the cases of HIV. The data collected from surveys show that the upward trend in cases of HIV concern mainly men who have sex with men and men who have had sex with sex workers living with HIV. The cases of HIV transmission from sex workers caused a strong public debate when the police arrested sex workers living with HIV and, in order to "warn" men who may have had sex with them, publicised in the press and other mass media photographs of the arrested women. Over 8000 men called the authorities,

chiefly the Centre for Control and Prevention of Diseases, asking to be tested for possible infection. Characteristic reactions of the daily press focused on immigrant sex workers living with HIV even though the large majority of the arrested women were Greek. In parallel with the disclosure of personal data and photographs of the women by the police the public prosecutor brought criminal proceedings for attempted deliberate grievous bodily harm against these women.. Eventually, the women were taken into custody.

These events took place in the run-up to the election of representatives to the Greek Parliament. Hundreds of citizens and civil society organisations denounced the publication of the details of the sex workers as a serious error on the part of the Ministry of Protection of Citizens and Health, talking of a blatant violation of human rights and a "deliberate pre-election witch hunt".

According to press reports the Minister of Health had provoked reactions when, at the end of 2011, he had recommended the deportation of immigrant sex workers living with HIV, stating that "transmission occurs through the illegal immigrant to the Greek client, to the Greek family".

The responsible authorities began a campaign for the free availability of condoms as well as syringes to people who inject drugs. All services involved work in close cooperation with NGOs in Athens such as the Centre of Life, PRAKSIS, Doctors of the World, The Positive Voice.

A group of experts from the European Centre for the Prevention of Diseases (ECDC), the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the European Monitory Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) visited Athens in November 2011 and May 2012 to assess the problem of HIV infections. The European Commission asked for a risk assessment of the epidemic and to examine which actions are necessary to deal with it.

SERVICE PROVIDERS AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

The financial measures of the government have not left service providers and therapy programmes untouched. The two main bodies concerned with the phenomenon of addiction in Greece are the Centre of Therapy of Dependent individuals (KETHEA) and the Organisation against Drugs (OKANA). The cuts which have been announced concern both organisations. The tangible financial pressure

has caused problems due to a lack of staff, bureaucracy and a general sense of insecurity with regards to planning.

New initiatives of KETHEA



ΚΡΑΥΓΗ ΑΓΩΝΙΑΣ ΚΕΘΕΑ

Διεκδικούμε το ΔΙΚΑΙΩΜΑ ΣΤΗ ΘΕΡΑΠΕΙΑ
και την ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΚΗ ΕΝΤΑΣΗ
Απαιτούμε ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΚΗ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣΥΝΗ



ΚΡΑΥΓΗ ΑΓΩΝΙΑΣ

Despite the financial difficulties, both service providers have recently developed positive activities recently and have tabled specific plans for new initiatives. KETHEA has announced the creation of new units with the financial support of the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF). Psycho-diagnostic centres will be created in seven large regions of the country to support drug dependent people of any age with problematic substance use and psychiatric problems. With the support of the "Stavros Niarchos" Foundation a low threshold centre will be created in Athens with two mobile street-work units.

Substitution Programmes, management of waiting lists

OKANA has recently had to deal with problems of long waiting lists to access its substitution programmes. Between 2010-2012 the substitution programmes have increased with 23 new units in Attica and 7 new units in Thessaloniki/Macedonia and Thrace, in collaboration with hospitals. The waiting lists have decreased by an overall 45% and in Thessaloniki they have nearly been eliminated and the average waiting time for admission for treatment is only 20 days. It is characteristic – as the report published by OKANA is stating –

that in Thessaloniki the creation of new small units in cooperation with hospitals has been done smoothly with societal consent whereas in Athens/Attica implementation was difficult due to "the lack of evidence based arguments and prejudice leading to allegations and claims which favour the arbitrary link between the units for pharmacological drug dependence treatment and breeding grounds of social nuisance".

The incorporation of substitution programmes into the hospitals of the National Health System (E.S.Y), IKA health centres and military hospitals is a positive development towards the acceptance and inclusion of drug dependent people into the general context of public health.

New initiatives of OKANA

New initiatives of OKANA in the area of therapeutic programmes consist of:

- The creation of substitution programmes in prisons (the relevant act by OKANA has already been approved through the NSRF). Greece is one of the exceptions in the EU without a substitution programme in prisons.
- The implementation of alternatives to imprisonment for petty offenders (this has been approved by OKANA through the NSRF) and
- The provision of incentives for those who wish to postpone their military service due to drug use in order to be integrated into a rehabilitation programme (a relevant Ministerial Decree has been issued).
- OKANA has reached an agreement with the Municipality of Athens on the creation of "hospitality areas" for people who use drugs in two parts of the city. This is an attempt to reduce public disturbance caused by drug use and dealing in the centre of Athens and to monitor and support drugs dependent people.

New narcotic substances



In the centre of Athens two new narcotic substances called Sisa and Tai have recently been in circulation and used. Sisa is mainly available in powder and crystalline form. It has been reported to be composed exclusively of liquid battery or combined with other substances such as petrol and crack or ephedrine, hydrochloric acid and ethanol. The substance Tai was released on a limited scale in the centre of Athens. It appears that it too was available in powder form. Both substances are cheap in comparison to the price of heroin or cocaine. Views were expressed that the use of both substances is linked to the economic crisis because they are cheap even though their use is extremely dangerous and can many times be fatal.

Reactions, contributions can be send to:



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