



NEWS RELEASE from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

CANDIDATE COUNTRIES NOW A CLEAR TARGET FOR DRUG CONSUMPTION

Need for common approach to drugs in enlarged EU

(16.4.2003) Public fears about drugs in an enlarged **European Union** often focus on the role of the Central and East European countries (**CEECs**) in drug trafficking. But a key development is that candidate countries have become 'a clear target for drug consumption'. So says the **EU** drugs agency, the Lisbon-based **EMCDDA**, in the latest edition of its *Drugs in focus* series, out today.

In most candidate countries 'recreational drug use and experimentation are increasingly becoming an integral part of youth culture', says the briefing. 'There has been an increase in experimental drug use in the general population in all **CEECs** in the past 10 years'. But the trend is particularly visible in schools, where the number of pupils aged 15 to 16 who have tried any illicit drug at least once, doubled between 1995 and 1999.

Whereas, in the **EU**, the population of problem drug users is largely stable and ageing (especially users of opiates), in the majority of candidate countries the phenomenon is newer and problem drug users are generally younger. There is considerable concern about the potential for future problems.

EMCDDA Management Board Chairman Marcel Reimen urges continuing support by the **EU** to enable candidate countries to 'align their actions in the drugs field with those of the **EU** and its current Member States'. He states in the document that it is essential for candidate countries to strengthen their drug coordination and information mechanisms and 'allocate, where appropriate, adequate resources to them'.

Challenge of enlarged EU 'drug scene'

Entitled 'EU enlargement and drugs – Challenges and perspectives', today's briefing is aimed at focusing the attention of **EU** policy-makers on the issues involved in this important area.

Among others, it points to an attitude change to drugs in the candidate countries in recent years: 'Whilst drug use was historically viewed as deviant behaviour normally associated with socially-maladjusted youth, it has become now an increasingly common practice related to leisure among young people.' There are 'serious concerns' about the long-term impact of substance abuse among young people. Increasing levels of drug use among young people have been accompanied by a concomitant rise in alcohol and tobacco use. The younger the age that substance use occurs within these countries raises serious concerns about long-term impact.

The briefing calls for a common approach to drugs in an enlarged **EU** of 28 countries. **Georges Estievenart, EMCDDA Executive Director**, says: 'The challenge for an enlarged Union will be to help new Member States build together a more comprehensive and more sustainable response to this complex issue. It will probably require new initiatives to set up the appropriate tools.'

Among the new challenges will be: implementing legislative measures; setting up administrative and co-ordinating structures; and developing the scope and range of services provided. While most of the candidate countries now have a legal and institutional framework in place for national drug strategies, the limited funding available is often more oriented towards law enforcement.

The report says that: 'Some health-oriented responses that are well-established in the **EU**, such as substitution treatment and needle-exchange programmes, are not yet supported politically and financially in all candidate countries'. The result is an unbalanced approach between supply and demand. Also, treatment availability is not yet sufficient to meet demand, and harm-reduction activities do not correspond to the extent of high-risk behaviour.

There is considerable evidence of high-risk behaviour related to drug consumption, although thus far the HIV epidemic has largely bypassed injecting drug users in most of the candidate countries. Nevertheless, this could lead to substantial increases in drug-related infectious diseases in the future.

The **EMCDDA** says that the current **EU** approach to the drugs problem, which aims at balancing demand and supply reduction and contains a strong commitment to public health objectives, 'is a result of more than 20 years' experience' and will provide the 'evidence base necessary to respond effectively to both current and future drug problems'. 'The need for a common European approach to drugs has progressively emerged'.

'Today on the eve of enlargement', it continues, 'the situation is more complex in the new European "drugs scene". European and national coordination mechanisms and the resources allocated remain, on the whole, limited. A common approach on drugs in an enlarged **European Union** is becoming increasingly imperative.'

The agency says combating drug trafficking remains a priority for both Member States and candidate countries and is a key issue in preparing the latter for **EU** accession.

Policy considerations

This briefing comes up with six areas that, it suggests, should be of particular concern to **EU** policy-makers:

1. The increase in recreational drug use and experimentation as an integral part of youth culture is now a general trend throughout Europe, and calls for a new political culture fostering common European responses.
2. If serious future public health problems are to be avoided, there is an urgent need to invest in health responses that cover all aspects of the drugs phenomenon. This is especially true in the candidate countries.
3. There is a need for a better balance and more coherence in the responses developed at national level, based on a better understanding of the situation and evidence-based practice.
4. In order to address the increased diversity of the situations within the enlarged **EU**, there is a need for a stronger political and financial framework, whose aim is to use common tools through a differentiated approach at local level.
5. The formal adoption of **EU** standards and instruments, covering both supply and demand reduction, as well as information and evaluation, is essential for the implementation of well-established responses (best practice).
6. Enlargement gives the **EU** a unique opportunity to deal with the complexity of the drugs phenomenon in Europe through an innovative integrated approach to the problem.

Note to editors

- *Drugs in focus*, Issue No 8 (March–April 2003): 'EU enlargement and drugs – Challenges and perspectives'
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- This news release may be downloaded from the EMCDDA website in English, French and Portuguese in PDF and Word format (see http://www.emcdda.org/infopoint/news_media/newsrelease.cfm).

The four-page briefings, ***Drugs in focus***, are designed to offer policy-makers food for thought on key issues in the drugs field. Each edition includes a brief introduction to the theme in hand; latest findings and statistics; key policy issues at a glance; graphs/tables; policy considerations; web information and further reading. The briefings are published six times a year in the 11 official **EU** languages plus Norwegian.

This policy briefing follows publication by the **EMCDDA** last October of a more extensive report on drugs in the **CEECs**. Its launch coincided with the release of the *2002 Annual report on the state of the drugs problem in the European Union and Norway*. The report, entitled *2002 Report on the drug situation in the candidate CEECs*, is a key source document for today's policy briefing and is available at <http://candidates.emcdda.eu.int/home.cfm>. For more on the EMCDDA's work with the candidate countries see: <http://www.emcdda.org/partners/candidates.shtml>