

The First National Conference for Drugs Politics “From laws to public health” Skopje 30.09.2014

On 30.09.2014 in Skopje was held the first national conference for drugs politics titled “From laws to public health”, organized by the civil organization HOPS – Healthy Options Project Skopje. The conference was supposed to be declared as open by the Minister of Health Nikola Todorov together with the executive director of HOPS Hristijan Jankuloski. But since Nikola Todorov hasn’t shown up at the conference, nor did other representatives from the Ministry of Health, the participants were left to imagine what are the attitudes and activities of one of the key institutions when it comes to drugs politics in Macedonia. Consequently, it remained unclear what happened with the National drugs strategy that has been adopted in June 2014. In the preparation of this strategy the members of the civil sector were invited in the work groups, including members of HOPS but none of them saw the final document which has been adopted. At the same time it remained unclear what is happening with the position National drugs coordinator of The Republic of Macedonia, which is dysfunctional for more than a year, since there is no one assigned to this position. On a contrary, at the conference was present the national drugs coordinator of The Czech Republic, Jindřich Vobořil who is a member of a conservative party but still remained at the same position for 4 years although the government changed in the meantime. This information is “exotic” when compared with the Macedonian story having in mind the virtues that are eagerly promoted by the Macedonian conservative government where drug users or other marginalized groups simply doesn’t fit in. It is more than certain that this kind of conclusions can be influenced by my prejudices but the absence of the Minister or other representatives of the Ministry of Health is not contributing in the correction of these prejudices. That is why Hristijan Jankuloski, executive director of HOPS justifiably did not excuse the representatives of the Ministry of Health because the section titled as “National drugs politics, experiences from Europe and Macedonia” was limited to some official representatives from Europe. Macedonian experiences were represented through the perspectives of the civil sector, mainly from HOPS, first by the exceptionally informative presentation of Natasha Boshkova, a lawyer from HOPS. Contrary to the immediate need of humanizing the drugs politics in Macedonia, decriminalization and social and health support (besides being more human, these measures are economically more effective according to the experiences of Czech Republic) Macedonia chooses suppression, penal policy or criminalization of drug use and drug users. This again feels up the above mentioned “prejudices” because of the actual practice of interpreting the law more sternly than it is regulated, in this case when it comes to drug users. The next illustrative example supports the sternness: even though holding and transporting drugs for personal use is not sanctioned by criminal code, still since October 2012 until December 2013 600 individuals have been criminally prosecuted and only 9 individuals have been prosecuted for offence which suggests to a weird logics of Macedonia having much more drug dealers than drug users. Ironically comforting in a manner that “there are more frightening situations

than our current one” was the rapport of Ivan Varencov from the Andrej Rilko Foundation from Russia. According to this harsh penalty politics stands the statement of Hristijan Jankuloski that for human and effective drugs politics international organizations are contributing much more than a national institutions in Macedonia. According to Vlatko Dekov, this politics of isolation, discrimination, punishment that should lead to re-education means further stigmatization of drug users.

In the second section titled as “Human rights of drug users” spoke Jaka Bitenc from the social cannabis club from Slovenia, Zharko Trajanoski from the Coalition “Sexual and health rights of marginalized communities” and Vanja Dimitrievski, program assistant from HOPS. Certain speeches for example those of Natasha Boshkova and Zharko Trajanoski caused lots of reactions from some representatives of state institutions that are dealing with the drug users: judiciary and police. In those debates on the “opposing sides” where the representatives of the civil organizations that are facing drug users in everyday basis and because of this target group they spoke about the problems that drug users are facing, and on the other side where the representatives of state institutions that are also facing drug users but this group which was supposed to be in the centre of discussion was somehow replaced with the drug traffickers. So the dilemma remains unresolved is this replacement due to a misunderstanding or is it a consequence of stereotypical connections of all those who have contact with drugs and labelling them in a category of criminals. The impression is that there is a serious lack of capacity for suitable treatment on the side of state institutions dealing with marginalized communities probably because of the laic approach to the drug users. Again this laic approach is probably due to the lack of capacity for understanding or tolerating the differences, or the unwillingness for rethinking one’s own stereotypes eventually through education, which appears to be very typical for some representatives of state institutions present on the conference. This assumption is more obvious according to the terminology used in the discussions where almost regularly the term “drug users” was missing from the vocabulary of the state institutions representatives. Their analysis mainly referred to the drug traffickers (according to the statements that the only suitable place for those people is in jail or that the society should be protected from instigators) or in a situations when drug users should be somehow appointed without using some pejorative popular term and in order to be politically correct, finding a suitable term was obviously very hard: “yours... how should I call them... those who were interviewed” ... “certain statements of those...” ... “Some of them...” Although it may sound a bit romantic to talk about the capacity of understanding and tolerating the differences, or for rethinking one’s own stereotypes when it comes to a professional who is dealing with an “exact” matter as legislation, still judges who are judging the drug users, and according to the above mentioned numbers 600 of them got pretty harsh sentences, maybe exactly those professionals need to put some poetics in their practice. The subject matter of this “exact” science is certainly subjected to different interpretations. Finally verdicts can be very much dependable besides on exact methods, also on subjective aspects or on the subject who is in a position of judge. In saying this I mean of hers/his character, personal attitudes, emotions, experiences, foreknowledge, education for a concrete problem in question, personal prejudice... (The list can be endless), or the verdict can be dependable on all those things that are composing hers/his referent system. However banal may sound the elements of the subjective referent system, they are inevitably complicating the strict exactedness of the science (and this

is also the case with the chemists, physicists, mathematicians and other representatives of natural sciences as the most exact among the exact scientists). Especially this is the case when human being is in the position to give a verdict to another human being. Defending one's own professional group (judiciary and police) in a manner "In Skopje that kind of thing has never happened, and will not happen" in this context sounds a bit naïve.

In the last section titled as "Models of drugs regulation. Which model is most suitable for Macedonia" the experiences were presented by Vlatko Dekov, program manager in HOPS, Nikola Tupanchevski, Faculty of Law "Iustinianus Primus" from Skopje and Slavica Gajdadzis-Knezhevic, Institute for marriage and family, Skopje. The conclusions lead to an urgent humanization of the drugs politics in Macedonia, but it seems that still there is no sense or capacity in the competent state institutions for implementing the human practice.

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