

Bulgaria

A. Introduction

Bulgaria is a transit country for heroin, as well as a minor producer of illicit synthetic narcotics. Bulgaria's location astride Balkan heroin transit routes makes it vulnerable to international trafficking organizations transporting narcotics into the European Union. Organized crime groups operating in Bulgaria have increased their influence and involvement in the international narcotics trade. These groups are sophisticated, well-financed, and entrenched within Bulgarian society. Bulgaria's Black Sea ports continue to be exploited by drug traffickers to smuggle cocaine from South America to Europe and heroin from Turkey and Iran to Europe.

The only illicit drug crop known to be cultivated in Bulgaria is cannabis, primarily for domestic consumption. Bulgaria continues to be a source of some synthetic drugs, though production has declined in recent years.

Counternarcotics efforts are primarily the responsibility of several specialized police services within the Ministry of Interior (MOI), and the Customs Agency under the Ministry of Finance (MOF). The MOI continues to strengthen institutional capacity, with its General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime (GDBOP) taking an increasingly effective lead in counternarcotics investigations and operations. The Customs Agency continues to implement reforms and registered a slight increase in drug seizures over last year.

Bulgaria is a party to the 1988 UN Drug Convention.

B. Drug Control Accomplishments, Policies, and Trends

1. Institutional Development

In June, Parliament passed legislation delegating the authority to modify the list of controlled substances to the Council of Ministers. This greatly increased the ability of the Government of Bulgaria (GOB) to effectively combat the increasing presence of designer drugs. This year the GOB added 40 unique substances to the list. Parliament also established a specialized criminal court to hear cases involving organized crime, including drugs. A lack of effective asset forfeiture legislation complicates government action against organized crime and narcotics distributors. Recent efforts to strengthen forfeiture legislation failed.

Over the past year Customs has continued to implement reforms, which appear to place an increased priority on the search for taxable contraband (i.e., cigarettes) at Bulgaria's borders and reduce the priority for narcotics. This trend is illustrated by two years of historically low narcotics seizures and an updated Customs Mission Strategy which no longer includes counternarcotics as a goal.

Bulgaria is a party to the UN Convention against Corruption and the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its three Protocols. A 2007 U.S.-Bulgarian Extradition Treaty allows the extradition of Bulgarian nationals to the U.S. for a variety of offenses, including drug trafficking charges.

2. Supply Reduction

The MOI continues to aggressively combat domestic narcotic production and from January to November closed eight synthetic laboratories, two deemed significant. On October 21, the MOI seized 5,600 cannabis plants in what is believed to be one of the largest indoor cannabis operations in Europe. The efforts of Bulgarian law enforcement have led to significant narcotics seizures and arrests both in Bulgaria and outside the country. Of special note is GDBOP's assistance in developing a case that led to the seizure of 460 kg of cocaine in France and 290 kg in Greece.

Overall MOI seizures of heroin registered only a slight increase from last year. This is due to a number of factors including less heroin moving towards Europe as a result of a poor poppy crop in Afghanistan, the increasing use of alternative trafficking routes, and the economic crisis. Significant gains were made in seizures of marijuana. From January to November MOI seized 129 kg of heroin, 4.6 kg of cocaine, 228 kg of amphetamine substance, 6,506 tablets of ecstasy, 173 kg of marijuana, 1,018 kg of dry cannabis, and 4,903 kg of green cannabis.

Bulgarian Customs seizures increased slightly over last year, but are still historically low. From January to November, the Customs Agency seized 246 kg of heroin, 0.6 kg of cocaine, 17 kg of synthetic drugs, 15.6 kg of marijuana, 2.5 kg of opium, and 16.8 kg of hashish.

The only illicit drug crop known to be cultivated in Bulgaria is cannabis, primarily for domestic consumption. Historically a small portion of the crop has been exported to Greece. MOI's October seizure was the first large domestic cannabis clearly destined for export to Western Europe. Domestic cannabis cultivation has spread from its traditional base in the southwest to include most of the country. Bulgarian law enforcement report that the domestic manufacture of synthetic stimulants continues to decrease as illegal laboratories relocate to Serbia, eastern Turkey, Armenia, and the Levant.

Bulgaria's membership in the European Union makes it a desired target for drug trafficking organizations supplying narcotics to consumer markets in Western Europe. In terms of heroin trafficking, Bulgaria remains a transit country along the Balkan route between the golden crescent and European consumer markets. Chemicals used for making heroin move through Bulgaria to Turkey en route to Afghanistan. Bulgarian law enforcement reports a surge in the import and use of "designer drugs," which are often shipped from China disguised as innocuous chemical products. These drugs are difficult to combat due to the ease with which their chemical structures can be modified to a nearly identical, but not yet controlled substance. Bulgaria has introduced one of the best control mechanisms in Europe for rapidly responding to such modifications.

3. Drug Abuse Awareness, Demand Reduction, and Treatment

According to the Bulgarian Institute for Addictions, there are approximately 300,000 drug addicts in Bulgaria, of which 30,000 are heroin addicts. Marijuana continues to be the most widely used narcotic with statistics from the National Center for Addictions (NCA) suggesting 22 percent of teenagers try marijuana at least once.

The Bulgarian national healthcare system includes methadone maintenance as a heroin treatment option. In 2011 there were 31 program centers with the capacity to treat 5,310 patients, 1,200 of which are cost-free to the addict. There are also inpatient clinics capable of treating 5,000 patients with psychological conditions, of which 170 spaces are expressly reserved for drug addicts. None of these facilities have separate units for juvenile patients. There are 11 social rehabilitation programs, with a capacity for 240 participants. The NCA conducts drug prevention campaigns. National drug prevention policy is implemented by 26 regional councils at the local level.

4. Corruption

Corruption remains a serious problem in the police, customs, and judiciary. Despite reforms, the judiciary (which includes prosecutors and judges) consistently receives poor scores in public confidence and opinion polls. Complicated judicial procedures and legal loopholes result in excessive case delays which make it difficult to effectively prosecute high-profile organized crime and corruption cases. Often, officials discovered to be corrupt are reassigned or pressured to quit, rather than fired and prosecuted. As a matter of government policy, Bulgaria does not encourage or facilitate illicit production or distribution of narcotic or psychotropic drugs or other controlled substances or the laundering of proceeds from illegal drug transactions.

C. National Goals, Bilateral Cooperation, and U.S. Policy Initiatives

U.S. DEA operations in Bulgaria are currently managed from the U.S. Consulate General in Istanbul, however, DEA has been authorized by congress to open a country office in Sofia. DEA serves as the primary liaison with the GOB on counternarcotics matters. DEA's current emphasis in Bulgaria is on conducting and coordinating joint international investigations with MOI counterparts and providing technical and legal expertise. DEA also arranges counternarcotics training for select Bulgarian law enforcement personnel.

In the past year, the U.S. Embassy provided State-INL-funded equipment and training to a Joint Organized Crime taskforce, which investigates and prosecutes many of the high profile drug cases in Bulgaria. The goal of U.S. funding is to increase the operational capabilities and effectiveness of these specially-vetted units.

D. Conclusion.

The GOB should continue efforts to strengthen its anti-corruption laws and should consider reintroducing legislation to implement some form of Non Criminal-Based confiscation. The GOB continues to make significant gains in counter narcotics enforcement against drug production and trafficking. Bulgaria's law enforcement has actively contributed to international investigations resulting in considerable seizures and arrests in both Bulgaria and the region.

The GOB should continue efforts to strengthen its asset forfeiture legislation and anti-corruption laws. While some progress has been made, further reform of the police and judiciary is necessary. The opening of the new specialized court for organized crime, if implemented properly, should be an effective tool in addressing administrative issues hampering the prosecution and sentencing of high-profile drug traffickers. Continued improvements to Customs Agency reforms are needed to ensure that counternarcotics efforts remain a priority.