



Turkish drug policies since 2000: A triangulated analysis of national and international dynamics



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ABSTRACT

This article assesses major developments in Turkish drug policies over the past fifteen years. As a retrospective policy analysis, this research analyzes systematically and chronologically the country's illegal drug policies in terms of a Walt and Gilson policy triangle approach. Accordingly, matters of *context*, *key actors*, and *process* are examined with regard to continuities and shifts in policy content. Broadly, the main factors exerting influence on drug policy making are demonstrated to be both national and international in origin. Since 2000, however, a national drug policy posture emphasizing a criminal justice approach and sanctions has won out. As a consequence, Turkish policies have proven inadequate for resolving drug-related problems faced by the state.

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1. Introduction

The issue of illegal drugs is a complex policy area that needs to be analyzed from a variety of perspectives. These perspectives include medical, social, psychological, legal, and international considerations that arise from different concerns and values regarding the issue of illegal drugs. The issue is also affected by a lack of universal consensus on drug policy. Even though many countries share similar concerns about drug problems, some countries respond to drug issues from a criminal justice perspective (i.e. arrest and punish), while others perceive it as a health problem or analyze it in a multi-dimensional manner and identify it as an interdisciplinary approach. Several governmental actors (e.g. criminal justice, health, education, social services etc.) are involved to a certain degree in the drug-policy making in most of the countries. One of the main dilemmas facing policymakers in developing countries is how to formulate drug policy and overcome drug problems.

After the international conventions adopted by the UN concerning illegal drugs (e.g. 1961, 1971 and 1988), drug issue has become one of the most significant policy domains for a large number of countries including Turkey. Illegal drug production, distribution, sales, and addiction exert a great influence on many institutions and their policies. Due to Turkey's geographic location (Robins, 2008) the strength of security institutions and policy makers' perceptions concerning narco-terrorism (Ekici, 2014; KOM, 1995), as well as an unaddressed problem of addiction (Department of Anti-smuggling Intelligence and Operation, 1994), the development of Turkey's drug policy has historically been to see it as a matter of criminal justice and law enforcement (Akgul and Kapti, 2010). Yet, Turkey's drug situation has changed dramatically over the last decade as may be witnessed in international drug reports (UNODC, 2012, 2016) and annual reports published by (national) Turkish authorities

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(KOM, 2015; TUBIM, 2014). From 2006 to 2015, there was an almost threefold increase in the total number of drug-related deaths. Furthermore, the number of drug addicts in the probation system has increased exponentially over the course of the last few years as well as there occurring a growth in the numbers of inmates incarcerated in Turkish prisons due to drug-related offences since 2006 (see [Charts 1 and 2](#)). This recorded its highest figure of 35,000 in 2016 ([Ministry of Justice, 2016](#)).

In addition to these figures, drug seizures increased dramatically from 2000 until 2014, in particular those for heroin and cannabis. For instance, the number of seizures for cannabis and heroin represented a figure higher than that of the combined seizures of all EU countries taking place during 2013 and 2014 ([EMCDDA and Europol, 2016](#)). Based on these figures, Turkey has turned into one of the world's most critical countries on the drug and trafficking markets ([UNODC, 2016](#)). Moreover, drug addiction has become one of the major problems of Turkey. According to annual reports, there has been an increase in the number of addicts that entered the criminal justice system and treatment centers since 2005 ([TBMM, 2008; TUBIM, 2014](#)).

In addition to these developments, Turkey's membership process to the EU and its regulations has created a "new" policy area which needs to be examined in a more systematic manner. Given the fact that public policy, as a broad discipline, is still considered a new academic field in Turkey ([Cevik and Demirci, 2012; Robins, 2009; Yildiz and Sobaci, 2013](#)).

Turkey's drug phenomenon was examined from a variety of perspectives such as critical geopolitics ([Evered, 2011a](#)) international & historical and public policy ([Akgul and Gurer, 2014; Evered, 2008; Robins, 2008, 2009](#)) as well as institutional ([Evered and Evered, 2016](#)) framework. In particular, [Evered \(2011a\)](#) demonstrated how international forces led to national policies of prohibition and enforcement that had an impact on local consequence. Likewise, [Robins \(2009\)](#) case study on Turkey's response to the illegal drug issue highlighted the proactive role of TADOC and TUBIM in drug policy process, which created ties with international actors and getting some prestige abroad. However, Turkey's drug policy is still a fresh topic for social scientists. Indeed, EMCDDA indicates that drug-related research in Turkey has gained momentum over the last few years; however, academic publications are still very limited and primarily focused on drug use and its prevalence ([EMCDDA, 2016](#)) rather than policy and its implementation. One of the main objectives of this article is to fill this gap and analyze Turkey's drug policy from a public policy and criminal justice standpoint.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

[Ritter and McDonald \(2008\)](#) reviewed several drug policy options and recorded 108 policy alternatives under four general classifications: treatment, law enforcement, prevention, and harm reduction. Although the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and European Union (EU) documents' emphasize a "balanced approach" concerning supply and demand reduction, it is extremely hard to realize the desired approach due to the differing priorities of countries, limitations of resources and perceptions of drug problems ([Chatwin, 2004; UNODC, 2010](#)). For example, it is rhetorically well-documented in many countries (e.g. the USA, Australia, Denmark, and Turkey) that there an approach of balance between different drug policy options should be applied; however, it is extremely hard to achieve this goal ([Chatwin, 2007; Dorn et al., 1996; Laursen and Jepsen, 2002](#)) For example, Turkey has allocated a greater amount of its resources for supply reduction efforts and this policy has been criticized in many EU progress reports since 2008 in the sense that a more balanced approach needs to be applied ([European Commission, 2008, 2013](#)).

Some scholars examined the effectiveness of drug supply reduction efforts and highlighted the uncertainty of the success of such strategies or offered little empirical evidence of the positive results/consequences of these efforts ([Kilmer and Hoorens, 2010; Mazerolle et al., 2007; Moore, 1990](#)). On the other hand, a large proportion of the research on the issue argued that drug is a health policy issue ([Kerr et al., 2005; Ritter, 2011a](#)), which requires a wider range of health approaches rather than criminal justice and law enforcement efforts.

Drug policy is affected by several variables. The political, cultural and historical backgrounds as well as the geographical location of a certain country determine its policy situation. According to MacCoun et al. "the optimality of a control regime is dependent on the nation's history of consuming and controlling the drug" ([MacCoun et al., 1996](#)) Such a history includes the drugs' characteristics, prevalence, and the availability of psychoactive drugs. [Lambropoulou \(2003\)](#) claimed that political and economic issues, the availability of resources, as well as the priority of the phenomenon at a governmental and political level are important parameters of policy formation of states. These are generally determined by the visibility of the problem in the media, perception of the threat among citizens and the emphasis given by responsible drug institutions.

[Lambropoulou \(2003\)](#) claims that "historical, social factors and those relating to the development of criminality in a country, as well as the dynamic of the interest groups shape these perceptions concerning drug policy. These perspectives determine, for example, whether drug control is primarily a public health, crime, law enforcement or social policy issue. Furthermore, every attempt to improve or confront the situation may have side effects or can be neutralized by unpredictable factors. Therefore, there are a lot of impediments for the formulation of an effective policy."

[Benson et al. \(1995\)](#) assert that the evolution of drug policy since its' initial criminalization has been shaped by the competition between law enforcement agencies and drug treatment bureaucrats over the 'ownership of the problem.' Furthermore, they emphasize the "shares of the federal state and local budgets and between law enforcement bureaucracies themselves at the federal level as well as between various local state and federal bureaucracies." In fact a "crime control policy that focuses on drugs should be a positive sum game in the sense that increasing drug arrests (and imprisonment of drug users) would reduce both drug crime and non-drug crime. There is no evidence that increasing use of law enforcement resources to combat drugs has reduced other [types of] crime, however".

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