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NATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE EUROPEAN UNION IN
THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA (NCEU-MK)

**"CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES IN NATIONAL
POLICIES ON DRUGS AND PSYCHOACTIVE
SUBSTANCES:**

**HARMONISATION OF MACEDONIAN
LEGISLATION WITH EUROPEAN STANDARDS"**

11
NEWSLETTER



**16TH SESSION OF WORKING GROUP 4
JUSTICE, FREEDOM AND SECURITY
CHAPTER 24**

On June 11, 2025, the 16th session of Working Group 4 – Justice, Freedom, and Security (Chapter 24) focused on aligning Macedonian drug policies with EU standards. The session, supported by the EU Delegation and the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasized the importance of a balanced, multisectoral approach addressing both drug supply and demand. Key speakers, including government officials, academics, and civil society representatives, highlighted rising challenges such as synthetic substances, regulatory gaps in medical cannabis, and a lack of effective prevention and harm reduction programs. Calls were made for science-based, health-centered policies, improved inter-institutional coordination, stronger international cooperation, and early prevention efforts targeting youth. The session concluded with a discussion on draft recommendations aimed at strengthening national strategies through continuous evaluation, improved treatment access, and better resource allocation.



In her opening remarks at the 16th session of Working Group 4 – Justice, Freedom, and Security (Chapter 24), Professor Mileva Gjurovska, National Coordinator of the National Convention on the EU in North Macedonia (NCEU-MK) and President of the European Movement, emphasized the importance of structured dialogue between institutions and civil society as a core component of the EU integration process. She noted that this session, supported by the EU Delegation and the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is part of a broader framework that has, over the past eight years, held 64 sessions and involved more than 2,500 participants. Gjurovska stressed that such inclusive platforms contribute to transparent policymaking and democratic development by allowing for open exchange of expertise and perspectives. She also reflected on the valuable work of Working Group 4, which in previous sessions addressed crucial issues such as corruption, organized crime, migration, and institutional integrity.

**Mileva
Gjurovska**
National Coordinator of
NCEU-MK,
Professor at the Faculty of
Philosophy, President
of the European Movement in
North Macedonia;



Gjurovska pointed out that this particular session stands out due to the record number of draft recommendations prepared, which signals the depth and urgency of the topic drug policy and its alignment with European standards. Her speech framed the session as both a continuation and a deepening of the Convention's mission to support reforms through broad participation and evidence-based dialogue.



**Panche
TOSHKOVSKI**

Minister of Internal Affairs

At the 16th session of Working Group 4 of the National Convention on the European Union in North Macedonia, Minister of Internal Affairs Panche Toshkovski delivered a speech addressing the challenges and perspectives of national drug policy reform. Expressing gratitude to the organizers and participants including academia, civil society organizations, and international partners he emphasized the significance of the session as part of North Macedonia's broader efforts toward European integration. He recognized the platform as a credible space for dialogue, analysis, and the development of recommendations essential to strengthening the rule of law and aligning national policies with EU standards.

Toshkovski underlined that drug-related issues are not isolated within the domain of law enforcement or criminal justice. Instead, they span a wide range of sectors, including public health, social welfare, and culture. He noted that addressing these challenges involves navigating complex dilemmas between repression and rehabilitation, control and support, and punishment and the chance for reintegration. He reiterated that the Ministry of Internal Affairs has consistently treated the fight against illicit drug trafficking as a top strategic priority due to its deep consequences for youth and social health, as well as its role as a major source of power for organized crime networks.

The Minister detailed the evolving threats the Ministry faces daily, especially the increasing availability of synthetic drugs and their connection to both local and transnational criminal groups.

These developments, he argued, make it clear that drug policy cannot be based solely on arrests and seizures. Instead, it requires evidence-based, multidimensional approaches that prioritize prevention, treatment, and social support. He advocated for the implementation of preventive programs in schools, improved inter-institutional trust, and active communication between the state and local communities.

Toshkovski also highlighted the importance of context sensitive policies those informed not only by international and EU standards but also by the specific realities of Macedonian society. He welcomed the involvement of academia, NGOs, and foreign partners in shaping these strategies, asserting that no policy can be effective without inclusive collaboration. This participatory approach, he said, ensures that policy responses are realistic, sustainable, and aligned with the public interest.

In his closing remarks, the Minister expressed his commitment to building a modern, responsible, and partnership-oriented police force one that achieves lasting security not through coercion but through understanding and systematic engagement. He expressed hope that the forum would lead to practical, strategic, and actionable recommendations. Toshkovski concluded by emphasizing the shared responsibility of all sectors government, civil society, international actors, and local communities in building a healthier, safer, and more inclusive society, one that is prepared for a future within the European Union.

Overall, his speech framed drug policy as a comprehensive societal issue requiring coordinated, forward-looking solutions. It reinforced the Interior Ministry's strategic priorities, encouraged multisectoral cooperation, and called for a balance between enforcement and care a message aligned with both domestic needs and European values.



**Liljana
IGNATOVA KITEVA**

**Professor,
Faculty of Medicine
UKIM, Skopje**

In her speech Professor Liljana Ignatova Kiteva from the Faculty of Medicine, UKIM, Skopje, addressed the urgent public health and security dimensions of drug use and addiction in the country. She opened by emphasizing that without addressing this issue comprehensively and seriously, North Macedonia cannot achieve meaningful progress in public health. Stigmatizing and marginalizing drug use only worsens the problem, and the issue must be treated as a top national priority.

Professor Ignatova stressed the importance of a balanced and evidence-based approach to drug policy. She criticized the state for focusing disproportionately on drug seizures and enforcement while neglecting prevention, treatment, and demand reduction. Simply targeting supply without addressing demand is ineffective, as the drug market operates on economic principles wherever there is demand, there will be supply. The government, she argued, has a responsibility not just to prevent crime but also to support those caught in the drug trade, who are often victims themselves.

She raised serious concerns about the rise of synthetic and semi-synthetic drugs, facilitated by easy online access and the transformation of every day items like nutrition oil and cleaning substances into narcotics. These substances are difficult to identify and treat clinically, posing new challenges for healthcare professionals.

Referencing the latest 2024 EU report on drug use, she highlighted how substances previously considered harmless or sold legally like CBD may now serve as precursors for synthetic drugs. She stressed the urgent need to regularly update the list of controlled substances in accordance with the current developments.

While acknowledging that the national drug strategy appears well-designed on paper, Professor Ignatova noted that its implementation and evaluation are severely lacking. The country has failed to meet most of the goals outlined in its action plan, especially regarding prevention. She criticized the absence of national standards for prevention and pointed out that during discussions on Chapter 24 of EU negotiations, the country had no tangible achievements to present. Despite applying for international funding, the lack of prioritization at the governmental level prevents progress.

She called for systematic and frequent evaluations of strategies and programs, underlining that a strategy that fails in practice must be revised. Current policies overly criminalize drug users, especially young people, by treating them as offenders rather than victims. This not only fails to curb drug use but also burdens the justice system and leads to further social harm. Instead, she advocated for expanding alternative treatment programs and prevention initiatives, which currently rank at the lowest level of effectiveness.

Professor Ignatova also emphasized the lack of programs for stimulant use and behavioral addictions such as gambling and video game addiction conditions already classified as diseases by the WHO. She reported a rise in cannabis-induced psychosis among youth, noting that the potency of cannabis has increased significantly. Countries like Canada, she explained, have conducted extensive scientific evaluations post-legalization, while North Macedonia lacks any similar evidence-based approach.



Marcela TITTLOVA

Professor of criminal law,
Member of the Department of
Criminal Law, Criminalistics
and Criminology, Faculty of Law,
Pan-European University in

Marcela Tittlova, a professor of criminal law at the Pan-European University in Bratislava and a member of the Slovak government's Council for Crime Prevention, presented a comprehensive legal overview of drug-related criminal legislation within the European Union (EU), with a focus on Slovakia. Drawing from her academic and practical experience, she explained that criminal law remains largely under the authority of individual EU member states, leading to significant differences in how drug offenses are handled.

Tittlova emphasized that while some countries have moved toward decriminalizing or legalizing certain drugs (such as marijuana), others, like Slovakia, maintain strict penalties, including criminalizing even minimal personal possession. She explained that EU-wide legislation, such as the Council Framework Decision 2004/757/JHA, provides only minimal common standards for defining and punishing drug trafficking offenses. This decision mandates penalties for intentional acts such as the production, sale, distribution, import/export, and possession of drugs with intent to traffic, while allowing mitigation of sentences for offenders who cooperate with authorities and requiring the confiscation of profits from drug crimes.

She elaborated on the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), which provides objective and comparable data to guide policymaking across member states. The EMCDDA categorizes drug-related crimes into several types:

- Psychopharmacological crimes, committed under the influence of substances.
- Economic-compulsive crimes, driven by the need to finance drug use.
- Systemic crimes, related to the illegal drug trade and market control.
- Administrative crimes, violating national drug laws.

In Slovakia, drug crimes are treated very seriously. Until August 2024, drug trafficking was punished with sentences equivalent to murder (20–25 years or life imprisonment). Although reforms are underway to differentiate penalties based on the type and quantity of the drug, even personal possession remains a crime. The new approach may reduce penalties for small quantities, aiming to shift toward partial decriminalization. However, Slovakia has not legalized drugs in any form.

Tittlova acknowledged the challenges of adapting to the emergence of new synthetic substances, which often fall outside current legislation. She stressed the need for national laws to evolve alongside European frameworks to ensure these new drugs are also regulated.

In conclusion, she reiterated that extremely harsh penalties have not achieved their intended goals. Instead, balanced even evidence based approaches are needed combining legal enforcement with public health, prevention, and education strategies to address drug-related issues effectively.





Gjoše STEVKOV

Vice Dean for Science and
International Cooperation,
Faculty of Pharmacy, UKIM

In his speech, Professor Gjoše Stevko, Vice Dean for Science and International Cooperation at the Faculty of Pharmacy, UKIM, focused on the challenges and priorities related to drug policy in North Macedonia, especially in the context of cannabis and psychoactive substances. He emphasized that this was his first time participating in the National Convention's strategy work but highlighted his longstanding engagement with the topic as a professor of physiology and phytochemistry and as a key figure in drafting the 2015 law on medical cannabis.

Stevko stressed the importance of clear definitions of drugs and psychoactive substances to ensure consistent policy and enforcement. He discussed his involvement in committees under the Ministry of Health and the Macedonian Agency for Medicines, which regulate cannabis use for medical purposes. He identified three core priorities from the new national strategy, focusing especially on the need to reduce drug demand through preventive measures and public education. He praised the integration of such topics in academic settings, citing his faculty's summer school on drugs and psychoactive substances, which attracts students across Europe.

A central theme of his address was the underutilized potential of North Macedonia's legal cannabis industry. While over €500 million have been invested and around 40 companies are active, the sector is stagnating due to outdated legislation, weak institutional support, and a lack of regulatory adaptation to evolving global trends.

He argued that Macedonia needs to amend its cannabis laws in alignment with European standards to support its own export, ensure patient access, and strengthen oversight.

Stevko criticized the limited institutional capacities for controlling, monitoring, and enforcing laws related to drug production and distribution. He pointed out that the five-member regulatory body in the Ministry of Health and the pharmaceutical committee are insufficient. He also emphasized the lack of real-time monitoring systems for cannabis and psychoactive substances, calling it a major institutional gap.

Furthermore, he noted the absence of mechanisms for the rapid identification and regulation of new psychoactive substances, contrasting this with countries like the Netherlands and Greece. He advocated for a centralized laboratory system for forensic and regulatory analysis and called for improved intersectoral coordination. Finally, Stevko referenced ongoing research at his faculty, including work on wild cannabis, psychoactive compounds, and spectroscopic detection techniques, insisting that such findings must be integrated into national policymaking. He concluded by underlining the need to align with EU drug policy while incorporating Macedonia's unique experiences with medical cannabis and other emerging issues like poppy cultivation.



Blagorodna KOCEVA SIMJANOV

Executive director,
HOPS - Healthy Options Project
Skopje

Blagorodna Kotseva Simjanov, Executive Director of HOPS – Healthy Options Project Skopje, shared critical insights based on over 25 years of NGO experience working with people who use drugs. She emphasized that effective drug policy must be grounded in public health, human rights, and harm reduction, informed by evidence-based practices. She expressed concern that while policies and strategies often look promising on paper, they lack implementation, which undermines real change.

Kotseva pointed out that North Macedonia's Action Plan on Drugs for 2024–2025, developed by the Ministry of Health, has been pending government approval for over a year, making timely implementation nearly impossible. She also criticized the disconnect between national strategies and actual realization, noting that NGOs are often expected to implement tasks without adequate institutional or financial support.

One major concern raised was the drastic reduction in funding for harm reduction services, which threatens the ability of health workers and NGOs to provide essential care and outreach to people who use drugs. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a sharp rise in new opioid substances, yet the country lacks reliable statistics and monitoring systems to understand and respond to this trend. Unlike many EU countries, Macedonia has no drug-checking programs or youth-targeted prevention programs, leaving young people unprotected and uninformed.

Kotseva praised recent steps taken by the Ministry of Social Policy in recognizing the role of private service providers. HOPS has been cooperating with the Probation Office since 2019, helping clients who receive alternative sentences reintegrate through rehabilitation programs. Since October 2023, some of these clients have been referred through local Centers for Social Work, showing the potential of institutional cooperation for reducing recidivism.

She also highlighted past work with the Ministry of Education to include drug prevention in elementary education curricula, but lamented that it remains optional and inconsistently applied. Currently, HOPS is implementing a NIPA-funded project aimed at establishing national prevention standards in high schools, but it remains stalled due to delays from the Ministry of Education and lack of coordination with the Ministry of Health.

Kotseva concluded by emphasizing the need for functional institutions, consistent implementation of planned strategies, and greater institutional accountability. She welcomed further collaboration and thanked attendees for their attention and engagement.



Discussion after the 1st panel

Moderators:

Muhamed HALILI
Muhamed REXEPI

The panel discussion centered on the growing challenges of drug trafficking, substance abuse, and the need for effective national policies and prevention strategies. Key points included:

- 1. Rising Drug Prevalence** – Synthetic drugs and cocaine are increasingly widespread, with transnational criminal networks exploiting corruption to transport drugs into the country.
- 2. Weak Prevention & Education** – Current drug prevention programs in schools are often superficial and ineffective. Experts stressed the need for early, science-based education targeting children and parents to curb drug use before it starts.
- 3. Institutional Gaps** – Poor coordination between law enforcement, healthcare, and education sectors hinders progress. Corruption enables drug trafficking, while legal cannabis production lacks proper oversight, leading to abuse.
- 4. Treatment & Stigma** – Access to rehabilitation is limited, especially outside major cities, and drug users face discrimination in healthcare and society. Prison systems lack proper addiction treatment, worsening the cycle of crime.
- 5. Policy & Political Will** – Existing laws and other strategies are not fully implemented. Participants called for evidence-based policies, stronger inter-agency cooperation, and EU-aligned approaches focusing on harm reduction, decriminalization, and public health.

The discussion concluded that without urgent, coordinated action prioritizing prevention, institutional reform, and anti-corruption measures the drug crisis will continue to escalate, harming public health and security.

Trpe STOJANOVSKI

NCEU-MK Expert,
Professor at the Faculty of
Security, UKLO



In his speech at the second panel of the 16th session of Working Group 4, Professor Trpe Stojanovski from the Faculty of Security, UKLO, addressed the complex and multidisciplinary nature of drug-related issues within the framework of Chapter 24 of the EU integration process. He began by emphasizing the historical context of drug use in Macedonia, pointing out that while opium had long been part of the local culture, modern challenges are far more complex due to the rise of new synthetic substances and transnational trafficking networks. He highlighted the growing need for coordinated state responses and questioned why once-functional commissions on drug policy and control, such as the active inter-institutional body from the 1990s, no longer exist today.

Stojanovski elaborated on the criminal dynamics of drug trafficking, especially the Balkan region's increasing involvement in global cocaine routes. He discussed findings from global initiatives and from Europol, pointing to the adaptability and growing influence of Balkan criminal groups, including Serbian and Montenegrin clans operating directly in South America. He outlined how corruption, both local and international, facilitates these trafficking routes and noted the critical role of ports across the Balkans as entry points. Cocaine, though increasingly present in Macedonia, is mainly destined for more profitable Western European markets. He also addressed the links between drug trafficking, human trafficking, and arms smuggling, stating these crimes often occur simultaneously, increasing the profits for organized criminal groups.

Moreover, Stojanovski noted the increasing use of cannabis as a currency in illicit arms trade, with Macedonia and Albania playing significant roles in regional cannabis production. He warned of the rise of synthetic drugs and local illegal laboratories, often supplied with precursors from China or Turkey. A key danger, he stressed, lies in inadequate state monitoring, weak institutional capacities, and tolerance toward small-scale trafficking, especially of chemical precursors.

His closing appeal was for strengthening institutional capacities, ensuring intersectoral coordination, and emphasizing criminal prosecution as a central pillar. He called for sincere political will and a holistic approach to drug policy, arguing that without unified efforts, fragmented institutional responses will remain ineffective in addressing such a deeply embedded and evolving threat.



**Nenad
SAVESKI**

**Judge, Basic Criminal Court,
Skopje**

In his address, Judge Nenad Saveski of the Basic Criminal Court in Skopje, Department for Organized Crime and Corruption, reflected on the role of the judiciary in both preventing and combating drug-related crime in North Macedonia. He opened with a personal anecdote that revealed how deeply rooted the fear of youth involvement in drugs and crime is in society, highlighting the urgency for more effective institutional responses. Saveski emphasized that Macedonia's geographical position along the Balkan trafficking routes, as well as its internal drug production and consumption, makes the country highly vulnerable to drug-related criminal activity.

The judge pointed out that while current legislation adequately defines drug-related offenses, the system lacks effective penalty policies and mechanisms for resocialization of offenders. He advocated for a data-driven approach to evaluate the success of existing sanctions and to determine whether alternative measures, such as mandatory treatment, could yield better results. Saveski warned that drug crimes are rarely isolated they are deeply intertwined with financial crime, corruption, and organized crime, and often serve as a foundation for other serious offenses like money laundering.

A particularly powerful part of his speech was his focus on confiscation of criminal assets as a judicial tool. He shared a personal story from his time as a prosecutor, where confiscating an expensive vehicle from an arrogant, wealthy offender proved more impactful than any prison sentence. For Saveski, confiscation sends a clear societal message: crime does not pay, and ill-gotten gains will be stripped away. He urged both judges and prosecutors to use this measure more proactively.

Saveski also expressed alarm at the increasingly young age of drug users in the country, citing reports of children as young as two years old. He advocated for a stronger focus on prevention, especially targeting youth, through institutional collaboration and public education. However, he noted that prevention must go beyond mere awareness campaigns and be part of a holistic, systemic strategy, backed by data and well-coordinated efforts across health, education, and legal institutions.

Finally, he called for greater judicial engagement in civil society, the strengthening of institutional controls over legal cannabis production, and urgent reforms to monitor and regulate cannabis plantations, which he believes are frequently used as fronts for illegal operations. In conclusion, Judge Saveski stressed that without a serious commitment to enforcement, rehabilitation, and intersectoral cooperation, efforts to combat drug-related crime will remain insufficient.



Lenche RISTOSKA

Prosecutor, Higher Public
Prosecutor's Office, Skopje

In her speech at the 16th session of Working Group 4, Lenche Ristoska, Prosecutor at the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Skopje, addressed the increasing complexity of drug trafficking and its evolving challenges, shaped by global trends, synthetic opioids, digital distribution channels, and gaps in national response. She began by highlighting the global shift from traditional drugs like heroin to extremely potent synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, which are stronger, cheaper, and more accessible, posing significant health and legal challenges.

Ristoska criticized the decline in international funding notably from the U.S. for anti-drug efforts in Latin America, which has reduced cocaine seizures and pushed surplus drugs toward Europe. She discussed how European markets, especially the Netherlands, serve as primary entry points for drugs, with some tolerance policies leading to unintended consequences like increased organized crime and violence. Drawing parallels, she warned about Macedonia's proximity to Albania, a regional trafficking hub, increases its vulnerability to higher-volume, higher-purity drug inflows.

Domestically, Ristoska identified serious gaps in institutional cooperation, data collection, and strategic enforcement, emphasizing that many national strategies remain unimplemented. She warned of new threats, such as online drug markets, misuse of express shipping services, and the proliferation of small synthetic drug labs. One such lab in North Macedonia was discovered to be a key supplier of party drugs in Western Europe, raising alarms not only for public safety but also for environmental harm due to toxic waste.

Ristoska stressed the need for science-based, evidence-driven policies, effective mapping of drug hotspots, and inter-agency coordination to track both supply and demand trends. She emphasized that prosecutors often work without updated data or guidelines, limiting their ability to act decisively, particularly on emerging substances. She also advocated for confiscation of criminal assets, echoing Judge Saveski, and criticized how easily narcotics criminals gain influence and wealth, often shaping public perception among youth, who view the criminal lifestyle as aspirational.


To counter this, she urged preventive education programs in schools and shared successful examples of engaging youth through real-world demonstrations of drug seizures. Ristoska concluded by highlighting North Macedonia's growing cooperation with Europol and Eurojust, including the establishment of joint investigative teams, and called for broader use of these tools. Ultimately, she argued that without structured data, active institutional engagement, and international collaboration, North Macedonia will remain reactive rather than proactive in the fight against drug trafficking.

Edward ANDERSON

Head of Public Safety and
Community Outreach
Department, OSCE – Mission to
Skopje




Edward Anderson, Head of Public Safety and Community Outreach at the OSCE Mission to Skopje, drew upon decades of experience in international law enforcement and community safety to offer a powerful, empathetic, and data-rich reflection on drug-related challenges. He expressed deep personal and professional commitment to North Macedonia, where he resides with his two sons, and thanked local institutions for their efforts in building safer communities. While he had forgotten his written speech, Anderson delivered a passionate and detailed talk informed by notes and his lived experience working on complex drug cases globally.



Anderson emphasized that North Macedonia still has a unique opportunity to get ahead of the growing drug crisis, unlike many Western countries where the problem has escalated beyond control. He warned, however, that early signs such as the involvement of young people in drug use and trafficking must not be ignored. Through vivid case examples from the United States, including infants born addicted to cocaine and a 10-year-old involved in a double homicide over drugs, he illustrated how drug addiction leads to a breakdown in communities, social systems, and families, often resulting in trauma that lasts for generations.

He advocated for evidence-based policymaking, improved data collection (even on small cues like tattoos or packaging), and the inclusion of victim-offenders in strategic thinking, recognizing that many drug couriers are both criminals and victims. He stressed the importance of confiscation as a punitive and symbolic tool, recounting how asset seizures like vehicles and property had immense psychological impact on offenders in his own cases. Yet he warned that confiscation also requires proper institutional planning and resources to manage seized assets effectively.

Anderson highlighted the need for tailored international support, arguing that OSCE and other actors must listen more and build locally relevant programs rather than imposing standard solutions. He called for greater integration of social services, education, law enforcement, and judicial actors, and encouraged using case studies and local curricula to train the next generation of practitioners. With warnings about the rise of synthetic drugs like fentanyl and carfentanil, and the increasing role of AI and cryptocurrency in trafficking, he urged North Macedonia to take proactive, preventive steps before the situation becomes unmanageable.





The following is a discussion on the panel of the the 16th session of Working Group 4 – Justice, Freedom, and Security (Chapter 24), moderated by Marina Mitrevska, Coordinator of Working Group 4, Professor, Institute for Security, Defence, and Peace, Faculty of Philosophy, UKIM, Skopje. The panel discussion focused on several critical issues related to drug policy, trafficking, and institutional coordination in North Macedonia. Key points included:

1. Historical Context of Drug Production – The discussion highlighted the historical shift from opium production to morphine extraction, noting that some countries still engage in unregulated production despite international conventions.
2. Institutional and Legal Challenges – Participants identified gaps in inter-agency cooperation, inconsistent data collection, and frequent turnover of focal points, which hinder effective drug policy implementation. The lack of a national anti-drug coordinator since 2017 was emphasized as a major setback.
3. Asset Management and Medical Use of Seized Drugs – Confiscated drugs, particularly cannabis, often go to waste due to legal ambiguities. Experts proposed reforms to allow seized drugs to be repurposed for medical use, but current regulations and storage issues complicate this.
4. Prevention and Education – The need for early, science-based drug education in schools was stressed, alongside lifelong learning programs for professionals. Stigmatization of drug users and inadequate public health responses were cited as barriers to effective prevention.
5. International Cooperation and Financial Crimes – Strengthening cross-border collaboration and financial investigations to track money laundering linked to drug trafficking was urged. Examples included suspicious tourist activities tied to drug production and the infiltration of illicit funds into legal businesses.
6. Policy Recommendations – Proposals included:
 - Establishing an early warning system for new synthetic drugs.
 - Expanding the mandate of the Asset Management Agency to handle seized drugs more effectively.
 - Integrating courts, probation services, and social entrepreneurship into rehabilitation efforts.
 - Ensuring continuity in international engagements by stabilizing focal point appointments.

The session concluded with a call to refine draft recommendations for the 2025 national drug strategy, emphasizing evidence-based approaches and multi-sectoral collaboration to address the complex challenges of drug abuse and trafficking.



RECOMMENDATIONS



Recommendation 1: Strengthening institutional preparedness and the role of the National Drug Commission in cannabis regulation

With the ongoing processes of legalization and/or decriminalization of *Cannabis sativa*, social tolerance toward its use is expected to increase. This change presents significant challenges for law enforcement institutions, which must be adequately prepared to implement new regulations and policies.

It is recommended that:

1. Law enforcement institutions (MoI, Customs, Prosecutor's Office, Judiciary) develop operational protocols and capacities to ensure effective application of the new legal framework governing cannabis production and use.
2. The National Drug Commission assumes a central and coordinating role in managing reforms, monitoring implementation, and aligning institutional responsibilities within the National Drug Strategy 2021–2025.
3. Action plans and risk assessments are regularly updated in line with legislative changes and societal dynamics.
4. Public information and education campaigns clarify the differences between medical, industrial, and recreational use, and inform citizens about their rights and responsibilities under the new regulations.

Recommendation 2: Improved oversight of marketing and export of cannabis from licensed producers

As the licensed cannabis market grows, there is a real risk that some legally produced high-quality cannabis may enter the illegal drug market. This undermines market integrity and contributes to organized crime and artificial price manipulation.

Institutions, particularly the Ministry of Interior and regulatory authorities, are recommended to:

1. Establish a “seed-to-sale” tracking system to monitor every stage of production, processing, storage, export, and final use.
2. Mandate reporting of sales and export contracts, including details of partners, quantities, and intended use (medical, industrial, etc.).
3. Conduct regular inspections and cross-checks between reported quantities and physical stock, involving financial police and customs authorities.
4. Create an interoperable data exchange system among producers, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, and Customs, similar to the model in the Czech Republic.

Recommendation 3: Preparing law enforcement for organized crime risks linked to increased medical cannabis production

With rising medical use of Cannabis sativa, the number of controlled cultivation laboratories and processing facilities is expected to grow. This trend increases the risk of legal capacities being misused for illegal purposes, including organized crime activities.

It is recommended that:

1. Law enforcement agencies (MoI, Prosecutor's Office, Financial Police, Customs) establish specialized teams to monitor and prosecute organized crime groups potentially abusing medical cannabis regulations.
2. Provide training and specialization for inspection and investigative services to identify unregistered facilities, unauthorized production and trade, and assess risks associated with disguised criminal activities within legal businesses.
3. Enhance institutional coordination between regulatory bodies (Ministry of Health, Medicines Agency) and enforcement authorities to ensure timely data exchange and traceability of each product.
4. Strengthen the use of financial intelligence to monitor suspicious investments, money laundering, and financial flows related to licensed entities.

Recommendation 4: Developing a targeted strategy to prevent heroin trafficking in exchange for cannabis

Current trends indicate a real risk that organized crime groups (OCGs) may trade Balkan-produced cannabis for heroin in Turkey. This "drug-for-drug" exchange model increases the risk of illicit trafficking networks, transnational criminal links, and escalation of violence between criminal groups.

It is recommended that:

1. MoI develop and implement a proactive strategy to prevent and prosecute heroin trafficking, based on analysis of trade routes, communication patterns, and financial flows of OCGs.
2. Establish specialized operational teams to identify and dismantle drug exchange networks.
3. Strengthen regional and international cooperation with Turkey and other countries along the "Balkan route" through intelligence sharing and joint investigations.
4. Conduct risk analysis within customs and transport systems, especially in border and transit areas, using advanced profiling and technological tools.
5. Introduce early-warning indicators for potential cannabis-for-heroin exchange schemes, involving financial institutions and mobile operators as part of broader operational monitoring.

Recommendation 5: Strengthening the institutional response to illicit synthetic drug production and trafficking

Advances in technology and increased availability of chemical precursors are driving organized crime groups toward illegal production of synthetic drugs. These groups already have advanced skills, enabling the use of non-controlled precursors easily obtained online or via distribution networks.

It is recommended that:

1. Establish an early-warning center to register new synthetic drugs and maintain a controlled substances list based on generics.
2. Enhance forensic and investigative capacities to detect and analyze synthetic drug laboratories, with a focus on non-controlled precursors.
3. Develop mechanisms to monitor online and cross-border trade in chemical substances with potential use in synthetic drug production.
4. Promote inter-institutional cooperation among police, customs, Medicines Agency, Ministry of Health, and financial institutions to track suspicious purchases and movements of chemicals and equipment.
5. Conduct proactive intelligence and trend analysis to anticipate and prevent new forms of illegal production and distribution.
6. Encourage regional and international information exchange on new substances and production methods, participating in joint investigations and operations.

Recommendation 6: Strengthening regional and international cooperation against drug-related organized crime in line with EU practices

Following European Commission, Europol, and EMPACT (European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats) guidelines, Western Balkan countries, including North Macedonia, are encouraged to intensify cooperation and align legal and operational frameworks with EU security standards. Drug-related organized crime is a key priority in the EU Strategic Cycle for combating serious and organized crime.

It is recommended that:

1. Align national legislation with EU directives on drug trafficking, money laundering, and terrorism financing, including adopting EU definitions of organized crime structures, membership, and operational schemes.
2. Establish and systematically use Joint Investigation Teams (JITs) in partnership with Eurojust and Europol for transnational drug investigations, particularly along multimodal routes in the Western Balkans.
3. Integrate national police and intelligence agencies into EMPACT activities through working groups on drug trafficking and organized crime to access operational tools, analysis, training, and EU funding.
4. Strengthen intelligence capacity and develop national Focal Points for Drugs in cooperation with Europol for proactive data exchange on criminal actors, trafficking routes, smuggling patterns, financial flows, and emerging trends (including drug-barter exchanges, synthetic drugs, crypto channels, etc.).

5. Operationalize regional cooperation through joint training, thematic conferences on emerging threats, expert working groups on hybrid challenges, and participation in EU regional networks such as SEESAC and IPA II & III internal security instruments.

6. Encourage countries to establish National EMPACT Focal Points to support EU priorities in drug control.

Recommendation 7: Establishing systematic monitoring and evaluation as a basis for effective drug policy

Monitoring and evaluation are essential tools for designing, adjusting, and improving drug policies. Without systematic monitoring, it is impossible to develop strategies, programs, and plans aligned with the context. Without evaluating existing strategies and programs, it is impossible to determine what works, what doesn't, and where reforms should head.

It is recommended that:

1. Establish regular monitoring of drug-related indicators standardized by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), including drug-related deaths, treatment demand, seizures, etc. Conduct regular evaluation of all national strategies and action plans in accordance with EU and EMCDDA standards.

2. Use clear indicators and measurable objectives during policy design to enable tracking and objective assessment of results.

3. Engage independent experts or institutions for external evaluations.

4. Use evaluation findings to revise existing policies and design new ones.

Recommendation 8: Treating drug use and addiction as a public health issue within drug policy

Addressing addiction as a disease rather than a crime allows for an effective, sustainable, and humane approach that protects both individuals and society. European experience shows that countries prioritizing public health in their drug policies achieve better outcomes in reducing drug use, crime, mortality, and morbidity, while lowering treatment costs and burdens on the justice system.

It is recommended that:

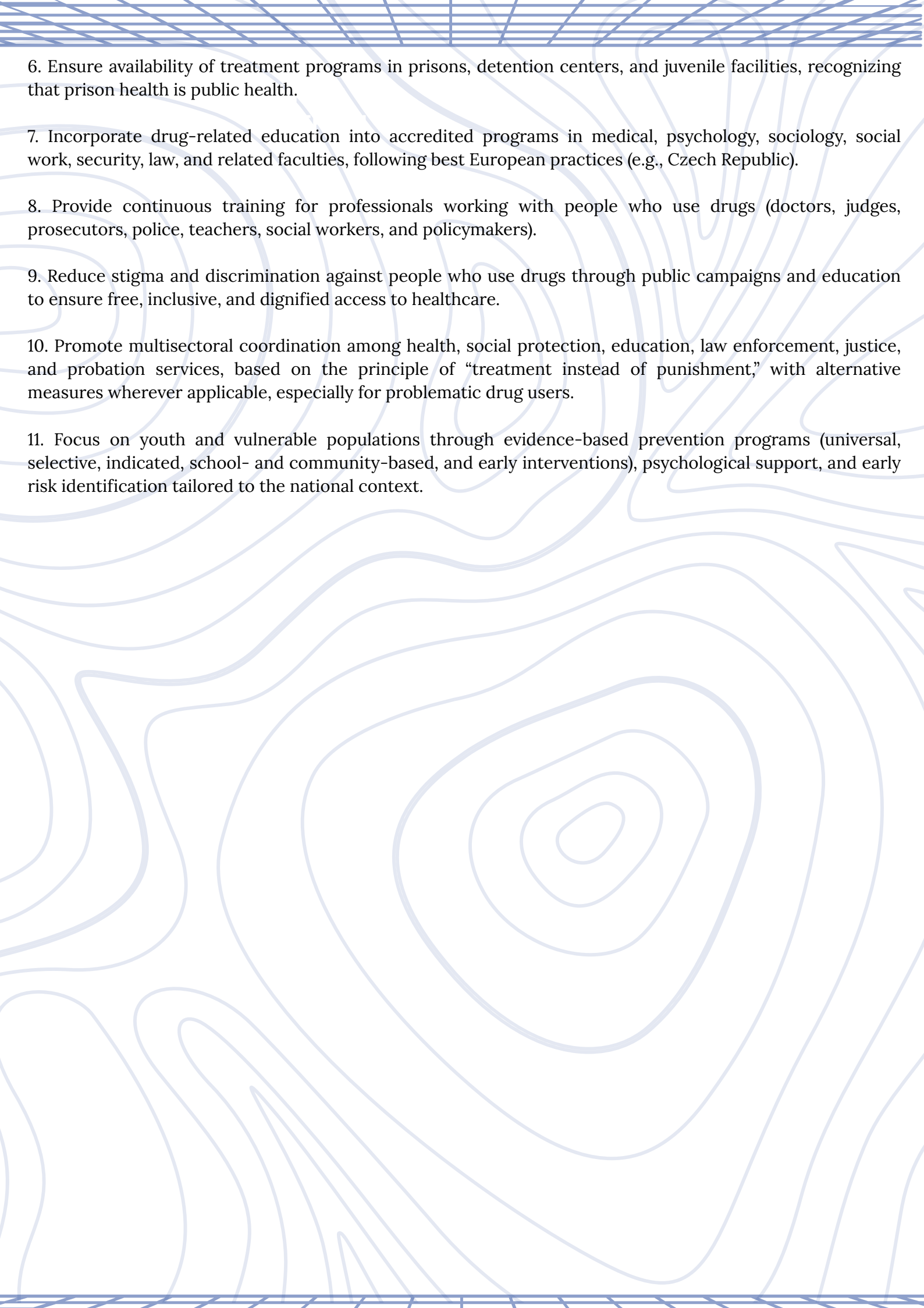
1. Integrate a health-based approach in the national drug strategy, emphasizing prevention, early detection, intervention, treatment, rehabilitation, and reintegration of people with substance use disorders.

2. Strengthen the role of healthcare institutions, particularly addiction treatment centers, as key actors in addressing drug use.

3. Ensure access to evidence-based treatments for disorders caused by opioids, psychostimulants, cannabis, other psychoactive substances, and non-medical use of prescription drugs, as well as behavioral addictions (online/offline gambling, video games, problematic internet use), with psychosocial support, mobile teams, and harm reduction programs in line with EMCDDA and WHO recommendations.

4. Ensure access to medications for overdose prevention.

5. Provide specialized programs for children using drugs, women (including pregnant women), migrants, and marginalized groups (e.g., homeless).

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6. Ensure availability of treatment programs in prisons, detention centers, and juvenile facilities, recognizing that prison health is public health.
 7. Incorporate drug-related education into accredited programs in medical, psychology, sociology, social work, security, law, and related faculties, following best European practices (e.g., Czech Republic).
 8. Provide continuous training for professionals working with people who use drugs (doctors, judges, prosecutors, police, teachers, social workers, and policymakers).
 9. Reduce stigma and discrimination against people who use drugs through public campaigns and education to ensure free, inclusive, and dignified access to healthcare.
 10. Promote multisectoral coordination among health, social protection, education, law enforcement, justice, and probation services, based on the principle of “treatment instead of punishment,” with alternative measures wherever applicable, especially for problematic drug users.
 11. Focus on youth and vulnerable populations through evidence-based prevention programs (universal, selective, indicated, school- and community-based, and early interventions), psychological support, and early risk identification tailored to the national context.