

Towards a harm reduction approach to drugs

The Congress of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) Party convening in Dublin, Ireland, on 2-4 June 2022:

Considering that:

- the “war on drugs” has not been effective; a limited harm reduction approach provides an instrument to combat the use and trade of drugs that comes at a serious cost to human rights, safety, the environment and our 2030 climate goals, alongside the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations;
- according to The Economist, a harm reduction approach via the decriminalisation of drugs means that people who consume drugs and possess drugs in small quantities will not be given a criminal record or a prison sentence. As this is already *de facto* the case in most European states – the consumption of drugs is only policed to a limited extent – it makes sense to accord formal legal stature with reality;
- in 2001, Portugal took a novel approach to the problem of drug addiction by decriminalising possession and use of illicit substances and implementing harm reduction policies to help addicts get treatment. As of 2020, this model has succeeded in bringing about a precipitous drop in addiction, drug-related crime and incarceration, as well as mortality rates that are related to drug consumption;
- the consensus of health experts and research overwhelmingly supports an evidence-based approach that combines harm reduction, prevention, early intervention, rehabilitation and the decriminalisation of small quantities of drugs for personal use, as these measures are more effective, rather than those that stem from a punitive perspective.

Believing that:

- arresting and punishing drug users tends to have a “marginal and short-lived impact on drug prices and availability” and creates market opportunities for replaceable low-level dealers;
- the penalisation of the production, possession, use, and trade of drugs overly burdens criminal systems, producing costs for governments with finite resources, where these human and administrative policing resources could be better spent on preventing other forms of crime;
- criminal and illegal drug activity is a pervasive reality in Europe, with the criminalisation of drugs pushing European citizens to the periphery of society and into criminal underworlds;
- at its very core, drug addiction is a (mental) health issue and should therefore be treated as such. The Portuguese example, which implemented a harm reduction approach in 2001 to a much larger range

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of drugs than this resolution proposes, demonstrates that treating the issue of drug addiction as a health issue is a more efficient use of limited public resources but above all a more compassionate approach to dealing with such a health issue;

- drug addiction is, first and foremost, a public health issue;
- all people are entitled to dignity and respect regardless of any ailments or addictions from which they may suffer;
- criminalising the consumption of drugs is counter-productive; it leads to more suffering for individuals with addictions and to society as a whole, as it punishes a person for having a health problem, rather than because they have committed an act of criminal harm towards another person;
- liberal democracies have neglected people suffering from drug addiction as second-class citizens by criminalising them, barring them from re-entering civil society and pursuing their goals in life for too long;
- the ultimate objective of drug control policy should not be to exclude 'undesirable' individuals from society and punish them due to their addiction, which is burdensome in and of itself, but to create an environment in which people suffering from addiction may find assistance in living a healthier, safer life, and seek out rehabilitation without fear of criminalisation;
- as liberals, we do not criminalise things just because we personally disapprove of them; the default presumption in a liberal society should be that a drug is legal unless it can be proven that criminalisation would be substantially beneficial to public health. This is not the case for many of the drugs currently criminalised in European countries;
- minors are especially vulnerable and drug use at a young age can lead to severe brain damage. Therefore, the protection of minors from harmful drugs always needs to be ascertained.

Calls for ALDE and its member parties to:

- reiterate actively their support and campaign for a harm reduction approach where decriminalisation and effective regulation of drugs is an option, in which the possession and consumption of drugs in small quantities for personal use is no longer illegal;
- support harm reduction initiatives which position the use of drugs as a public health issue, rather than a criminal one, and invest in user prevention and support;
- support the investigation of the use of medical cannabis and other similar drugs that are presently banned, under prescription, in situations where the drugs have proven medical benefits;
- support the implementation of needle and syringe sharing programmes that would help minimise the health hazards, such as blood-borne

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diseases, that are present in communities where there is no access to clean and unused needles;

- support a legal framework for, and provision of, 'safe injection rooms', where drugs can be injected under medical supervision, under the principle of harm-reduction and where people with a substance use disorder have optimal access to information on options offered regarding therapy, drug rehabilitation and risk mitigation;
- support provision of "no questions asked" drugs testing, so that drug-users can verify the purity and strength of drugs they have purchased prior to consumption, reducing injuries and death due to accidental overdoses and adulterated drugs;
- bring more attention to the need to revamp and update programmes concerning drug use, with special attention to the approach predicated by the philosophy of harm reduction, expanding prevention (especially in schools, where school students could receive information regarding the risks and effects that certain drugs may have), early intervention and intervention programmes;
- implement harm reduction and evidence-based drugs policy on the national scale in their respective party platforms, with attention to providing more financial support dedicated to institutions and experts that could better the state of drug control policy and bring more aid to those that would require medical and psychological aid;
- pursue a more balanced policy towards drug users and people that suffer from drug addiction, as the stigmatisation and the otherisation of drug users leads to a further discriminatory and exclusionary society which burdens the individuals that constitute that society with unnecessary expectations or discriminates them because of their addictions.

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