

International Narcotics Control Strategy Report -2007

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Europe and Central Asia

Macedonia

I. Summary

Macedonia is neither a major producer nor a major regional transit point for illicit drugs. The government made some progress in combating drug trafficking in 2006 -- illicit drug seizures in Macedonia increased during 2006 -- although domestic use of illicit drugs also rose. The quantity of drugs seized in 2006 increased on average in some categories (heroin, opium, and marijuana), while decreasing in others (cocaine and other psychotropic substances).

The government approved the Inter-ministerial Counternarcotics Commission's "Counternarcotics Strategy and Action Plan" on December 16. Macedonian law enforcement authorities cooperated closely with regional counterparts, including the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), in counternarcotics operations. Such operations occasionally were hindered by ineffective interagency coordination and planning, as well as by inadequate criminal intelligence, although there were some modest improvements in interagency coordination compared to the previous year. Macedonia is a party to the 1988 UN Drug Convention.

II. Status of Country

Macedonia lies along one of several overland routes used to deliver Southwest Asian heroin (through Turkey and Bulgaria) to Western Europe. Hashish and marijuana produced in Albania travels along the same route to Turkey, where it is exchanged for heroin that is then transported to Western European markets.

Small amounts of marijuana are grown in Macedonia, mainly for personal use. According to government sources, there were no reports of the production of precursor chemicals in Macedonia. Cocaine was not transported to or through Macedonia in significant quantities (although a major seizure of nearly 500 kg of cocaine in January 2007 suggested official figures might have been under-reported).

According to MOI sources, trafficking in synthetic drugs appeared to increase in 2006, but seizures were not higher than in 2005. Macedonia produced some poppy straw and poppy straw concentrate, but in quantities insufficient for its pharmaceuticals industry. As a result, some poppy was imported, under license, from Serbia and Australia.

III. Country Actions Against Drugs in 2006

Policy Initiatives. The 2005 draft national strategy and action plan for demand reduction and combating drug trafficking, prepared by the GOM's Inter-ministerial Counter-Narcotics Commission, did not include any provision for adequate funding for its implementation. The government approved the strategy on December 16, and was preparing by year's end an action plan for implementing it.

As of the end of 2006, there has not been a parliamentary vote on draft laws, previously submitted by the GOM, to further strengthen control of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances, and medical and chemical precursors.

As of October 2006, a draft National Strategy and Action Plan for Prevention, Treatment and Harm Reduction related to drug abuse for 2006-2012, which had been prepared by a working group established and chaired by the Minister of Health, had not been finalized.

Accomplishments. The Witness Protection Law was adopted in May 2005, strengthening the legal framework for combating organized crime and drug trafficking. In November 2006, the Macedonian parliament passed legislation, which will enhance the ability of prosecutors to use wiretaps as evidence in criminal proceedings.

The Ministry of Interior's (MOI) Organized Crime Unit includes a sector for combating illegal drug trafficking and a criminal intelligence cell. However, inadequate MOI intelligence regarding narcotics trafficking hampered counternarcotics efforts. The Customs Administration continued to strengthen its intelligence units and mobile teams, and police officials claimed cooperation with their Customs colleagues had improved compared to past years. Wide-ranging personnel changes in Customs after the new government took office in August, however, called into question the training and competence of the new Customs cadres.

Law Enforcement Efforts. According to MOI statistics, in 2006 criminal charges were brought against 328 persons, including two juveniles and two police officers, involved in 249 cases of illicit drug trafficking. Police seizures of heroin and, marijuana in 2006 were on average higher than in the previous year. Seizures of other drugs, such as cocaine, hashish, and other psychotropic substances were significantly lower. However, MOI sources believe trafficking in some synthetic drugs, such as Ecstasy, actually rose in 2006, as evidenced in lower prices for such narcotics, reflecting an increased supply on the market.

The MOI reported the following quantities of drugs and psychotropic substances seized:

- heroin, 150 kg (two and a half times more than in 2005);
- marijuana, 309 kg (50 per cent higher than in 2005);
- cannabis, 142 plants (a major decrease from the 3,000 plants seized and destroyed the previous year);
- hashish, 16 grams (about 5 percent of the amount seized in 2005);

--raw opium, 3 kg (a significant increase compared to the 7.8 grams of opium seized in 2005); and
--Ecstasy, 1,377 pills (about half the amount seized in 2005).

In mid-September, a Macedonian court convicted four defendants on drug smuggling charges. All four defendants, (three Macedonian citizens and one Greek citizen) received prison sentences ranging from five to eight years. The convictions resulted from a successful inter-agency, cross-border counterdrug operation involving the Macedonian MOI, Ministry of Justice, and the Special Organized Crime Prosecutor's Unit, working with Greek authorities and U.S. DEA agents.

Corruption. Corruption is pervasive in Macedonia. Low salaries and high unemployment help to foster graft among law enforcement officials. The judiciary remains weak and is frequently accused of corruption. The new government removed the Chief Public Prosecutor, accusing him of having failed to effectively prosecute a range of crimes, including high-level corruption cases. As a matter of policy and practice, however, the government of the Republic of Macedonia does not encourage or facilitate the illicit production or distribution of drugs, or the laundering of proceeds from illegal drug transactions. Macedonia has signed, but has not yet ratified, the UN Convention against Corruption.

Agreements and Treaties. Macedonia is a party to the 1988 UN Drug Convention, the 1961 Single Convention as amended by the 1972 Protocol, and the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances. A 1902 Extradition Treaty between the United States and Serbia, which applies to Macedonia as a successor state, governs extradition between Macedonia and the United States. Macedonia is a party to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its protocols against trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling.

Cultivation/Production. Macedonia is not a major cultivator or producer of illicit narcotics. There are no reports of local illicit production or refining of heroin or illegal synthetic drugs. Only one pharmaceutical company in the country was authorized to cultivate and process poppy. Authorized poppy production is reported to the Ministry of Health, which shares that information regularly with the Vienna-based International Narcotics Control Board. Marijuana cultivation in southeast Macedonia continued to present a challenge to authorities, although MOI sources reported only small quantities of the drug were cultivated, mostly for personal consumption.

Drug Flow/Transit. Macedonia is on the southern variant of the Balkan Route used to ship southwest Asian heroin to the western European consumer market. The quantity of synthetic narcotics trafficked to Macedonia in 2006 appeared to increase, largely due to the low cost of such drugs. Most synthetic drugs aimed at the Macedonian market originated in Bulgaria and Serbia, and arrived in small amounts by vehicle. At border crossings with Bulgaria and with Kosovo and Serbia, Customs officials and police seized significant quantities of both outbound and inbound heroin.

Domestic Programs/Demand Reduction. Official Macedonian statistics regarding drug abuse and addiction are unreliable, but the government estimated there were between 7,000-8,000 drug users in the country. The most frequently used drug was marijuana, followed by heroin and Ecstasy. There were an estimated 1,000 cocaine users in the country in 2006, according to official sources. Treatment and rehabilitation activities are carried out in the one state-run outpatient medical clinic for drug users that dispenses methadone to registered heroin addicts. There are also seven specialized local centers for methadone substitution treatment, including one in the largest prison in the country (with over 60 percent of the prisoner population). Nevertheless, Macedonian health officials acknowledge that rehabilitation centers currently are overcrowded. The Ministry of Health announced in June a cooperative project, funded by the EU, to "combat drug-related criminal activity" through the opening of three new addiction treatment centers. In-patient treatment in specialized facilities consisted of detoxification, accompanied by medicinal/vitamin therapy, as well as limited family therapy, counseling and social work. Follow-up services after detoxification, or social reintegration programs for treated drug abusers were inadequate. Educators and NGOs continued to support programs to increase public awareness of the harmful consequences of drug abuse, targeting drug use among youth in particular.

IV. U.S. Policy Initiatives and Programs

Bilateral Cooperation. During 2006, DEA officers worked with the Macedonian police to support coordination of regional counternarcotics efforts. As reported above, DEA officers supported a successful cross-border Macedonian-Greek counterdrug operation that resulted in the conviction and sentencing of four drug smugglers in September. MOI police, the financial police, Customs officers, prosecutors, and judges continued to receive USG-funded training in antiorganized crime operations and techniques. USG representatives continued to provide training, technical advice, and other assistance to Macedonian Customs and MOI Border Police units.

The Road Ahead. Macedonia's porous borders and the influence of regional narcotics trafficking groups suggest the country will continue to provide an important route for the transit of illegal drugs, which is likely to boost drug use domestically. DEA officials continue to expect increased use by traffickers of Macedonia as a "warehousing" base during transshipments. Some Macedonian authorities argue, however, that the accession of both Bulgaria and Romania to the EU in 2007 could decrease the flow of illicit narcotics through Macedonia, as Asian suppliers find it easier to reach Western European markets through those two countries.

The United States government, through law enforcement training programs, will continue to strengthen the ability of the police, prosecutors and judges to monitor, arrest, prosecute, and sanction narcotics traffickers. In cooperation with EU and other international community partners, the U.S. will press for implementation and funding of the national counternarcotics strategy, and for a permanent secretariat for the National Commission.

With the passage of wiretapping legislation in November, USG law enforcement training agencies in Macedonia can now focus on working with GOM counterparts to implement the law in order to strengthen the hand of prosecutors in counterdrug cases. The USG will continue to work with the GOM and our international partners to strengthen the criminal intelligence system, and to improve the government's ability to provide reliable statistics on drug use, as well as on arrests, prosecutions and convictions of traffickers.