

Entertainment Starts With an E: *The Ecstasy Market in Greece*

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide an account of the social organisation of the Ecstasy market in Greece. There are several reasons that justify a specific interest in this particular drug market. The synthetic drugs market in general and the Ecstasy market in particular is typically treated as less important compared to other drug markets, and has only sporadically received serious scholarly attention internationally (see Massari, 2005). Ecstasy consumption has been primarily associated with the rave/dance scene (Forsyth *et al.*, 1997; Sherlock and Conner, 1999; Hansen *et al.*, 2001; Bahora *et al.*, 2007), and according to EMCDDA (2007), the global production of Ecstasy in 2005 was estimated at just 113 tons. From a geographical viewpoint, while North America, East and South-East Asia begin to play an important role in the Ecstasy business, Europe does remain the main production and trafficking centre in the world (Blickman, 2005; EMCDDA, 2006). In addition, while Greece may not be a prominent part of the global Ecstasy market, its being a node for the trafficking of other substances (e.g. cannabis and/or cocaine) suggests it is well placed to perhaps play an increasingly important role: it firstly shares borders with a country that is increasingly considered as a major player primarily in the *production* of synthetic drugs such as Bulgaria, and secondly it is a major tourist destination for young people from Europe and elsewhere. The “trapezoid region” from Albania, Bulgaria and Moldova to Turkey and Cyprus has already been identified as a geographical area where Ecstasy use is on the rise (UNODC, 2008: 165).

Perhaps more importantly, the relatively small significance of the Greek market is complemented by an even smaller amount of knowledge about it. Yet despite such dramatic deficit in knowledge, concern about Ecstasy production, distribution and use in Greece has risen since Ecstasy appeared in the country in the early to mid-1990s, and continues to be fuelled by media reports that reinforce the perception that there are huge profits for traders (Kathimerini, 2003). After the arrest in 2003 of two Bulgarian nationals suspected of Ecstasy (and other synthetic drugs) trafficking, the Greek authorities have also adopted a ‘war on drug’ rhetoric when it comes to Ecstasy trafficking. On that occasion the police director of Thessaloniki commented that ‘a battle has been won but the war continues’ (Tsigganas, 2003). Thus, the fact that rank officers of the Greek police are drawn to such mentalities, while the knowledge deficit remains nevertheless gaping, makes it an imperative to examine the structure and dynamics of the Ecstasy market in the country.

We aim here to provide an account of the ‘extent’ and nature of the Ecstasy market in Greece as well as a presentation of the ‘actors’ involved. We also explicitly focus on the issue of price of Ecstasy tablets in the country, which we regard as key to the understanding of the logic of this particular market. As we base our investigation on a variety of sources, we begin from an overview of the study’s data and methods as well as some indicative studies on the prevalence of the use of the drug in Greece. Our investigation of various aspects of the market concludes with a number of more systematic observations regarding the business and the logic appropriate policy responses should adopt.

Methods and Data

As noted already, the current study uses several sources. Specifically, we have used firstly a number of reports by organizations and research centers that are concerned with drugs and drug use such as United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and EMCDDA (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction). Some of these reports do not refer specifically to the Greek context although information for the particular context can be obtained. In addition, official statistics from SODN-EMP (*Syntonistiko Organo Dioksis Narkotikon* / Central Anti-drug Coordination Unit — National Intelligence Unit), the Hellenic Coast Guard and the Hellenic Ministry of the Interior (2008) were used. The statistics that are directly relevant to this article refer to the number of seized Ecstasy tablets (among other drugs), for the period 1996-2007, although data from the Hellenic Coast Guard only are available since 1987.

We also refer extensively to the annual reports on ‘organised crime’ for the years 1999, 2004 and 2005 published by the Greek former Ministry of Public Order (MPO, 2000; 2005; 2006). These reports are based on the compilation of information and data on ‘organised crime’ by Greek law enforcement agencies. There have been serious reservations expressed as to the capacity of those reports to convey a meaningful image of ‘organised crime’ in Greece, primarily due to their reliance on concepts whose relevance for the Greek context has not been clearly and firmly established (see, for instance, Lambropoulou, 2003). We express similar reservations and in this article we use the annual reports not to assess the ‘organised crime’ situation in Greece but only to collect part of the information about sources, methods and routes of transportation of Ecstasy tablets.

Articles from nationally and locally circulated newspapers published from May 1998 to September 2008 were selected. Again, we used these articles to obtain information on ‘actors’ and their practices, and features of the production, transportation and distribution phases of the market. The aforementioned media reports were complemented by press releases from the Ministry of Mercantile Marine and the Bureau for Special Inspections (*YP.E.E*).

Finally, we have collected information from interviews with the Greek police, and specifically with officers who have served in the drugs squad, as well as with ‘key informants’, individuals working in clubs and other venues in popular resorts of Greek islands in which Ecstasy consumption takes place. Such insiders are known to constitute a very important source of information for research on drugs (Hughes *et al.*, 2004).

Prevalence of Ecstasy Use in Greece

Although there have been no studies focusing *exclusively* on Ecstasy use in Greece, the prevalence of drug use in general, including the use of Ecstasy, has been the subject of several investigations. Of particular importance are the surveys conducted by Kokkevi and her colleagues at the University Mental Health Research Institute in Athens. In one of the reports (Kokkevi, 2005) it was shown that the consumption of Ecstasy was not particularly popular among the sample, which consisted of more than eight thousand Greek students aged 13-18. Out of 8,453 participants, only 2% had used Ecstasy, whereas the percentage for *cannabis* use was 9.5%, *inhalants* 13.4%, and *unprescribed tranquilisers* or *sedatives* 3.9%. The percentage of participants who had consumed Ecstasy in their lifetime was only second from the bottom only to the

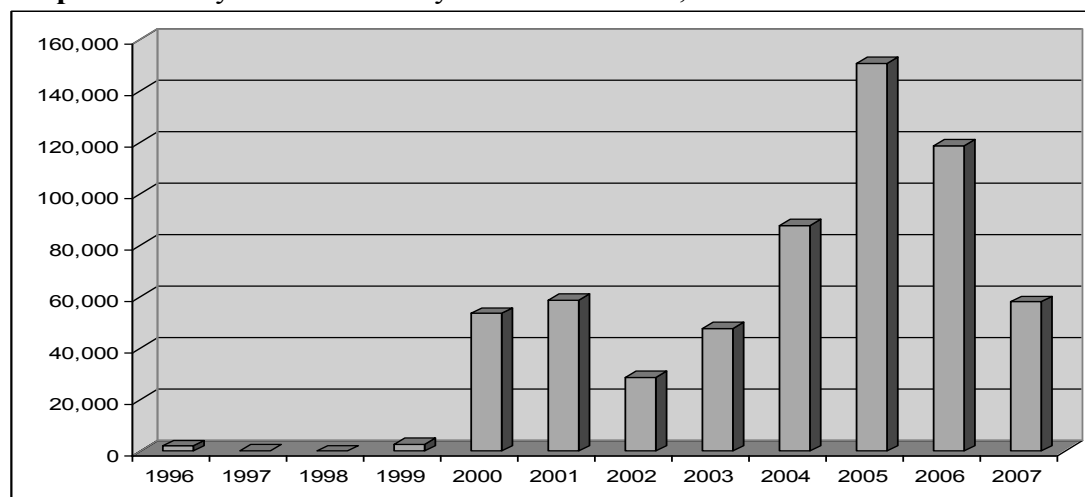
use of anabolic steroids (1.3%), the low consumption of which may be explained – among other – by the young age of the participants. Another study on drug use prevalence used data from face-to-face household surveys carried out in 1984, 1998 and 2004 with an approximately 4,000 participants aged 12-65 years. Overall, the study identified a general increase in lifetime drug use from 1984 to 2004 and that drugs other than cannabis have lifetime use prevalence below 1% (Kokkevi *et al.*, 2007). The low annual prevalence of Ecstasy use in Greece as a percentage of the population aged 15-64 is the lowest among countries of western and central Europe, and one of the lowest in Europe not exceeding 0.2% (see UNODC, 2008). Although Ecstasy consumption in Greece is generally very low, the equivalent use among clubbers increases considerably. For instance, according to EMCDDA (2002), lifetime consumption of Ecstasy among club goers in Athens reached 22% in the beginning of 2000s and 25% in 2006 (Kaitanidi, 2007).

According to the University Mental Health Research Institute (UMHRI, 2004), the stability in the prevalence of Ecstasy use in Greece compared to the reduction in the use of other illicit drugs points to a likely future increase of Ecstasy use in the country. The aforementioned studies however, do not offer an account on the *quantities* of Ecstasy consumed, and the only reference to the actual number of Ecstasy tablets consumed at a specific point in time is this by Avramidis (2001, citing a media source), a professor at the Medical School of the University of Athens, suggesting that 6,000 Ecstasy tablets were consumed during the weekends in the late-1990s in Athens and Thessaloniki only. It is not certain however, how this estimate was produced.

Official Statistics on Ecstasy

As with every illegal market in which activities and merchandise are generally hidden, it is extremely difficult to reach an accurate estimation of the Ecstasy market extent in Greece. We, therefore, depend upon statistics compiled by Greek law enforcement agencies. The available official statistics on seizures of Ecstasy tablets start in the year 1996. As mentioned earlier, however, some official statistics from particular law enforcement agencies and specifically the Hellenic Coast Guard exists since as early as 1987. For the period 1987-2007, 2,469.5 Ecstasy tablets were seized by the Hellenic Coast Guard alone. Unfortunately, this is an aggregate and no yearly figures are provided. As regards seizures, between 1996-2007 609,188 Ecstasy tablets were seized by the Greek authorities with 2005 being a peak year (150,788) (SODN-EMP, 2007; Ministry of the Interior, 2008; see Graph 1). In addition, 23, 51 and 243 grams of Ecstasy were seized in 2005, 2006 and 2007, respectively.

Graph 1. Ecstasy tablets seized by Greek authorities, 1996-2007



Source: SODN-EMP (2007); Ministry of Interior (2008)

It is apparent from an examination of the above figures that there are significant increases from the year 2000 onwards. However, fluctuations in the numbers of Ecstasy tablets seized by the authorities between 1996-2007 do not allow us to identify anything other than an overall upward trend in the 2000s. Still, in comparison to countries such as Belgium, Germany, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the number of ecstasy tablets seized by the Greek authorities is small. For instance, in 2005 150,788 tablets were seized in Greece as opposed to 2,547,874 tablets in Belgium, 1,588,908 tablets in Germany, 1,900,000 tablets in The Netherlands and 3,244,000 tablets in the United Kingdom (Table 1).

Table 1. Quantities (tablets) of ecstasy seized 1995 to 2007

Country	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
<i>Belgium</i>	818515	-/-	1485000	58278	-/-	2547874	482904	541245
<i>Germany</i>	1634683	4576504	3207099	1257676	2052158	1588908	1082820	985218
<i>Netherlands</i>	5500000	3684505	6787167	5420033	5500000	1900000	4118300	8430000
<i>UK</i>	6552000	7669000	6050381	7434515	4991225	3244000	6849000	-/-

Source: EMCDDA (2009)

It is important to note that the figures presented here are official statistics that, in contrast to what some Greek media sources suggest¹, do not provide an integrated picture of the actual Ecstasy market size in the country, but only those quantities of this illegal commodity that the Greek authorities come across. They are, therefore, figures that can be affected by ‘contextual variables’ such as the intensity of law enforcement in the country (von Lampe, 2004). Furthermore, *numbers of seizures* (as opposed to *quantities of seized Ecstasy tablets*), which can serve a rough indication of demand for Ecstasy, are not provided by the Greek law enforcement agencies. It should be mentioned however, that in an article appearing in a Greek magazine associated with the dance/rave culture, it is suggested that there has been a massive introduction of Ecstasy tablets in Greece in 2003 (Freeze, 2003).

¹ According to an article appearing in the Greek daily *Eleftherotypia*, the huge increase in the seized Ecstasy tablets by the Greek police in the 2000s reflects an actual increase in the consumption of Ecstasy tablets in the country (Eleftherotypia, 2007).

According to the National Statistical Service of Greece (ESYE), only 15 individuals were convicted for Ecstasy trafficking from 1998-2001 and 2005-2006 (ESYE, 2006).² Ecstasy traffickers represent about 0.1% of the individuals convicted for *drug trafficking* during these periods. The years 2005 and 2006 had the highest number of convicted Ecstasy traffickers, 7 and 6 traffickers respectively. However, it should be noted that there is a large percentage of cases of sentenced individuals for which the type of drug is not recorded. In 2006, for instance, out of 2,212 people who were sentenced for drug trafficking in Greece, the type of drug trafficked was reported as 'not known' (to the National Statistical Service of Greece) in 925 of the cases (41.8%).

The Ecstasy Trafficking Business

As is the case with smuggling in Greece in general (see, for instance, Antonopoulos, 2008; Antonopoulos and Papanicolaou, 2009) smuggling of drugs including the smuggling of Ecstasy is perceived as one of the main activities of 'criminal organisations'. This is widely accepted in all Ministry of Public Order reports on 'organised crime' in Greece, reports by SODN-EMP, and media reports. A more careful look at the available evidence however, shows a different picture. Such structures were not present in our research; in fact we were able to identify highly *decentralised* entities involved in the particular trade, similar to the findings of other international research studies on the subject (e.g. Blickman *et al.*, 2003). An extremely interesting feature is perhaps the presence of two different, parallel schemes of trafficking Ecstasy in Greece.

The first scheme, which operates in continental Greece, has Greek youth as its primary customers. The second scheme exists in popular holiday resorts in various Greek islands, such as Crete, Kos, Zante, Corfu, Rhodes, etc., with Western Europeans and specifically British and Dutch young people as the main customers. The aforementioned localities are international night-life resorts, typically associated with increased consumption of Ecstasy (see, for instance, Bellis *et al.*, 2000). It is worth noting that not only do British and Dutch constitute an important part of the Greek tourist industry³, but also British and Dutch young people constitute the vast majority of tourists in these *particular* resorts, where night-time economy establishments have been set specifically to accommodate the needs of these tourists. The second Ecstasy trafficking scheme is basically the importation of the Dutch and/or British markets to Greece.

Excluding the *producer*, it is possible to distinguish different actors in both schemes of the Ecstasy market in Greece:

- *Importers*: The importers operate on a more or less continuous basis and conduct business regularly. They import large (for the Greek context) numbers of Ecstasy (10,000-20,000 tablets) per operation. The importers in the first smuggling scheme (continental Greece) are individuals who are linked to the rave/dance business. They are usually club owners.
- *Middlemen*: There are two types of middlemen in the Ecstasy trafficking business, similar to those identified by Pearson and Hobbs (2001): (a) middlemen, who simply connect parts of the business and specifically, the

² Relevant data on 2002, 2003 and 2004 is not available.

³ The British and the Dutch were, for instance, the largest and the fourth largest client group for the Greek tourist industry in 2007 (Business Stories, 2008).

producer and the importer. We have come across, for instance, retired Dutch nationals residing in the aforementioned island resorts, who play the particular role. The involvement of settled Dutch citizens in synthetic drug trafficking in tourist areas is also highlighted in the study of Montañes *et al.* (2003) on the synthetic drug market in Barcelona; (b) middlemen, who *actively* link parts of the process by being involved in the actual importation of Ecstasy.

- *Middle-level traders*, heavily involved in the organisation of parties in which Ecstasy is consumed such as professional party-organisers and DJs.
- *Courier*: they are responsible for transporting small quantities of Ecstasy from production countries into Greece.
- *Retail sellers*: There are different types of sellers depending on whether the seller consumes Ecstasy as well as on the reason for the seller's initial presence in premises in which Ecstasy is traded and consumed. Specifically, there are (a) *sellers*, individuals who are there only to distribute Ecstasy tablets; (b) *user-sellers*, individuals (in continental Greece), who are regulars in clubs and participants in the rave/dance scene, who consume *and* sell Ecstasy primarily to friends and "friends of friends" (Pearson, 2006: 84). The large number of Ecstasy sellers who are also users is a feature that greatly affects the distribution chain in the Ecstasy trafficking business. There are many instances in which additional 'layers' are added to the process of distribution depending on the number of individual seller-users selling a small number of Ecstasy tablets primarily to friends and acquaintances. These additional layers are responsible for the price wedge, which also explains the relatively high price of Ecstasy in Greece and most importantly the relatively high ranges of prices per pill (see following section on prices); (c) *employee-sellers*, people who legally work on the premises such as flyer distributors, and holiday representatives in island resorts who are in close contact with the consuming population. Bouncers are also involved to some extent in the selling of Ecstasy although they usually act as a filter for sellers by deciding who can and cannot sell in the premises they work; (d) *holidaymakers-sellers*, individuals who spend their holidays in Greece and find the opportunity to sell a number of Ecstasy tablets (see, for example, Eleftherotypia, 2002). As opposed to the importers, the majority of the sellers are what Dorn *et al.* (1992) have called 'opportunistic irregulars'. The additional layers in the distribution phase are not present in the Ecstasy trafficking business in holiday resorts, which explains why the price range in this Ecstasy trafficking scheme is narrower.

Furthermore, a distinction can be made in relation to Ecstasy traffickers along drug *versatility-specialisation* (see Pearson and Hobbs, 2001; Matrix Knowledge Group, 2007). There is, firstly, a number of individuals who are involved in the trafficking of Ecstasy as part of a multi-drug enterprise. Evidence suggests, for instance, that some Ecstasy traffickers in Greece also trade in amphetamines, LSD, poppers, speed, ketamine or cannabis, and there have been instances in which Ecstasy traffickers also trade in hard drugs such as cocaine and heroin (see, e.g., Astynomiki Anaskopisi, 2004). There are others, primarily those who are involved in legal businesses in which Ecstasy can be easily distributed (e.g. tourist venues), that focus exclusively on Ecstasy.

Non-Greeks are involved in the Ecstasy business to a lesser extent than Greeks in Greece. According to SODN-EMP (2007), for instance, of the 139 individuals arrested for Ecstasy-related offences, 102 (73.4%) were Greeks and 37 (26.6%)

foreigners. Unfortunately, the data is not broken down further by country of origin. Although foreigners appear to be over-represented compared to their percentage in the total population of Greece, this is a result of their involvement in parts of the trafficking business that are more exposed and, therefore, more vulnerable to apprehension, such as transportation of Ecstasy. There are, for example, numerous references in the Greek media of Albanian nationals being apprehended at the Greek-Albanian border. The involvement of foreigners in dealing in more closed settings such as this of Ecstasy retail market is even smaller (see Paoli and Reuter, 2008). Of note is that, according to the key informants interviewed, there is an increasing involvement of young, second-generation Albanian, Georgian and Russian migrants who have integrated well into groups of Greek young people.

In terms of the employment background of individuals involved in the Ecstasy market in Greece, no information is provided by official channels. There is however, a strikingly large number of references to individuals working legally with or being close to young populations; for instance, military officials and teachers (see, e.g., Eleftherotypia, 2003a). In addition, a look at media references highlights the *diversity* of Ecstasy traders as far as the employment background is concerned. For example, in 2003, officers of the Greek police raided an apartment in Kypseli, Athens, and arrested 12 individuals aged 19-35, who were involved in Ecstasy trade. The arrestees included –among other – a university student, a painter, a journalist, and an air force officer (Eleftherotypia, 2003b).

Sources of Ecstasy / Transportation to Greece

Some official figures can assist in an initial identification of the country of origin of Ecstasy tablets. The Netherlands, traditionally a major source due to the link between producers and the chemical industry (Blickman, 2004), is the country of origin of the vast majority of seized Ecstasy tablets. The percentage of seized Ecstasy tablets that originated from the particular country in 2006, for instance, was about 85% or 100,760 tablets (SODN-EMP, 2007). There are however, sources which point to a completely different source country for Ecstasy tablets for specific years. Seizures by law enforcement agencies in 2004, for instance, suggest that Albania is the country from which the largest proportion of Ecstasy originates from (29.92%), followed by the Netherlands (23.11%) (MPO, 2005)⁴. These figures need to be carefully considered for a variety of reasons. Firstly, there is a significant proportion of seized Ecstasy tablets whose origin is ‘not known’. In 2004, the origin of 39,910 Ecstasy (44.64%) was ‘other’ or ‘unknown’. It is also interesting to note that those two categories are aggregated into one, which hampers even more the effort to identify country of origin.

Secondly, the ‘fact’ that Albania constituted the country of origin of most of Ecstasy seized in Greece in 2004 may be the result of the ‘spill over’ effect that is present in some drugs markets throughout the world (Hartnoll, 1989 cited in Ruggiero and South, 1995: 69). Our interviews with the police revealed that a number of Ecstasy from Albania seized by the authorities were not initially destined for the Greek market but were produced in Bulgaria and destined to Western Europe via Albania. Individual traffickers, who got hold of a number of these tablets decided to

⁴ No data in relation to the country of origin of Ecstasy is provided in the subsequent *Annual Report on Organised Crime* (MPO, 2006)

market them into Greece. It is extremely unlikely that Ecstasy tablets were produced in Albania, and according to reports produced by the United Nations (UNODC, 2008), Albania is generally an insignificant Ecstasy production actor in the business to justify such a number of tablets for Greece only. Finally, it should be noted that although the synthesis of MDMA almost always takes place in the Netherlands and Belgium, the actual production of *tablets* may be taking place elsewhere. This may explain the high percentage of Ecstasy tablets from countries other than the Netherlands and Belgium seized in Greece.

Ecstasy tablets can be simply sent to Greece in discreet packs and are often concealed in other commodities. For example, in one of the cases we came across, the police arrested an importer who was receiving Ecstasy (and other drugs) in a parcel containing sex toys. The available limited data on the seized Ecstasy tablets suggests that sending Ecstasy in small shipments seems to be the most common way of delivering merchandise to the country. According to SODN-EMP (2007), for instance, of the 118,035 tablets that were seized by the authorities in 2006, 100,975 (85.5%) were sent by mail. Ecstasy tablets from the Netherlands and Belgium are transported directly or via other countries such as Germany. The merchandise can also be transported in luggage by air, by car via Italy and from there by boat to the ports of Igoumenitsa and/or Patras. Some of the loads identified by the authorities were concealed in crypts. A number of Ecstasy tablets are imported to Greece from Bulgaria and Romania. The merchandise is kept in houses and shops or other legal businesses that serve as warehouses.

Although Greece may not be considered a key player in the European Ecstasy production scene, 'one of the biggest Ecstasy laboratories'⁵ was found and dismantled by the Greek authorities in 2000 in the town of Corinth. The chemist involved in the production was a Bulgarian national. According to the authorities, the merchandise produced in the particular factory was destined for foreign market (Astynomiki Epitheorisi, 2000). However, we cannot be certain as to whether Ecstasy produced by the factory was also introduced in the Greek market. Moreover, in 2005 during a police operation in a suburb of Athens an underground synthetic drugs (Ecstasy and Ice) laboratory was found and dismantled; the drugs produced were reportedly distributed in night clubs in the southern suburbs of the city (Marnellos, 2005).

Purity and Prices of Ecstasy Tablets in Greece

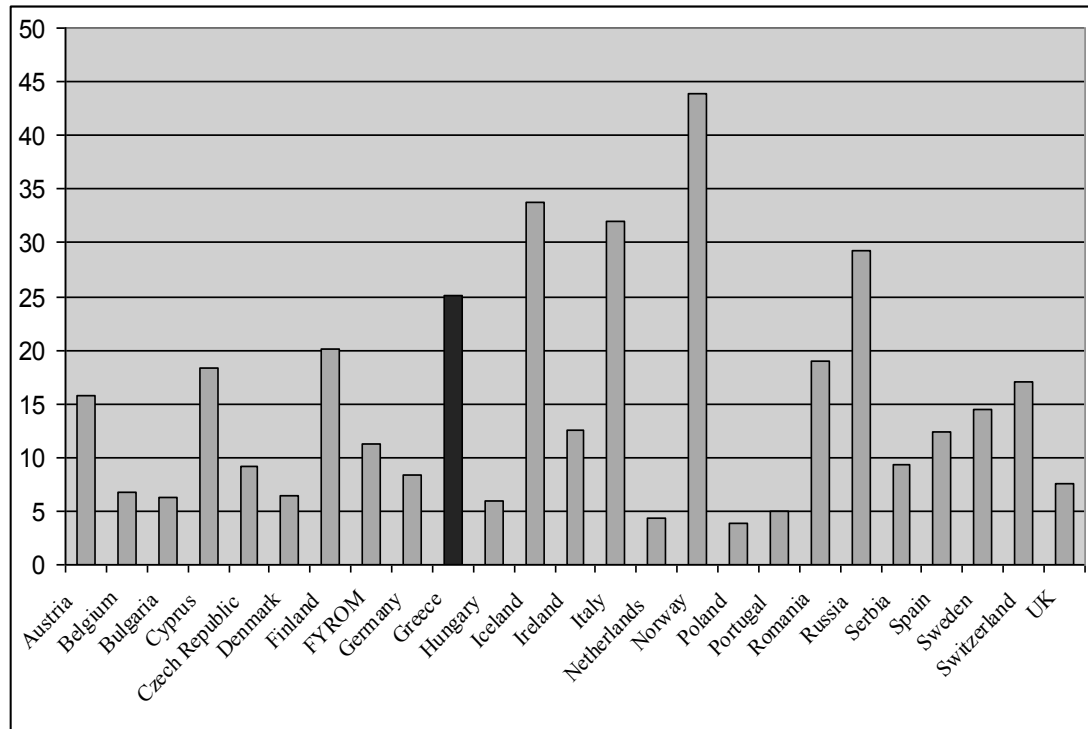
The MDMA quantity/dose in an Ecstasy pill defines its purity. The purity of Ecstasy tablets (and other drugs) that are seized by the Greek authorities is examined by the Greek Chemical State Laboratory (*Geniko Chemio tou Kratous*), which operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Economy and Finance. In Greece, 95% of the Ecstasy tablets that were analysed in 2004 contained MDMA or MDEA as the only psychoactive substance (EMCDDA, 2006).

There seems to be significant fluctuation in Ecstasy tablets price even when consecutive years are examined. For example, in 2003 the price of an Ecstasy pill ranged from €20-€30. In 2004 the price dropped to €10-€20, whereas in 2006 the minimum and maximum price rose to €15-€25, when the average minimum and maximum price in the rest of Europe is only €2.5€-€12.5 (for prices in other countries

⁵ We clarify that the account about of the size of the laboratory has been made in the source consulted, Astynomiki Epitheorisi (2000), and not by us.

see EMCDDA, 2008). This fluctuation may be a result of the quantities being available in the Greek market as well as the purity of the tablets. Irrespectively of the Ecstasy price fluctuations however, Ecstasy tablets are relatively expensive in Greece compared to other European countries. According to UNODC (2008), in 2006 Greece had the fifth highest *typical* retail price for Ecstasy in Europe after Norway, Iceland, Italy and Russia (see Graph 2).

Graph 2. Typical retail Ecstasy price in US\$ in several European countries, 2006.



Source: Data elaborated from UNODC (2008)

The UNODC report (UNODC, 2008) does not offer *wholesale* prices for Ecstasy tablets in Greece. Our research however, reveals that, on average, each tablet costs €2 in the wholesale market. For example, in one of the similar cases we came across, an arrested trafficker bought 10,000 tablets for €20,000. In Table 2 we summarise the wholesale and retail prices in Greece and other European countries, which either have about the same wholesale price as Greece such as France, Germany, Slovenia, and Turkey or countries in which the wholesale price of Ecstasy is higher than in Greece. The interesting finding is that the retail price in Greece is much higher than in countries with similar wholesale price, and even higher than in those countries in which the wholesale price is higher than in Greece. The biggest difference from wholesale to retail exists in Greece (nearly 930%). This huge difference can be explained by the additional layers of retail sales, mentioned earlier, which provide for numerous price wedges.

Table 2. Wholesale typical price per tablet (US\$), retail typical price per tablet (US\$) and percentage of difference from wholesale to retail in several European countries, 2006

Country	Wholesale Typical Price US \$ (per tablet)	Retail Typical Price US \$ (per tablet)	% Difference Wholesale to Retail
France	2.2	8.8	400.00
Germany	2.4	8.3	345.83
Slovenia	1.9	6.3	331.58
UK	1.8	7.5	416.67
Austria	7.8	15.7	201.28
Cyprus	4.4	18.3	415.91
Czech Rep	4.9	9.2	187.76
Denmark	4.0	6.5	162.50
Finland	5.6	20.1	358.93
Latvia	3.3	7.6	230.30
Malta	5.8	12.6	217.24
Slovakia	5.2	8.1	155.77
Sweden	4.0	14.4	360.00
Croatia	6.0	6.7	111.67
FYROM	5.0	11.3	226.00
Romania	5.0	18.9	378.00
Turkey	3.0	7.6	253.33
Greece	2.7	25.1	929.63

Source: UNODC (2008); empirical research by the authors.

Distribution of Ecstasy

Although there is no empirical research in Greece that focuses on the distribution of Ecstasy tablets, research on prevalence of drug use in the country suggests that Ecstasy tablets, also referred to as *koubia* ('buttons'), *biscota* ('biscuits') or *va-va-voom* among users and traders, are relatively easily accessed by interested individuals. According to EMCDDA & REITOX (2005), 24.6%, 24.4%, 20.8% and 18.1% of respondents from Athens, Thessaloniki, other urban areas and semi-urban/rural areas, respectively, suggested that it was 'fairly easy'/'very easy' to be supplied with Ecstasy tablets. The respondents thought that Ecstasy was more accessible than cocaine, LSD, heroin, amphetamines, crack, magic mushrooms, ketamine and GBH (EMCDDA & REITOX, 2005). The association of the particular drug with the dance/rave scene greatly affects its use and distribution patterns, and this is also the case in Greece. Ecstasy use is a "normal part of the leisure-pleasure landscape" (Parker *et al.*, 1995: 25) in the country. In accordance with international evidence and literature (see, for instance, Tossman *et al.*, 2001), it emerged from our research that the use of Ecstasy in clubs and underground dance/rave parties is widespread particularly in Athens (e.g. southern suburbs of the city) and Thessaloniki but also in localities which are geographically close to Athens. In addition, Ecstasy is popular in

resorts primarily in islands such as Rhodes, Zante, Kos, Corfu, Ios and Crete, which feature high numbers of West Europeans and specifically British and Dutch tourists during the summer months. Ecstasy is also distributed in parties organized in garages, empty premises, warehouses and other *ad hoc* venues throughout Greece. The distribution and use of Ecstasy however, is concentrated in large conurbations and specifically Athens and Thessaloniki, although high distribution and use can be observed in other localities and in specific events such as the carnival in Patras.

The use of Ecstasy takes place in ‘discreet places’ (Pearson and Hobbs, 2001). This is also supported – among other - by the fact that media (e.g. newspapers circulated at the localities of the holiday resorts) focus on criminality, ‘indecent behaviour’ on the part of the tourists, public order and law enforcement. There are no references to Ecstasy use and trafficking in these resorts, and alcohol consumption and ‘binge drinking’ are the primary concerns. The structure of the holiday economy in several holiday resorts with the ‘all inclusive packages’ that generally limit the client into a pre-paid environment (or locality) further reinforces the seclusion of environments in which Ecstasy distribution and use takes place. Incidentally, we did not come across any indications of or even references to *street* dealing/distribution of Ecstasy.

The sellers do not usually approach any individual in the premises: only people they know or their friends and acquaintances. This highlights the importance of networking particularly for this stage of the business, and verifies Spapen’s (2007: 5) claim that “the quality of an entrepreneur’s social network determines his business opportunities”. The distributors approaching people they know and their friends and acquaintances serves another purpose, namely to avoid friction between the sellers and uninterested clients, and, very importantly, to avoid unnecessary contact with bouncers in the premises. In the schemes that take place in the popular islands resorts which have a transitory client base, it is the holiday representatives who serve as the link between the merchandise and the clients. While prospective clients can also approach an Ecstasy dealer, the latter are sometimes reluctant to supply tablets to clients who are not acquainted to. The Greek Ecstasy market, similarly to other contexts, requires the development of trust within the Ecstasy subculture as threshold for access to a distributor or supplier in general (see Parker *et al.*, 2002).

Finally, Ecstasy tablets are occasionally used as currency in the business. For example, in May 2006, the police and the Bureau for Special Inspections (*Yp.E.E*) arrested three individuals with 100,000 Ecstasy tablets from the Netherlands. These individuals were planning to exchange the Ecstasy tablets with 1,000 kilos of ephedrine which was to be transported to Australia for the production of other synthetic drugs (SODN-EMP, 2007).

Discussion

The preceding analyses allow some more systematic observations regarding the nature of the Ecstasy market in Greece. The fact that clearly stands out is that the patterns of trafficking of this specific drug are patently conditioned by its embeddedness in the dance/rave scene, which is, in turn, primarily linked with the night-time and the tourist night-time economy of the country (see also Massari, 2005). This greatly affects relations between actors in the business. It is evident, firstly, that much activity in the market occurs under the oversight of legitimate actors, in so far as the consumption of the drug presumably enhances the experience of what is being traded

in the legitimate tourist and night-time economy. Secondly, the same fragmentation and volatility that characterizes the above environment also engenders a chaotic configuration of positions in the market, since one typically encounters a multitude of individuals likely to drift between legality and illegality as well as between use and trade. A clear distinction between the user and the 'dealer' is not always possible, and, in fact, previous research has shown how those individuals tend to deny the identity of a 'dealer' (see Jacinto *et al.*, 2008).

The relatively secluded, 'discreet' nature of the Ecstasy market makes it at once open and purely competitive in so far as anyone with the right contacts can become involved as long as they are at least peripherally involved in the club scene (see also Blickman *et al.*, 2003). It is interesting to note, for instance, that according to the Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD, 2007), the first imported synthetic drugs introduced to Bulgaria were Ecstasy smuggled into and distributed by Greek students at Bulgarian universities.

Furthermore, unlike other illegal trades in Greece (see, for instance, Antonopoulos, 2008) there is no distinction between 'workers' and 'entrepreneurs' in the Ecstasy trafficking business (although there is a great difference between sellers of Ecstasy in clubs and other venues on one hand and the importers on the other). Even those who deal in very small numbers of Ecstasy tablets tend to do it for the extra cash as well as the prestige among their friends: by using their own consumption as a platform in which their business operates, they are at once small-time entrepreneurs and brokers of 'good time'. This opportunistic, small trade configuration quite convincingly explains the very high retail prices of Ecstasy pills, especially when one takes into account levels of wholesale prices in Greece.

The above characteristics are even more pronounced when one excludes from the picture accentuated poly-drug traffickers who generally appear to be an exception to the general pattern. Even if they were included, the link between the drug business and other illegal businesses and criminal activities in Greece remain elusive according to our data. Of course, this work is only a first step towards the investigation of the social organization of Ecstasy use and trafficking in Greece, and additional research is needed. It is not, however, too early to posit with some confidence that the wholesale identification of the Ecstasy trade with the idea of corporate-like 'organized crime' which official and journalistic accounts invoke systematically, appears to be quite unwarranted in the light of our data. The implications of this are not insignificant since association of any illegal activity with the imagery that informs the current doxas about 'organized crime', makes the former a target for highly aggressive policing and sentencing. But if the image that emerges from our data is accurate, and given the populations - young people - involved, the design and implementation of effective intervention against the use and trafficking of the particular drug would require a careful consideration of the very specific conditions of organization of the market, rather than the sort of heavy handed action that anti-drug war cries typically inspire.

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