

Modernising the global drug control system – Can Europe lead?

29th May 2012, Brussels, Belgium

The seminar entitled “Modernising the global drug control system – Can Europe lead?” was organised in the European Parliament by the International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC), and the Global Commission on Drug Policy, and co-hosted by the Member of European Parliament (MEP) Nikos Chrysogelos. The event aimed to present the recommendations of the Global Commission and discuss the role that the European Union (EU) could play in current drug policy reform debates taking place within Europe and around the world. The seminar also comes at a time when the EU is working on drafting a new Drug Strategy to replace the one that will expire at the end of 2012. Two Global Commissioners participated in the panel discussion – Michel Kazatchkine, physician and former Executive Director of the Global Fund, and Pavel Bém, psychiatrist, who has played a leading role in designing Czech Drug policy and is the former mayor of Prague.

Mr. Kazatchkine explained that the work of the Global Commission was triggered by a global assessment of the current “war on drugs” approach. The Commission found that 40 years of such a prohibitionist and punitive strategy had failed to reduce the production, trafficking and consumption of drugs, had led to increased levels of violence, corruption and insecurity, had undermined social cohesion, and had led to an explosion of the HIV epidemic among people who use drugs, and of the number of overdose deaths. The report of the Global Commission, “War on drugs”, which summarised these findings, was presented to the UN Secretary General in June 2011. A second report will be launched in June 2012 in London, focusing this time on issues related to public health, and more specifically the HIV epidemic. The 2011 report includes 11 recommendations, with a general call for:

“I would like to plea for moving away from prohibition. We need a policy that is based on freedom. And if we have freedom, we need to allow people to act foolishly. Then we can start with education, prevention and dealing with health issues, rather than issues of criminal law.”

Sir Graham Watson, MEP

- Breaking the taboo for the political leadership to engage in open and honest debate on drug policies.
- Ending the criminalisation and stigmatisation of people who use drugs.
- Focusing on providing drug dependence treatment and harm reduction services, as part of a general public health approach to the drugs issue.
- Experimenting with alternatives to drug control, including legal regulation.

Mr. Bém described Europe as a pioneer for the past thirty years on designing and implementing a balanced and cost-effective drug policy, focusing on the health and social aspects of the drug problem. Looking at numbers, it seems that even Europe has not quite been effective in reducing the scale of the drug market and use, while new challenges have recently arisen, among them an

increasing prevalence of cocaine use, and the emergence of new psychoactive substances against which governments do not have the ability to react fast enough and efficiently. Evidence clearly shows that arresting and punishing people who use drugs have not been effective in reducing drug use prevalence and have led to countless harms. However, there is a wide range of evidence which demonstrates that harm reduction and social inclusion strategies have been highly effective in reducing drug-related harms. The current economic and political crisis does not enable governments to waste valuable resources on ineffective policies.

Mr. Bém and Carel Edwards, former Head of the Drugs Coordination Unit of the European Commission (EC), raised concerns about the recent EC Communication “Towards a stronger European response to drugs”, as this document seems to promote a one-sided approach to the drugs problem by mostly promoting stronger law enforcement initiatives as the best way to tackle

“Since prohibitive policies have failed in their primary objectives and they have proven ineffective, with a clear overweight of cost over benefits, there is an urgent need to reform them towards better regulation that would reduce the harms to users, society and the economy”.

Nikos Chrysogelos, MEP

drug markets – the very approach that the Global Commission has criticised as ineffective. In response to these concerns, the EC Justice representative, Paula Tardioli-Schiavo, stated that the Communication represented future plans for the EC to introduce new legislation on key pressing issues for Europe, but did not necessarily reflect the contents of the future EU Drug Strategy. The new Strategy will be based on the conclusions of an independent evaluation of the Strategy for 2005-2012 conducted by RAND Europe, the recommendations of the EC Civil Society Forum on Drugs, as well as the principles of “balance” and “evidence”. The previous Strategy had been developed under the Dutch and Irish Presidencies with extensive involvement of European Commission experts. While it is clear that the European Commission is taking a less proactive role in the production of the new Strategy, Ms Tardioli-Schiavo emphasised that her unit is ready to support the Cypriot Presidency in developing the new Strategy, and she expressed confidence that the new Strategy will be based on more specific objectives than the previous strategy.

Despite these explanations, several participants raised concerns that the EU and its Member States had become complacent regarding their drug policies and the issue of public health. A number of initiatives from around the world, in particular in Latin America and even the United States, are now calling for drug policy reform. It was made clear that the US government is not planning on comprehensively revising its prohibitionist drug policy, but it is also noticeable that they are giving more priority to treatment and health. At the 2012 Commission on Narcotic Drugs, Gil Kerlikowske himself declared that the US had been over-reliant on ineffective and costly punishment and incarceration. Mr. Trace remarked that, because the US had been so influential on drug policies developed in many regions of the world, this new position was particularly important in the current context. Many countries around the world are today looking to turn to a more balanced European-style strategy. In a Latin American context, it is crucial that the EU steps into the debate and takes responsibility in leading discussions positively, since drug production is mainly triggered by demand from North American and European markets.

Pierre Vimont, Secretary General of the European External Action Service (EEAS) reminded the participants that the drugs issue was highly complex and that any response would need to be global and comprehensive, taking account of every dimension of the problem, including social stability, democracy, security, etc. In addition, he noted that because of the diversity of views on drug policy among EU member states, it would be difficult to come to a common position on the issue, but

agreed that there were opportunities for Europe to use its diplomatic and technical resources to influence the international debate more proactively. Mr. Vimont also acknowledged the need for European representatives and EU focal point diplomats in various regions of the world (e.g. in Latin America) to give one coherent and agreed discourse on drug policy, during multi- and bi-lateral meetings and events.

Mr. Kazatchkine and Mr. Bém agreed, and called on the EU to join the active debate currently taking place on drug policy reform, and to take a positive lead both within and beyond Europe to share evidence and scientific knowledge, and provide technical and financial support, in order to promote balanced, effective and evidence-based drug policies. MEPs and Global Commissioners present at the seminar also called for support for initiatives undertaken by coalitions of countries willing to promote drug policy reform.

Following this vibrant and well informed debate, IDPC and the Global Commission made a commitment to continue working on these issues at a European level, and will promote work in the following areas:

- With the European Parliament, to convene an informal working group of MEPs to look at the drug policy issue from a problem solving, rather than a political party, perspective.
- With the European Commissioners for Justice, Home Affairs, and Public Health, to urge them to recognise the importance of drug policy reform for the achievement of wider EC priorities of security, justice, public health and human rights, and to bring forward initiatives that use European experience and expertise to modernise responses.
- With the European Commissioner responsible for DG Justice, to ensure that the findings of successive evaluations into progress and challenges are fully incorporated into the drafting and implementation of the new EU drug strategy.
- With the EEAS, to develop a clear position statement on drug policy and best practices, and be proactive in promoting the European model in multilateral and bilateral settings.

The seminar was followed by a second meeting on a similar theme, this time attended by civil society organisations.

For a full account of the event, please watch the [video of the seminar](#).

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