



Speech

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Introduction

Good morning,

It is my pleasure to present to you the new report on the drug situation in Europe and it is a privilege to present it to you with Mrs Ylva Johansson, European Commissioner for Home Affairs and with Mrs Laura d'Arrigo, Chair of the Management Board of the EMCDDA.

I will present you today with the key findings resulting from all the data collected up to 2020, including statistical data collected until the end of last year and more recent data coming from rapid studies that we have launched to follow and assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am going to present to you three main findings...

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Let's have a look at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are three main impacts of the pandemic on the drug situation in Europe this year.

Impact on services

First of all, services were severely disrupted at the beginning of the pandemic and in the first weeks and months of the lockdown. This resulted in the closure, or very important reduction, in the availability of treatment and harm-reduction services and a lack of access of practitioners to protective equipment. Luckily, this was followed by a much more positive movement, where we have seen a lot of innovation and creativity from all services, such as more e-health or m-health activities or applications, more telemedicine and installing new partnerships with the client.

Impact on drug use

Second, the impact on drug use. There was some reduction in the use of substances usually consumed in recreational settings, such as cocaine or ecstasy (also called MDMA). For other groups of substances, we have seen an increase. This is namely the case for the use of cannabis, the use of benzodiazepines and the use of alcohol, frequently in combination with one or other of the substances that I have mentioned. For a third group of substances, the picture is not so clear. Here we are talking about other stimulants and amphetamines, where the decrease was not as important as we expected.

Impact on organised crime

Third, the impact of COVID-19 on organised crime. Organised crime groups have been extremely resilient. We can say that the pandemic has boosted, not only digital transformation for the licit economy but also for the illicit economy.

Evolution of the European drug market

Let's have a look at the evolution of the drug market in the recent months and at its possible impact and risks for public health and also for public security and safety. Three main findings: what does it mean and what is the impact for the European citizen?

Higher availability of all drugs in Europe

First, higher availability of all drugs, but also highest purity and highest potency ever seen for the substances. This raises a lot of risks and questions regarding also the potential harm for consumers who do not realise this important change in the potency and the likely negative health consequences.

Growing importance of large shipments

Large shipments are becoming the main way of conveying these drugs to the European territory. This raises concerns regarding the possible infiltration by organised crime groups of the legitimate supply chain (and all the economy around), the risk for corruption and money laundering and the increase of drug-related violence and other crime.

Growing diversification of production

Finally, diversification of production is bringing a completely different picture: increased production of cannabis, of ecstasy on the European territory and the appearance of new laboratories producing new substances. These include new synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl, which raise a lot of concerns and certainly ring the alarm.

Drug use and drug-related harms

Finally, let's have a look at what has changed concerning drug use and drug-related harms.

Plant-based substances

If we look at plant-based substances — here we are talking about cocaine, cannabis and heroin — we start seeing the first effects of the increased availability of cocaine in the form of problem use of cocaine and some increase in the demand for treatment that is caused by this problem use. This is only the beginning. We also see and observe from some low-threshold programmes located in different cities in Europe the first effects of the increased availability of crack cocaine. Cannabis has seen its concentration in THC doubling over the last decade. These new concentrations have the potential to create more health problems, including mental health problems.

Synthetic drugs

But there is a second group of substances. The chemicals, the synthetic drugs. It encompasses different groups of substances: ecstasy (or MDMA), amphetamines, methamphetamines, new psychoactive substances (with new synthetic opioids and new benzodiazepines). And finally, we have seen in recent years, an increase in the seizures of GHB, ketamine and LSD. And if we look at the situation in particular of new psychoactive substances, we detect through the EU Early Warning System one new substance per week on the European market.

So, these changes and this evolution are very important, because they are not bringing the same profile of drug use as 25 years ago when the EMCDDA started its operations. Drugs have changed, they are less visible, but they are more disseminated throughout society and we need to remain vigilant and continue to protect the citizens.

Health consequences

In terms of protection, the health consequences of drug use remain an important concern. There is some good news and there are some good perspectives, but there are also new needs.

The EU made a very strong commitment to eradicating hepatitis C. This objective cannot be reached if people who are using drugs are not covered by, and are not participating in, and associated with, better testing and better interventions.

And last is the evolution of drug-related deaths. In 2018, there were around 9 000 drug-related deaths in Europe (over 8 000 in the EU), most of them associated with opioid use, frequently in combination with other substances, such as benzodiazepines. What we have observed in recent years is that there is one specific group of people who are using drugs and who are suffering more from deadly overdose. Drug deaths have increased in the 50+ age group by more by 75%. This reflects the fact that there is an ageing population that continues to use opioids. There is an urgent need to provide more appropriate, better tailored treatment and support for these persons.

Conclusions

This was the picture that we wanted to share with you on the occasion of the launch of this new report. What we have learned from the pandemic is that some things can go worse. Of course. But there is fresh hope. For instance, with the creativity and innovation that has been developed and shown by many treatment programmes and harm-reduction services. These services managed to recover from the negative and disruptive effect of the measures taken to cope with the pandemic and managed to develop new ways to work in partnership and in association with people who are using drugs.

For us, and for the European Union, there is a need to continue to monitor carefully these new emerging changes to assess the possible consequences in the long term. In particular, we need, and we want, to pay careful attention to what will happen in the next months. Everybody expects a very important economic recession that could increase the vulnerability of some groups in the population that are already very vulnerable. Also, there is a potential risk that, because of this more challenging economic situation, we could have more people entering drug-related (directly or indirectly) criminal activities.

This shows that the approach that is developed at the EU level, and the work of the EMCDDA, has a direct impact or direct scope to provide support for a better, healthier and more secure Europe as far as drugs are concerned.

Recording available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDbk1Gh9FbM>