



Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor

**Findings 2016:
Monitoring of Mass Media Publications
on Drug Users, Illicit Drug Trafficking
and other Drug-related Issues**

**REFERENCE
BRIEF**

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Contents

Introduction 4

Sources and nature of publications 4

Impact of publications on shaping public attitudes 5

Reflection of human rights violations in publications..... 6

Summary 6

Introduction

Since 2011, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor has regularly monitored the publications of the mass media in the Republic of Armenia by collecting and analyzing information on drugs, drug users and illegal drug trafficking. The monitoring aims to identify the situation of drug users' rights protection and the attitudes of the state and society towards drug users and their problems, as shown in such publications.

In 2016, the 15 websites below, including 3 official websites of state bodies: police.am, genproc.am, moh.am and 12 mass media websites: news.am, a1plus.am, lragir.am, 168.am, 7or.am, slaq.am, ilur.am, galatv.am, armlur.am, lin.am, operativ.am and hhpress.am¹ were monitored. A total of 1505 publications were collected and analyzed.

The publications were classified by the sources sharing the information, i.e. publications via official websites of the state bodies and publications via the mass media, which in their turn were classified by relevant state bodies, organizations and groups of people.

The publications were also classified by their content: publications on implementation of criminal procedural actions and general informative publications.

The collected publications were also evaluated in terms of their impact on shaping the public attitude to drug users and their problems as well as drugs and use of drugs: publications shaping positive attitude, publications shaping negative attitude and neutral publications.

Also, the Study identified publications with information on potential human rights violations and publications containing personal data identifying a person.

Sources and nature of publications

Out of a total of 1505 publications on drug users and illicit drug trafficking on the 15 websites monitored in 2016,² 248 were posted on the official websites of state bodies and 1257 – via the mass media.

The number of the publications via the mass media based on information provided by the RA Police also made a majority; in 2015-2016, the number of such publications was 1115 or 73.5% of the total number of the publications. And in 2016, the publications on the websites of the law enforcement agencies or based on the information provided by them made about 54% of the total number of publications.

¹ The same websites were monitored in 2015 as well.

² The collected 1505 publications concerned 533 cases, i.e. one or more than one publications concerned the same person or case.

The said publications primarily concern drugs and detection of individuals or groups of people involved in illicit drug trafficking and mostly focus on criminal prosecution of such people. 1056 (about 70%) of the 1505 publications monitored in 2016 actually concern performance of criminal procedural actions.

About 82% of the 1056 publications on criminal procedural actions concerned illicit drug trafficking with indication of officials and citizens, and about 5% - without indication of any specific individuals or groups of people. Also, about another 6% of publications concerned the offences committed by drug users; this number grew by almost 7 times as compared to that in 2015.

As compared to the publications on performance of criminal procedural actions, publications on the current problems of drug users, their treatment and rehabilitation are quite insignificant (making about 1% of the monitored publications). Notably, the problems, treatment and rehabilitation of drug users were mostly referred to by representatives of NGOs.

We can argue that the state carries on its punitive policy in the field of drugs.

Impact of publications on shaping public attitudes

Among the 1505 publications monitored in 2016, there are those promoting positive and negative attitudes towards drug users and their problems as well as drugs and their use for non-medical purposes.

The number of publications promoting in one way or another positive attitudes to drug users and their problems is 6 and that of publications promoting negative attitudes is 12. The publications shaping positive attitudes mostly target the unnecessary stigma and stereotypes against drug users due to which they are not perceived as full members of the society, as well as the life stories of drug users. As for the publications shaping negative attitudes, they on the contrary emphasize that such persons are useless and unworthy.

Apart from the 12 publications promoting negative attitude, 143 out of the 1505 monitored publications used stereotypical words “drug addict” or “drug addiction” that might also lead to shaping and reinforcement of negative attitudes. Moreover, the number of publications using this term has grown significantly as compared to that in 2015 (95 publications in 2015).

There are 75 publications promoting negative attitudes towards drugs and their use for non-medical purposes and 20 ones promoting positive attitudes. The publications promoting positive attitudes concerned the well-known persons using or advertizing drugs, medicinal properties of drugs and even usefulness of their preparation and use at home. The publications promoting negative attitudes concerned the negative effects of drugs and their use, going as far as human death resulted from such use.

It should be noted that as compared to 2015, in 2016 the number of publications promoting negative attitude to drugs and their use grew by 1.9% and that of the publications promoting positive attitude grew

by 0.4%. Whereas such a dynamics of publications shaping positive attitudes towards drugs and illicit drug trafficking may worsen even more the current difficult situation in combating drugs and illicit drug trafficking.

At the same time, we can argue that the manifestations of attitudes leading to reinforced negative stereotypes and stigma against drug users continue to prevail and there are not noticeable steps to overcome the negative public attitudes.

Reflection of human rights violations in publications

24 of the 1505 publications monitored in 2016 contained information on human rights violations in RA and 243 of them identified violations of a person's right to personal data protection.

4 of the 24 publications (1 case) concerned potential violations of a person's right to privacy and the rest 20 publications (9 cases) concerned potential violations of the right to a fair trial, with 2 publications (1 case) also concerning potential violation of the right to liberty of person. Under 2 of such publications, information was provided by the mass media and in the rest 18, it was provided by the RA Special Investigation Service. The publications provided information mostly on abuse of power by officials.

243 (16%) publications identifying violations of person's right to personal data protection may be used to identify 142 persons, 81 of whom were reported to be drug users or be suspected of using drugs. Therefore, in such cases, the confidentiality of a person's health status was also breached.³ 49 of the 243 publications with information on person's personal data were posted on the RA Police website and the rest 194 via the mass media.

At the same time, 428 of the publications carry risks to violation of the right to personal data protection and make it possible to identify in some cases 278 persons, including 155 drug users.

Summary

In 2016, 1505 publications on drug users, illicit drug trafficking and other drug-related issues were monitored. 248 of such publications were posted on the official websites of state bodies and 1257 publications were posted via the mass media.

³ The publications have no mention of any permission to disclose personal data that might make clear the lawful purpose of disclosing such data.

The overwhelming bulk of the publications concerned identification of drugs and individuals and group of persons involved in illicit drug trafficking and their criminal prosecution. At the same time, there are single publications on the health, social and legal problems of drug users.

The publications contain information and wording reinforcing negative stereotypes and stigma against drug users which poses a serious challenge to their rights. As compared to the extensive efforts to combat illicit drug trafficking, efforts against the stereotypes and stigma obstructing protection of the drug users' rights and causing discrimination against drug users are quite unnoticeable. There are publications encouraging use of drugs for non-medical purposes.

16% of the publications collected in 2016 violate person's right to personal data protection. Also, there are publications providing information on examination of the cases on abuse of powers in terms of illicit drug trafficking which shows the vulnerability of drug users and risks of pressure by officials against citizens in the field of illicit drug trafficking.

To resolve the identified problems, we suggest that the RA public authorities take the actions below:

1. Refrain from disclosing any personal data that can be used to identify a person;
2. Treat with caution publications on drug users, given their legal vulnerability;
3. Provide information on the negative effects of using drugs for non-medical purposes in publications on drug users and illicit drug trafficking;
4. Provide awareness on the actions taken by the state to solve the legal, health and social problems of drug users.

We urge the mass media to:

1. Refrain from disclosing any personal data that can be used to identify a person (when there is no lawful purpose for doing so, no matter from whom the media obtained the information);
2. Treat with caution publications on drug users, given their legal vulnerability;
3. Promote raised awareness of the legal, health and social problems of drug users;
4. Promote prevention of using drugs for non-medical purposes:
 - by providing broad awareness on the negative effects of using drugs;
 - by refraining from any publication encouraging using drugs.