



THE ENCOD BULLETIN ON DRUG POLICY IN EUROPE

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ONE STEP FURTHER

The road towards sensible drug policies is no motorway. It's more like a mud path through mountains, deserts and swamps. Not a single person or initiative in the world can claim to have the key to the doors of enhanced political perception. We will have to make alliances amongst ourselves and with all those who wish to modernise society in order to solve the true problems of the globe with transparent, just, effective and human approaches.

This was the outcome of the conference The Road to Vienna 2008 that took place in the European Parliament in Brussels on 6 & 7 November. The final declaration (to be found at www.encod.org/viena.htm) can be read as a call on EU authorities to embrace the Zero Point One Tolerance approach in drug policy and bring this message to the UN meeting in Vienna in 2008. This call was subscribed to by the majority of the participants at the event, a diverse coalition of people who are daily involved in the drug phenomenon, either as consumers, coffeeshop owners, legal, health and policy experts, affected citizens, Members of European Parliament and representatives of local, regional and national authorities from all over Europe and beyond.

Does the Vienna 2008 meeting matter at all? Peter Cohen of the Amsterdam University doesn't think so: "There is absolutely nothing to do there. The Holy Texts are written, in stone, in a way that makes it easier to change the Bible than the Treaties." Meanwhile, Douglas Mc Vay of the US based NGO Common Sense on Drug Policy concluded that Vienna 2008 is one stop along the longer path toward the end of prohibition. "Hopefully something positive will come out of the UN meeting. At the least, it is certainly providing us an opportunity to press the case for drug policy reforms, for harm reduction and for legalization".

MEP Giusto Catania (GUE/NGL), the European Parliaments rapporteur on the EU Drugs Strategy 2005-2012, issued a press release just after the conference in which he stated that the director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Antonio Maria Costa. "would do well in resigning, as the policy carried out by his agency during the past years has allowed the production, sale and consumption of drugs to increase."

Two weeks later, at the occasion of the publication of the new Annual Report of the European Union Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), Catania declared that "it is obvious that we need to insist on the change of UN Conventions: the data of the EMCDDA in Lisbon are indisputable: criminalisation of consumption does not help to reduce international drugs trafficking which continues to increase its profits."

During the past years, the European Commission and the Member States have chosen to ignore the report that Catania put his name to, and was approved by the European Parliament in december 2004. However, this attitude is less and less sustainable in the long term. During the Public Hearing on drug policy in the European Parliament on 21 April 2005, the head of the Anti Drugs Coordination Unit of the European Commission, Carel Edwards, characterised the call for a different drug policy in the EU that is proposed in the Catania report as useless. According to Edwards, it would never be possible to modify the drug policies of 25 Member States in the direction that was indicated by the report. However, with the voices for a true change of course gaining strength in number and force, it will be impossible to maintain intact the consensus on not to consider any change at all.

The interest of some EU Member States to interfere in the future dialogue process with civil society which the European Commission is supposed to start in 2007, proves the importance of that opportunity to push the debate in a certain direction. In a speech held on 17 November at a conference of EURAD (Europe Against Drugs) in Volendam, the Netherlands, Raymond Yans, a future member of the UN International Narcotics Control Board and representative of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, expressed his fear that "in order to select those who will be listened to in this dialogue, the temptation is to take a tolerant approach. There is a danger that the dialogue with civil society will thus become limited to groups who have the same opinion (pro legalisation)", declared Yans.

Unfortunately for the Belgian government, the Finnish presidency of the EU has presented a proposal to include all organisations in the drugs area, including drug users and a large diversity of opinions from civil society in this dialogue. Probably in April next year, we will know the definitive concept in which this dialogue will be organised. In the mean time, ENCOD has sent some questions to the European Commission, in which we ask clarification on the role that Member State representatives appear to have in the preparation of the dialogue process with civil society, in particular in the selection of counterparts. In a transparant dialogue process, the decision on who should be considered as a legitimate dialogue partner should not be taken unilaterally by one of the actors.

With time, it will become increasingly clear that in order to maintain the universal regime of drug prohibition it is necessary to violate the values of democracy: accountability and transparency of authorities. You can not fool all people all the time. On the road to sensible drug policies, there is no turning back. If politicians will not take the necessary steps, citizens will do it for them.

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