

How Saakashvili Failed In a War Against Drugs

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Guys used to park at the end of our street to shoot up. They littered the ground with their used needles until one day they disappeared, imprisoned for drug use. For several years, our quiet little street was safe for children to play on.

Many people thought that President Mikheil Saakashvili's zero-tolerance policy was an efficient solution to Georgia's alarming drug problem.

But that's because Georgians know nothing about addiction. An alcoholic may never touch a drop again, but he'll always be an alcoholic. Opiate addicts are no different. Kicking the habit is not a one-time deal. It's a process that continues until, ultimately, you kick the bucket.

Nobody knows where the new government stands on drug issues. Many of the 8,000 people it released from prison in March under a broad amnesty were problem drug users, although Georgia still has one of the harshest drug policies in the region.

A first-time offender caught with less than 5 grams of marijuana faces a fine of \$300 or one month in jail. If caught again within a year, the punishment increases to \$3,000 or one-year imprisonment. More than 5 grams of drugs can put you behind bars for the rest of your life, compared to premeditated murder, which carries seven to 15 years in prison.

There is no categorization of drugs in Georgia, nor does the law clearly distinguish dealers from casual or dependent users. However, the government has promised to reform the drug laws, and a commission is reviewing the decriminalization of marijuana. In response, about 1,000 people rallied in Tbilisi earlier this month to urge the government to decriminalize marijuana.

The previous government had also talked about liberalizing the marijuana law once, but to no avail. Now Saakashvili admits jailing people for smoking pot was a mistake.

Georgia's failed war on drugs was predictable. Studies find that the number of drug users has actually increased. Take away somebody's heroin, and they'll just mainline iodine and phosphorus. Make pot illegal and people will smoke a dangerously synthetic alternative instead.

Under Georgian law, drug addiction is considered a disease; therefore, the state must invest in treatment and rehabilitation and start treating its drug abusers as health concerns — not criminals. It should start a needle exchange program to reduce the risk of HIV and, perhaps, keep our streets safer for our children.

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