

## **The Cannabis between the Cultivators, Police and Politics**

**By Xhavit Shala**

With the arrival of spring,<sup>1</sup> the unnoticed campaign of cannabis cultivation also begins. The early April days may be also the last days of this campaign. This period should have marked the climax of the campaign to prevent cannabis cultivation that must be a joint effort between the police, local government, civil society, local communities and media. There has been no information offered to the public whether any such actions have been taken. This leads us to believe that this may be prosperous year for cannabis cultivators.

The 2005 is an electoral year<sup>2</sup> and the election date also coincides with the cannabis period of maturation. The post election period leading to the formation of the new government coincides with the cannabis harvesting season. Consequently, it is likely that we may have this year an abundant<sup>3</sup> "cannabis harvest." In order for the cannabis cultivation not only to be reduced, as the National Anti-narcotics Strategy stipulates, but also to be eradicated it is necessary that the work to prevent the cultivation be intensified. It is better to prevent, rather than punish the cultivators.

Cannabis cultivation in Albania has alarmed the international bodies. According to the Europol's Report on Organized Crime, December 2004, after Morocco, Albania, Pakistan and Afghanistan are the countries occupying the biggest role in the supply of cannabis to the European Union. Albania has become an important source of this drug for the Greek and Italian markets, in particular<sup>4</sup>

International narcotics networks have already certified the high quality of hashish produced in Albania. According to the International Strategy Report for the Control of Narcotic Substances 2005- "the Albanian high quality hashish is exchanged with heroine".<sup>5</sup>

The cultivation of cannabis continues to be evident in Albania. During 2004 there were 77 thousand narcotic plants identified and destroyed in eight districts of the country. During the first six months of the 2004 only, there have been 116 cases of narcotic plant

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<sup>2</sup> The article was first published as an editorial in the daily "Korrieri" of March 27, 2005. The author, in his capacity as Director of the Albanian Center for National Security Studies also, aimed at sensitizing state structures, the local government and public opinion about the threats generated from the cultivation and the need to take timely preventive measures.

<sup>3</sup> Just a few months later, the cannabis harvest for 2005 proved very abundant. Police structures destroyed 332.186 plants of cannabis. One year earlier there were destroyed 77 thousand plants.

<sup>4</sup> Europol - 2004 - European Union Organized Crime Report - December 2004, f. 13.

<sup>5</sup> UN Report on Drugs, 2004.

cultivation identified.<sup>6</sup> The recent large-scale sequestrations of narcotics by the police, aside from indicating a good performance by the police, also indicate large "un-exported" reserves of cannabis stored in our country.

### **The beginnings of cannabis cultivation in our country**

The cultivation<sup>7</sup> 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. Following this year, the cultivation of cannabis plants spread swiftly.

The Albanian cannabis, initially cultivated for export and the criminal groups that trafficked it were successfully integrated into the European market, creating a very negative image for Albania and the Albanians. This image issue may create serious problems in Albania's progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration and may negatively affect our national security.

The main causes for a continued cultivation of cannabis are the failure to treat this issue with the required seriousness, failure to coordinate the structures tasked by the law to fight this phenomenon and an absence of community participation in this fight.

### **Factors that contributed to the spread of cultivation**

There are several important factors (listed as follows) that have contributed to the spread of cannabis cultivation in parts of the Albanian territory: failure to take measure to counter the negative phenomena that were introduced with the opening up of the country after a long period of isolation; the successive political crises accompanied by the absence of the rule of law in the country; population impoverishment and high levels of unemployment in the rural areas; Albania's favorable geographic position, one step away from the west; loopholes in the legal framework to fight narcotics trafficking and failure to enforce existing legislation; inefficiencies in the preparation of police structures and other law enforcement institutions to face of such phenomena; continued high levels of corruption in the police, prosecutor's office and courts and a progressive increase in the interest of foreign criminal organizations to extend their activity in Albania.<sup>8</sup>

### **The dynamics of the cultivation**

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<sup>6</sup> Central Anti Narcotics Service, Department of Organized Crime, Albanian State Police.

<sup>7</sup> - 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."

<sup>8</sup> Xhavit Shala. "Between Anti cannabis and cannabis politics", page 10-18, a publication of the Albanian Center for National Security Studies, Tirana, 2005.

The extent of cannabis cultivation reached its peak in 1996, spreading to 30 districts in the country. During 1997 because of the weaknesses in the performance of the anti crime structures the quantity of cannabis plants destroyed and the number of persons prosecuted plummeted to the lowest levels ever.

During 1998-2002 the number of districts with cases of cultivation was limited (10-13), while the number of the cultivation cases identified, number of persons prosecuted and plants destroyed kept growing.

The year 2002 marks the highest levels in the number of narcotic plants identified and destroyed, while during 2003 we note a digression in the curb of narcotic plant cultivation in our country. During 2003 there were 2.8 times less narcotic plants identified and destroyed than in 2002. The year 2004 marks the lowest figure (of all the years) of narcotic plants destroyed (See table one at the end of the article).

From 1996 to 2002 the quantity of cannabis sub-products (marihuana, hashish, and hashish oil) seized in Albania and Italy (of Albanian origin) increased, transforming the cultivation and trafficking of narcotic plants into a growing and profitable business.

The quantity of cannabis products trafficked from Albanian and seized in Italy is several times higher than the quantity seized in Albania, with the noted development, though, of a continued decrease in this trend. The quantities seized are also an indicator of the growing appetite of the Italian market for Albanian marihuana.

### **Impact on the community and national security**

The cultivation of narcotic plants negatively affects the community and national security of the country. It contributes to an increase in criminality; it delays our country's integration into the euro-Atlantic structures; it punishes a large number of persons inside and outside Albania; it contributes to an increase in the numbers of cannabis dependents in the country among the young especially; it generates a loss of interest in legitimate enterprise; it leads farmers away from the tradition of cultivating agricultural plants, etc.

### **Characteristics of the fight against cannabis cultivation**

During 1993-2000 the focus of the fight against cannabis cultivation were the eradication campaigns undertaken by the police prior or during the cannabis maturation period. The effort was then followed by actions to uncover and target marijuana traffickers and products. Nothing was done during this period to prevent the cultivation of narcotic plants

Up to 2000 it was the police structures alone, (which have demonstrated an increased engagement to the effort year by year,) that were involved in the fight against cultivation. There was no cooperation between the police, local community and government structures established. The local government structures have never considered the fight against narcotic plant cultivation as their responsibility also.

There has been a striking lack of information available to the citizens on the consequences and the ensuing penalties for those who cultivate narcotic plants. Cannabis was referred to in some area as lucrative grass and the people possessed no information that any one who cultivated it risked imprisonment.

This mindset was also helped in large part by the court's decisions. During 1998-2000, 95 per cent of 207 perpetrators declared guilty of cannabis cultivation by the courts were released on bail. The "penal policy" followed by the courts did not contribute to a decrease in narcotic plant cultivation.<sup>9</sup>

### **Prevention of cultivation - the key to success**

As we underlined at the beginning of this article, in order for the fight against cultivation to be effective, it is necessary that focus be placed on taking action to prevent the cultivation from taking place. The prevention efforts should then be coupled with the efforts to fight this phenomenon in cooperation with the community, local government structures, educational departments and non-profit organizations. The strategy adopted against the cultivation of cannabis in the region of Fier in the spring of 2001, which aimed first of all to focus on the prevention of cannabis cultivation, removed this region from the map of massive cultivation of narcotic plants. The implementation of this strategy in other areas of the country led to a noted digression in the curb of narcotic plant cultivation in our country after 2003.

The Region of Fier marks the first case when the fight against this criminal phenomenon was waged in cooperation with local government structures and the community, which is the beneficiary of the public service provided by the police. It further established the conviction that only through cooperation with the community one can achieve good results in the fight against crime.

### **Anti-cannabis or a [pro] cannabis politics?**

A successful campaign against the cultivation of narcotic plants will reduce to zero levels the cases of cultivation. This effort must be implemented with intensity in every area where the cannabis cultivation has been an issue.

If an anti-cannabis prevention campaign is not undertaken and the success of the fight against this phenomenon is left only to the police, gray areas where the police can not carry out its legal duties may be created.

Taking advantage of the electoral campaign, the cultivators or the traffickers, self-proclaiming themselves as supporters of this or that political force, may attempt to evade

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<sup>9</sup> Central Anti Narcotics Service at the Fier Regional Police Department.

police intervention until the cannabis is harvested. Cannabis politics has often proven successful for the cultivators and traffickers of cannabis in Albania.<sup>10</sup>

The success in the fight against cannabis will be fully guaranteed only when the Albanian political forces in power or in opposition renounce cannabis politics and wholeheartedly turn to support the police and encourage the community to stop the cultivation of cannabis.

A vote that smells of cannabis is dangerous for both the voter and politician.

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<sup>10</sup> During 2005, as this article warned against, the cultivation of cannabis grew to alarming proportions especially in the area of the river of Vlora, Lazarat and Shkodra Highland. The year 2005 was a golden one for cannabis growers. As a result of the bad political management of the Ministry of Public Order, and due to the removal of a considerable number of well qualified State Police officials and this being an electoral year, the situation deteriorate very quickly. Compared to 2004, the cultivation of cannabis quadrupled (See table 1 at the end of the article).

*Table no. 1*

The extend of cultivation per district, cultivation cases identified, number of plants destroyed and number of people prosecuted, during each year<sup>11</sup>

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of cases</b>	<b>Number of plants destroyed</b>	<b>Number of persons prosecuted</b>
<b>1993</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>1994</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>1995</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>167.417</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>1996</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>346.968</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>1997</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>807</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1998</b>	<b>325</b>	<b>58.577</b>	<b>314</b>
<b>1999</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>91.267</b>	<b>218</b>
<b>2000</b>	<b>374</b>	<b>256.398</b>	<b>374</b>
<b>2001</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>276.803</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>2002</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>484.958</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>2003</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>168.298</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2004</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>73.757</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>2005</b>	<b>458</b>	<b>332.186</b>	<b>227</b>
<b>1 01-28.09. 2006</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>74.010</b>	<b>54</b>

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<sup>11</sup> Central Anti Narcotics Service, October 2006.

**Table 2**  
**Cannabis derivates seized and number of persons prosecuted per year<sup>12</sup>**

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of cases</b>	<b>Quantity of the marijuana/hashish seized</b>	<b>Quantity of hashish seized</b>	<b>Quantity of oil</b>	<b>No. of persons prosecuted</b>
1995	35	-	-	-	35
1996	62	-	-	-	64
1997	45	944 kg and 112 gram	-	-	85
1998	76	2307 kg and 433 gram	-	-	111
1999	76	4395 kg and 156,5 gram	13 liters	-	129
2000	115	6604 kg and 226,4 gram	2,1 liters	-	176
2001	117	6915 kg and 79,5 gram	-	-	135
2002	98	13717 kg and 898,5 gram	0,6 liters	-	141
2003	98	7760 kg and 170 gram	48,5 liters	-	123
2004	93	4544 kg and 154,4 gram	-	-	129
2005	120	6332 kg and 10.4 gram	7 liters	-	173
1 01-28.09.2006	160	5164 kg e 385.8 gram	0.95 liters	-	234

<sup>12</sup> Central Anti Narcotics Service, October 2006

