

## OFFCUTS

What happens (or might happen) when **laws banning possession of controlled drugs** are repealed or relaxed is the subject of much research; what happens when such laws are introduced is for most countries lost in the mists of time. Not so for the Czech Republic, which from the 1 January 1999 criminalised unauthorised possession of narcotic and psychotropic substances for personal use, a controversial move at first vetoed by the president. The government commissioned Palacky University to research the impact of the change under the scientific supervision of Florida State University, establishing the project's independence. The extensive English-language summary<sup>1</sup> records that while the catastrophic consequences predicted by some did not materialise, neither did the anticipated benefits: the change "had hardly any impact on drug-related problems". As a result, all the expenditure on the law and its enforcement was wasted. Estimated at nearly £800,000, the potential waste was certainly far greater since the estimate included only the cost of prosecutions and only for the first two years.

Interviews with drug users suggested practically nil impact on established addicts but a "clear trend" for recreational

users to avoid services for fear of social stigmatisation and contact with the police. Cannabis and 'hard' drug markets merged. The squeezing out of small-time home production, and the need to avoid detection, encouraged escalation both in the potency of the products and in the quantities sold at any one time. There were clear signs of the emergence of a professionalised and 'hardened' market featuring mobile phones, 'runners' and relatively powerful dealers, familiar to countries such as Britain with long-standing anti-possession laws.

Inconsistency in the application of the law, also familiar to Britain, quickly became apparent as police found the new powers a convenient way to pursue other agendas. Had the law been rigorously enforced the waste of resources would have been even greater, argues the report, though it is at least conceivable that wholehearted implementation might have had a greater deterrent impact (but perhaps also further negative side-effects).

<sup>1</sup> Záborský T. et al. *PAD: Impact Analysis Project of New Drugs Legislation (summary final report)*. Prague: Czech Government, 2001. Download from [www.ceis.it/focalpoint/download/Czech\\_impact\\_study.pdf](http://www.ceis.it/focalpoint/download/Czech_impact_study.pdf).



**Criminalising drug possession in the Czech Republic 'did not reduce drug problems'**