

The Anti-Cannabis Strategy From its Outset to Implementation

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I. Introduction¹

“Long live the Cannabis of Cakran.” This is the large lettered graffiti in the walls of University in Rome that gives praise to the high quality cannabis. Both users and anti-narcotics specialist agree on the high quality and special characteristics of the cannabis produced in this area. Hashish “Made in Albania” is already certified by the main international narcotic networks. According to the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report - 2005, “the high quality Albanian hashish is exchanged for heroine”²

The cultivation³ of *cannabis sativa*, was officially acknowledged as a phenomenon in Albania in 1993, a year that marks the registration of the first cases of the cultivation of this plant. In the absence of any obstacle, the cultivation spread quickly to other areas with a higher and better quality production. In the villages of the south of the country cannabis plants grew higher than the roofs of the houses. In spite of the efforts made, the phenomenon of narcotic plant cultivation is present and is characterized by specific features in several districts of our country. The methods and forms used in fighting this activity have not produced the required results.

Cannabis and its sub-products are the most widely used narcotics today in the world. Out of an estimated total 185 million narcotics user in the world in 2004, 150 million⁴ or 81% are users of cannabis or its sub products. This is the most widely used narcotic substance in the European Union today. After Morocco, Albania, Pakistan and Afghanistan are very important routes of transportation for cannabis into the countries of Western Europe. Albania has become an important source for this type of narcotic for the Italian and Greek market in particular.⁵

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² – International Narcotics Control Strategy Report - 2005. Released by the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs. March 2005

³ - With the term "cultivation" we mean all the activity invested to produce plants containing narcotic or psychotropic substance, or of plants that may be used for the extraction of narcotic or psychotropic substances- definition provided by article 2 of law no. 8750, dated 26.3.2001 “For the Prevention and Fight against Trafficking of Narcotic and Psychotropic Substances.”

⁴ - UN Report on Drugs, year 2004

⁵ - Europol-2004-European Union Organized Crime Report - December 2004, f. 13.

Albanian cannabis was originally cultivated as a product destined “for export.” The criminal groups involved in trafficking it became well integrated in the European market contributing to the creation of a very negative image for Albania and the Albanians. This negative image can have a negative effect on national security and may create serious problems in Albania’s path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. This makes the intensification of the fight against cannabis even more necessary and transforms it into a political issue.

Among the main reasons why for years the required results in the fight against cannabis have been missing are the absence of an "anti-cannabis" strategy, lack of serious attention and poor coordination between the structures charged by law to fight this phenomena and the absence of involvement of the community in this effort.

The purpose of this study is that by analyzing the dynamics, methods, forms, the factors that contributed to the spread of the cultivation of narcotic plants, and consequences it entails for the community and the affect on national security, present the required strategy for the prevention of the cultivation of narcotic plants and the fight against this phenomenon, introducing it not just as a task for the police only, but for all the community and civil society in general.

II. The Anti-Cannabis Strategy

During my term in office as Police Director for the Region of Fier in early 2001, after becoming acquainted with the extent of cannabis cultivation in that region and analyzing the phenomena with the experts and police units, we put the fight against cannabis on the top of our list of challenges in the fight against crime. For this purpose we drafted a new strategy.

The strategy for the fight against cannabis cultivation introduced new methods of work not employed before by the Albanian police. It intended first of all to prevent cannabis cultivation by cooperating with the community, local government structures and non-governmental organizations. The strategy was first launched in the region of Fier in early 2001.

The strategy set forth the following tasks:

1. Frequent meetings with the communities affected in every village would be orginsed. Farmers would talk to groups made up of representatives of the Police Directorate, prefect's office, local government representatives, education department and even religious communities representatives (See pictures two and three). The aim of these meetings would be to sensitize the citizens on the legal consequences facing those that would cultivate cannabis. These meetings would be sending a clear and firm message that no cases of cultivation would be tolerated.

** Those involved in this activity would have on "their back" not only the police but also the other state structures and the local government. The engagement of all the*

state structures in preventing the cultivation of narcotic plants would transform the fight against this phenomenon into a problem of all the society. The involvement of other structures in the fight against cannabis cultivation would also increase police access to information on cases of cannabis cultivation.

2- Intensification of the fight against narcotics by carrying out frequent police operations to arrest and prosecute all persons implicated in narcotics activity with a special focus on those responsible for the organization and direction of cannabis cultivation, and those processing and trafficking cannabis.

** This sent a clear message that all those encouraging or organizing the cultivation and those of collecting it would be hit hard. This would enable us to target those ordering and managing the cannabis production. This would bring about a decrease in the demand to buy cannabis from the farmers leading to decreased interest in cannabis cultivation.*

3. -Preparation and distribution of leaflets containing information on the legal consequences foreseen by the Albanian legislation for those implicated in cannabis cultivation, contact phone numbers for the police, etc.

** These leaflets contained quotes from the Penal Code of the articles that punished the cultivation, possession and transportation. They were handed out in villages to each family with a particular attention to areas most affected by cannabis cultivation with the purpose of informing the public and preventing in time massive cultivation of Cannabis sativa.*

4. - Close Cooperation with Local Media outlets to raise public awareness on the dangers coming from drugs.

** Special TV programs and ads were aired dealing with the consequences of narcotics in general, and those coming from the cultivation of narcotics plants in particular. Police officials, doctors, lawyers, journalists and others attended the shows. The campaign aimed at making the public aware of the consequences of narcotics cultivation and to inform them about the legal responsibility for those involved in this activity. It also provided a forum to present on permanent basis the work done by the Police Directorate in the fight against narcotics.*

5 – Preparation of lectures for schools dealing with the consequences of narcotics cultivation, dangers it carries, penalties against those that break the law by growing, processing and trafficking narcotic substances.

** These lectures were made available to the Educational Department in the region to discuss with students in schools where the use of cannabis had become a cause for concern.*

6 – Assistance by State Agencies with small crediting and business support projects for the people in areas affected by narcotics cultivation. These projects would help shift the focus of farmers towards other legal economic activities encouraging them to cultivate other agricultural plants.

** We had often sought to find funding with small loans for farmers in the affected areas. In the capacity of Director of Criminal Police in the Ministry of Public Order from April 10-17, 2000, I attended the UN 10-th Congress for the Prevention of Crime. During the proceedings of the Congress we had a meeting with Mr. Pino Arlachi, Deputy Secretary of the UN and Executive Director of UNODCCP in Vienna. We discussed possible ways for bringing down the level of cannabis cultivation in Albania. We asked Mr. Arlachi for assistance in the form of programs that would support the development of business in the areas affected by the cultivation. Of course, many promises were made that never became reality. At the end of the day, the burden of solving the problem was left only to us.*

** With the involvement of the Prefect's Office, efforts were made to intervene with programs of assistance and crediting for the inhabitants of areas most affected by cannabis cultivation so the focus of the farmers could shift to other legitimate crops. One thousand phone numbers were provided and a new police station was set up in Cakran. Schools were repaired and sewage systems were updated. We are conscious that more should have been done to encourage the development of small business and in supporting farms with low interest loans, equipment and selected seeds.*

7 - Preparation and handing out of Forms that farmers would sign affirming that they would not cultivate cannabis and that they did not possess any quantity of cannabis produced in the past. Police inspectors in the areas and village heads would follow the process.

** This effort would have more of a psychological effect. The farmer's statement would have no legal value but these forms would help in getting the right information to the farmers on the consequences awaiting those who grew cannabis.*

8. -Close cooperation with the Prosecutor's office and the Courts in the various districts of the region. The cooperation would aim at ensuring a stricter penal policy against transgressors with a focus on those responsible for organizing this activity but without excluding from criminal responsibility the regular narcotic cultivator as well.

** Aside from efforts to inform and persuade the farmers against growing cannabis, the law would be enforced, justice served and those challenging the law would receive the merited and un-compromised punishment of the law.*

9 – Coordination of the Operation with the Central Anti-Narcotics Service informing them of the measures taken and seeking their assistance in coordinating efforts with neighboring police directorates.

10 – Assigning specific professional tasks to the various Commissariats and sections of the Police Directorate in the Region in support of the implementation of the anti-cannabis strategy.

11- Setting up of a Central Staff at the Regional Police Directorate to constantly follow the progress of implementation of the tasks laid out in the plan and to analyze the dynamics of the situation and come up with the required decisions.

**The Staff of the Directorate would convene twice a week. All units would report on the status of the implementation of the objectives of the strategy. Police Inspectors in the districts would submit weekly reports on the cases of narcotics cultivation in their areas and measures taken. If later on it was found that the report submitted had been inaccurate or not based on observations in the field disciplinary measures were taken against the Inspector that as a last action included dismissal from duty.*

12- Establishment of field monitoring structures. A working group under the leadership of the mayor would be set up in every Commune. In cooperation with school directors, and local government officials the police inspector would follow the implementation of the plan for the commune. The goal was to set up similar structures in each village.

** Local teams were set up attached to Local Government Structures that would follow the implementation of the objectives set forth in the action plan. Representative of the local government that were part of these groups carried a great part of the burden in conducting preventive operations and sensitizing the residents to destroy the plants in the their plots of land. The work of these groups was conducted in cooperation with the Regional Police Directorate of Fier coordinating the police operation with the voluntary destruction of the plants by the residents of the area.*

III. Regional Conference on the Strategy

These were in general lines the objectives that the strategy set for implementation. As you can see, most of these objectives aimed **at preventing the cultivation** of narcotic plants. It is better to prevent than to convict.⁶

By preventing the cultivation of narcotic plants both the police and the farmers would be winning. Farmers would not be wasting their efforts and money in growing plants that would be destroyed by the police and that would put them in trouble with justice.

Police, on the other hand, by preventing the cultivation of narcotic plants would be also sparing themselves the energy-demanding effort of destroying the narcotic plants

⁶- C.Baccaria-“Tratatto dei delitti e delle pene”- Milano 1964.

in the peak of the summer heat. The police would thus be able to concentrate more efforts in the fight against other crimes.

The Regional Directorate of Police in Fier with the purpose of introducing this strategy to the public organized in cooperation with the Prefect's office on February 7, 2001 a Regional Conference "On the Prevention of Narcotic Plant Cultivation in the Region of Fier"

The conference was attended by mayors of the communes of the region of Fier, village elders, and representatives from the prosecutor's office, courts, etc. All those that had a role to play in the implementation of this strategy attended the conference. The Conference was attended by representatives of the OSCE, UNDCP, religious communities, local media, educational department, civil society activists, all of who later on provided a significant contribution to the successful implementation of the strategic plan.⁷

One of the conclusions that the conferences reached was the need for preventive efforts in the cultivation of cannabis sativa in order to ensure the success of the strategy. The police alone, without the support of the local government, other state structures, and the cooperation of the local communities and civil society, cannot be successful in the effort to stop the cultivation.

IV. The implementation of the strategy and the results in the field

The detailed implementation of the plan⁸ for the prevention of narcotics cultivation in the region of Fier produced impressive results within the first months of its implementation. Following intensive efforts, **massive cultivation was definitively prevented**. There were still small sporadic cases of cultivation with no more than 20 plants, intended for seed production rather than marijuana, in remote plots of land that had no recognized, alongside water brooks and drainage canals planted randomly and that were not cared for.

During 2001 there were only 3080 narcotic plants registered and destroyed, a much lower figure than the 51.775 number destroyed during 2000. The result was a 17-fold decrease in the cultivation of cannabis. During that year, there were no cases of cultivation registered in the regions of Lushnjë and Mallakastër.

The number of criminal prosecutions decreased significantly. There were only 17 cases out of 77 during a year earlier. The decrease in criminal prosecution was 3.5 times.

⁷ - Conference was attended by the Minister of Public Order, Ilir Gjoni, who expressed appreciation for the strategy and called for an implementation of this strategy across the country.

⁸ On January 30, 2001 the Regional Directorate of Police Fier through a press release announced the launching of a new Anti-Cannabis Strategy and called for support of the citizens in implementing it.

It was also noted that most of the cultivators were now women in age that did not have any man in the family capable of working and that had no other source of revenue.⁹

The achievement of these results in the early months of the implementation of the strategy indicated that the "right medicine" for fighting cannabis cultivation had been found. A general impression was established that the implementation of this strategy during upcoming years would reduce towards zero levels the phenomena of narcotic cultivation in the region of Fier.

The strategy introduced a new method of police work that focused on preventing crime in cooperation with the community and the results achieved received significant support from the public opinion and the media.¹⁰

This strategic plan implemented by the Fier Regional Police Department, though prepared and implemented without any prior instruction from political structures, was praised by the then Minister of Public Order and the General Directorate of State Police was ordered to apply the same plan in other areas of the country affected by the cultivation of narcotics, with a focus on Shkodra and Vlora in particular.

Straight Magazine, a publication of the Information Department of the Council of Ministers, carried a detailed report on the new anti-cannabis strategy of the Fier Police. In its 2001 issue, detailed information is provided on the regional anti-narcotics conference and the anti-cannabis strategy in general.

The results achieved in the anti-cannabis strategy indicate that this strategy was not only the best technical method to be employed in the fight against this phenomenon but more so a policy to be followed against cannabis. The prevention of cultivation of cannabis is so important as to be equated with the political will to fight it as a phenomenon. The anti-cannabis strategy was prepared after a full analysis was conducted on the phenomenon of cannabis cultivation in our country and of methods used in fighting it.

Tirana, 2005

⁹ Cultivators of narcotic plants when caught by the police would often declare as the owner of the narcotic plants the aged members of the families so as to escape arrest.

¹⁰ Korrieri of September 07. 2001, pg. 9, conducts a detailed analyses of the cannabis phenomenon in the country and focuses specifically on the strategy implemented in Fier and its success. Klan Magazine of March 18, 2001 in a report form Cakran village states that it has followed in the field the implementation of the anti-cannabis strategy. Other daily's, like Shekulli and Gazeta Shqiptare, and national TV stations devoted coverage to the strategy.