

# Speech

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Speaker	<b>Wolfgang Götz, EMCDDA Director</b>
Title of speech	<b>Drug policies in the perspective of the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS 2016) — Views of the EMCDDA Director</b>
Occasion	<b>Exchange of views with European members of the Global Commission on Drug Policy at the European Parliament, Brussels</b>
Date	<b>27.01.2015</b>

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Dear Chairman,  
Dear members of the European Parliament,  
Dear members of the Global Commission,  
Dear colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today and to participate in this interesting debate.

As Director of the EMCDDA for the last 10 years, and as a keen observer of drug policy developments at European and international level, I am well aware of the important activities developed by the **European Parliament** — and of the work promoted by the **Global Commission** for a new approach to world drug policy.

My contribution to this policy debate is from the perspective of the EMCDDA, an EU agency that is tasked with supporting the decision-making process by providing neutral, non-partisan, reliable information on all aspects of the drugs phenomenon.

Indeed, I firmly believe that a factual analysis of the drugs phenomenon is the point of departure for a fair debate.

Our analysis of the EU drug situation reveals some positive developments — but there are also worrying challenges that will need to be tackled.

## **Heroin and HIV decline**

On the positive side for example, with the more established drugs such as heroin — a veritable killer in the 80s and 90s in many EU countries — we now see fewer new users and less practice in injecting. Moreover, HIV and AIDS — a possible consequence of drug injecting and the blight of a whole generation — are now largely under control. Even if we need to pay more attention to HCV epidemics.

## **Benefit of treatment**

This decline is the result of the strong political support and large investment made in the field of treatment and harm reduction in Europe. I do not want to bother you too much with figures, but listen to these:

There were 70 000 drug users receiving substitution treatment (for opioids) in 1993 and today there are more than 730 000. This represents more than a tenfold increase over 10 years. And we estimate that overall more than 1.3 million people receive treatment in Europe.

### **Cocaine decline**

If we look at cocaine, a drug that has been very popular since the mid-90s — especially in a few European countries — recent data show a decline in all indicators: use, treatment and law enforcement. And European data are, on average, much lower if we compare them to the use of cocaine in the United States or Australia <sup>(1)</sup>.

We also observe positive developments on the political side.

For instance, we see in Europe that drug policies are moving in a constant progression — from ideology to evidence.

### **Positive policies in the EU**

And rebalancing drugs policy towards demand reduction — still a distant objective in many parts of the world — has been accomplished in Europe for over a decade!

The EU is the only region explicitly mentioning ‘risk and harm reduction’ as an objective of its strategy. Other countries or regions still reject the very use of these terms.

The EU is the only region promoting alternatives, not just to prison but to coercive sanctions, for drug-using offenders through education, treatment, rehabilitation and social reintegration.

The EU is the only region in the world that refers to ‘scientific evidence’ as a constitutive element of its drug strategy.

And at international level, the ‘EU approach’ offers one of the most humane, balanced and realistic drug policies in the world.

I would like to recall here, that at the last Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the EU was the only regional group to explicitly request that protection of human rights and abolition of the death penalty for drug-related offences be mentioned in the political declaration.

### **Concerns and challenges**

These are positive aspects, but they should not be used to mask the many concerns and challenges that the drugs phenomenon poses to the health and security of European citizens.

There are several <sup>(2)</sup>, but I would like to concentrate on a few of particular relevance. First of all, new psychoactive substances (NPS) which have changed the landscape of the drug situation in the EU.

### **NPS challenge**

They appear on the EU market at a speed of almost two new substances per week.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Last-year prevalence of cocaine use among young adults in Europe (2.1 %) is below the levels reported for young adults in Australia (4.8 %) and the United States (4.0 % among 16- to 34-year-olds), but close to that reported for Canada (1.8 %). AR 2012

<sup>(2)</sup> Among others, the increased availability and use of methamphetamine in some European countries, the injection of synthetic cathinones among groups of high-risk users in Hungary and Romania and new routes for trafficking cocaine into Europe.

At the EMCDDA, we are currently monitoring over 430 new psychoactive substances. 101 of them were notified to the EU Early Warning System in 2014 — more than 4 times more than 4 years ago, and this upward trend shows no sign of running out of steam.

Some of these compounds, such as synthetic opioids or hallucinogenic substances, are so highly pharmacologically active that only a few grams are needed to produce 10 000 doses.

Online networks play a key role in how consumers learn about new drugs, buy them and share their experiences.

### **The Internet**

Retailers use marketing techniques similar to those used by large e-commerce companies. YouTube is used for demonstrations as well as for consumer reviews of products. And Twitter and Facebook are used for advertising new products and stock availability.

We have identified some 650 websites selling new psychoactive substances to Europeans. And in addition, we notice the increasing popularity of 'darknets' — underground, online networks — permitting anonymous communication and the sale of both new and 'old' drugs.

These developments signify a revolution in how drugs are bought and sold — and present a real challenge for law enforcement and for policymakers in general.

The developments we are seeing in the market for NPS are confirmed also for other drugs, where production has been moved close to its intended consumers. I am talking about cannabis in particular.

Cannabis is still the most used illicit drug in Europe, tried once by at least 70 million Europeans and used on a daily basis by more than 3 million. Cannabis accounts for more than 80% of Europe's drug seizures, and 78% of all arrests for drug use/possession.

### **Cannabis as a challenge**

But its market is changing.

Today, cannabis is produced in virtually all EU Member States and it is often cultivated intensively using high-tech approaches that can boost its potency.

It is not unusual to find that cannabis produced in this way is very high in THC (more than 50% THC even) and low in CBD — CBD is the component that may help reduce psychosis associated with high doses of THC.

Moreover, evidence shows that in many countries organised crime is increasingly involved in this market because of the large earnings associated with it. We are currently working to assess the 'size of this market' (and we are going to address this question in the next 'EU drug markets report', being produced this year with Europol). But taking a rough estimate of 2 000 tons <sup>(3)</sup> of marijuana and hashish consumed annually in the EU, we are possibly talking of several billions of euros which permeate the European economy each year.

### **Lack of political interest for drugs**

Another challenge that I would like to highlight is the waning political attention on the drugs phenomenon in Europe. Today, other subjects and priorities hit the headlines and dominate the political agenda — for example terrorism or migration or infectious diseases such as Ebola.

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<sup>(3)</sup> 2000T are 2 billion grams. Costing on average 1 gr = 10€ it is possible to talk about billions.

When drugs and drug users disappeared from the streets, so too did the political attention awarded to it.

Yet the drugs business is still one of the most profitable commercial activities — and a core business for organised crime groups across Europe, and worldwide...

And it is still a threat to the well-being of European citizens, who often express this in opinion polls by rating drugs among their top concerns.

### **Cannabis as a challenge**

Drugs still permeate the legal economy with billions of euros of laundered money, allowing illicit patrimonies to flourish and fuelling corruption.

And drugs are still a danger for any young person, from any place in Europe, who can be offered one outside school or who can, from her/his computer, choose to buy chemicals of unknown composition, but of potentially very high risks.

### **Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have a wish — like I said at the beginning, as an observer of drug policy developments — for the European Union.

And this wish is about the upcoming **UNGASS 2016**.

I think we need to agree that contrary to other parts of the world, in the EU there has been some progress in the field of drugs, both in terms of situation and policy.

I think that the European Union and its Member States have been particularly successful in introducing their unifying values — freedom, democracy, rights — into drug policy.

I believe that Europe now has a role in helping other countries and regions in the world to adopt these same values in their drug policies.

What is clear to me though, is that this process — from ideology to evidence (as I called it earlier) — does not happen spontaneously.

It is the fruit of investing in solid evidence and long-term monitoring in a non-partisan way. This is the backdrop needed for rational arguments to be won in an often highly politicised debate.

I believe that all regions of the world are united in the need to let science and objective and reliable information inform the political debate and contribute to political decisions — as the EMCDDA has been doing in Europe for the last 20 years.

The **UNGASS 2016** is approaching and I believe the EU has a crucial role there — to speak with a unified and loud voice, to bring 'more Europe' into world drugs policy.

I am deeply convinced that for a more effective drug policy approach in the future, we need more faith in evidence and more Europe internationally.

Thank you very much for your attention.